### The Strength of the Wolf

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**The Strength of the Wolf**

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**Summary**

Jackson had thought that moving to London would solve at least some of his many, many problems. He could start over somewhere that was about as far away from Beacon Hills as it was possible to get, and leave his recent past behind him. But Jackson isn’t the only werewolf who tried to leave his trauma in Beacon Hills. When an old acquaintance comes to town, Jackson finds that he can’t escape his past after all. But maybe, just maybe, something good can come from it. (Canon-compliant; concurrent with Season 4, extending into post-4.)
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; 
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

CHAPTER ONE: LONDON CALLING (The Clash)

See, we ain’t got no high 
except for the one with the yellowy eye.

London was... difficult.

It had been freeing for Jackson, at first, to move someplace where nobody knew him. To have a chance to start fresh. All the pain, the blood, the death—all of it thousands of miles away.

The only problem was that, well, nobody knew him.

Jackson hadn't thought the culture shock would be too bad. After all, he'd visited London a few times. He'd even spent a summer there once with some family friends. But that had been vacation, and that had been before.
School was awful. Jackson didn't understand their grading system or the length of their semesters-terms--or the ridiculous amount of standardized testing. Hell, he didn’t even really understand what ‘sixth form’ meant, let alone how to navigate it. He might as well have gone to fucking Hogwarts, with school uniforms and houses, to boot. Thank God his parents had taken pity on him and arranged for him to live alone in a flat rather than in the school’s boarding house.

Worst of all, lacrosse was a joke to the Brits. A girls' sport. And sure, Jackson was good at other sports--Hell, as a werewolf he could be good at any sport--but lacrosse had been special to him, and now he didn't even have that.

Jackson was no one. He was average. And he was tired, and bored, and scared, and... If he were honest with himself? Lonely.

It took him three weeks to realize why. At first he had just figured it was because he didn't really have any friends in London, and there was only so much to talk about with Danny on Skype, and it was too awkward to try to talk to Lydia much. But when the loneliness started to feel like a physical ache, it finally dawned on him:

Pack. He wanted a pack. After this revelation, Jackson had spent the better part of an hour half-transformed into wolf form, trashing his flat in a rage. This was the final 'fuck you' from Derek Hale. This was the putrid icing on the rotten cake that was Jackson's post-Bite experience. All pain and no gain.

Jackson might not have survived the first full moon alone if it hadn’t been for some wolfsbane tranquilizers Deaton had given him. No one--including Jackson--trusted his anchor alone to keep him in line. Before the sun set, Jackson gave himself a higher dose than Deaton had recommended and chained himself to a radiator. He spent the night curled up in a blanket on the floor next to it, half-delirious and shaking, and woke up with the mother of all hangovers and an aching body that painkillers wouldn’t work on. But at least he hadn’t transformed.

After a month, the loneliness became unbearable. Jackson paid a classmate to get him a fake ID and started hanging around pubs and clubs, searching for the scent of other werewolves. If there were werewolves in Beacon Hills, he reasoned, there had to be hundreds in a city the size of London.

It turned out he was right. It only took a week for him to find the first pack. It was large--over a dozen wolves, many of them related like the Hales had been--with a gruff, no-nonsense alpha. The alpha wasn't cruel, exactly, but he also wasn't welcoming. One of the betas who Jackson had befriended tried to convince her alpha to accept him into their pack, but the alpha had had no interest in Jackson whatsoever.

"We don't need a little Yank omega hanging about, using our resources and getting into trouble."

Omega. Jackson began to loathe the word and how it swallowed up his identity. How it made him feel like he was nothing on his own, that his worth could only be measured by his usefulness to a pack.

Despite the alpha’s disapproval, the beta was kind to Jackson, and the time he spent with her helped soothe the sting of the alpha’s rejection. Her name was Elizabeth and she talked too much but she was pretty and soft and didn’t seem to care that, being in her early twenties, she technically (legally) shouldn’t have invited Jackson to stay over at her flat on a regular basis.

It was very nice to have sex again, even if Jackson sometimes got a little too rough (thanks to his unruly inner wolf) and Elizabeth had to talk him down. He wasn’t proud of the fact that some of
what he did to her by accident would’ve left scars on a human, but she was forgiving and understanding. It was the nicest anyone had been to Jackson in a very long time. It wasn’t pack, but it helped.

It was less than two weeks, though, before Elizabeth’s alpha put his foot down and told her to end it with Jackson. He was forbidden from setting foot in their territory, and Elizabeth’s goodbye felt pretty damned final. Having that companionship and then losing it made Jackson feel even worse than before.

Jackson had almost given up and accepted his miserable loneliness when another werewolf practically ambushed him on the Tube. The short girl with spiky white-blonde hair and an outfit straight out of the Seventies London punk scene grabbed his arm and pulled him with her into a dark corner of the station just after he’d stepped off the train. If her scent hadn't given her away, her strength would have.

"Omega," she said with a strangely friendly smile. "Lost?"

"No," said Jackson defensively. He wrenched his arm out of her grip.

"Lonely, though," said the girl, as if she were stating a fact.

"Fuck off, Nancy Spungen," said Jackson. Because seriously, Jackson would bet a month of his very generous allowance that she had a Sex Pistols poster on her bedroom wall.

The other wolf smiled. "A Yank! I hadn’t heard you talk before. You're a long way from home."

Jackson tried to push past her, but she stepped in front of him. He glared at her. "Let me go."

"You don't want to go," she said, voice steady and sure. "Not really."

Jackson opened his mouth to argue, but then she flashed her eyes at him. They were glowing bright red.

Alpha.

Of course. Of course she was an alpha. That was perfectly in line with the current trajectory of Jackson’s life. And she was right: The moment her eyes had shifted, Jackson had felt a surge of longing to belong. To obey, to submit. He wanted nothing more in the world than to do something that would make this alpha happy.

"I can smell it on you," she said, not unkindly. "You need a pack. At least come and meet mine?"

It was only Jackson’s pride that made him hesitate, and only for a moment. Before he’d realized that he had agreed to go with her, they were walking together to Josie’s pack’s ‘den’ in Holborn.

"My name’s Josie," she said as they walked. “Yours?”

"Jackson."

She thought he was confused. "What's your given name?"

Jackson cringed internally. This conversation again. He’d already had it at school and with several people he’d met at pubs.

"Your Christian name," Josie clarified, like he was a bit thick, and maybe she was having second thoughts about recruiting him. “Your first name."
"Jackson," repeated Jackson irritably.

"That's a surname!" said Josie. "Jackson. Son of Jack."

Jackson rolled his eyes. "I don't know what else to tell you. It's my name."

"Ridiculous," said Josie. She held out her hand for him to shake. "Good to meet you, Jack."

"Jackson," he insisted, but Josie's answering smirk was not promising.

"Just as you say, Jack."

The pack’s ‘den’ was a large three-story Georgian flat near Bloomsbury Square. Either someone in the pack owned the place, or they somehow had or made enough money to pay the small fortune it would cost to rent it. This was the kind of neighborhood where rental prices were listed by the week rather than the month to help avoid sticker shock. It turned out that the flat’s proximity to Jackson’s was no coincidence:

“So do you just go around looking for omegas to recruit, or what?” Jackson asked Josie as they neared the front door.

“No,” said Josie. “I investigate omegas who stay in our territory too long.”

“Your territory?”

“Most of Holborn,” said Josie, “and a few bits nearby. If one of my betas sees another wolf in our territory, they tell me. If the wolf’s from another pack, we chase them off. If they’re an omega, we watch them for a while. If they stay too long, we give them a choice: join or leave.

“So you’ve been stalking me?” said Jackson, suddenly realizing the meaning of what she had said earlier: I hadn’t heard you talk before.

Josie shrugged. “Tracking.”

“For how long?”

“Long enough,” said Josie with a bright smile.

Because that wasn’t creepy at all.

The welcoming attitude of Josie’s pack was so different from the other pack’s coldness (except Elizabeth) that Jackson was sure there must be some kind of catch. The pack was ten strong, not including two ‘pups’--five-year-old fraternal twin boys named Justin and Colin--that belonged to a woman named Eva who Jackson judged to be in her mid-thirties. It turned out that the boys’ father was another pack member--a guy of about the same age named Dominic--but Eva was currently with a younger woman named Ada (Jackson got their names mixed up for a full month after that). Apparently this kind of arrangement wasn’t all that uncommon in werewolf packs. Dominic had a scar across his jaw and neck that looked suspiciously like it had been made by an animal’s claws, which gave away the fact that he was a bitten wolf, not born, but no one talked about it so Jackson didn’t ask.

The oldest member of the pack was Will, who was probably around forty. Jackson was told later that Will had been alpha before Josie. Jackson hadn’t known you could become an alpha without killing one, but then, Jackson didn’t know much about werewolves. No one said why Josie had taken over, but the two seemed to be on decent terms. Will had two university-aged kids, Zachary
and Sarah, with his ‘mate,’--Jackson wasn’t really sure if that meant they were married or what--Helen. Helen was human, a trait which she had passed on to Zach; Sarah had been born a wolf like Justin and Colin.

Finally, there were Jackson’s favorite packmates: Rodger and Bronagh. Rodger--“With a D before the G,” he’d said, “for ‘Dead Gorgeous.’”--was about a decade older than Jackson, olive-complected with startlingly light amber-brown eyes that he said he’d gotten from his Pakistani mother. When they glowed werewolf gold it looked like they were just getting brighter rather than changing color. Bronagh was Rodger’s long-time mate. She looked stereotypically Irish: ginger hair, green eyes, and pale, freckled skin, with a Northern Irish accent to match. Bronagh had a full wolf form, black with eyes very similar to the shade they were when she was human, which was a little unsettling.

There was a pack meeting before Jackson would be officially accepted as a member. Josie told Jackson ahead of time, explaining that various pack members would ask Jackson questions and then vote on whether to allow him to join the pack. This sent Jackson into a minor panic, because there were questions he didn’t want to answer, and he couldn’t lie to werewolves.

So he asked Josie if he could talk to her alone first. She agreed and they walked together far enough away from the den that werewolf hearing couldn’t pick up on their conversation.

“What’s going on in that busy head, Jack?”

Jackson stared down at his own feet as he spoke.

“There’s something you should know about me. But if I tell you, you probably won’t want me around anymore.”

There was a pause during which Jackson’s pulse began to speed up with nervousness. He didn’t know what he’d do if he wasn’t allowed to be a part of Josie’s pack. But if he didn’t admit this now and Josie found out later, Jackson was positive that he wouldn’t be allowed to stay.

“Tell me,” said Josie, voice gentle.

“I…” Jackson swallowed. He wouldn’t be able to say it out loud. There was really only one way to go about this. He concentrated for a moment, then looked up at Josie.

A flash of alarm crossed her features when she met Jackson’s eyes--which he knew were glowing blue--but she didn’t recoil, or look afraid or disgusted with him. There was a long pause during which Josie regarded Jackson thoughtfully. His heart pounded against his ribs and he felt vaguely sick with anxiety.

“Was it an accident?” she said finally.

Hope flickered in Jackson’s chest. She hadn’t immediately rejected him. But he wasn’t sure how to answer her question. No, it hadn’t been an accident; he’d killed deliberately. It had just been on someone else’s orders.

“It’s hard to explain,” said Jackson. “I wasn’t really… myself. I don’t remember most of it.”

There was another anxiety-inducing pause.

“Do you think you might do it again?”

“No,” said Jackson with certainty. He didn’t remember much about what he’d done as the Kanima,
but the parts he did remember made him sick to think about. The thought of killing someone else, on top of everything he’d already done, was enough to turn his stomach.

“How do you know?”

Jackson frowned, trying to come up with a way to reassure her without explaining the entire situation.

“The... reason I did it is... gone,” he said lamely.

He prayed that would be enough for her, though he wasn’t particularly optimistic. After all, who in their right mind would trust someone who had murdered innocent people at their word that they wouldn’t do it again? But somehow...

“All right,” said Josie. “I won’t make you explain if you’re not ready.”

Jackson could have collapsed under the weight of his relief. He actually physically staggered, prompting Josie to grip his arm to steady him. The alpha’s--his alpha soon, hopefully--touch was grounding, reassuring.

“Thanks,” said Jackson, which was ridiculously insufficient, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“I hope you will be someday, though,” said Josie. “Ready, I mean. To talk about it. Wolves need to be able to trust their pack, especially their alpha.”

Jackson nodded an acknowledgement. He doubted that he’d ever be ready to tell anyone that story, but it was nice to be told that he might be able to do it without being shunned for it.

“I’ll vouch for you with the others. They’ll have questions, but if I trust you, they’ll accept it. You have my permission not to answer if they ask you about your past.”

The meeting was relatively quick and painless. A few people asked some questions Jackson wasn’t comfortable answering, but Josie excused him and no one argued with her. Each pack member was invited to share their thoughts, and there was a vote in the end. Jackson was accepted unanimously. It wasn’t until he heard the verdict that he realized how tense all his muscles had been.

Afterward, there was a little ritual (for lack of a better word) where everybody got a bit of their scent on Jackson one way or another: generally by placing a hand on his shoulder or back, or ruffling his hair. Josie gave him a tight hug and flashed her red eyes at him, smiling openly and welcomingly. Jackson finally had an alpha. He finally had a pack.

Josie's pack was good for Jackson. Even though he didn't know them that well at first, being with them made that unbearable ache go away. Being in the pack couldn't fix school or make the nightmares go away--the nightmares where his hands were covered in scales with claw-tipped fingers dripping blood--but it eased the crippling loneliness and allowed Jackson to start accepting London as his new home. Slowly, over the course of several months, their support and companionship helped him to finally leave his life in Beacon Hills behind him.

Yes Chris, I get the joke, Isaac typed impatiently into his phone. I’m American, I’m a werewolf, and I’m in London. We all get the joke. It’s just not funny. It was still weird to him sometimes that he and Chris Argent had become close enough to tease each other.

Isaac ducked his head and hunched his shoulders against a sudden frigid blast of cold, late-
February air, glad his signature scarf was functional as well as fashionable here.

He did feel a little bad that he hadn’t been there to help with the aftermath of the whole ‘Stiles is an evil psychopath trying to kill us all’ thing, but at the rate his friends channeled murderous nightmare monsters, he was sure he’d have another chance.

After Allison... he just couldn’t handle another disaster. Not for a while, anyway.

So he and Chris had left. They went to Paris, where Isaac drank espressos in dark cafés, had chocolate croissants for breakfast and baguettes for lunch, even drove a friggin’ scooter--every cliché he could think of--not to mention made a serious effort to master the language. Not like Chris gave him a choice. As soon as their plane had touched down, Chris had spoken to him exclusively in French. Immersion, or in French: immersion. Other than that, Chris hadn’t asked much of him, didn’t even make him go to school, so Isaac spent the first two weeks wandering the city during the day and hooking up with pretty strangers in clubs at night.

Then one day he came home early and interrupted a meeting between Chris and some fellow hunters from the Baudin family. Chris had told him about them: a newer family and breakaway faction from the Argent family who had disagreed with the fire-and-brimstone approach the Argents had begun taking over the last dozen years or so. Now that Chris was no longer associated with those policies, the Baudins wanted him to help them find an omega that had been killing livestock.

“Are you sure it’s a werewolf?” Isaac had asked in passable French after listening to the conversation from the hall and understanding the basic conversation, if not every word.

Immediately all the hunters in the room bristled. “Uh, I mean--” Isaac tried to appeal to Chris for help, but the traitor was simply looking at him smugly with a raised eyebrow.

Luckily, or not, Isaac was cut off by an old man with deep frown lines and a patchwork of scars all over his arms. “New student, Argent? I thought you were out of the business.”

Chris was still watching him, amused. “Isaac is a special case.”

“All right, special case, why wouldn’t we be sure it’s a werewolf?”

Isaac glanced at Chris (who was still smirking) one more time before nodding at the pictures of the slaughtered livestock lying on the dining room table.

“Because that’s not how I’d kill a cow.” This probably came out more like ‘I not slaughter cow like this’ given Isaac’s grasp of French, but his point seemed to get across. (His French was actually pretty good, but his conversations generally tended toward nightlife and pretty people rather than murder and livestock.)

Instantly every gun in the room was on him except Chris’s. No, Chris was hiding his face in his sleeve, stifling a laugh while Isaac tried to stay very still and not look threatening.

“Argent,” the old hunter started without taking his eyes off of Isaac, “I didn’t know you were taking in strays.”

“I told you, he is a special case.” Chris wasn’t laughing anymore, but he didn’t look worried either.

The youngest hunter, who was still several years older than Isaac, said something quickly in French that Isaac missed most of, but caught the phrase petit chien, making Isaac’s eyes flash gold and the hunters grip their guns a little tighter.
Finally Chris stepped forward, “Okay, enough. I don’t want to be digging bullets out of my walls, so put the guns down. And you,” he said quietly to Isaac in English, “remember what I said about picking your fights more carefully?”

The three hunters lowered their guns, but didn’t put them away. Isaac would have appreciated how literally they listened to Chris if he hadn’t still been worried about becoming target practice.

Chris stepped out from between Isaac and the Baudins. “Albert speaks English. Stick to that so that he doesn’t decide to shoot you for butchering the language, too.”

Isaac looked at Chris like he was crazy. He actually wanted Isaac to keep explaining to them why he thought they were wrong?

He looked back at the hunters and cleared his throat. “Well... the way their throats have been sliced and their stomachs have been pulled out, it’s way too neat for claws or fangs, especially if the wolf’s out of control. Plus, why kill the cow and not eat it? Or why not get inside the house and kill the farmer’s family?”

The hunters were all looking at the pictures again. Isaac took a few hesitant steps into the room to get a better look as well, although staying close to the door in case anybody got twitchy. The first thing he noticed was the way the back of the cow’s head had been bashed in, exposing a mess of bloody brain and reminding Isaac vividly of the whole darach debacle.

“Sacrifices,” he said to himself before speaking up. “I think they’re sacrifices.”

Isaac explained as briefly as he could about why he was familiar with the Threefold Death ritual without going into too many specifics. It seemed likely that they were dealing with something similar, and last night’s had been the second cow, meaning there would probably be a third tonight. The reason they hadn’t caught anyone was because they’d been trying to track down a wolf instead of a person, or in this case, potentially a druid.

After a few more questions, Chris, who probably had the most experience with pagan sacrifices (having almost been one), went with the hunters, leaving Isaac to pace around the apartment and worry until Chris came back late that night. Luckily it hadn’t been a proper darach, just a couple of kids who had stumbled on some ancient spellbooks and decided to try their hands at magic. (Because apparently ritual sacrifice was what all the cool kids were doing these days.) The Baudins sent their thanks for Isaac’s input.

“Really?” Isaac asked, shocked.

“Well, not in so many words.”

A few days later he got an urgent call from Chris. A little girl, the daughter of one of the hunters he’d met before, was missing. Isaac ended up tracking her scent through the woods behind their family home and eventually found her stuck in the mud in a river, alive and well and hungry, completely unaware of her dangerous predicament.

After that, the Baudins started coming to him with questions, looking for advice or a different perspective on old problems. They even asked him to help mediate a land dispute between two Parisian packs claiming different territory lines. Chris started calling him their werewolf consultant, even started training him.

And it was fun. Isaac was making friends and he was useful. He went out sometimes with the few hunters that were near him in age, and the best part (well, maybe aside from the several very pretty
people the young hunters introduced him to) was that now he didn’t have to worry about hunters coming after him here. It was kind of strange to not have a reason to look over his shoulder every five minutes. A guy could get used to not being in constant fear for his life.

Then Chris went back to Beacon Hills to help with the next emergency without even asking Isaac if he wanted to go. He didn’t want to, but he still felt like he’d been ditched. Luckily abandonment was not one of his issues. He was quite surprised when Chris called him early in February and asked if he wanted to take a job in London. The Bristow family, more hunters Chris was on good terms with, had an unusual problem that they were willing to try an unusual method to solve.

So now Isaac was in London for a job. But that wasn’t the only reason he had accepted.

The other reason was somewhere in the area, but with all of the people around, there was no way that Isaac would be able to pinpoint the scent, especially since it had been months since he’d last smelled it.

Isaac hadn’t so much as exchanged a text with his prickly ex-packmate-slash-neighbor since before the guy had left abruptly for Jolly Olde Englande, and they hadn’t exactly been best bros before that. But there was no way Isaac could be within a stone’s throw (if you had werewolf strength) of Jackson Whittemore and pass up the opportunity for a reunion.

He’d gotten the name of the school that Jackson was attending from Lydia, but as he waited outside the enormous stone building, watching the hundreds of students in matching uniforms swarm out, he knew there was no way he was going to be able to find the one obnoxious teenage needle in this hormonal haystack.

So maybe he could make Jackson find him.

There was a pub near Jackson’s flat called Lamb. It was about as old-school a higher-end London pub as you could find: it had been around in some form for a couple of centuries and its last major interior renovation had left it looking charmingly Victorian. It was smallish and low-key with a good drink selection and very traditional but high-quality pub food. Best of all, they had a no-music, no-TV policy. Ever since Jackson had become a werewolf, he had found that places with large crowds and background noise could become overwhelming when he was trying to relax. A constant buzz of conversation was fine, even soothing, but combined with music or other sounds it could make him antsy and anxious.

It was Friday evening and Jackson was having a solitary (apart from the crowded pub’s many other patrons) dinner and drink at Lamb. Rodger had been suggesting that Jackson come over to the den more often, but Jackson wasn’t sure if he wanted to go that night. He liked the pack and he felt welcome there, but sometimes it was difficult to have such close contact with so many people in one place who actually wanted to talk to him, especially after a long week. At the end of the day, Jackson was an only child. Now that his longing for pack had been quelled, he’d started to re-learn the skill of being alone sometimes without being lonely.

Jackson had just finished and paid for his dinner when he caught the scent of another werewolf. He could tell by smell that it wasn’t one of his packmates, though there was something vaguely familiar about it that he couldn’t quite place. That fact put him on edge. Jackson debated with himself about whether to call Rodger or Josie. Josie had said that they investigated other werewolves who wandered into their territory. Jackson had an obligation to at least check it out and report back.

The scent led him out into the cobblestone lane. Since it was Friday, the area was by no means
deserted, but it wasn’t very well lit. Jackson focused his hearing for sounds of movement that would fit with the scent. He crept carefully after what sounded to him like footsteps around a nearby corner. When he leaned his head around it so he could see, he nearly jumped out of his skin. A tall figure was right in front of him, and he could tell by the scent that it was the wolf he’d been tracking.

Feeling threatened, Jackson sprang into action. He launched himself at the strange wolf and tackled it, shoving its back up against the nearest wall and pinning it by its shoulders. Jackson lifted his head to ask the strange wolf who it was and what it was doing in their territory, but to his utter confusion he found that he recognized its face.

Jackson stared up at the taller boy, utterly bewildered.

"Lahey?"

Isaac wasn’t sure if he felt flattered or threatened by the welcome Jackson gave him. He had figured his appearance in London would be a surprise, and sure, they hadn’t parted on the best of terms, what with Isaac and Derek and the others having tried to kill kanima-Jackson a couple of times, but he hadn’t been expecting an assault.

“Nice grip you got there, Jackson.” Isaac smirked, not even trying to push the stunned boy off. “Took you long enough. I’ve been walking around this neighborhood for an hour looking for you.”

“Looking for me?” Jackson said, finally snapping out of his shock, letting Isaac go and stepping back suspiciously. Suddenly his eyes widened and the air filled with the scent of Jackson’s fear. “Wait, where’s Hale?”

Isaac would have laughed at how fast Jackson went from fight to flight, if he hadn’t been so alarmed by the shift. “Hale? Oh, you mean Derek?”

“Who the hell else would I mean?”

“Why would Derek be here?”

“He’s your alpha, right?” said Jackson, like it was completely obvious. “Why would you be here without him?”

“Derek’s not my alpha anymore.”

“Then who?” said Jackson incredulously.

“I don’t have an alpha.”

Jackson stared at him in disbelief. “...Oh, fuck, no. No way. You? No.”

“You don’t think I could be an alpha?” Isaac raised an eyebrow at Jackson and stepped into his space, making himself as tall and imposing as possible (basically doing a Derek impression). To his delight, Jackson took a wary step back.

“Not a chance,” said Jackson, though he didn’t look positive about that.

Isaac fell back with a shrug, giving Jackson the most innocent smile he could manage with glowing, golden eyes. “You’re right. Red isn’t my color, anyway.”

“Okay, I get it. Now knock it off, there are people around.” Jackson checked that nobody was
close enough to have seen Isaac’s display.

"Says the guy who just openly assaulted me."

Jackson clenched his jaw and glared at Isaac, his heart-rate increasing audibly (to werewolf ears). "What is your problem, Lahey? Slipped your leash so you came to harass me? Is that it?"

Isaac was genuinely taken aback by the anger being directed at him. "What? No. I was in town so I thought we could catch up."

"Why? It’s not like we were ever friends."

The sneer on Jackson’s face suddenly reminded Isaac of exactly what they had been, and what they hadn’t.

“No, you’re right,” Isaac said finally, “we weren’t.” Jackson had never harassed Isaac like he did Scott and Stiles; he had just completely ignored him. They’d been neighbors and classmates their entire lives and the most contact they’d ever had was when Jackson had been a bloodthirsty lizard monster and Isaac was trying to help put him down. “Sorry if I thought maybe we could be.”

“Sod off, Lahey.” Jackson growled.

“Whatever you say, redcoat.”

“Fuck. Off.” Blue eyes flashed wolf blue, and Isaac knew Jackson was being serious. Isaac didn’t even try to follow him when Jackson spun around and stormed off.

Well, that could have gone better.

Chapter End Notes

I am SO EXCITED for this project! Savannah and I have been working on it for a couple of months and finally feel like we have enough of it done to confidently start posting. This is my first co-authored project in a while, and the experience has been fantastic. Savannah and I have similar writing styles and she is WAY better at plot than I am, and we’ve basically just been having a blast creating a rich vision of what Jackson’s and Isaac's lives after Beacon Hills might look like. What started as literally, "Oh man, Isaac should move to London and he and Jackson could be like The Odd Couple except maybe also they have sex" is now what promises to be a pretty massive fic with a supporting cast of original characters that we are very passionate about and hope you will enjoy. If you've gotten even this far, thank you so much for reading!

Lenna
Looking Up

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWO: LOOKING UP (Paramore)

I thought I'd never see the day
when you'd smile at me.

Running for his life in a city he hardly knew was not the way Isaac had planned to start his evening.

It had been three days since Jackson had ever-so-politely told him to “fuck off,” but Isaac hadn’t had time to track him down again.

The day after that exciting reunion, he’d been preoccupied meeting one of the hunters who he was going to be working with. Maybe. Depending on if they liked him, or thought they could trust him, or didn’t kill him outright, or whatever.
It had been arranged that they would meet somewhere public, somewhere with lots of witnesses, to discourage any killing impulses on either side.

As Isaac waited at the Costa, sipping his coffee and wishing it was French espresso, he tried to act like he wasn’t about to jump out of his skin. Not only was this basically a job interview, his new boss killed stuff like him for a living and didn’t have a reason to be particularly endeared to him like the hunters he had worked with alongside Chris.

Isaac rubbed the back of his neck as he tried and failed to keep his head from swivelling around like an overactive bobble-head, trying to see everywhere at once. Chris had suggested to him that if he got there first: not to put his back to a wall since that would put him in a more secure position, to stand up when shaking hands, to not maintain eye contact for too long, and a whole list of other tips for the paranoid soul. Isaac’s crash course on ‘how to not seem threatening to hunters’ did nothing to boost his confidence that this wasn’t some kind of trap, however, so he listened more intently than usual to his surroundings.

Luckily, Isaac didn’t have to wait very long. He recognized the hunter the moment he walked in by the distinct burnt-metal smell that was practically a trademark of all hunters. It had taken Isaac a long time to get used to the smell of Chris’ arsenal. Now he kind of missed it.

Isaac sized up the hunter while the man stood in line for coffee, the way Chris had taught him to assess a potential threat. The important thing was not to seem like he was staring.

The hunter was probably about Isaac’s height but had a more muscular build… Or did the layers of his winter clothes just make him seem that way? Maybe he was shorter. Or taller. It was too hard to tell from across the room. Isaac also couldn’t tell if he was armed, but had to assume that he was. Dark hair, dark skin, nice smile. Age maybe forty? Late thirties? Crap, Isaac could practically hear Chris’s rebuke: “Well, Isaac, absolutely none of that was helpful. Now what’s going to happen is that man is going to kick your ass because you underestimated his size, drag you outside because you overestimated his age, take out the Lupara you didn’t notice, and shoot you with wolfsbane bullets. But that’s okay. Do better next time.”

After doctoring his coffee, the hunter made a beeline for Isaac’s table. Isaac fought the urge to duck, to avoid notice. It was always the same when he met new hunters: the wolf in Isaac wanted to assume they were all threats even though the human side of him knew that wasn’t the case anymore.

“Isaac Lahey?” The man had a pleasant voice, deep and cultured. Isaac almost knocked his chair over in his rush to stand up.

“Uh, yeah.” He shook the man’s offered hand. “How’d you know?”

“You’ve been staring at me since I walked in. I only seem to get that reaction from a very specific group. My name is James Bristow.”

They both sat. James took a slow sip of his chai tea latte--Isaac could also smell a hint of nutmeg. Nice.--while Isaac tried to keep from fidgeting or staring or looking away for too long or any number of other contradictory behaviors Chris had been trying to drill into him before he had headed back to Beacon Hills.

Isaac and the hunter--Mr. Bristow? James? Isaac decided on James for now, at least internally.--chatted casually for a bit about how Isaac’s train ride was, how he was liking the city, how he had liked Paris. Despite how politely innocent the questions were, Isaac couldn’t get over the feeling that this was some kind of interrogation. All they were missing was the spotlight.
“The Baudins are good friends of ours,” James said suddenly. “We wouldn’t risk upsetting them by disemboweling their consultant, even if you did seem like a threat.”

Isaac laughed a bit and felt his shoulders visibly relax. “Yeah, well, it’s one thing to know you’re not planning to take me out behind the woodshed to shoot me, and another to get my instincts to believe it.”

James took another sip. “I know what you mean. It feels strange to be sitting here having a conversation over coffee with someone you’ve been taught presents a danger. But you’ve become rather close with both the Argents and the Baudins. They trust you.”

Isaac sensed that this wasn’t a question and managed a quick gulp of his own drink as James continued.

“For the past several months, we’ve been finding bodies in graveyards.”

“Isn’t that kind of--”

“Fresh and half-eaten.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound normal.”

“They only show up on the night of the new moon, occasionally a day or two on either side as well.”

Isaac quickly checked his mental lunar calendar. Last new moon had only been a few days before he had been asked to come to London. So less than a week ago.

“We have access to the most recent body and would like you to see if you can smell anything.”

“You mean anything werewolf?”

“I mean anything. We are not ruling anything out, but the patterns are completely wrong for everything we are familiar with. Hence our willingness to try something new.”

He meant Isaac. A werewolf consultant. The only one, as far as Isaac knew. Hell, maybe if this went well he’d open an agency.

James was studying him carefully. Probably sizing him up. Isaac was once again glad he didn’t seem like a threat, but this time he held the older man’s gaze.

James smiled, finished his drink, and stood to go. As he grabbed his coat from the back of the chair he tucked his hand inside.

Isaac was almost on his feet before he could stop himself.

James politely smiled and pulled out a thick envelope. “Mr. Lahey, we’re going to be working together quite closely. I hope we will be able to trust each other.” He handed Isaac the envelope. “We requested your services for a month. This is your daily stipend for that time with a bonus waiting at the end, dependant on the resolution of our mystery. Chris said cash would be best?”

“Uh, yeah, great.” Isaac tried not to stare at the thick folds of cash that were tucked into the envelope. He had no idea what kind of rates Chris had worked out for him, but he was glad he wouldn’t have to be dipping into the Argent family account for a while. Chris had been way too generous when they’d left for France, giving Isaac access to no small sum, with the expectation
that he’d spend responsibly. Having almost nothing to his name, Isaac had taken him up on it, but
with every intention of somehow paying Chris back someday, even though Chris had made it clear
that it wasn’t necessary.

Isaac spent the rest of the day trying to figure out something safe to do with all that money since he
couldn’t put it in a bank but didn’t feel like walking around with it all for the next month. After he
counted it and calculated his daily allowance, he took out three days’ worth and asked the manager
at the hostel to keep the envelope in the hostel’s safe.

The next day James picked him up in a car and proceeded to drive on the wrong side of the road all
the way to the morgue, which was fine because all the other drivers were also wrong. James’s
daughter, Hannah, kept turning around to stare openly at Isaac.

“I’ve never actually been this close to a werewolf before,” she said, almost entirely turned around
in her seat. She seemed to be only a little older than Isaac, but everything about her screamed
confidence. And also she was gorgeous. The only sign that she was maybe a little uncomfortable
sitting so close to a werewolf was a faster than average heart rate. She didn’t even smell nervous.
Isaac assumed she was well through her hunter training and was joining their investigation because
she already knew all the best ways to kill a wolflike Isaac, so nobody was worried that he would be
a threat to her.

“Can I see your eyes?”

“Uh…” Isaac had already found that, while the Baudins had enjoyed the benefits of having his
heightened senses and abilities working for them, most of them had still been edgy about being
actively reminded that he was in fact a supernatural creature that they had been trained to seek and
destroy.

“Please?”

Isaac could tell that she was genuinely curious, and only hesitated another moment before flashing
his eyes gold.

Hannah’s heart rate immediately spiked, but her polite smile stretched into something slightly wild.
A total adrenaline junkie then. She didn’t smell nervous because she wasn’t; she was excited. And
she wasn’t just doing this because it was the family business; she genuinely got a thrill out of it all,
the danger, the mystery. Isaac wondered if that was an asset or a liability in a line of work like
theirs.

When they got to the forensic institute, they were let in by a petite blond intern in a lab coat who
had been expecting them. Turned out James’s day job was animal control (go figure), and since this
definitely seemed like an animal attack, this visit was probably pretty standard to her.

Isaac caught Hannah checking out the intern as she lead them towards the back. Pretty and smart.
Hannah had good taste.

They talked about where the body had been found (graveyard) and in what condition (in pieces,
mostly consumed, gross) and then it was time for Hannah to distract the intern while James and
Isaac inspected what was left of the body. The framework was mostly still there, Isaac could tell by
the shape under the sheet, just diminished and oddly lumpy. When James removed the sheet so that
they could inspect the bite patterns, Isaac was both gratified and grossed out that he had been right.

“Anything?” James asked as Isaac took a deep breath through his nose.
There were many things: death, ammonia, formaldehyde (to name a few), but nothing supernatural that Isaac recognized. He took several more deep breaths until he felt dizzy and ill from the chemical fumes. He didn’t recognize the bites, either. They were large and strangely precise, almost like in a cartoon. In some places, skin, muscle, organ, and even bone had all been taken in one clean bite. What the hell kind of creature could do that?

It was already getting dark by the time they left, despite it not being that late, and James offered him a lift back to his hostel.

“That’s okay,” Isaac declined. “I could use some fresh air after all that. Besides, walking back gives me a chance to see more of the city.”

“If you’re sure. Do you have a map? London can be confusing at first.”

“I can show him, Dad,” Hannah spoke up. “I’ll just catch the Tube home.”

There was a very definite pause before James answered her. Isaac could tell the hesitation was on account of him, not that he was surprised. Of course the guy wouldn’t be crazy about his daughter spending time alone with a werewolf. But the moment passed and James smiled.

“Yes, it would be good for you two to get to know each other I think.” He said thoughtfully, “In fact, Isaac, why don’t you come to dinner on Tuesday night. Meet the whole family.”

Isaac felt like the ground had just lurched beneath his feet. “What? Oh, I, uh… I wouldn’t want to impose…”

“No trouble at all. I’d say tonight, but if I brought home a werewolf without some warning, it might invite trouble,” James said wryly. Isaac was really starting to like James: he reminded him of Chris a bit, and it was nice that James didn’t try to avoid the fact that Isaac was a werewolf or pretend he wasn’t, the way several of the Baudins had.

They made plans for James to pick him up Tuesday on his way home from work, and then Isaac was alone with Hannah.

“This way, Wolf.” Hannah grinned and deliberately started walking away, turning her back to Isaac. He was definitely starting to think she might be a bit crazy.

He caught up quickly, only having to take one step for every three of hers, and fell into place beside her. She was a full foot shorter than Isaac’s 6’2” (he didn’t even want to try to do the math to hands or whatever weird thing they measured in), but definitely had the whole ‘people-constantly-underestimate-me-and-then-regret-it’ type of thing going on. Even through her coat Isaac could tell she had a great figure, not to mention hunter muscles. After all, you didn’t get through training like that without developing something. Isaac should know. And he’d thought lacrosse had given him definition!

“So, did you get her number?” Isaac asked without specifying, since they both knew who he meant.

“Of course,” Hannah said without a trace of arrogance, like she hadn’t expected anything less. She looked a lot like her dad, Isaac realized. Same dark skin and hair, same casual confidence, but she must have gotten her high cheekbones and dark, almond-shaped eyes from her mom. Hannah accentuated both features with just a subtle touch of make-up, giving her an ‘I’m just naturally this gorgeous’ look. Isaac was always kind of jealous of people who seemed so comfortable in their own skin. “So what’s your story, Wolf?”
“What do you mean?”

“You born or bitten?”

“Bit, about a year ago.”

“We’re taught bitten werewolves have more trouble controlling themselves. You ever kill anyone?”

Isaac looked at her, bemused. “If I had, do you think I woulda been allowed to live, let alone work with hunters?”

“You could have gotten away with it.”

“What, and decided to throw the hunters off my scent by working with them?”

“Hmm, you’re right. Doesn’t really make for a good story. This way.” Hannah made a sudden turn down an alley Isaac hadn’t even noticed. “My school’s just up ahead. I’ll show you around.”

She led Isaac to a giant, old, stone building securely locked behind giant, old, metal gates.

“Nice,” Isaac said, more interested in getting out of the cold than in admiring the admittedly awesome architecture. But the tour wasn’t over. There was a large field behind the school with bleachers set against the fence on the far side.

“Discovered this my first year,” she said, heading towards a pair of dumpsters in an alcove where the fence wasn’t quite as high.

She didn’t give Isaac the chance to protest before climbing on top of a dumpster, grabbing the top of the fence, and hauling herself over, landing gracefully on the other side. She looked back at Isaac through the bars. “Are you coming?”

After jumping the fence, squeezing through an unlocked window, and climbing four flights of stairs, Isaac found himself on the roof of the school with a decent view of London at night.

“This is pretty awesome,” he admitted to Hannah, who was sitting on the guard wall, dangling her feet over the edge. He leaned against the wall beside her and looked out at all the lights.

“I come up here at night when I need to have a think. The lock on the door from the stairwell’s been busted for years. Guess nobody’s thought to check it.”

“You ever been caught?”

She scoffed. “Right. Oh, but if you look just between those two buildings,” she pointed, “you can see fireworks on New Year’s Eve. Tobias and I were up here for them last year. He’s a runaway my Gran took in, and now he’s learning to be a hunter, too. Gran runs a foster home, mostly orphans who are too old to get adopted. She’s also the matriarch. It was her call to bring you in.”

Isaac was having trouble keeping up with Hannah’s rapid-fire commentary. He could barely get a word in, except when she was asking questions.

“So what was it like being raised knowing about all this stuff?” Isaac finally managed to ask a question of his own.

“You mean about werewolves and everything being real? Well, lets just say I believed in Father Christmas far longer than is socially appropriate. When you grow up knowing that the stuff of
nightmares is really out there, nothing seems that unlikely, but once you’re trained to fight it, it’s also not that scary.” Hannah shrugged. “So do the Argents do that whole, see how long you can stand being locked in a pitch black room, thing as initiation?”

“No, they do the whole, tie you to a chair and see how long it takes you to get out, thing.”

“How’d you do?”

“Oh, like ten seconds.” Isaac still laughed when he thought about it. “Woke up tied to the chair and smashed it before I even realized what was going on.”

"Does it count if you didn't know?"

Isaac shrugged, still kinda proud of himself. "Chris said it was good enough. What about you?"

“Made it the full twenty-four hours,” she said, grinning. “Barely.”

“So what, they just lock you in a dark room and leave you?” Isaac said, alarmed. That sounded frighteningly familiar.

Hannah put a gentle hand on his arm and smiled reassuringly. “There’s no danger, and they give you a bell to ring in case you can’t stand it. I came close a few times, but it’s not really so bad once you get over the initial shock of it all.” She was obviously aware of Isaac’s distress, but he appreciated that she didn’t ask him about it.

“That sounds awful.” Isaac shuddered, glad the Argents didn’t do the same thing. He wouldn’t have lasted twenty-four seconds, let alone twenty-four hours.

"To be honest, I'm just grateful there weren't any chairs down there."

"So they made you sit on the floor that whole time? That must’ve been uncomfortable." Isaac tried to mimic Hannah’s deadpan delivery, but couldn’t help smirking.

After exhausting their reservoir of witty repartee (which wasn’t very deep), Hannah declared that she had to get home before her family sent a search party, “And they would, too.” She got him to the main road that would lead him back to an area he was familiar with, and from there he knew how to get back to his hostel. They exchanged numbers and Hannah texted him cool clubs and restaurants and other places he had to check out the whole way back.

The next day Isaac slept as late as he could with the noise of nine other people getting ready for their day over the course of several hours, before deciding to check out some of the most touristy places in the city.

He started at Trafalgar Square, then walked towards the river to see the Eye and Big Ben and Westminster Abbey in the daytime. Went past Buckingham Palace on his way towards Harrods and the various parks and gardens. He took his time, slowly wandering through the city, getting used to the smells and the heartbeat of the city thrumming around him. He ended his tour eating a cheap Tesco sandwich as the sun set, sitting on the ground near the pond in St. James’s Park.

It turned out to be a little too near the pond. It also turned out that he was sitting a little too near a swan’s nest, and also that the surrounding geese were hoping he had more bread crust to share. (In retrospect, maybe it would’ve been a good idea to heed the ‘Please do not feed the birds’ signs.) One minute Isaac was sitting happily in the grass eating his sandwich, and the next he was hightailing it out of the park being pursued by a very big, very loud, very angry swan.
Even after Isaac thought he’d lost it, he didn’t stop running. Experience had taught Isaac that swans could be vindictive sons of bitches, and who knew what lengths a British swan would go to? So Isaac kept running until he ran straight into a completely different vindictive son of a bitch. A slightly taller, less feathered, blond, devastatingly handsome son of a bitch.

“What the fuck?” shouted Jackson as he struggled to get back up to his feet. This was somewhat difficult to accomplish since there was an unnecessarily tall person pinning him to the ground.

“Sorry!” said a familiar voice, and Jackson groaned internally. Seriously?

“Get off me, Lahey,” Jackson growled.

Isaac scrambled to his feet and held his hand out to help Jackson up, but Jackson ignored it and stood up on his own. He brushed off his uniform with his hands as best he could. Isaac was just lucky he hadn’t ripped them in the fall.

“Are you stalking me?” demanded Jackson, making it clear to Isaac that he was not happy to see him.

“No!” insisted Isaac.

“Then how do you explain lurking around a pub near my flat when I’m having dinner and then literally running into me near my school--in a completely different neighborhood, in one of the biggest cities in the world--when I just happen to be on my way home?”

“I…” Isaac held up his hands helplessly. “I don’t know. The first time was intentional, but this time there was a swan, okay?”

“A swan,” said Jackson flatly.

“Yes, a friggin’ swan,” said Isaac. “A big, angry, violent swan!”

“Oh God, you didn’t try to fight it, did you?”

“What? No,” said Isaac, crossing his arms defensively.

“Because you know they’re under the protection of the Queen, right?” said Jackson. “Like, the cops take that shit seriously.”

“...I know,” said Isaac, though he paused for a beat before he said it. “That’s why I didn’t fight it. Obviously.”

“Uh-huh,” said Jackson, unconvinced. “Okay, well, bye.”

“Really?” said Isaac. “Fate brings us together twice and you’re just gonna ditch me?”

“You can’t ditch someone if you’re not hanging out with them in the first place. We--” Jackson prodded Isaac in the chest for emphasis, “--are not hanging out.”

“But we could be,” said Isaac.

“Why would I want to hang out with you?”

“Because you missed me?” Isaac said with what he apparently thought was a winning smile.
“I did not miss you,” said Jackson emphatically.

“Because I’m irresistibly good-looking?”

Jackson snorted.

Isaac tried a different tack. “Because if you have one drink with me now, I will let you leave when we’re done, but if you don’t, I actually will stalk you?”

This was how they ended up in front of Lamb at half-four on a Monday afternoon. Isaac stared at the sign above the pub’s door with open amusement. “Lamb? Seriously? You do know you’re a werewolf, right?”

“Yeah, so?” Jackson pushed the door open, eager to get this over with so he could go home and salvage his evening.

“Isn’t that irony?” said Isaac. “I think it might be irony.”

“Pretty sure it’s not,” Jackson muttered under his breath as he started looking for a table. Of course, Isaac took the booth side.

“Hey, buy me a drink?” he said as he unraveled the ridiculous scarf he was wearing.

“Get your own,” said Jackson. “I assume you’ve got money.”

“Yeah, but they’re always weird about my French ID here. They think it’s fake.”

“It is fake,” Jackson said pointedly, because he was pretty sure Isaac wasn’t eighteen yet either. Isaac was unfazed.

“Yeah, so you see my problem.” Isaac flashed Jackson an infuriatingly sassy smile. “I promise I won’t let anyone take your seat.”

Deciding it wasn’t worth wasting time arguing, Jackson went to the horseshoe-shaped bar and bought two pints. When he returned to the table he set Isaac’s down in front of him hard enough to make it slosh over the side, then sat down across from him.

“All right, we’re having our one drink,” said Jackson. “What do you want?”

“What makes you think I want something?” said Isaac.

“Because you won’t leave me the fuck alone,” said Jackson irritably.

“I just wanted to chat,” said Isaac. “One expat to another.”

Jackson assessed Isaac. If Jackson focused hard enough he would probably be able to hear whether Isaac was lying, but it wasn’t worth the effort.

“Where’s your leather jacket?” said Jackson. “I thought that was like the Hale uniform.”

“Are you bummed out you didn’t get one, too?” said Isaac. “You’re the one who didn’t wanna join the club.”

Jackson’s jaw clenched. He regretted making any reference to Hale, even to make fun of Isaac. Any line of thought that led back to the Hales never ended well for Jackson.
“I like your new look,” said Isaac. “Very Dead Poets Society.”

Jackson ignored the comment about his uniform in favor of glaring at Isaac over the rim of his pint while Isaac innocently took a sip from his own.

“So, what do you miss most about Beacon Hills?” Isaac asked suddenly, setting down his glass.

“No.”

“No, what?”

“We’re not doing that,” said Jackson, tone firm. “We are not going to reminisce about the good old days in Beacon friggin’ Hills that never existed.”

Isaac stared at him skeptically. “You’re telling me there isn’t a single thing, person, or place you miss?”

Jackson snorted. “Why? Can you think of something that didn’t completely suck?”

“I don’t know,” said Isaac. “I mean, once people started noticing that I existed, things were pretty okay.”

That was a nice way of saying that Isaac had gotten bitten by a werewolf, undergone the Hale makeover, and started strut ting around like he owned the place. With that level of subtlety (none), it had been kind of hard not to notice he’d existed. Even with all of the murder and mayhem and emotional turmoil that Isaac wasn’t acknowledging (probably for the best).

“Then why did you leave?” Not that Jackson cared. He was just curious.

“Well… Things got… complicated. I thought I’d try being on my own for a while.” Isaac shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal, but Jackson could tell there was way more to that story than he was letting on.

“So you just decided to become an omega one day? Just like that? Are you insane?”

Isaac picked up his glass with a little salute. “Nothing has been proven, but arguments have been made.” He took a long drink. “It’s not that bad, actually.”

“Being insane?”

“Being an omega. Not having an alpha means I get to do whatever I want, whenever I want. It’s been pretty liberating.”

_Liberating?_ That assessment of life as an omega could not have been farther from the truth of Jackson’s reality.

“Can’t say I really miss it.” Isaac continued, interrupting Jackson’s train of thought.

“What?”

“Being part of a pack. I feel way more comfortable as an omega than I ever did as a beta.”

“Seriously?”
“Seriously. It sounds weird, but...” Isaac looked thoughtful for a second. “I know it’s different for every omega, but I’m alone because I want to be. I’m not exactly in the market right now for a new pack. I’m just good as-is. Derek told me once about this ache he felt after his family died, how lonely he was. I don’t know, I guess our situations are pretty different. Or maybe I don’t have whatever it is that draws werewolves together.”

Jackson couldn’t believe what he was hearing. A werewolf with no pack instincts? He had thought that every werewolf wanted, needed a pack. He thought about how he’d felt before joining Josie’s pack, about how being alone had become torture. He’d sometimes imagined that what he was feeling must be like what an addict’s withdrawal was like. Not needing pack, to Jackson, might as well have been quitting heroin cold turkey.

“So, what, you’ve been alone for months and you’re just fine?”

“Well, I wasn’t totally alone. I was with Chris up until about a month ago.”

Isaac said the name like Jackson was supposed to know who that was, but Jackson couldn’t remember anyone named Chris from Beacon Hills. “Chris?”

“Mr. Argent to you, I guess.”

*Allison’s dad?* Jackson had thought he couldn’t be any more surprised by Isaac’s story. “You’ve been hanging out in France with a hunter?”

“Well, yeah,” Isaac started, talking to Jackson like he was the crazy one. “But you missed a lot. He’s really cool now.”

Since Jackson didn’t even know where to start with responding to Isaac’s assessment of their dead classmate’s dad—who also happened to be a werewolf hunter—as really cool, Jackson opted not to respond at all.

“Anyway,” Isaac continued, “did you find a new pack out here?”

“Yeah,” said Jackson carefully, not sure he wanted to get into it, but Isaac didn’t pry.

“That’s cool.”

“That’s it?” Jackson raised an eyebrow at Isaac, suspicious. “No annoying questions?”

Isaac actually seemed to give it some serious thought before coming back with, “Are they nice?”

Jackson was kind of (pleasantly, he admitted begrudgingly) surprised that that was Isaac’s only question. It was bad enough that his past was catching up with him, but he wasn’t sure what he would do if Isaac tried to get involved in his life in London.


That actually got a laugh out of Isaac. “I’ll bet. Those guys had a lot of issues.”

It was Jackson’s turn to laugh, in spite of himself.

“But,” Isaac continued, “you have to admit, Derek’s not all that bad. Don’t get me wrong, he probably should not have been an alpha, but he’s a pretty good guy.”
"Shouldn't have been?" said Jackson. Isaac had used the past tense.

Isaac looked up from his drink. "Didn't I tell you? Derek's a beta again. He gave up his alpha-ness to save his sister."

Jackson paused for a moment, considering Isaac. He wanted to ask about how someone could 'give up' being an alpha. Jackson hadn't even known that was possible. But his overwhelming desire not to ever talk about or even think about his former alpha again won out.

"Is that why you left?" Jackson asked instead.

"No, I think I was pretty much out of his pack before that happened. He... there were some bad people after him, and he didn't want me to get hurt, so he kicked me out." Isaac took a sip and shrugged. "Of his apartment, anyway. I don't really know if he meant to run us out of his pack."

Jackson really didn't want to keep talking about Beacon Hills, but he would have been lying if he'd said he wasn't a little curious. He'd gotten a few updates from his parents. He'd heard about Allison, and how teenagers from his school kept going missing, and how Stilinski (his parents only knew him as 'the sheriff's son') had been in the friggin' nut-house for a while but seemed to be doing better, and how there had been a series of disturbing murders and his parents were glad they didn't have to worry about him. But Jackson didn't actually know what had been going on. He assumed it was all supernatural-related, but there wasn't really anyone he could ask for details.

"So is he--" Jackson struggled to say the name through gritted teeth. "--is Derek an omega, then, too?"

"I don't know. He might be part of Scott's pack."

Hang on. McCall? An alpha? That pathetic little nobody who was barely literate and couldn't even throw a lacrosse ball two feet before he'd gotten on wereoids was an alpha now? How was that even remotely fair? Jackson bristled.

Isaac must have sensed Jackson's anger because he made himself scarce, mumbling something about finding the loo (with an exaggerated accent), and leaving before Jackson could tell him that nobody except girls in their teens and twenties really called it that here.

By the time Isaac got back, Jackson had calmed down again. Let McCall have his Beacon Hills pack. Good for him. Jackson was just glad he'd left before he'd had to watch it happen. Being a beta was rough enough sometimes. He couldn't even imagine what it would've been like if he'd had to stick around and be Hale's beta, let alone McCall's.

Jackson sighed forcefully, trying to push the thought out of his head entirely. "So, what was with all the weird murders a few months back?" Not a great topic change, but Isaac seemed relieved.

"I had already left by then, but I guess there was some supernatural deadpool; a list putting a bounty every werewolf, banshee, kitsune, and every other supernatural creature in Beacon Hills, which I guess is now literally a beacon thanks to the thing with the Darach and the Nemeton."

Isaac blinked. "Wow, you really have missed a lot."

Jackson thought that sounded like a massive understatement, but refrained from commenting.

A half hour passed without Isaac or Jackson finishing the last few sips of beer in their respective glasses. Jackson was convinced that Isaac was doing it just to draw things out and annoy Jackson, but for his own part, Jackson… Well, Jackson didn't want to leave yet.
Finally, Jackson made himself swallow the last of his beer, which was unpleasantly warm after sitting there untouched for so long. He thought he saw a flash of disappointment cross Isaac’s face when Jackson set his empty glass back on the table and got up. Isaac moved to stand, too, but Jackson put his hand on Isaac’s shoulder and pushed him back down into the chair.

“Another pint?” said Jackson, deliberately casual about it.

Isaac smiled and nodded eagerly. “Strongbow?”

“You have terrible taste,” said Jackson. “Fine. You’re buying the next one, though.”

Jackson noted that Isaac did not agree to his terms, but he got the drinks anyway.

They didn’t talk about Beacon Hills after that. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement between them that they wouldn’t. Isaac told Jackson about France and about living with Chris and what French werewolves and hunters were like. Isaac asked Jackson questions without prodding or being nosy. He asked about Jackson’s school, his flat, what the werewolves were like in London, and Jackson answered him without really thinking about it. And he couldn’t even credit that to alcohol since they were werewolves so they couldn’t get drunk. It was just Isaac and Jackson being completely different people in a completely different context, and it worked like it never would’ve back home (if Beacon Hills could even be called home to either of them anymore).

In a way, Jackson felt like he was meeting Isaac for the first time. On the outside, he was basically the same, though a little more muscular and with shorter hair. But everything else was new: the confidence in his voice, his strong posture, the way he held his head up and made eye contact almost too intensely, where he used to look down and away and curl in on himself. Same appearance, same name. The rest was gone. Jackson wondered if Isaac thought Jackson was that different, too.

“I should go,” said Jackson, just after seven. He still needed to get home and eat something and finish his homework before bed. “School tomorrow.”

Isaac scoffed. “So responsible!”

“Some of us want to be able to go to college.”

“One of us,” corrected Isaac after downing the last of his drink. “I don’t want to.”

“Never?” said Jackson skeptically, grabbing his coat and heading for the door.

“Why would I?” said Isaac as he followed suit. “It’s not like I have like, a career plan or anything.”

Jackson figured that was probably true. Clearly Isaac didn’t care about school. “What are you doing in London, anyway? Aside from stalking me, that is.”

Outside the temperature had plummeted, making Jackson seriously consider going back inside for another drink rather than walk home just yet. He didn’t live that far away, but still.

Isaac smirked secretively. “Do I really need another reason?”

Jackson rolled his eyes for what felt like the thousandth time that night, which made Isaac laugh. “I’m working, actually. Doing research.”

“What, are you writing an epic Doctor Who fanfiction or something?” Jackson drawled.
“Definitely ‘or something.’ Maybe if you agree to have another drink with me some time I’ll tell you.”

“You are seriously overestimating how interested I am in your life, Lahey.”

“I’ll pay?”

“You already owe me one from tonight.”

“Then I’ll buy you two. And I’ll forget to give you shit about your familiarity with Doctor Who fanfiction.”

Jackson snorted. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“So is that a yes?” Isaac asked hopefully.

Even though Jackson didn’t understand why Isaac was trying so hard, part of him didn’t actually mind.

“Well, I’m not sure you understand ‘No’…”

“Friday night. Someone was telling me about a cool place in Soho.”

“There are cool places in Soho?” said Jackson, skeptical.

There were only ‘cool’ places in Soho for people who wanted to pay ten pounds for a drink and not be able to hear themselves think, let alone hear other people talk. Plus there were a shit ton of tourists. But somehow Jackson knew that explaining the logic of this would have no effect on Isaac.

“I don’t know, but we can find out,” Isaac said cheerily. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“How? You don’t even know where I live.”

“I’m sure a nice swan will show me the way,” said Isaac, taking a few steps backward at first so he could grin at Jackson before he turned around and headed toward the main street.

“Well, that, or you really are stalking me,” Jackson called after him.

“Looking forward to it!” said Isaac. He threw his hand up with a ‘peace-out’ sign as he strolled merrily away.

Jackson stared blankly after him, completely at a loss.

Who the fuck was that, and what had he done with Isaac Lahey?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! We’ve gotten really positive responses so far and can’t wait to see what you all think of where the fic is headed :D

Lenna and Savannah
Warm Day, Cold War

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THREE: WARM DAY, COLD WAR (Bronze Radio Return)

Cold enemies look like warmer friends.
If they don’t, let’s pretend.
Hey, we’ve all got some rules to bend.

After a surprisingly uneventful day, James picked Isaac up for dinner at the Bristows’. Isaac had no idea what to expect, but he was still somehow shocked.

Bristow Manor was straight out of a movie. James drove up the dirt drive, past rows of stately trees and a perfectly manicured lawn, right up to the front of a freaking stone castle. And Isaac had thought the Argents’ chateau in Nice was impressive. Okay, so it wasn’t quite a castle, but still, he felt underdressed walking into the marble foyer. A large, scarred shield hung over a second set of
doors and between two sweeping staircases. Several deep gouges in the steel made determining the
crest impossible, but the motto emblazoned along the edges read, ‘lux in tenebris lucet.’

All the stone and marble should have felt cold and unwelcoming, but somehow it all seemed warm
and inviting. The manor felt lived in, the way a home should, Isaac thought. The room just past the
foyer was a modest size, and Isaac wondered if this was the type of room Jackson would have
called a sitting room. There was furniture from every era of the last hundred years and the floor
was a collage of mismatched rugs, with more thoughts given to comfort than style. Several vases
were filled with the same purple flowers he had noticed growing in beds along the perimeter of the
house and up the outer walls like ivy. Isaac absently rubbed his nose.

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house and up the outer walls like ivy. Isaac absently rubbed his nose.
the Argents have done.”

Isaac couldn’t remember exactly how long that had been, but he knew it was a while.

“When we realized we could not have children of our own, my husband and I opened our home to those who needed one; orphans, like James here.” Pol and James shared a warm smile that made Isaac glance away awkwardly, feeling like he was intruding on something personal. It also reminded him of what he didn’t have.

“I am the last of my bloodline, Isaac,” Pol said, regaining his attention a moment later, “but I could not let my family’s tradition of protection end with me. Not all of the children I have adopted or fostered over the years, however, have become hunters, although they have all been made aware of exactly what is out there: the monsters that extend beyond mere fantasy.”

“Like werewolves,” Isaac said wryly.

Pol smiled. “Among other things.”

“So,” Isaac started hesitantly, “you let them choose if they want to become hunters? You don’t make them?”

“My late husband was a good man, and a good father, but a terrible hunter.” Her smile became more gentle. “I trained my whole life to shoulder the responsibility of leadership and protect this city from dangers most people will never even know exist. I would never force someone to follow the same path. However, no child who passes through these halls leaves afraid of the dark. They are taught exactly what is out there and they know how to defend themselves against it.”

Isaac could see the sense in that; better to be safe than blissfully ignorant. Even if there had been times that he wished he didn’t know about all the nightmares that were really out there, joining the Loyal Order of Werewolves was probably the only reason he was still alive.

Pol stood up, causing James to rise and Isaac to scramble to his feet a moment later. “Now, Isaac, you should meet the rest of the family. I have a few more things to take care of before dinner.”

“Uh, great. I mean, it was great meeting you,” Isaac said as he was being nudged by James towards the door.

After James closed the door gently behind them, he smiled at Isaac. “There, that wasn’t so bad.”

Isaac silently admitted that it could have gone much worse, but figured the rest of the evening would be all downhill from there. In an easy way, not a bad way. He hoped.

“Would you like to meet the kids?”

Kids? Great. Isaac had jinxed himself.

James led him across the sitting room and Isaac found himself in a joint living room/dining room filled with kids. Isaac was bad at guessing ages, but the three playing video games seemed to be either early teens or preteens, and aside from one moody kid in the corner listening to music who appeared to be only a year or two younger than Isaac, the rest were younger, a variety of ages with the littlest one only a baby. A couple of the younger ones, a boy and a girl, noticed James and Isaac walk in. They watched the stranger (Isaac) curiously, just old enough to be wary but not shy.

James cleared his throat meaningfully. “Children, attention please.” They quieted down much
faster than Isaac would have thought possible. “This is Isaac. He’s the werewolf I told you all would be working with us on a case.”

Isaac felt the weight of their collective attention shift to him. He raised a hand in an awkward greeting. “Hi.”

He smelled some fear but more curiosity. Nothing like Hannah’s wild excitement the first time they’d met, though. Maybe Pol’s philosophy of teaching the kids early on about monsters was a good idea. The older ones in particular seemed less worried about a werewolf in their home than he would’ve thought they’d be.

“He’ll be around for several weeks,” James continued. “I hope that you will all treat him as you would any guest.”

Sensing that the introduction was over, most of the kids returned to their activities. The only one who didn’t was the teenager in the corner. He continued to stare at Isaac, sizing him up, judging him. Isaac’s wolf side wanted to take it as a challenge, but before he could decide how to react, Isaac felt a tug on his sleeve. It was the little girl who had first noticed him.

After a quick glance at James to make sure it was okay, he knelt down so he was closer to her eye level. She was tiny in a small-for-her-age kind of way, with long auburn hair and green eyes. “Hi, what’s your name?”

“Annie.” She regarded him curiously, clearly not sure if she was supposed to be scared of him or not, before glancing back at the blond boy she’d been playing with. “Grayson wants to know if your teeth fall out when your fangs grow in.”

Isaac tried not to shudder at the idea of his teeth falling out every time he grew fangs, and smiled slowly in what he hoped was a nonthreatening way. “See. Normal teeth. I don’t know what happens when my fangs come out, actually. That’s a very good question, though. Maybe some time you and Grayson can help me figure it out?”

Annie nodded, suddenly shy, and ran back to Grayson and started whispering in his ear. Isaac stood up and realized that James had disappeared, leaving him alone in a room of hunter kids. Not totally alone, he realized; there was a middle-aged woman keeping an eye on the baby while working on a laptop at the biggest dining room table Isaac had ever seen. Twenty people could have easily fit with room to spare.

The woman seemed to be intentionally ignoring him; Isaac didn’t think she’d looked at him while James had given his introduction, either. But before he could do more than consider going over to introduce himself, another woman came bustling in with a stack of plates. “Taylor, Petra, come set the table, it’s your night.” The video game was immediately paused as two of the preteens, a black boy and an Middle Eastern girl, jumped up and ran to help. How well behaved were these kids? Isaac couldn’t remember him or his brother ever literally running to do chores growing up. Maybe it was because they were foster kids.

“You made it,” Hannah said, suddenly hugging him, “and you’re still in one piece. Well, the night’s still young. How d’you like the family so far?”

Isaac recovered from his surprise and returned the quick hug. He’d never had hugging friends before. Usually they’d been a little too busy stopping whatever emergency had come up for hugs during greetings. It was nice. “They all seem nice. And Pol seemed to like me, so that’s good.”
“Well, of course she does! You’re very likable.” Hannah swept Isaac over to the couch, where she was immediately approached by the cutest little kid Isaac had ever seen. Big chocolate eyes set in a chubby, caramel colored face peered up at Hannah.

“Han! Fwowers!” said the little girl, thrusting her tiny fists at Hannah, which were overflowing with more of the purple flowers.

“All right, Maya.” Hannah said, scooping up the little girl onto her lap. She looked at Isaac as she began braiding Maya’s dark, wavy hair. “She likes when I braid the flowers in.”

Isaac sneezed and rubbed his nose again, smiling. “Adorable.”

Hannah handed him a tissue from the side table. “Allergies?”

“Not sure. Can werewolves have allergies?”

Hannah made a face and held up one of the flowers. “They can if they’re exposed to wolfsbane. I didn’t even think about it. It grows all over the place around here. Gran’s family planted fields of the stuff as a deterrent. Now we use it for decoration because it’s pretty.”

Isaac sneezed again, making Maya giggle while Hannah worked on the braids. “I’ll be okay, as long as I don’t eat the stuff, I think. Wait, isn’t it poisonous for humans, too?”

“Yeah, but supposedly this variety isn’t as toxic for us. The family have been breeding it to be less harmful to humans and more potent against werewolves. We definitely shouldn’t eat it, either, but it’ll all right to keep around the house and have near your clothes and all that.”

Isaac nodded his understanding. Smart of the hunters to improve a weapon like that: making it safer for them and more dangerous for their enemies. It made the werewolf part of him nervous, but the hunter part of him was impressed.

A sudden presence loomed over them. “’annah, can I ‘ave a word?”

It was the sullen kid from before. Up close, Isaac could tell by his blond eyebrows that his black hair came out of a bottle, and since he was wearing a black hoodie, jeans, and boots, Isaac wanted to recommend some black nail polish and eyeliner to complete the look.

“Tobias, have you met Isaac?” Hannah asked coolly as she finished braiding Maya’s hair.

The question was met with a glare. “Can I talk to you in the ‘all?”

Hannah sighed and gently lowered the girl in her lap to the floor. “Don’t forget to wash your hands, darling,” Hannah said to Maya as an afterthought before turning back to Isaac to explain: “It’ll still irritate our skin if we hold it too long.”

Maya obediently rushed from the room to obey, skipping happily with the purple flowers adorning her braided hair.

Hannah brushed her hands off on her jeans before following Tobias out of the room, rolling her eyes at Isaac.

Werewolf hearing could be very inconvenient sometimes; fire drills at school had gone from annoying to painful and nerve wracking, not to mention the times that Chris had woken him up
using sonic emitters. But that didn’t mean it couldn’t be useful, too. Isaac had never been a particularly nosey person, but when someone was clearly talking about him, he enjoyed having an easy way of finding out what they were saying.

“What’s your dad thinkin’, eh?” His accent was much thicker than Hannah’s, possibly because he was upset, possibly because Hannah tried to sound more posh. “Invitin’ a bloody wolf into our ‘ouse--”

“That ‘bloody wolf’ is my friend, so watch yourself, Toby.”

“But you don’t know anythin’ about ‘im.”

“We know he’s trusted by the Baudins and the Argents--”

Tobias made a rude noise. “There’s only one Argent left. Not exactly a ringin’ endorsement.”

Isaac couldn’t help think that while not technically true, Chris didn’t deny the rumors that his whole family was dead. It was definitely easier than explaining the truth about how nuts his dad and sister were.

“You questioning Granny Pol, then?” The dark tone of Hannah’s voice brought Isaac back to the conversation taking place on the other side of the door. “It was her decision to bring him in on this, after all.”

A brief silence hung between them. When Tobias finally spoke again, his voice was a lot less hostile. “I’m just sayin’ you don’t know ‘im. So watch your back.”

“Toby, look, I’d say I appreciate your concern, but I really don’t. This is an amazing opportunity to put hundreds of years of hostility behind us, plus you can’t tell me you’re not even a little curious about him.”

“The only thing I’m curious about is ‘ow long till ‘e tries to kill one of us.”

Tobias must have stomped off after that because Hannah came back a moment later alone.

“Trouble in paradise?” Isaac asked, trying to lighten the mood and pretend he hadn’t been listening.

“Tobias is just… opinionated,” Hannah said, flopping down onto the couch beside him. “He’s got this thing against werewolves.”

Isaac raised an eyebrow. “You mean more than the usual thing hunters have against werewolves?”

“It’s personal for him.” Hannah shrugged, clearly not wanting to talk about it any more. Luckily for both of them, a moment later a call of “Dinner’s ready!” came from the general vicinity of the dining room and they were swept up in the tidal wave of kids heading that direction.

Isaac quickly realized that nothing in his life had ever prepared him for a large family dinner.

It was like something from an old-timey TV show or movie. They all sat around an enormous table piled high with dishes, every setting had a placemat, and underneath everything was an honest-to-god tablecloth.

The closest experience he’d ever had was one year when he was little, they’d spent Thanksgiving
with his grandparents. He’d been so young he didn’t remember much aside from his dad packing him and his brother up in the car and driving all night. Thanksgiving itself had taken place in a hazy gingerbread house with lace doilies icing every surface and so much food he’d stuffed himself until he was sick. To this day he still couldn’t eat pumpkin pie.

But that was five people. This was fifteen, sixteen including himself.

Pol sat at the head of the table with James on her right and Isaac on her left. Hannah provided a buffer on his other side, between him and the rest of the family, with the kids all the way down at the other end. Isaac couldn’t be sure if that was because of him or if that was just where they typically ate.

Wendy, the stern brunette who had carefully ignored him earlier, was sitting on James’s other side, still carefully ignoring Isaac. He learned that, although James was the first child that Pol had adopted almost forty years ago, Wendy was the oldest of all her kids and therefore the future matriarch of the family.

Of the four new adults he met, Nina, the woman who seemed to be in charge of wrangling the kids, was the nicest, but even she was clearly wary of him. She and James asked him questions throughout dinner while the others chatted around them or listened. The other two adults were George and Chandra, a young married couple. Maya and the baby, Leela, belonged to them. They were quiet all through dinner, seemingly content to exchange uncomfortable glances whenever Isaac spoke, rather than attempt to interact with him.

Isaac really couldn’t fault any of them for being nervous. They had pretty much literally invited a wolf into the hen house; they couldn’t trust how good Isaac’s control was or that he wouldn’t go postal just because some other hunters vouched for him. Isaac had known he was walking into a prejudiced environment from the start, but that didn’t make it any easier or less uncomfortable.

Tobias, down by the kids, glared at him the whole night, sullen and resentful. Isaac had never smelled pure, absolute hatred before, but he was inclined to think it smelled quite a bit like whatever was rolling off Tobias in waves. The rest of the kids didn’t seem to care that there was a werewolf sitting at the table, though, because they were as loud and energetic as they’d been earlier, just confined a bit and happily stuffing their faces.

Hannah was the one who noticed his ring. “Isn’t it a little strange for a werewolf to be wearing silver?”

Isaac slipped it off to let her have a better look. “Actually, Chris gave it to me. Said if I ever got into trouble with hunters when he wasn’t around, I should show them this if I could. Might buy me some time, if nothing else.” It was just a simple flat silver band etched with a stylized ‘A’ and an arrow on either side. “That was before I started working with the Baudins.”

At that, Wendy finally looked at Isaac, as if only just realizing he was there. Her sharp blue eyes locked on him and he suddenly understood the expression ‘deer in headlights,’ because he utterly froze, even before she started talking.

“And what kind of work, exactly, did you do for the Baudins?”

She spoke slowly and quietly, probably knowing that Isaac could hear her perfectly, even over the roar of the kids at the other end of the table.

Suddenly this dinner felt like a test.
Isaac kind of hated tests. Like, a lot.

“Well,” Isaac began, slipping his ring back on. “It depended on the case, but mostly I provided a fresh perspective.”

“Which is exactly what we need.” Pol spoke up sharply.

There were no more questions after that. James and Hannah were able to keep the conversation flowing smoothly while everyone finished eating, but when Nina brought out dessert, Isaac politely declined and said he needed to be getting back. He offered to help clean up, but nobody would hear of it, and a few minutes later Hannah was walking him to the door.

“So what was the occasion?” Isaac asked, tying his scarf. “Or is it always like that?”

Hannah laughed. “Believe it or not, that was a pretty quiet dinner. You should see breakfast, though. Now that’s a mess! Everybody running in and out getting ready for school and work? I don’t know how Nina manages this lot. Dad says you'll be spending a few more dinners with us while you're here?”

Isaac was getting used to Hannah’s abrupt topic changes. “Yeah, he mentioned that earlier. He was nice about it, but it didn't really seem like a request. It’s okay, though. Should give me a chance to prove to your family that I’m not an insane, slobbering demon.”

“ Noticed that, did you? They’re not exactly the most understanding.”

“Can’t really blame them, though. I mean, you guys do protect people from some pretty crazy, supernatural stuff. Better safe than sorry, I get it, even if it makes me nervous to be on the side of the crazy, supernatural stuff.”

Hannah shot him a dazzling smile. “At least you’ve got me to protect you, Wolf. See you in a couple of days.”

Isaac’s relief stayed with him the whole way back to his hostel. It hadn’t been perfect, but he’d still classify the evening as a success. Even the confusing train lines couldn’t put him in a bad mood. And then he smelled wolf.

A tall man in a scarf and cap was leaning against the stoop leading up to Isaac’s hostel in an overly casual way, smoking a cigarette. Isaac was going to take his chances and try walking past him, until the man spoke and stopped him in his tracks.

“Well, well, so you’re the wolf runnin’ ‘round in our territory, eh?” The guy—werewolf Isaac corrected himself—took a long drag as he looked Isaac up and down appraisingly.

Isaac took a slow, deep breath, but all he caught was the stench of unfiltered cigarette. He couldn’t tell if there were any other werewolves in the area. Isaac maintained a bored look but shifted his weight forward just a bit, better to defend himself if it came to that. The other wolf didn’t seem to notice or didn’t find Isaac enough of a threat to be bothered. He pushed off of the railing and circled Isaac, sizing him up while maintaining a cautious distance. Isaac turned his head to keep an eye on him, but otherwise didn’t make a move.

“Not much more than an overgrown pup, I’d say. So maybe you don’t know the rules,” he said as he finished his inspection, stopping just in front of Isaac.

Isaac locked down his emotions the way Chris had taught him and deliberately met the other
 Isaacs’ stare. Externally, Isaac would seem calm; he focused on keeping his pulse steady and his emotions in check. There would be time to be angry with himself later. How could he have been so stupid? He knew London was divided between something like half a dozen packs; why hadn’t he thought to get permission before setting up shop? He didn’t even know whose territory it was. Probably whichever pack this guy belonged to, but somehow it would’ve felt rude to ask.

“Usually, we don’t mind tourists, so long as they don’t make themselves too comfortable, but it seems like you’ve been ‘angin’ out with a bad crowd. Spendin’ a bit too much time with ‘unters, as it were, and see… Well, that makes us just a titch nervous.”

Behind him, two more guys came out of the hostel. “You seem like a good lad, though, so we’ll let you off with a warning.” The wolf flashed his gold eyes. “Welcome to London. Now get the ‘ell out of our territory, omega.” He said it like a dirty word, like it was the filthiest insult he could come up with.

Isaac maintained his utter stillness while the three brushed past him. He didn’t even look at them, trying to act like they weren’t enough of a threat to be worth it, when actually one look was all it would take to make his control waver.

Isaac knew that his control was fantastic for such a young wolf, even better than some born-wolves he’d met, but these guys… They had riled him. Looking down on him like that. Like he was nothing. Like he was worse than nothing.

His teeth and fingernails itched. He felt like picking a fight, but he knew that would be a horrible idea.

He let himself growl quietly once, then took a deep breath. Whatever, tonight he would go inside, get a good night’s sleep, and find somewhere new to stay tomorrow. Isaac liked an unfair fight as much as the next guy, but Chris’s lessons were finally starting to sink in and he was learning to pick his battles more carefully.

So he went inside, brushing past several loud college kids on holiday, and held his breath past a few dirty backpackers on the way to his room. As soon as he saw the crowd of people with concerned faces standing around the doorway to his room, though, he knew he wouldn’t even be able to sleep here tonight.

Jackson had been having such a nice evening until his phone rang. When he picked it up he saw, to his surprise, Isaac’s name--with less-than-three next to it?--and a selfie of him with a devious smirk, clearly taken in Lamb, most likely when Jackson had been getting drinks or in the bathroom. Jackson stared at it blankly for a few seconds. Seriously, who the hell was this guy?

Jackson grumbled “Sneaky bastard” to himself and made a mental note not to leave his phone unattended (or unlocked, for that matter) in the future, then accepted the call.

“What,” said Jackson shortly. Because sneaky bastards didn’t deserve polite hellos.

“What do you want, Lahey?” said Jackson, trying to sound unconcerned. Given this New-and-Maybe-Not-So-Improved Isaac’s unpredictability, for all Jackson knew he was just being fucked with.

“How much do you know about pack territories in London?”
"Why?" Jackson asked, suspicious.

"I'm looking for a new hostel. Maybe one that isn't in somebody's territory."

Well, shit. Jackson was intimately familiar with the dangers of being an omega in another pack’s territory.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," said Isaac, a little too quickly. "A few betas tried to pick a fight, but I didn't give them the satisfaction and they left. After they trashed my bed. The hostel manager was cool about it, but I can't stay there anymore."

Jackson groaned. This was one of the many reasons why he’d been happy to leave Beacon Hills behind: the place and almost everyone from there were an inconvenience to Jackson at best. Isaac had only been in London for a few days and already the kid was turning out to be a magnet for trouble. Swans, Isaac could probably handle without Jackson’s help. Angry werewolves from rival packs were another story. As much as Jackson didn’t want to get involved, things would be a lot worse in the long run if a wolf associated with Jackson got hurt by a London pack.

"I was just wondering if maybe you knew someplace else I could stay where I wouldn't piss anyone off?" Isaac continued.

Jackson considered the layout of the London packs, or at least what he could remember from what Rodger and Josie had told him beyond ‘Don’t go here after sunset’ and ‘Don’t go there ever.’ There were a few areas Isaac would probably be able to stay no problem, but nowhere that would be easy to get to or necessarily available at--he glanced at his watch--ten o'clock at night.

He knew what he should do, but it was still a struggle to force out the words:

"You can stay at mine tonight," he muttered between clenched teeth. "Just tonight. I'll text you the address."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. "...I don't know if that’s a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you say you live in your pack's territory? Won't they care about an omega hanging out?"

So the guy actually did have a brain hiding somewhere in his head.

"It's one night. Nowhere's going to be open anyway."

"But--"

"Show up or don't. I really don't care."

Jackson hung up and texted Isaac his address. Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at his door.

"Wow. This place is really nice," was the first thing Isaac said when he walked inside and dropped his lacrosse duffle by the couch. He was practically gaping.

Jackson glanced around. Sure, the flat was pretty nice, but it wasn’t open-mouthed-stare-worthy nice. Was it?

Isaac looked outwardly calm, but when Jackson listened carefully he could hear that Isaac’s pulse
was slightly elevated, and that his eyes darted around a bit more than someone who was relaxed. He was on his guard. As soon as Jackson noticed this, he recognized it as something he associated with the Isaac he’d known back in Beacon Hills: an ever-present nervousness, a skittishness, like someone was always about to jump out and scare him. Like someone was always about to hit him...

“We’re in my pack’s territory,” said Jackson, by way of a reassurance. “Other wolves won’t come here.”

“Pack territories,” said Isaac, frowning. “I forgot about that shit. In Paris they only care if you attack somebody. Otherwise it’s all sex and cigarettes and being annoyed about tourists. Oh, and sometimes tennis.”

Jackson snorted. “Please tell me you didn’t start smoking.”

“Hey, I know I’m pretty damned cool and all, and I can’t get lung cancer, but that doesn’t mean I wanna smell like an ashtray. Plus Chris probably would’ve gotten pissy about it.”

“Your leather jacket phase was James Dean enough already,” said Jackson. “Good call getting rid of it.”

“Oh, I still have it. Chicks dig it. And dudes.” The corner of Isaac’s mouth turned up when he said it, but the smile was forced, and his voice was a little tight.

Movement caught Jackson’s eye, and when he glanced down he saw Isaac fidgeting nervously with a silver band on his right middle finger. Jackson wasn’t sure if it was new or if he just hadn’t noticed it before now.

“Well, don’t wear the jacket around me,” said Jackson. “I refuse to be seen with you wearing it.”

Isaac’s smile was more natural this time. “But you don’t mind being seen with me in general?”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Don’t push it, Lahey.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Isaac, genuinely smiling now, in an obnoxiously mock-innocent way.

“Right, well, you can have the couch. There’s a blanket. Just so you know, it gets cold at night.”

“I’ll deal,” said Isaac, and Jackson nearly laughed at him. The guy had no idea.

“Shower takes a minute to heat up. You have to flip the switch in the hall first and there’s a button.”

“Okay.”

“I’m gonna sleep,” said Jackson. “School tomorrow.”

“Cool,” said Isaac. Jackson turned to head for his bedroom, but Isaac spoke again from behind him. “Jackson?”

“What?” said Jackson, not bothering to turn around to face Isaac again.

“Thanks.”

Jackson didn’t know what to say to that, so he sort of shrugged in acknowledgement, then went to his bedroom and shut the door behind him.
By the time Jackson got out of the shower the next morning, the coffee had just finished brewing and the second omelette was the perfect shade of yellow with just a slightly browned crisp to it.

Isaac kind of enjoyed the confused look on Jackson’s face when he came out of the bathroom, hair still dripping water. “Oh good, just in time.”

Isaac had woken up when the water had started. Remembering from lacrosse that Jackson was one of those people who took insanely long showers, he had used the time to scrounge around Jackson’s practically empty kitchen for something to make for breakfast. The coffee maker was the only appliance that seemed to see frequent use, so Isaac threw on a pot. He’d found a half carton of eggs, butter, and cheese that were all before the sell date, and decided omelettes sounded good.

“For what?” Jackson was wearing a bathrobe, Isaac noticed, which he somehow managed to make look cool and attractive. But that second adjective wasn’t really a surprise. Jackson could make anything look attractive, that was just who he was; part of his undeniable charm.

Isaac gestured to the kitchen island with the spatula. “Sit.” He was amused by the hesitant way Jackson obeyed, like he wasn’t sure if he was still dreaming or not.

Isaac set down a cheesy omelette and a mug of coffee in front of Jackson.

“What’s this?”

“Breakfast.” Isaac shrugged. “Best I could do with what you had. I might be grateful to you for letting me stay, but it is way too early and cold to run to the store.”

Jackson just stared at the plate like he had no idea what to do with it.

“It’s food,” Isaac prompted as he sat down next to Jackson with a plate of his own, “you eat it. You may look like a Greek god, but I know for a fact you eat just like everyone else.”

“You didn’t have to cook for me,” Jackson said, almost petulantly, like Isaac making breakfast was some kind of implication that he couldn’t do it himself.

Isaac just shrugged as he started eating. “I know. I just wanted to. And I like breakfast. It would have been pretty shitty of me to make breakfast for myself and not my host, right?”

Jackson didn’t seem to have an argument for that and cautiously started eating. Isaac hid his smirk by taking another bite, appreciating (not for the first time) how much different Jackson seemed now.

Where were the ‘I’m better than everyone’ looks and the casual disregard for other people? It was like Isaac had stepped into some Twilight Zone-y alternate universe, where Jackson was British (except without the accent, to make it even weirder) and not an asshole. Well, he was still an asshole, but not a hostile asshole. And that made a surprisingly big difference. Isaac had never really been around Jackson and not felt at least a little nervous or insecure before London. Before, Jackson had given off a vibe like he was a volcano that could be set off by the slightest tremor. Now… Now he felt, for lack of a better word, safer. There was still lava in there, but you could probably go for a hike…

Okay, so Isaac wasn’t good at metaphors. The point was, Isaac felt for the first time like he could relax around Jackson. Maybe it was a bad idea to let down his guard (think about Pompeii and Mount St. Helens), but it was also really nice.
The strangest thing was that, all things considered, eating breakfast with Jackson seemed kind of... *normal* somehow. They had never even come remotely close to eating lunch together in the cafeteria, but somehow Isaac felt that if this version of Jackson had been in Beacon Hills, they might have. Isaac wondered if maybe he could like this version of Jackson instead of just admiring and envying him.

But first Isaac needed to make sure he didn’t wear out his welcome.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again so much for reading! Sorry about the few days’ delay; Lenna genuinely just forgot to post after a long week. You guys have been so great and we continue to be excited about what you think as the story progresses :D

Lenna and Savannah
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CHAPTER FOUR: UNTouched (The Veronicas)

I feel so untouched
d and I want you so much
that I just can’t resist you.

Breakfast was… good. It was nice having a hot meal in the morning, especially since Jackson would never make one for himself. The last time someone had made him breakfast had been when he’d spent the full moon with his pack. Eva had been getting the twins ready for school, and had made an extra portion for Jackson.

But this was different. Even though Isaac tried to shrug it off, he had made breakfast specifically
for Jackson, in Jackson’s kitchen. And it was actually pretty decent. Jackson never would’ve guessed that Isaac could make much more than a bowl of cereal, let alone proper food.

So far, Isaac had been a surprisingly okay houseguest.

“Shit,” said Jackson, seeing the time on the microwave. “I gotta get ready for school.”

He dumped his empty plate in the sink and grabbed his half-finished mug of coffee before heading to the bedroom.

“Can I use your computer?” Isaac called after him.

Jackson paused in the doorway to his bedroom and hesitated for just a few seconds too long. A person’s computer was kind of a private thing these days, after all.

Isaac rolled his eyes. “Come on, it’s not like I’m going to look for your porn stash.”

“No one has a ‘porn stash’ anymore now that there’s reliable streaming.” Jackson managed to deliver the sentence deadpan, but nearly cracked a smile when Isaac laughed. Having food and coffee waiting for him had turned out to be an effective boost to Jackson’s mood.

“I just figured I should start looking for a new place to live,” explained Isaac.

“Do what you want. It’s on the desk.”

Jackson got ready in record time. The one good thing about uniforms was that he never had to think about what he was going to wear.

"So I think I want to rent a room for the month,” Isaac called out. “Seems like it’ll probably be cheaper in the long run than a hostel or a hotel or something. What do you know about Brixton?"

When Jackson went back into the living room to grab his books, Isaac was sitting comfortably at Jackson’s desk, browsing flat listings.

"There’s a reason there’s a song called ‘Guns of Brixton,’” said Jackson. “The pack there is kind of still obsessed with the riots in the Eighties. Insanely territorial.”

"Okay, what about Camden?"

Jackson snorted. “Well, your leather jacket would fit right in.”

“Battersea?”

“The pack there split last year and the two halves hate each other. You don’t want to get in the middle of that.”

Isaac sighed deeply. "Is there anyplace in London where I'm not going to piss someone off?"

Knowing you? Unlikely.”

“Where am I supposed to live, then?”

Jackson didn’t have time for this.

“Move,” he said shortly, walking over to the desk. Isaac slid out of the chair easily but stayed close
as Jackson sat down.

“You see these areas?” Jackson pointed to several places on the map of London Isaac had pulled up. “Avoid them. And here,” he said, remembering another territory. “And don’t waste your time looking at anything past the city limits. The commute will kill you.”

“Because I’ll have to travel through somebody’s territory?” Isaac asked, leaning against the back of the chair so he could look over Jackson’s shoulder. Loom over was more appropriate, Jackson amended. The guy was practically on top of him.

Jackson stood up abruptly, forcing Isaac to take a quick step back.

“No,” said Jackson as he grabbed his notebooks off the desk, “because it’s a long freaking commute.” He threw the notebooks in his backpack and turned around. He was surprised that Isaac was still standing right there.

“I really appreciate all this,” Isaac said sincerely. “It’s not like you have any reason to help me, and probably a lot of reasons not to, actually.”

Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. “Is there a point to this?”

Isaac shrugged. “Just that I owe you one, Whittemore.”

“You owe me a lot more than ‘one’.”

“I helped save your life back in Beacon Hills. Does that count for anything?” There was that cheeky grin again. Jackson couldn’t decide if it was annoying or amusing.

“Was that before or after I was declared legally dead?” said Isaac flatly.

“I’m going to take that as a maybe,” said Isaac, reaching for Jackson’s collar, presumably to straighten it (which Jackson already knew needed to be done). Jackson swatted his hand away.

“I have a mirror, thanks,” he said irritably.

“You sure?” asked Isaac with a pointed look at Jackson’s hair. Before Jackson could object, Isaac ran curled fingers messily through it, separating out the strands in a way that Jackson knew would leave the cut looking ‘piecey,’ as his stylist had once called it.

“I know how to do my hair, Lahey.” Jackson stepped back from Isaac, who was way too comfortable in Jackson’s space. “I just wasn’t done yet.”

If Isaac caught the lie, he didn’t say anything. Jackson didn’t spend much time on his hair these days, at least compared to when he’d lived in Beacon Hills. It was bad enough when he opened his mouth and people heard his accent, or he didn’t understand something that was obvious to his classmates; he didn’t want to draw attention to himself visually as well. At this point all he wanted from school was to get decent marks, do well on his exams, and avoid conflict with his classmates.

A quick glance in the mirror confirmed that Isaac really had improved his hair, but Jackson would lace his own coffee with wolfsbane before he’d ever admit it. He had certainly never thought he’d see the day when Isaac Lahey knew or cared more about personal grooming than Jackson did. Between the scarf, the haircut, and the clothes he’d bought in Paris, Isaac looked more like he belonged in a city like London than Jackson did (plus a bit older thanks to Jackson’s school uniform).
“Knock it off,” said Jackson, shouldering his backpack. Just because Isaac had made Jackson’s hair look better didn’t mean he’d had permission to do it in the first place.

“What?”

“All the touching, standing in my space,” said Jackson. “It’s weird.”

“Good weird?” asked Isaac hopefully.

“No, just weird. I like my space, okay?”

Isaac smirked in that new, infuriating way of his and took an exaggerated step back. Jackson rolled his eyes. “Come on, I have to go to school.”

“Okay…?”

“So, come on.” Jackson gestured toward the front door.

“What? I don’t have school.”

“I’m not just going to leave you alone in my flat.”

Isaac raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you think I’m going to snoop through your stuff? Are you really that paranoid?”

“No, but you need the key to lock the door and I only have one key. I don’t want my flat left unlocked while nobody’s here.” Although this was the truth, Jackson also had to admit to himself that he definitely did not want Isaac snooping through his stuff, either.

“But I still don’t actually know what areas are safe!”

“Not my problem.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jackson suddenly flashed back to the last time he’d said them in relation to Isaac. Jackson forced down a groan. For whatever reason, he did kind of feel responsible for the oblivious moron now. Maybe he had a responsibility to make Isaac his problem for once.

“Fine, I’ll help you tonight. I’ll text you when I’m done with school.”

“Really?” asked Isaac, incredulous.

“Sure,” said Jackson. “After my homework, though. We get a shit ton of it this time of year.”

“Awesome,” said Isaac, smiling brightly. “So, Londoner to tourist, what should I do today?”

“Don’t you have ‘research’ to be doing or whatever?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Isaac slammed back the last of his coffee. “Then Londoner to tourist, where should I research today?”

Jackson shrugged. “The British Library is like a twenty-minute walk from here. Pretty sure they have books. Time to go.”

Isaac obediently preceded him out the door and onto the street, where they parted ways.
Isaac did check out the British Library first, but it was kind of (insanely) overwhelming, and he didn’t know where to start. Since he couldn’t do much about finding a safe place to live without Jackson’s knowledge of the city, Isaac spent most of the day wandering the neighborhoods nearby (doing his best to avoid the places Jackson had told him were dangerous) and pestering Hannah by text for good places to eat. Walking was hungry work!

After Jackson texted him that he was done with school, they met up and grabbed a pizza, went back to Jackson’s place, and found a live stream of a lacrosse game online and plugged Jackson’s computer into the TV so they could watch while they ate and drank a couple of beers. Jackson laughed at all the American commercials that seemed ridiculous to him now (while Isaac laughed at him laughing) and complained about how nobody in the UK appreciated lacrosse.

Then Jackson had to be all responsible and do homework so Isaac started checking for apartments again.

Isaac hadn’t thought that finding a place to live would be so difficult. Didn’t people do this all the time? To be fair, most people weren’t werewolves. He spent an hour looking for places that fit the magic combination of being reasonably priced (without being a complete shithole), close enough to the heart of the city that the commute wouldn’t be insane, and not in an unfriendly pack’s territory.

Even Jackson admitted, after joining Isaac a half-hour later, that there was virtually nothing that fit those criteria. Isaac, who wasn’t even sure why the guy cared where Isaac lived, was ready to compromise--especially since he was sure Jackson wanted him out as soon as possible--but Jackson refused to let him. So Isaac let Jackson take over the search. Jackson researched while Isaac asked questions and made suggestions.

After another forty-five minutes--during which Jackson became increasingly more irritated with Isaac’s questions and suggestions--Jackson deemed Isaac incapable of choosing a place on his own and forbade him from setting up any viewings unless Jackson first made sure Isaac wasn’t going to get mugged, murdered, and/or kicked out of the country for doing something illegal.

Isaac didn’t let on how relieved he was that Jackson was helping him with this stuff, since he basically had no idea what he was doing. Besides, who didn’t like being taken care of? Isaac had learned to be independent a long time ago--perhaps younger than was healthy--but since he’d become a werewolf, he’d also learned the comfort and support of friendship, and the validation that came with being wanted (even if it was just for a couple of hours or one night). It was something he hadn’t expected from Jackson, and it made him want to reciprocate. As Jackson sat beside him on the couch e-mailing various landlords and property management companies, Isaac had to remind himself not to reach over and fix Jackson’s hoodie strings.

After so many quick flings, it was just habit to straighten a shirt or fix someone’s hair, especially before parting ways. It seemed like the polite thing to do, and it was usually a good excuse for a final kiss. Besides, gestures were easier for Isaac than words, and a last touch made for a better goodbye when the fun was over. Isaac was so used to making those gestures that it was easy to forget that things weren’t like that between him and Jackson. Jackson had seemed pretty serious that morning about his personal space, and Isaac wanted to respect that.

But Jackson wasn’t making it easy, dressed how he was now, looking unassuming in a T-shirt, jeans, and hoodie. Those clothes combined with his fluffy hair made Jackson look extra soft and touchable. The effect was so different from the impeccably-groomed severity of Jackson’s expensive ensembles from Beacon Hills. He had been untouchable then. Sexy, but out of reach. Now Isaac’s fingers itched to run through Jackson’s hair, to straighten (or perhaps dishevel) his clothes, and he wasn’t allowed to. It was torture!
Had it really only been less than a week since Isaac had arrived in London? He had clearly become spoiled in Paris if it was this difficult for him to be around a person he was interested in and not try to make a move. God, if his pre-wolf self could see him now, all used to having physical attention (to put it politely) whenever he wanted and lusting after Jackson Whittemore…

All right, time to stop that line of thought. After all, Isaac wasn’t the only werewolf in the room, and he knew from experience how easy it was to smell if someone was turned on.

Thursday was decidedly less productive.

Isaac started the day with good intentions: He went to the library to check his e-mail and follow up with some of the people who Jackson had contacted for him, but he stalled on setting up any viewings, justifying it to himself with the reasoning that it would be more productive if Jackson came with him, and he didn’t know Jackson’s schedule right now.

It wasn’t like Isaac specifically didn’t want to see the apartments or to find someplace to live. He just realized that he was having fun staying with Jackson. He also realized that Jackson would probably say no if he actually asked to stay, so maybe it would just be easier to not ask and see how long it took Jackson to get impatient and kick him out.

So that night, Isaac half-lied and told Jackson that he had been in contact with some of the people Jackson had e-mailed and that he was working on setting up viewings. He even asked Jackson his schedule. Then he half-heartedly searched for more potential places to live while Jackson worked on homework.

Or tried to, at any rate. It was clear that Jackson was getting frustrated (the muttered swearing and heavy sighs of frustration from the desk were strong clues), but Isaac wasn’t sure if he should say something or just let Jackson work through it.

After the fifth frustrated sigh and the third slammed book, however, Isaac decided to end both of their torture. He shut the laptop and dumping it on the couch beside him.

“Okay, that’s it. Get your coat and your wallet.”

Jackson just gave him a look. “No. I’m not going out. I actually have to work for my grades here.”

“Aaand you can work tomorrow.” Isaac walked over and grabbed Jackson’s arm. “Sitting here stressing won’t help. Luckily, I know what will.” Isaac struggled to pull a resisting Jackson to his feet. “Come on! Remember that cool place in Soho I was telling you about?”

The pounding music of the club drowned out the heartbeats, and the whole place smelled like alcohol and sweat and adrenaline and arousal. Everything blending together in a tsunami of sensation that threatened to overwhelm him.

Isaac loved it.

He spun around and crashed into Jackson. “Let’s dance!” he practically shouted in his ear.
Jackson looked at him, then at the mass of writhing bodies on the dancefloor, then back to him. He raised an eyebrow at Isaac, lips pursed in a straight line.

Isaac grinned wildly and pressed his mouth even closer to Jackson’s ear. “Fine, buy me a drink then. I’m going to dance.”

After thoroughly exhausting himself grinding and eye-fucking (as Jackson no doubt would’ve called it) his way across the dancefloor, Isaac found Jackson sitting in a booth across from two girls who were clearly flirting with him. He couldn’t see Jackson’s face, or tell by any of the usual signs, but by the hunch of his shoulders, Jackson was only being polite, and the way he kept turning his face away made it seem like he wasn’t really listening to them.

Isaac didn’t feel bad about interrupting.

“Hey, Jackie, who are your friends?” Isaac said as he threw his arms affectionately around Jackson’s neck from behind. He leaned over the back of the booth, putting his face next to Jackson’s.

Jackson didn’t miss a beat. “Don’t call me that.”

Isaac tightened his hug briefly before letting go and climbing into the booth. He sat much closer to Jackson than necessary and grabbed the drink Jackson had so obligingly bought for him.

“I’m Isaac!” He shouted to the girls, who were looking decidedly less interested in the conversation now that Isaac was there. One whispered something into the other’s ear about things she thought Isaac and Jackson might be doing together that were (regrettably) not true, and after a quick excuse, the girls left.

“Nice meeting you, too.” Isaac smirked before turning back to Jackson. “Thanks for the drink. You want to dance yet?”

Jackson didn’t look like he was having a bad time, but he didn’t look like he was having a particularly good one, either. In fact, without being able to hear or smell him, Isaac found he was having a very hard time getting a read on Jackson at all. That killed his buzz a little bit.

“Hey, you okay? If it’s about those girls--”

“It’s not the girls.” Jackson took another sip of his mostly finished drink. He reached up to his ear like it was bothering him before twitching at a particularly fierce drop in the music.

Isaac tried again, still hoping to help Jackson relax a little. “Dance with me.”

When Jackson didn’t respond, Isaac sighed and downed his drink. “Okay, just a few more songs, then we’ll go.” Isaac pressed his lips firmly against Jackson’s for a long heartbeat, then looked deep into his baby blue eyes. “Promise.”

He didn’t wait for a response before darting back into the fray.

Jackson didn’t quite register that the kiss had happened until it was over and the word "Promise" had slid between his ears. It was brief, chaste, almost innocent, and seemed to come out of nowhere and disappear back into nowhere before Jackson had a chance to experience it. He might’ve explained it away as his mind playing tricks on him, but he couldn’t blame it on the alcohol. So where the hell had that come from, and why had Isaac acted like it was perfectly natural?
And why, against all logic, did Jackson feel a twinge of disappointment at how he hadn't gotten the chance to enjoy it?

It wasn't like it was his first kiss from a guy. That had been with Danny when they were in eighth grade, and neither of them had enjoyed it that much. Then Danny had kept kissing guys, and Jackson hadn't. Until about thirty seconds ago. (If you could even really call that a kiss.)

So why the disappointment? Maybe it had been too long since he'd had a decent kiss from a girl? His time with Elizabeth felt like forever ago, and none of what little snogging he'd done over the past six months was particularly memorable. He'd often found himself missing Lydia's mouth, the way that she used to bite at his lower lip, the softness and familiarity of her.

But Isaac kissing him hadn't been like Lydia or any of those girls. It didn't make Jackson want them. Jackson wasn't really sure it made him want anything at all, except... Except didn't disappointment mean that you wanted something and didn't get it? What had Jackson wanted, then?

He could still feel the phantom sensation of Isaac's arms around his shoulders, the unnecessary close proximity when Isaac had been scaring off the girls. Isaac definitely had a habit of invading Jackson's personal space (despite Jackson’s objections), but still, it had felt…

Jackson shook his head and let his eyes drift back to the dancefloor, locking on Isaac without really thinking about it. The slutty dumbass was practically sandwiched between a short girl and a guy who was almost as tall as Isaac--to call it 'dirty dancing' would be like labeling softcore porn PG-13. Still, Jackson couldn't look away. There was something familiar about it that he couldn't quite place; a kind of déjá vu triggered by the three figures, the look in Isaac's eyes. Then it passed.

'Let's dance,' 'You want to dance yet?' 'Dance with me,' Isaac had practically begged him, enthusiastic and giddy through the throbbing beat. As if there were a world in which Jackson would ever have agreed. As if he could ever be like Isaac, acting on impulse and dealing with the consequences later, not giving a shit what people thought, just doing what he wanted, not bothered about anything else. Dancing with strangers because it made him feel good, while still (supposedly) intending to go home with Jackson instead. Kissing people, without permission or explanation, just because he felt like it. There was no world in which Jackson could be like that.

'A few more songs' apparently meant five to Isaac, but Jackson finally got him to leave just after midnight. (This meant that Jackson would have to get up early to finish his homework.) Now that they were back on the street, Jackson could hear and smell properly again. Isaac's heart was still racing from dancing, and he was covered in the scent of sweat and pheromones from his dance partners. It put Jackson off, though he wasn't really sure why. He didn't give a shit who Isaac danced with. All Jackson wanted to do was go home and sleep and forget about Isaac's ill-conceived plan to ‘cheer him up’, and Isaac was just talking a mile a minute, like nothing had happened, the whole way back to Jackson’s flat.

It was after one o'clock by the time they got home, and half-one when Jackson got into bed. He could afford maybe four or five hours of sleep if he wanted enough time to finish his homework before class.

After the heat and noise of the club, the silent chill of the living room was especially noticeable. Isaac tried to press further into the couch, curl up with the blanket more snugly around him, but nothing seemed to help. Despite being half asleep from wearing himself out dancing, the cold was keeping him awake. Even the hot shower he had taken immediately upon getting back to Jackson’s had only been a temporary relief.
How was it possible for the apartment to be this cold? The last two nights hadn’t been fun, but at least he’d been able to sleep. Isaac wondered how Jackson could possibly sleep like this. The guy must have more blankets on his bed or something.

Isaac sat up, pulling the fluffy but far too thin blanket around himself as tight as he could as he waddled towards Jackson’s mostly closed door.

He nudged it open just a bit with his face since his hands were preoccupied with not letting any more of the frigid air reach his body than was absolutely necessary.

“Jackson,” he whispered. “Jackson.”

“What?” Came the clipped response.

“It’s fucking freezing in here.”

“I warned you.” Jackson’s voice had no sympathy. He was probably buried under a mountain of blankets.

Isaac nudged his way into the room just a bit more. “Do you have any more blankets?”

“No.”

“Well, can we turn on the heat?”

“Do you know how expensive electricity is here?”

“Since when is price an object to you?”

“Since I came to London. Shut up and put a jumper on.”

“Ha. Jumper.”

“Oh, my god.” Jackson partially sat up to glare at Isaac in the near darkness. “I already gave you my second blanket. I’m in the same position you are, so just shut up, go to sleep, and be glad neither of us can die of hypothermia.”

Jackson flopped back down and burrowed back under his (Isaac corrected his perceptions) single blanket.

Isaac frowned and thought about this for a moment: It was too cold to sleep but Isaac really wanted to sleep. Jackson didn’t seem to be having an easy time of it, either. Logically there was an easy solution.

He shuffled all the way into the room and moved silently in double-sock-shod feet towards Jackson’s bed. He took a slow, deep breath to prepare himself before quickly dropping his protective blanket cocoon and throwing it over Jackson’s bed.

Jackson stiffened when he felt a weight sink into the mattress behind him. Isaac was crawling into bed with him.

“Fuck off,” he growled half-heartedly through his exhaustion, not bothering to turn to face Isaac. Having his second blanket back did feel good, but he wasn't keen on Isaac violating his personal space yet again. He had a large bed by British standards, but he had to move out of the spot he normally slept in when Isaac invaded it.
“I’m not staying up all night just because you wanna be a little bitch about sharing your space,” said Isaac with a smile in his voice. He was brazenly wrapping himself up in the part of the blankets that Jackson hadn’t managed to cling to and settling in close enough to Jackson that his shoulder touched Jackson’s back.

“This entire flat is my space,” said Jackson irritably, inching away from the contact, but reluctant to leave the spot he’d already warmed up in the middle of the bed.

“Fine, so what difference does it make where I sleep, then?” countered Isaac.

Was this guy fucking serious? Clearly there was no reasoning with someone who lived that far outside reality. Jackson sighed in resignation, not bothering to respond. He was too exhausted to keep fighting about this. He just wanted to be warm and asleep...

The dream was vivid, seen through the haze of primitive emotion that characterized Jackson’s memories of his time as the Kanima. There was a deafening beat pounding in his ears, flashing lights, and a girl. She was gorgeous and he wanted her and he had no reason not to show it by pressing his body close to hers. But someone else was there, too, a rival, he’d thought at first, but no: the boy wanted to share with Jackson. The boy wanted Jackson as much as he wanted the girl, and Jackson found that he wanted the boy, too. So many pheromones, wide pupils, lascivious smirks, hands on each other’s hips and wandering. He wanted them both, badly. And then--

Jackson woke with a start, heart racing and skin overheated despite the chilly air in the bedroom. Well, that was a first: a kanima-related dream that didn’t involve Jackson committing one or more brutal, bloody murders. Considering that fact, Jackson decided that it had probably not been based in memory. After all, the dancing and club music in the dream could’ve easily been caused by the hours he’d spent in the club earlier that night. It wouldn’t be the first time the Kanima had made an appearance in an otherwise ‘normal’ dream.

Far from waking up terrified, Jackson was instead experiencing another, somewhat more physical, reaction to the dream. It was at this point that he became aware of his body: first, the intense ache of need in the pit of his stomach (related to his more-than-obvious arousal), then the fact that there was an arm slung over his waist, a body pressed up against his side.

Isaac.

Jackson would’ve been annoyed with Isaac for invading his space, but mostly he was trying not to focus on how good it felt to have physical contact with someone when he had this much pent-up sexual energy inside him. Even if that someone was not Jackson’s general ‘type’ (female). The only people who had touched Jackson for a while now were his pack, and that was completely different.

It didn’t help matters that Isaac had taken a shower before bed, washing away the scent of sweat and pheromones from the people he had danced with that had been so off-putting to Jackson earlier. Now Isaac was clean and warm, smelling like what was probably the cheapest brand of bathing products he could find; a scent which was somehow appealing to Jackson right now. Hell, maybe the scent of anyone so close to him right now would’ve been appealing, but that didn’t change the fact that Jackson was sort of starting to wish that maybe Isaac would wake up and decide to--

Yeah, Jackson really needed to do something about this situation. Carefully, he slid out from beneath Isaac’s arm, flinching when his bare feet touched the cold floor. The shower would probably be the best place to do this. The running water would help mask sounds that werewolf hearing could normally pick up on (if Isaac inconveniently woke up) and clean-up would be easier
and all that.

It didn’t take long. All Jackson really had to do was remember the dream. In his mind, the faceless girl became Lydia (there would be time to feel guilty about that later), and the boy… Despite Jackson’s efforts to sort of gloss over that whole part of the dream, the boy inevitably became Isaac (there would be time to feel extremely uncomfortable about that later). It wasn’t like it was Jackson’s fault that Isaac had kissed him and then invaded his bed, right? What else was Jackson’s subconscious supposed to do with that information? In any case, the whole mental image was extremely hot.

Despite the promise of future guilt and awkwardness, Jackson felt worlds better when he stepped out of the shower. There was still an itch of want beneath his skin, but it was bearable, and he was much less tense. He was also still exhausted, and his alarm would be going off in a couple of hours. So he pulled on a clean T-shirt and boxers with his pajama pants and, after a debate with himself over whether to try to reclaim his side of the bed with Isaac sprawled in it, crawled back in on the other side. His hair was still damp, but he’d deal with it tomorrow if sleeping on it made it dry funny.

The pillow smelled like Isaac. It smelled good. Jackson whispered a few choice swear words to himself about the whole situation before falling back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading and commenting and giving kudos and everything! We are so grateful for all of the positive feedback, and we hope you continue to enjoy the fic!

Savenna Cloverunner ;)
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; 
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)
CHAPTER FIVE: SHOCK TO YOUR SYSTEM (Tegan and Sara)

You seem like you’re so restless, young at heart.
Who gave you reason?
You should be out driving people wild.
Who gave you reason?

One of Isaac’s favorite things since becoming a werewolf was waking up to the smell of coffee brewing. There were some things that Isaac used to think smelled good but were now overwhelming (such as certain body sprays) and then there were things that had smelled good but were now even better (like coffee).

In Paris, Chris had always been up before him, which meant there had always been coffee brewing as an incentive for Isaac to get up relatively early. Since coming to the UK, Isaac hadn’t had
anyone make him coffee, so it was a nice change when the first thing Isaac noticed upon becoming conscious was a mix of Jackson’s scent on the pillow and coffee in the air.

He’d almost forgotten he’d slept in Jackson’s bed last night (a sentence he’d never thought would ever cross his mind). The only thing that would make it better, Isaac thought idly as he stretched his arms above his head, would be if Jackson were to bring him a mug and crawl back in bed with him. Something told him that wasn’t likely. Honestly, he was still surprised that he’d been allowed to crawl in bed with Jackson at all. He’d expected to be thrown out immediately, but Jackson had actually fallen asleep before Isaac had.

Jackson’s bed was incredibly comfortable, and definitely intended for more than one person, Isaac decided. He reluctantly crawled out of the incredibly comfortable bed and followed his nose to the kitchen.

Jackson was already sitting at his desk.

“What time did you get up?” Isaac asked, pouring himself a mug.

“Half-five, thanks to some dipshit who thought keeping me out most of the night would be a good idea.”

“What does that even mean? ‘Half’ what? Before or after?”

“Five-thirty. Stop being an ass. I’m tired, and it’s your fault.”

Isaac frowned. “You didn’t have to come with me.”

“Yeah, well, it’s done now. Hurry up. I gotta go soon and you can’t stay here.”

Isaac would have liked time to make breakfast, but even if he’d had the time, there was nothing to make. When Jackson started practically shoving him out the door a few minutes later, they were in such a rush that Isaac was lucky Jackson let him borrow his to-go mug or he would have had to abandon any hope he had of coffee, too. His brief pass through Jackson’s kitchen resolved Isaac to get groceries on his way back later, he couldn’t stand to see the fridge so empty. Besides, staying at Jackson’s was saving him a fortune in rent. Isaac figured the least he could do would be to put some of that towards keeping them both fed. Plus he missed cooking.

Well, ‘missed’ was probably an exaggeration, but he’d always liked cooking. Cleaning up, less so. That was one of the things that had been nice about living with Chris; any time Isaac cooked, Chris did the dishes. He’d actually kicked Isaac out of the kitchen the first time Isaac had tried to help clean up.

“Isaac, I didn’t bring you along to be my maid. We both live here, the least I can do is my share of the house work.”

That wasn’t the only thing Chris had been understanding about.

Chris had never asked why Isaac didn’t like eating at the dining room table, even though he must have noticed how jumpy Isaac had been the first and only night they’d tried it. Maybe it had reminded them both a bit too much about what they had left behind in Beacon Hills, because they didn’t even make it the full meal before Chris was asking what sports Isaac liked and taking his plate to the living room. So on the rare nights that they were home at the same time to eat dinner together, it had become habit for them to eat on the couch while Chris explained European football—which was soccer—to Isaac.
Isaac left Jackson at the first coffee shop they passed to grab breakfast after quickly fixing Jackson’s hair and wishing him a good day at school, receiving a lovely glare in return.

Thinking about Chris made Isaac realize that it had been a few days since they’d last touched base. He sent off a quick text while waiting in line for food.

*Me: still alive?*

A few days after Chris had left for Beacon Hills, just when Isaac had been wondering if he’d been completely ditched, he’d sent a quick, two word text:

*Uncle Chris: Still alive?*

It hadn’t been much, but it had meant a lot to Isaac, knowing that even with whatever drama was going on half a world away, Chris was still looking out for him. So Isaac had replied:

*Me: still alive*

A few days later, Isaac had sent Chris the same question and received the same answer, and a tradition was born. A slightly macabre tradition, but it worked for them.

Since Chris was eight hours behind him, Isaac didn’t expect an immediate response, which was good because he didn’t get one until he was at the grocery store later that afternoon.

He was trying to find cilantro—okay, coriander? What the fuck, England?—when his phone buzzed.

*Uncle Chris: Still alive and well in Mexico.*

Isaac had been as surprised as anyone to hear that Chris’s sister Kate was still alive (and a were-jaguar). He had offered to help, but Chris had said that there was no way the Calaveras would be okay with accepting help from a werewolf, so he’d stayed in Paris.

That had been several months ago, and Chris was still trying to track her down. Isaac knew Chris would get it taken care of, he just wished there was something he could do to help.

But now Isaac had a case of his own to worry about, and groceries to buy, so he grabbed the stupid coriander and went to see what weird thing they called sour cream.

With his hands full, Isaac had to knock on Jackson’s door with his foot (also known as kicking). He was glad once again for werewolf strength or else he wouldn’t have been able to carry six bags of groceries from the nearest full size grocery store (which was not that near) and up the stairs. There really had been nothing in Jackson’s kitchen.

Jackson’s face when he opened the door was priceless. It shifted from neutral, to confused, to flat in the span of about a second.

“You didn’t.”

“Pretty sure this is evidence that I did,” said Isaac as he squeezed inside past Jackson. “Besides, there was no way we were going to eat takeout on date night.”
“Date night?” said Jackson, confused again.

“I had been planning to take you to that place we went last night, but since we already did that, I figured—”

“That was not a date,” Jackson interrupted, realization dawning on his face. Had he really forgotten about their plans to hang out tonight from before Isaac started living with him?

“I figured,” Isaac continued, unpacking the groceries, “we should make Mexican. They had like zero Mexican groceries in France. Sour cream is soured cream here, by the way,” said Isaac as he put the little container in the fridge. “What is wrong with this country? That doesn’t sound appetizing at all.”

“And sour cream does?” Jackson asked as he slid onto one of the island bar stools.

“Not the point. The point is, you have a fully stocked kitchen now. We’re not ordering takeout.”

“Cooking is work. It’s Friday night. I don’t want to work.”

“Less bitching, more chopping,” said Isaac. He placed a cutting board, a large knife, and an onion on the island for Jackson.

Jackson stared down at the cutting board for a moment. Then he heaved a long-suffering sigh, picked up the knife, and started chopping. Isaac started on the chicken, but within a minute he could hear sniffling and annoyed sounds from Jackson’s direction. Isaac covertly looked over to find Jackson awkwardly trying to wipe his watery eyes on his sleeve without using his hands, swearing intermittently under his breath.

It didn’t help that it was an extra potent onion. Even from across the room, Isaac’s eyes were beginning to sting a bit. He could only imagine how bad it was for Jackson, who was now wiping his face on his arm every few chops. Isaac tried not to laugh as Jackson’s swearing got more and more inventive.

Isaac finally decided to take pity on him. “All right, enough onions.” Isaac took the cutting board, knife, and onions from Jackson. He found another cutting board and a clean knife and placed them in front of Jackson along with several bell peppers, a few sprigs of coriander, and an avocado.

“Hope those don’t make you as sad as onions do,” he said with a cheesy smile, which was answered by a watery-eyed glare from Jackson. “You should probably wash your hands before you touch anything else.”

“No shit,” said Jackson, already on his feet.

Isaac smirked to himself at his own joke (well, mostly Jackson’s grumpy determination not to comment on it) as he finished slicing up the chicken and liberally peppered it with the stupid light brown dust the Brits seemed to prefer to real black pepper.

They worked mostly in silence. When Isaac looked over to find Jackson eyeing the avocado dubiously, Isaac snatched it away from him and cut it himself; avocado slicing was not an amateur’s game.

“Pick something to watch,” Isaac demanded, shredding cheese as the peppers, onion, and chicken finished simmering together.

“Like what?”
“I don’t know, something light. I’m not really feeling like a Breaking Bad type thing right now.”

“I haven’t seen Breaking Bad, so….”

Isaac’s jaw literally dropped. “Dude. How have you not seen Breaking Bad!”

“I’ve been busy.”

Isaac snorted. “Busy living under a rock, maybe.”

“Everyone talks it up so much. I don’t like watching things that have too much hype. They’re always a letdown.”

“Watch it with me. I guarantee enjoyment.”

“You just said you don’t want to watch ‘a Breaking Bad type thing’. I think Breaking Bad probably qualifies.”

“Okay, not while we eat, but after. This is going to happen.”

“Fine, whatever.”

So they ended up watching some quiz show called QI—which Jackson informed him stood for ‘Quite Interesting’—that was absolutely hilarious and Isaac would’ve kept watching all night if Jackson hadn’t reminded him about Breaking Bad.

“How many of these shows are there?” asked Isaac as they switched over.

“A shit ton. They’re really cheap to make and everyone likes them.”

“They’re fucking awesome. We should have these in the States!”

Jackson’s reaction to Breaking Bad was much less vocal than Isaac’s, but he seemed to like it. At least well enough to watch four episodes without Isaac’s prompting. Jackson was still watching when Isaac dozed off.

The show was good. Actually, it was really good. This annoyed Jackson, because it meant he would have to admit that Isaac had pretty good taste, and Isaac would probably get smug about it, because that was what Isaac did. Jackson was only able to make himself turn off the TV for the night when Isaac fell asleep. It wasn’t really the kind of show you wanted to be watching alone in the middle of the night, even if you were a werewolf and knew there were much scarier things in the world than meth dealers.

Jackson managed to get up from the couch without waking Isaac up. He figured he’d get ready for bed and then grab the couch blanket off his bed and bring it back to Isaac. It wasn’t as cold as the previous night, so they’d probably be okay with one blanket each. However, when he exited the bathroom, teeth brushed and in his pajamas (sweats and a T-shirt), he found a yawning Isaac at the side of his bed, lifting the duvet as if he were about to climb in.

“So this is a thing now,” said Jackson flatly.

Isaac paused and looked over at Jackson. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“For starters, you didn’t ask me last night,” said Jackson irritably. “You also called me a little bitch.”
“But we were both way more comfortable than if I’d stayed on the couch and left you all cold and alone, right?”

Jackson felt himself flush at the memory of waking up with Isaac pressed close against him (as well as the dream and the aftermath of all that). He could only hope that Isaac wasn’t attuned to his pulse at the moment since he didn’t want to have to explain why.

“Seriously, it was freezing,” Isaac continued. “Didn’t it make way more sense for both of us to be warm?”

“Whatever,” said Jackson dismissively, because he refused to acknowledge that Isaac had a point, “just stay on your side this time.”

“This time?” asked Isaac. “Did I miss something fun last night?”

Jackson crossed his arms and glared at Isaac. “You invaded my space. Again.”

“I was asleep!” Isaac protested, clearly amused by the situation and further annoying Jackson.

“That doesn’t mean it’s okay to molest me while I’m unconscious.” Jackson regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth.

“Does it mean it’s okay when you’re awake?” Isaac smirked suggestively. This was why Jackson hadn’t meant to bring it up at all.

Jackson pointedly ignored the innuendo. “Just stay on your side this time, or I’m kicking you out and keeping both blankets.”

“I’ll try, but it’s not my fault you’re magnetically attractive.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “I am going to sleep now.”

When Jackson woke up, he was in bed alone, and the spot next to him didn’t have much of a trace of Isaac’s body heat. He focused his hearing for sounds of Isaac showering, making breakfast, but the flat was silent. Jackson had a quiet moment of irrational internal panic before he remembered that he had Isaac’s number and could just text or call him to make sure he hadn’t been murdered by rival pack of werewolves.

He blinked blearily at his phone. Irritation quickly replaced panic thanks to half a dozen texts from Isaac.

*Isaac <3: gone out*
*Isaac <3: be back later*
*Isaac <3: probably before dinner?*
*Isaac <3: PS don’t forget to eat breakfast*
*Isaac <3: PPS I stayed on my side last night*
*Isaac <3: PPPS used the window since i don’t have a key. fyi lock is broken. not my fault*

Leave it to Isaac to climb out through the friggin’ window (despite the fact that the flat was one story up) rather than just wake Jackson up and have Jackson lock the door behind him and go back to bed. Yes, Jackson known about the broken lock on his window. He hadn’t bothered getting it
fixed because no one (until now) would have been easily able to climb up through it. Now it was essentially a werewolf cat flap.

Jackson rolled his eyes and checked the time. Somehow he’d managed not only to sleep through Isaac getting up and leaving but also through most of the morning. His stomach was rumbling, so he began the usual pre-Isaac morning routine: start the coffee brewing, shower, eat a bowl of cereal and drink coffee while dicking around on the Internet a bit, and get some of his homework out of the way.

Except he couldn’t concentrate. It was too quiet in the flat. Less than a week, and Jackson had already gotten used to the sounds of Isaac watching TV or using Jackson’s computer or cooking or whatever the hell else Isaac did while Jackson was trying to focus, and now the absence of those sounds was distracting.

After a half hour of trying music and white noise, Jackson gave it up as a bad job and texted Rodger:

Me: *You busy?*
Rodge: *Free as a bird. Why?*
Me: *I was thinking lunch*
Rodge: *You could come over to the den if you like. The twins have been complaining about missing Cousin Jack.*
Me: *No they haven’t*
Rodge: *Okay, maybe that was me. Coming over or not?*
Me: *Can we go out?*
Rodge: *Usual place, then?*
Me: *Sure*
Rodge: *See you in 15.*

“Someone’s made a friend,” said Rodger halfway through the usual greeting hug. They had met up at a sandwich shop that was about halfway between the den and Jackson’s flat, and therefore a favorite meeting place for Rodger and him.

“What?” said Jackson, perplexed.

Rodger didn’t elaborate until he and Jackson were seated in a corner and could talk discreetly.

“You’ve got another wolf’s scent all over you, and it’s not one of ours.”

Jackson blanched. He had been hoping to avoid having this conversation for a little while longer. He’d known that he’d probably have to tell his pack about Isaac eventually; reporting omegas staying in the area was a pack rule. But he’d wanted to wait until he had some idea of how long Isaac would be sticking around. If Isaac ended up only being there for a week or so, maybe it wouldn’t even become an issue...

“Male, judging by the pheromones,” added Rodger. He leaned across the table toward Jackson and sniffed.

“And either you’re wearing his clothes or he sleeps in your bed.” Rodger raised a dark eyebrow. “Something you’d like to share with the class, Jackie Boy?”
Jackson’s cheeks grew hot. “How the hell can you tell all that just from how I smell?”

“Practice,” said Rodger with a shrug. “You can tell a lot with your nose if you know how to use it.”

“Is it that bad?” said Jackson, sniffing his own clothing self-consciously. He couldn’t smell Isaac, though. Had Jackson already gotten used to Isaac’s scent?

“You’ve no idea.” Roger chuckled. “If the scent were any stronger I’d bet you were shag--”

“We’re not--” Jackson objected quickly.

“I know,” said Rodger, raising his hands slightly in a placating gesture. “You wouldn’t be this uptight if anything fun were happening.”

Jackson opened his mouth to object again, but thought better of it. Rodger grinned. Both of them knew that Jackson couldn’t win; arguing would only make him seem like he was trying to hide something. Rodger was baiting him.

“Why is he staying with you, then?” Rodger took a bite of his sandwich.

“It’s… complicated.”

Rodger shook his head, smiling slightly. “Everything’s complicated with you, Jack.”

“We went to school together in the States,” said Jackson, hoping it would be enough of an explanation for now. “Is it a problem? Him staying at mine?”

“Well, you really should tell Josie,” said Rodger. “You know the rules.”

“I know,” said Jackson sullenly.

“I doubt she’ll be happy about it,” said Rodger, “but you’re best off telling her straight away instead of letting her find out on her own. An alpha is even more aware of the scent of strange wolves than the rest of us.”

Jackson sighed deeply. “How long do you think I have before she catches on?”

Rodger frowned. “Not much longer, especially with the full moon coming up. My advice? Find out when he’s leaving and tell her as soon as you can. And shower two or three times before you come to the den for the moon. Unlucky for you, our senses are even keener then. You don’t want to smell like a strange wolf near your alpha on the full moon.”

Jackson nodded his understanding. Guilt made his shoulders hunch. He’d never kept anything from Josie before.

“Is there a reason you’re keeping him a secret?” asked Rodger, regarding Jackson thoughtfully.

“I…” Jackson started, but found that he didn’t have an answer. Logically, if Isaac wasn’t staying long, there wasn’t really a reason not to tell Josie about him. He was just an omega passing through their territory. He could be gone any day now. But something in Jackson balked at the idea of his two worlds colliding like that. Isaac was too closely associated with the parts of Jackson that he had tried to leave behind when he’d moved to London. There would be too many questions he didn’t want to answer.

Was that the only reason, though? Jackson thought back on the time he’d spent with Isaac during the last couple of days, from the first confrontation outside Lamb, to the confusing kiss in the club,
to Isaac somehow ending up in his bed, and found that he had no idea how he felt about any of it. How could he explain to Josie a situation he himself didn’t fully understand?

“I don’t know,” Jackson said lamely. Because he really didn’t.

“Well, at least you’re honest,” said Rodger. “Just… sort it out soon, yeah? For your own sake as well as his.”

Jackson was acting weird.

Not just, new-Jackson-weird either; actually, genuinely weird.

Ever since Isaac had gotten back from spending the day with Hannah, Jackson had been keeping his distance. It was subtle--casually moving away from potential contact, getting up for water when Isaac went to sit down beside him on the couch to watch more Breaking Bad--but it wasn’t done with Jackson’s trademark pissiness, which was the weird part.

It wasn’t like Jackson had mentioned anything about Isaac not finding a place yet, so Isaac didn’t think that was the reason--even though Jackson had to know by now that Isaac had stopped looking--but something had definitely happened, and Isaac had no idea what. He couldn’t decide if he should apologize just to be safe or continue pretending like he didn’t see all the awkward glances Jackson was shooting him.

If Isaac didn’t know any better, he would’ve thought Jackson Whittemore was embarrassed.

Isaac couldn’t think of what Jackson would have to be embarrassed about though. Okay, so maybe Isaac had woken up with Jackson close enough to kiss--which had not been Isaac’s fault, he reassured himself, checking that it was Jackson who had gravitated towards the middle--but they hadn’t been touching. Nothing for Jackson to freak out about if he knew.

But that didn’t change the fact that Isaac would’ve stayed there until Jackson woke up to tease him about it if Hannah hadn’t texted him asking if he wanted to go to the cinema (“You mean the movies?” he had texted back).

Afterwards, during lunch, Isaac had caught Hannah up on everything that had happened that week.

“...And then they told me to get out of their territory.”

“That’s rough, babe. You werewolves are so territorial.”

“Don’t lump me in with them. But Jackson was telling me about all the pack lines and stuff in the city, so I think I’ll be okay now.”

“And who is Jackson?”

“A guy I used to go to school with.” Isaac shrugged. “He’s part of a pack here now.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t use that tone.”

“What tone?”

“I’m not taking you to meet them.”
“But--”

“I’m not even welcome. I guess they’ve got a ‘No Omegas or Hunters Allowed’ sign on their clubhouse. Maybe if you’re nice to me I’ll invite you out for drinks with me and Jackson sometime.”

“I’m always nice,” Hannah had sniffed, “and you’d better.”

Motion out of the corner of his eye caught Isaac’s attention, drawing his focus back to the show and to the obviously tense boy who was sitting as far away from Isaac as possible on the couch. Jackson’s eyes were fixed on the TV, but his hand was fidgeting, fingers combing absently through his adorably fluffy hair. It was clearly a nervous tic, and while Isaac would prefer that Jackson be a little less tense, he still found it endearing. It made his own fingers itch to ‘fix’ Jackson’s hair for him, but that would probably end the tenuous peace.

Isaac really wished he could figure out why Jackson was so on edge, because if touching his hair might set him off, it was unlikely that Isaac could casually mention Hannah to Jackson without a negative reaction. How would he even start that conversation? ‘Hey, Jackson, want to meet my hunter friend?’ Something told Isaac that wouldn’t go over well. Probably the same something that had kept him from telling Jackson exactly what he was doing in London (not that he’d lied exactly, Isaac just hadn’t gone into the details).

The best thing to do, Isaac decided, would be to act like everything was normal. The problem was figuring out what exactly ‘normal’ was for them. Isaac hadn’t really been there long enough for them to have developed a sense of normalcy. Like, it was kind of becoming normal for Isaac to sleep in Jackson’s bed (as weird as that fact was), but maybe Jackson was tense because he didn’t want Isaac to do that anymore. But what if Isaac went back to the couch and it drew Jackson’s attention to the awkwardness? Wouldn’t Jackson just tell Isaac he didn’t want him there if he really didn’t? It wasn’t like Jackson had a problem telling Isaac not to do things...

“What!” said Jackson suddenly, and sat forward on the couch. Isaac started, worried he’d been caught staring at Jackson, but Jackson was talking to the TV. The episode had ended on a cliffhanger. He turned toward Isaac and said, “What the fuck was that?”

He said it like Isaac was personally responsible for the plot of the show.

“That’s Breaking Bad, dude,” said Isaac, stifling a smile at Jackson’s outrage.

“It’s bullshit is what it is,” said Jackson grumpily. It was almost a relief to see him like this; grumpiness was a familiar trait in Jackson. Isaac could work with grumpiness.

“We don’t have to keep watching.”

“You made me start this, and now you want to stop on a cliffhanger?”

“I’m just saying, you look like you could use some sleep.” Isaac shrugged, smirking.

Jackson glared at the TV. Isaac could see the inner conflict: Jackson didn’t want to admit that he was addicted to the show by demanding to watch the next episode, but he also didn’t want to go to bed.

“Compromise,” said Isaac, grabbing their empty snack bowl from the coffee table and heading towards the kitchen. He didn’t miss how Jackson leaned back slightly as he moved past, not as bad as he’d been earlier, but still enough to bother Isaac (even though he didn’t let it show). “You’re
never gonna fall asleep if you keep watching this. The cliffhangers only get worse as you keep going, and I’d kinda like to sleep tonight even if you don’t.”

Isaac dumped the rest of the chips into the bowl and moved back to the couch, going around the table this time to give Jackson space. “Maybe something a little more chill?” he asked, putting the bowl between them on the couch.

Isaac had no idea what exactly had changed, but after a bit more glaring—which seemed much more like regular-Jackson than weird-Jackson—Jackson agreed to an episode of another quiz show, and things were better. Isaac caught him trying not to laugh at several of Isaac’s comments, and Jackson didn’t even flinch when their hands accidentally brushed in the snack bowl. By the time it was over, there was considerably less tension in the room, much to Isaac’s relief, and he found himself wondering if Jackson’s earlier tension had just been caused by Breaking Bad after all.

While Jackson turned off the TV, Isaac stood up and yawned, stretching his arms over his head and generally making it obvious that he was tired. Even if it didn’t feel awkward anymore, Isaac was still worried about what their new normal was. If normal was going to be Isaac sleeping in Jackson’s bed; awesome, if it wasn’t; less-awesome, but still totally acceptable. Isaac just wanted to make sure it was Jackson’s decision to make.

“Need any help, or can I turn in?” said Isaac, leaning against the doorway to Jackson’s bedroom.

Jackson barely glanced up from the sink. “It’s like three dishes, I think I can handle it. You can leave the light on, I’ll be there in a sec.”

Isaac blinked, pleasantly surprised, and crawled into bed. Jackson joined him a few minutes later, and he was out.

It was still dark when Isaac woke up the next morning, but that was no surprise since the UK only seemed to get about five hours of daylight during the winter. How did anyone get anything done here?

It felt even earlier than he usually woke up, though.

Despite Jackson’s deep, even breaths beside him, Isaac could tell that he was awake, too. Something about his heartbeat made Isaac wonder if Jackson got nightmares like Isaac did. It wasn’t like Jackson didn’t have plenty of nightmare fuel in his memories, after all.

“You okay?” Isaac managed to mumble, despite still being mostly asleep.

Jackson was quiet for so long, Isaac had almost fallen back asleep by the time he finally responded, sighing almost imperceptibly and whispering, “Yeah.”

Isaac almost reached out to touch Jackson’s wrist reassuringly, but changed his mind at the last second, instead tucking his hand beneath his pillow.

They slept in on Sunday morning, or at least Isaac did. He had no way of knowing how long
Jackson had stayed awake, pretending to be okay when there was clearly something wrong. Isaac decided not to say anything else about it, figuring no good could come of it. At best, Jackson would be evasive, at worst he’d be openly hostile and defensive. So Isaac made breakfast/brunch/lunch for both of them and then entertained himself watching British television (sooo many quiz shows) while Jackson finished his weekend homework.

Isaac’s phone rang around 3:00. He checked his caller ID out of habit, even though there were maybe four people who had his UK phone number, and one of them was taking a shower in the next room.

“Hey, Hannah.”

“Hey, Wolf.” Despite the use of her customary nickname, Hannah sounded less exuberant than usual.

There was a pause. Isaac was almost shocked by her silence. “What’s up?” he asked finally.

“Well...” Hannah dragged the word out, like she was reluctant to continue.

“Everything okay?” Isaac asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Another pause. “Look, I know it’s a bit last minute, but could you come over tonight?”

Then it clicked. “Over to your reinforced manor where hunters can keep an eye on me during the full moon.” Isaac didn’t even bother asking it like a question.

Hannah sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s a reasonable precaution.” Isaac had just been looking forward to binge watching Netflix alone while Jackson was off with his pack (if Jackson didn’t mind Isaac staying there while he was gone; Isaac had forgotten to ask). Full moons weren’t exactly fun, but they weren’t a huge inconvenience to Isaac, either, as long as he didn’t go out of his way to find trouble. Staying with the Bristows didn’t exactly sound like the best way to avoid trouble, but at the same time, Isaac doubted it would be dangerous.

“What time should I be there?”

“Any time before sunset, but I’d say the sooner the better. Whatever it is that’s been killing people has everyone on edge.”

Isaac was confused. “But I thought it only killed during the new moon?”

“So far, that’s been true,” Hannah said, suddenly sounding like Chris, “but that doesn’t mean it couldn’t change its M.O.”

“Are you on patrol tonight, then?”

“Nope. I figured I should stay behind to look after you. Wouldn’t want those bloodthirsty junior hunters to decide tonight’s a good night to test their skills against something more than a training dummy.”

Isaac laughed before he actually thought about what she’d said. “Wait, what?”
“See you in a bit, Wolf,” Hannah said quickly, and hung up before Isaac could say anything else.

Well, it sounded like Isaac had plans after all. He just had to figure out how he was going to explain the situation to Jackson. Maybe he wouldn’t have to. If he waited for Jackson to leave and got back before him tomorrow--

“What the fuck, Lahey?”

Isaac winced and turned around. Jackson was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, staring at Isaac like he’d grown a second head. Of course Jackson had to pick today for a short shower. Isaac hadn’t noticed when the water had stopped running, but he supposed it was too much to expect that Jackson hadn’t heard both sides of the conversation Isaac had just been having with Hannah.

Isaac felt like he’d been caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing; a feeling that always put him on edge.

“What, Jackson. Good shower?” Isaac tried to change the subject, but could already tell Jackson was not going to let it go.

“I’m sorry, I must be going deaf. I’m pretty sure you did not just say that you’re spending the full moon with hunters.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the continued support! Hope you liked the Hannah portrait. There will be portraits of some of the OCs peppered throughout the fic, which we are very excited about :D

Savenna Cloverunner
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;  
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes
CHAPTER SIX: ALL I’M LOSING IS ME (Saves the Day)

*The moon hangs like the blade of an axe tonight,*
*and it’s poised to drop sometime soon enough.*

“I’m sorry, I must be going deaf,” said Jackson, arms crossed over his chest, glaring at Isaac. “I’m pretty sure you did not just say that you’re spending the full moon with *hunters.*”

“Yeah, so?” Isaac casually slipped his phone back into his pocket, but Jackson could sense a hint of nervousness in him.

“So, why the hell would you do that?”

“Well, they want me to stay with them,” said Isaac. “Which kind of makes sense, considering that
“technically I work for them.”

“You what?” Jackson was so blindsided by this revelation that it took him a few seconds to continue. “Were you planning on telling me this at some point?”

Isaac looked at Jackson like he was the crazy one. “What, that I’m working with hunters? I’ve been working with Chris. You know that. This isn’t that different.”

“You said you were living with him. You didn’t say anything about hunting.”

“What else would I have been doing?”

This brought Jackson up short. It was a good question: one Jackson had genuinely just not considered. Still, that was beside the point right now. He changed tack.

“Argent isn’t a London hunter. These people are the ones in charge of putting my pack down if the hunters see them as a threat. Did you think of that?”

Isaac’s head quirked to the side. “What does that have to do with anything? It’s not like I’m going to be helping them hunt you down.”

“Then what the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s… complicated,” Isaac said evasively. “There’s plenty of stuff they hunt that isn’t werewolves. I’m helping them with that.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring,” Jackson drawled. “They kill monsters, but not the ones who help them kill other monsters?”

“They know I’m not a threat,” insisted Isaac.

“You’re still a werewolf! They’re hunters. They don’t like it when werewolves act like werewolves. You know what happens to a pet dog when it bites somebody?”

Isaac hesitated for a moment, clearly considering his answer before he continued.

“Chris trusts them. I trust Chris.”

“Well, I don’t,” Jackson snapped.

Isaac stared at him before making a short, disbelieving sound through his nose. “Then it’s a good thing you’re not coming with me, right?” Isaac brushed past Jackson on his way to the door.

“Seriously, Jackson, it’s not a big deal. In fact, I’m probably safer with them, being an omega and all. Remember what happened at the hostel? I’m better off with hunters.”

The words stung. Jackson knew Isaac was only talking about the full moon, but it didn’t feel that way. In his head, Jackson told Isaac to fuck off, to leave and never come back if that’s how he felt. But what came out of his mouth was: “You seriously believe that?”

“Well, it was either stay the night at their place or have an armed escort follow me around all night. Seemed like a no-brainer.” It sounded like Isaac was trying to make it seem like a joke, but to Jackson it felt forced. Jackson wondered how far from the truth it actually was.

“Still sounds like a good way to get shot with a wolfsbane bullet to me.”

Isaac, infuriatingly, just shrugged and opened the door. “Thanks for looking out for me, but I’m not
worried. It’s not like I have control issues anyway.”

“Fine,” said Jackson, because there was literally nothing else to say.

“See you tomorrow?” asked Isaac, just before Jackson slammed the door shut behind him.

Jackson fumed for several minutes, pacing his living room, listening to make sure Isaac was gone before leaving as well.

He took the long way to the den to give himself time to calm down. The pack would expect him to be a little agitated by the full moon, but not actively angry. And right now, Jackson was furious.

Of course Isaac had to ruin everything. Jackson had been nervous about his pack finding out about Isaac, but after talking to Rodger, he had decided to tell Josie when he went over for the full moon. Rodger was right in saying that it would be best to get it over with as soon as possible, and Jackson had been hopeful that they could work something out.

Not now, though. Not if Isaac was working with hunters. Jackson was almost as angry with himself about the situation as he was with Isaac. Because Jackson had been a fucking idiot not to have known. Isaac had been living with Chris Argent, for fuck’s sake, and then he had just randomly shown up alone in London to do “research”? Was Jackson really so dumb that he couldn’t put two and two together, or had he just not wanted to think about it?

Why couldn’t Isaac have just left Jackson alone?

Even with his efforts to rein his anger in, Josie still gave him a worried frown when she opened the door.

“All right there, Jack?”

Jackson nodded, because he’d have to lie if he spoke, and thanks to Isaac he was already keeping very important information from Josie. But of course Josie pressed him.

“You’re sure?” She smoothed his hair back affectionately and gripped his shoulder as a sign of support. Josie’s hand on his head made Jackson think about Isaac’s fingers in his hair. He shoved the thought away.

“Had a bad day,” said Jackson tightly. That, at least, was definitely not a lie. Still, Josie’s concern for him sharpened the guilt he was already feeling.

“Come on, then,” she said with an encouraging smile. “Rodger’s waiting for us.”

As usual, Jackson got to spend the full moon in semi-isolation from the rest of the pack, in a back room of the basement that smelled musty and damp. It had been set aside when the pack had first moved into the flat as the place to put a wolf who was having ‘control issues.’ The room even had chains, wolfsbane, and other means of subduing a werewolf, just in case. At some point someone had brought some furniture in there to try to make it a bit more comfortable, but it was still pretty damned dismal. Jackson hated it.

Jackson had spent his first two full moons in London alone in his flat. Derek had given him a crash course of Intro to Werewolf Self-Control before he’d gone to London, but Jackson knew that it had taken Derek years to learn proper control, and Derek had been born a wolf. In the end, Deaton had given Jackson some wolfsbane tranquilizers and had advised him to buy strong chains when he got to London. The tranqs were supposed to be a last-resort solution, but Jackson hadn’t been able to face the prospect of being awake and alone all night. So he’d used them both times, even though
they made him feel like he had a combination of a strong hangover and the flu for a full day after the moon.

After Jackson had joined the pack, Josie had spent the first few months’ full moons with him alone in the basement room. At first she’d just watched him and kept him from hurting himself, trying to get a feel for how he behaved without someone guiding him. Then she’d started teaching him to stay in control. When he’d gotten good enough at it to stop being violent, she’d rotated in some of the other pack members, one or two at a time, to spend a few hours in the room with her and Jackson. This was supposed to help Jackson’s inner wolf get used to being around his pack when he was at his most stressed.

Rodger usually spent the full moon curled up with Bronagh, who had a full wolf form, but Josie had asked him to come down tonight.

“Want to take the lead with Jack this time, Rodge?” asked Josie. Jackson eyed her warily. She hadn’t asked any of the other visitors to do that.


Will and Eva were much more experienced in teaching control. Especially Will, since he’d been alpha before Josie.

“They’re with the twins,” said Josie. “They’re even more of a handful than usual tonight. I can ask someone else if you really want me to, but I think you should try. Having to teach someone else on the full moon tests your control, too. I want everyone to know how to keep another wolf in check.”

Rodger looked like he might object, then thought better of it. “As long as you’re here to step in when I fail miserably.”

“I have complete faith in you, Rodge,” said Josie with a smile. “He’s all yours.”

Rodger went over to Jackson and clapped his hands together like it was time to get to work. “All right, Jackie Boy. How do you want to spend the moon?”

“Unconscious,” said Jackson tersely. He already felt restless and anxious, and the moon had barely risen.

“Tranqs are for emergencies only,” said Josie, voice and expression stern. “We’ve been over this. I don’t know what your old alpha was thinking, letting you leave on your own and giving you wolfsbane. What if you’re caught outside without it?”

“You need to learn control,” Rodger agreed.

“I’ve been controlled enough,” growled Jackson, knowing from Rodger’s and Josie’s expressions that his eyes were glowing.

“Wow,” said Rodger, fascinated. “They really are blue.”

Rodger had seen Jackson’s eyes before (most of the pack had at one point or another), but only briefly. Being reminded of their color’s significance did not improve Jackson’s mood. Full moons tended to make him feel closer to his animal side, which reminded him of being the Kanima. He growled at Rodger again.

“Rodge,” warned Josie. “Glowing eyes are bad.”
“Right,” said Rodger. “Remember the mantra, Jack?”

Jackson nodded, but he didn’t want to talk. He was afraid he’d feel fangs in his mouth when he did.

“Come on, pup,” said Rodger. “Say it with me. ‘Nor moon, nor men, nor stars control’…”

Jackson gritted his teeth and reluctantly opened his mouth to finish the line, “...’my mind, my heart, my self, my soul.’”

It was an old mantra, longer and more complex than the Hales’ ‘alpha, beta, omega,’ but Jackson liked it better. There were centuries of history behind the rhyming couplet, used by hundreds, maybe even thousands of werewolves since its creation. It reminded Josie’s pack of their connection to the wolves that had lived before them, and of the fact that if so many other werewolves could conquer their animal natures, so could they.

It was even one of Zach’s tattoos. Zach said it had been his first: the words ‘mind, heart, self, soul’ in a beautiful script across the inside of his left forearm. Zach said he didn’t need the mantra to help him keep a wolf in check, but it reminded him that he was the only person or thing that could take ownership of himself and who he wanted to be.

“Good,” said Rodger. “Again.”

“Nor moon, nor men, nor stars control--” Jackson took a deep breath and pushed it out, hissing, through his teeth. “--my mind, my heart, my self, my soul.”

Jackson’s hands were clenched into fists, so when his claws started to emerge, they cut into his skin. Rodger must have seen the blood, because he grabbed Jackson’s hands, pried them open, and pressed his palms to them, interlocking his fingers with Jackson’s. There was no doubt that it hurt Rodger when Jackson’s claws dug into the back of his hands, but Rodger didn’t let go.

“You can do this, Jack,” said Rodger. He held Jackson’s hands tightly. Josie was silent, watching the two of them intently. She frowned when Rodger’s eyes briefly flashed gold, but she didn’t comment.

Jackson shut his eyes and repeated to himself, “Nor moon, nor men, nor stars,” over and over again. Nothing could control a werewolf--not the full moon, not hunters, not fate--unless they let it. Control was self-imposed. A kanima could be controlled, but not a wolf. Jackson wasn’t a slave anymore. He was his own master.

“Good.” Rodger ducked his head to check Jackson’s teeth and eyes. “Keep at it.”

“Mind, heart--” Jackson focused on his hands, willing his claws to recede. “--self, soul.”

Rodger smiled at him when Jackson’s claws became human fingernails again, harmless to Rodger’s hands (which were bloodied). Rodger’s pulse was elevated and he was breathing harder than usual, but his eyes stayed their rare but human amber.

Next, Jackson focused on his teeth. He concentrated internally on the mantra until he could run his tongue over his canines and find them blunt. He could tell by the way his face felt that he’d managed to keep the extra hair at bay.

His eyes were always the hardest part. They threatened to glow even if he just got angry, full moon or not. A constant reminder of the unthinkable things he’d done when someone else had had control over his body.
“Breathe, Jack,” said Rodger. Rodger was clearly trying to take his own advice as well, carefully controlling his breath.

And Jackson tried. He really did. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Inhale--”Mind,”--exhale--”heart,”--inhale--”self,”--exhale--”soul.”

When he looked up at Rodger again, the older werewolf was smiling. “Well done, Jack. Well done you.”

“Well done both of you,” said Josie. She beamed at Rodger, who was wiping sweat from his forehead. “Takes more effort than you’d think, eh?”

Rodger nodded vehemently. “You’ve got a wild wolf in there, Jack. Makes the rest of ours want to come out and play.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. He could still feel his ‘wild wolf’ awake inside himself, pawing at the mental cage Jackson had built to contain it, howling for freedom. But he kept the door firmly locked. He stayed wide awake (another reason to miss the tranquilizers), alternating between pacing back and forth and lying on a couch, staring up at the stone ceiling and whispering the mantra under his breath, over and over, until the words were just sounds, just familiar shapes in his mouth.

Every now and then Jackson thought about Isaac, and how easy he made self-control sound. Like the wolf in him was just a fly buzzing around his head once a month that he could shoo away. Isaac was so confident in his own control that could spend a full moon with hunters and not think twice. Hell, he could work with hunters and not even think it was a big enough deal to tell Jackson about, despite the fact that it meant Jackson had to keep something really important and potentially dangerous from his alpha.

Jackson also remembered the brief, utterly confusing kiss Isaac had given him in the club, and how Isaac had started sleeping in his bed, and how he’d woken up with Isaac pressed close to him. How the feeling of Isaac there with him had turned Jackson on. How Isaac smelled sometimes, and how Jackson had gotten so used to it that he’d accidentally let Rodger find out because of the scent on him.

Thoughts of Isaac made Jackson’s wolf surge to the surface: angry, resentful, bewildered. He had to grit his teeth--they were sometimes sharp when he did it--and shut his eyes and sink his claws into the couch (or, twice, Rodger’s arm) and spell the words of the mantra out letter by letter in his head until he was relatively calm again. This cycle happened several times.

At some point after midnight, Bronagh came down in her wolf form to check on them. Rodger had been dozing in a chair for about a half hour while Jackson was sprawled on the couch. Jackson had thought she’d go to him, but instead she hopped up on the couch with Jackson. She was small for a wolf, but still as big and heavy as a large German Shepherd, so when she flopped down with half her body on Jackson’s chest, it nearly knocked the wind out of him.

He thought about trying to push her off, but he soon found that the weight was calming. It forced him to breathe slowly and carefully, and he could listen to Bronagh-the-Wolf’s breath and pulse and try to match his own to them. He was actually able to slip into a light sleep for a little while, though he was half awake when Rodger patted Bronagh on the top of her head and ran his hand gently over Jackson’s hair.

Jackson, eyes closed, could hear Rodger moving toward the side of the room where Josie was.
“I haven’t seen a bitten one this young since Dominic,” whispered Rodger to Josie, in a tone so low even Jackson had to concentrate to understand him. “Have you?”

“No,” said Josie. “But Dominic was eighteen. A good alpha wouldn’t give the Bite to a child.”

“How old was Jack?”

“Sixteen, I think,” said Josie. “He’s seventeen now.”

Rodger swore. “Is that why you took him in so soon?”

“Well, not the only reason,” said Josie with a smile in her voice before her tone turned more serious. “But yeah. He shouldn’t be alone. And I wouldn’t trust some of the other packs with him.”

Rodger made a sound of agreement.

“From what I’ve been able to get from him, he wasn’t the only one,” said Josie. “At least one of them was only fifteen. Their alpha was younger than me. Not much older than Sarah.”

“How the hell did that happen?” said Rodger.

“Dunno,” said Josie. “Something must’ve gone wrong.”

They made it sound so horrible. Jackson had known that the werewolves back home had been young, but it seemed like Beacon Hills was a special case, that there were rules Derek had broken. That Josie’s pack saw Jackson and McCall and Derek’s other betas as victims: children who’d been taken advantage of. Jackson had never felt like a victim, but… With the way Josie’s pack saw it, maybe they were.

Rodger and Josie were silent again. Jackson continued to fake sleep, repeating the mantra to himself in his head until he could feel the moon’s influence on him waning with the approach of dawn.

*Something must’ve gone wrong*, he thought. That’s what they should title his biography.

“Is this really necessary?” Isaac scratched at the back of his neck, looking around the damp cellar warily. Made completely out of stone, it was the most secure area in the house, or so he’d been told by the hunters standing between him and the exit.

Isaac traced several deep gouges in the wall with his fingers. This place wasn’t meant for keeping wine.

Pol and James stood at the bottom of the retractable ladder set into the stone floor. Once pulled up, it would be impossible to open the hatch from below, making it a very secure, very boring, prison cell. And Isaac’s accommodations for the night, apparently. He couldn’t believe that the Bristows would lock their own kids in here for their hunter initiation. With the lights on, it was creepy; Isaac didn’t even want to imagine how it felt with them off.

“When Hannah ‘invited’ me to spend the full moon with you guys, I thought we’d be playing board games and eating popcorn or salty harrumphs or whatever weird thing you guys call it here. Not spending it in your creepy Batcave.”

It was enormous, must have been the same dimensions as the first floor of the house (ground floor, *whatever*): more than enough room for an eccentric billionaire to set up shop as a vigilante. Or, for
a family of werewolf hunters to contain things they couldn’t or didn’t want to kill. Either way. Thick stone columns supporting the manor must have also pulled double duty at one point since the inset chain-rings definitely had a used-for-containing-prisoners kind of vibe. At least the place was well lit. For the moment.

The werewolf turned back to the hunters. “I’m starting to feel a lack of trust here.”

“We are responsible for the safety of this city from dangerous, supernatural entities,” Pol began. “We are also responsible for inviting a potentially dangerous, supernatural entity to the city. You can see why we might wish to exercise a degree of caution on this night in particular.”

Isaac could kind of see her point, but it still stung.

Hannah came racing down the stairs. “Gran! Dad! You can’t be serious!”

James caught her as she tried to fly past him. “It’s just a precaution, Han. Isaac can stay upstairs as long as he stays calm. We just wanted him to be aware of the alternative.”

Relieved, Isaac followed them back upstairs. Once pulled up, the stone the ladder folded down from was indistinguishable from the rest of the stone floor in the pantry, and was securely bolted into place. Usually. Tonight it was left open. Just in case someone needed to be pushed in quickly.

Great.

Locked-in-basement was a little too close to locked-in-freezer-in-basement for his comfort. Isaac knew for a fact that being trapped down there would be the opposite of good for his control.

There were a total of six active hunters in the house, including Hannah and Tobias, with another dozen or so hunters who were part of the family but not actually part of the family and didn’t live at the manor. Pol was retired from field work and Nina always stayed in to watch the kids. George and Chandra, the only married couple, always traded off so that their kids would hopefully never be orphaned (it was a dangerous line of work, after all). It was Chandra’s turn to stay home, so it would be her responsibility to keep an eye on Isaac. At least Hannah would be there to keep an eye on her family keeping an eye on Isaac.

Everyone else left before sunset. They would patrol the typical frequents of the various packs, making sure that everyone was on their best behavior. James had made it clear to Isaac that they only killed werewolves that attacked humans, and even then, they preferred to let the packs take care of it themselves when they could. Their main priority right now was looking out for the thing that was eating people in graveyards anyway.

After the hunters left, the kids did homework until dinner while Isaac and Hannah played cards. Dinner was its usual loud, messy self, and after the kids all helped clean up, each with a different task or chore, they were set free to occupy themselves until bedtime.

The children were surprisingly democratic about figuring out how best to spend their time. They actually voted and decided that they wanted to act out a story, demanding Isaac and Hannah’s participation, and the story chosen was The Three Little Pigs.

Greyson, Annie, and Maya, being the youngest, played the roles of the three pigs, while Taylor, Petra, and Nate helped build the houses. These were primarily blanket and pillow forts, with the ‘brick’ house having the added sturdiness of being the dining room table. The role of the big bad wolf was, unsurprisingly, filled by Isaac, and Hannah designated herself narrator.
“Once upon a time,” she began dramatically, “There were three little pigs, who built three little houses.” The kids all scrambled around setting up couch cushions and blankets while Isaac hid behind the couch. “The two youngest pigs didn’t have a care in the world, and just wanted to have fun forever. But the oldest pig knew there were dangers lurking out there, like the Big Bad Wolf, who wanted nothing more than to gobble up the tasty little pigs.”

Isaac took that as his cue and quietly howled (mimicking an actual wolf, not a werewolf).

The children all shrieked with excitement and dove into their forts.

As the story went on and Isaac knocked down the ‘straw house’ and the ‘stick house,’ huffing and puffing, the kids all scrambled, laughing, into the safety of the ‘brick house.’ According to the story, there was nothing the wolf could do to get inside, but Isaac could think of at least one way.

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in,” Isaac growled.

“Not by the hairs on our chinny chin chins!” The children all intoned gleefully, knowing they were safe.

“Well then, I’ll just have to huff and puff and blow your house down!”

“The wolf took a deep breath and blew with all his might,” Hannah narrated as Isaac made the appropriate noises and shook the blanket with his hand. The children giggled as Hannah continued, “but he couldn’t blow the brick house down.”

“But,” Isaac cut in, “the pigs didn’t know that the wolf was actually a werewolf, with super strength, who could rip the roof right off of the house.” Isaac gripped the edge of the table and slowly began lifting it, causing several blanket and pillow fortifications to be shaken loose. He stuck his face inside, flashing his gold eyes at the surprised children and faked a fierce growl.

The kids fled the fort in all directions, screaming.

“Oops.” Isaac hadn’t meant to actually scare them. He’d half expected them to try to fight him.

Isaac had just set the table back down when Chandra and Nina ran into the room with guns drawn and pointed right at Isaac.

“Whoa!” he shouted, putting his hands up in what he really hoped was a nonthreatening way. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! We were just playing.” Isaac looked over at Hannah to back him up. However, she found the whole thing immensely funny and was doubled up laughing.

Nina and Chandra glanced at each other, and after apparently deciding that Isaac was not trying to dismember their charges, lowered their guns. Chandra did manage to stay in the same room with Isaac for the rest of the evening, and she never put her gun away.

The kids were no worse for the scare and were back in the room within minutes, bringing with them a large plate of cookies. The younger ones were taken up to bed soon thereafter, but the older ones were allowed to stay up for a movie.

They watched something animated with talking animals and a moral, and then it was time for the rest of the kids to go to bed. While Hannah helped Nina herd the “not tired yet” children upstairs, Chandra sat and watched Isaac. Didn’t talk, just stared and creeped Isaac out. Still holding her gun casually in her lap. He was honestly thinking of making a break for the door when Chandra finally spoke.
“Why are you here, Isaac?” Even though Chandra’s voice was casual and her question seemed innocent, for the first time all evening, Isaac felt truly threatened.

Isaac didn’t try to be charming. He didn’t try to be smart or clever. He tried to be honest. “I’m here because I want to help. Pol hired me because she thinks I can.”

Chandra’s eyes steeled when Isaac mentioned Pol. Maybe the ‘big happy family’ wasn’t entirely as it seemed…

He pressed on anyway. “I’m here tonight as a gesture of goodwill. I didn’t have to come. I know you don’t exactly have a reason to trust me, but I don’t think I’ve given you a reason not to, either.”

“You are a werewolf. That’s plenty of reason.”

“Not tired, my arse. I swear, the second their heads hit the pillows, those monkeys are unconscious.” Hannah came back into the room and immediately noticed the tension. “Chan, you threatening our guest?”

“He’s not my guest.”

“No. He’s mine.”

Even Isaac jumped when the old woman casually wandered into the room, carrying two cups of tea on saucers. She handed one to Isaac without asking and stood beside him in a clear show of support. Isaac supposed humans played as many dominance games as werewolves did. They were just a lot more subtle than flashing eyes and bared teeth.

Pol didn’t even have to glare to get her point across; merely raising her eyebrow at the loaded gun in Chandra’s lap was enough to make the younger woman flush and look down.

Suddenly even more uncomfortable (if that was possible), Isaac pretended to be very interested in the item he now found himself in possession of, which wasn’t difficult. The cup was fine china, white with a thin band of gold around the base and the rim, with a subtle flower pattern. Isaac held it gingerly by the handle and saucer, worried about shattering it and causing an international incident.

The tea smelled earthy, somehow sweet and bitter at the same time, doctored with just a bit of milk and sugar. He’d never had tea with milk and sugar before. He couldn’t actually remember ever having tea before, just hot water, lemon, and honey when he was sick, and he hadn’t been sick for a while now. Stabbed, shot, and other forms of bodily harm? Sure. But at least he’d never have to worry about catching a cold again. He took a small sip, burning himself on the scalding liquid but well rewarded by the rich texture and taste of flowery spices.

“Thank you, Chandra, for your diligent attention tonight. I think I can watch him now.” Pol’s voice was soft, but Isaac could hear the dismissal just as well as Chandra apparently could. The younger woman stiffened and stood abruptly.

“I’m going to check on Leela,” she said, and, with one more dark look in Isaac’s direction, left the room.

Later, after Hannah, Pol, and Isaac had chatted for a while, Hannah showed Isaac to his ‘guest quarters’--which consisted of a single bed tucked into the corner of a small room on the third floor--said goodnight, and warned him that Chandra and George’s room was right next door.

Isaac lay awake for a while, focusing on his anchor, keeping the nervous energy that was building
under his skin at bay. Being with the Bristows, playing with the kids, being a part of a family... It had been a balm on a wound he hardly even remembered anymore. His family had been so broken by the end, but it hadn’t always been all bad. It was remembering the good stuff—playing catch with his brother, his dad taking them to the movies, the boring, family stuff—that kept him human during the full moon.

From the very first, Isaac had never had that much trouble controlling his wolf during the full moon. (Except when small spaces were involved, but Isaac figured he deserved a pass for that, all things considered.) Sure, he’d smashed through the window of the subway car, but he had almost immediately been able to get a hold of himself and come back to help Derek restrain Boyd and Erica.

He frowned as his thoughts drifted to Jackson trying to learn control from Derek that month before he’d left Beacon Hills. It… hadn’t gone very well. For anyone. Sessions had often ended with Jackson storming out and Derek being even more quiet and intense than usual. With Boyd and Erica missing at the time, and the Alpha Pack closing in… It had been rough.

Isaac felt the nervous energy caused by the moon creeping back in, so he shook himself and instead thought about how excited Camden had been that day he’d gotten his orders. Their dad had bought a cake to celebrate. Chocolate raspberry. Cam’s favorite.

Then he found himself wondering what Jackson’s anchor was, if he’d found one, if it helped. Isaac hoped Jackson’s new pack was a better fit for him than the old one had been. What would it have been like if Jackson had stayed? Him and Derek butting heads all the time? There had been so much anger in Jackson then. There was definitely still some there now. Maybe, Isaac admitted to himself, that was part of the reason Isaac maybe hadn’t been as forthcoming about his situation as he might’ve been. It wasn’t like Isaac had exactly meant to keep the fact that he was working with hunters a secret... He had just kind of hoped that it would never come up.

Isaac groaned, remembering how pissed off Jackson had been at him earlier. Isaac was confident that his choice to work with hunters didn’t actively affect Jackson. Sure, Jackson’s pack was part of their jurisdiction, but shouldn’t that make Isaac working with them a good thing? Another reason for werewolves and hunters not to fight, right?

In any case, Jackson knew now. Isaac decided he was glad. It was probably better to have everything out in the open if Isaac might be sticking around for a little while.

Isaac was still thinking about Jackson when he drifted off for a few hours of fitful sleep. After tossing and turning most of the night, he woke up in the early morning, completely exhausted. He might as well have not slept at all. But the sun finally came up, and Isaac could rest a little easier. Despite the fact that the moon was only just past full and still strong, Isaac always felt the pressure ease immediately when the sun rose. It was like covering your head with a blanket on a hot summer night until you were breathing stale, muggy air, then suddenly kicking it off. It’s still hot, but the contrast is astounding, the air you’re breathing is cooler, fresher, the heat isn’t as oppressive as it was under that blanket.

Still, being shut up in a car or the subway was entirely out of the question, so after he dozed for a little longer and finally got up—and declined food or coffee or a ride home--Isaac committed to a very long walk back to Jackson’s. Almost everyone had already headed off to school or work, so he was able to say goodbye to Pol and leave without too much fuss.

Isaac didn’t actually have a key to Jackson’s flat, he realized as he stared at the front door of Jackson’s building several hours later. This had never been a problem before since he’d either been with Jackson or stayed out all day when Jackson was at school. Being early afternoon on a
Monday, technically Isaac should have found some way to entertain himself until Jackson was finished with school, but he was way too tired and cold to stay outside any longer than he needed to.

Luckily, he had discovered that window with the busted lock. Unluckily, the window was on the second floor (if you counted floors the right way). Having no other options, Isaac sighed and headed around the side of the building.

Climbing in turned out to be a lot more difficult than climbing out two days before had been, but thanks to werewolf strength and agility, even exhausted he managed to scale the drainpipe with only marginal trouble and pry the frosty window open before tumbling gracelessly onto Jackson’s living room floor.

“What the hell?” Jackson came out of his bedroom just as Isaac was shutting the window behind him. He sounded less angry than Isaac would have expected, especially after the way they had left things yesterday.

“Hey, sorry, I thought you would still be at school.”

“So you broke into my flat?” Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. “I said I didn’t want you here alone.”

Isaac began the process of escaping his winter attire. “Well, you’re here, so I’m not alone.”

“You just said you thought I was at school.”

“Yeah, why aren’t you at school?” Isaac looked at Jackson for the first time. His shoulders were hunched and he had dark circles under his eyes that matched the ones Isaac was probably wearing. Apparently neither of them had managed much sleep last night. “Hey, you okay?”

Jackson turned and went back into his bedroom without answering and curled up into a miserable-looking ball beneath the blankets.

Isaac frowned, wondering how badly the full moon really affected Jackson. Isaac stood at the foot of the bed for a moment, considering his options. If Jackson was still mad at him about yesterday, it might be better for Isaac to go sleep on the couch and give him some space. On the other hand, Jackson really didn’t look well, and Isaac wanted to help.

Jackson gave Isaac a look as Isaac crawled in on the side that he had claimed. “Isaac--”

“Sleep,” Isaac interrupted with his face pressed into a pillow that smelled like Jackson.

Jackson turned away from Isaac, moving as close to the edge as he could without falling off the bed. At least he hadn’t told Isaac to leave. Isaac would happily call that a win. As he started warming up, though, Isaac began feeling restless again. He turned over a few more times, but it didn’t matter which side of his body he was lying on or what he did with his arms or the pillow, with the full moon only just passed and the tension between him and Jackson still there, the magic of the Huge Comfy Bed was not enough.

Isaac sighed and rolled over. Jackson’s bed really was enormous. With Jackson as far away as he could possibly be, Isaac could probably reach out and only just trail his fingertips across his back. A tempting thought under different circumstances, but for today, Isaac had another idea.

“Are you asleep?” Isaac asked, not bothering to whisper since he already knew the answer. Jackson was practically radiating ‘I’m too stressed out to sleep even though I really wish I could.’
Jackson ignored him.

“Good, then you won’t mind this.”

It was a gamble, but at this point a Hail Mary-style move was pretty much Isaac’s only option for breaking the tension. So Isaac more or less dove into Jackson’s side of the bed and pressed close against him.

Jackson made a startled sound and shifted abruptly so he could see Isaac. “Dude, what the hell!”

“I can’t sleep,” said Isaac, frowning pitifully.

Jackson wasn’t buying it. Now that the initial shock had worn off, he began trying to shove Isaac back toward the other side of the bed. “Why is that my problem?”

Isaac sighed. “I feel weird in my skin the day after the full moon.”

Jackson stopped pushing Isaac away, but he was definitely still tense. Either he was still really pissed off at Isaac, or he was even worse off from the full moon than Isaac had thought.

“And this… helps?” Jackson sounded more resigned than anything. Isaac may have just been imagining it, but he thought he felt Jackson relax slightly against him.

Isaac took that as his cue to force his way under Jackson’s arm. “I’ll move when I feel better. I promise.”

Jackson only hesitated for another couple of seconds before awkwardly muttering, “Fine.” After a struggle to figure out what to do with the arm that Isaac had burrowed under, he finally settled his hand (somewhat reluctantly, Isaac thought) on Isaac’s back over the blankets.

Isaac sighed, settling in. He hadn’t been lying; he did feel weird in his own skin after the full moon. And physical contact helped ground him (especially physical contact from someone who looked and smelled like Jackson). But mostly, Isaac hoped it would help Jackson. Maybe they could get over that stupid fight and Jackson’s awkwardness and at least go back to how things had been before, if not move forward from there.

That hopeful thought, plus the blankets and the personal heater he had acquired, meant that Isaac was finally able to get comfortable. He fell asleep almost immediately with a smile on his face, Jackson’s heartbeat in his ear, and absolutely no intention of moving.

Jackson woke up early the next morning, well before his alarm was supposed to go off; the sun was on its way up, but hadn’t breached the horizon yet. His rumbling stomach made him immediately aware that he’d slept through dinner and most of the night. He moved to stretch, but found that his range of motion was impeded by someone’s back pressed firmly against his own. Isaac. Jackson dragged his own heavy body into a sitting position, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he looked down at Isaac’s sleeping form. Of course, the entire other half of the bed was empty and Isaac was firmly settled on Jackson’s side of it. Again. So much for ‘I’ll move when I feel better.’

Isaac looked deceptively peaceful and (for lack of a better word) innocent when he was asleep. It was weird. But then, puppies looked adorable right up until the moment they chewed up half your furniture. Jackson had just decided to take another couple of minutes to enjoy the quiet before making himself get out of the warm bed when Isaac’s eyes opened and fixed on his. Jackson’s heart skipped in surprise.
“Mornin’, darling,” said Isaac in a sleep-husky voice.

Jackson rolled his eyes. Yep, there was the real Isaac. Peaceful and innocent. Yeah, right.

“This is a really big bed for the UK, you know,” said Jackson.

“I know,” said Isaac happily, then yawned. “It's really nice.”

“There’s more than enough room on that side of it.”

Isaac glanced over at the rest of the bed, then shook his head. “It’s cold over there.”

“It warms up when you lie there long enough,” said Jackson.

“Still colder than sharing body heat. It’s scientifically proven,” Isaac said patiently, like he was explaining something to a child. “We can’t share body heat from all the way across your ocean of a bed.”

“I feel like we already had a talk about personal space,” said Jackson dryly. “More than once.”

“I like your personal space,” Isaac said with a lopsided smile. “It has you in it.”

Isaac moved to sit up, and then he was definitely in Jackson’s space, leaning in close, his arm reaching around Jackson. Jackson was convinced that Isaac was going to kiss him again, and he couldn’t move, either to stop it or to accept it.

And then Isaac’s hand closed around the glass of water that Jackson kept on his bedside table. He leaned away again and took a long gulp, then offered it to Jackson.

“Thirsty?”

Jackson regarded Isaac for a moment, then calmly took the glass from him, had a drink, and set it on the nightstand. Then, in one quick movement, he grabbed Isaac’s arm, shoved at his shoulder, and tossed him onto the floor. Jackson indulged in a smirk as he rolled back over into the warm spot Isaac had left under the duvet and closed his eyes again.

He enjoyed the sound of Isaac’s body hitting the floor, and had to stifle the urge to laugh when Isaac recovered and started to chuckle, clearly impressed in spite of himself.

“That’s gotta be the most interesting way I’ve ever been thrown out of bed,” said Isaac from behind Jackson as he got to his feet.

Jackson snorted and burrowed more deeply into the duvet. He wondered idly how many other times Isaac had been thrown out of bed, and why.

“If you shower fast enough there might still be some real bacon left when you get out,” said Isaac as he left the bedroom. “It only takes about twenty minutes to cook, though, so you might have to cut your shower in half.”

The promise of bacon was even more alluring than the pull of the warm bed, so Jackson was able to drag himself out from beneath the duvet. Maybe it was that he was in a good mood from sleeping well and getting the better of Isaac, but Jackson found himself smiling to himself at Isaac’s teasing rather than being irritated by it. It was strange that Isaac already knew so much about Jackson’s routine. It might’ve been creepy if the result wasn’t a hot breakfast on a school morning.
In the shower, Jackson’s thoughts became more serious. He felt so much better after a good sleep, and after a shower and food he’d probably feel better than he had in days, if not weeks. But knowing that reminded him of what had made him feel so awful. His full moons were supposed to get better over time, but his progress was so slow from month to month that, despite Josie saying otherwise, Jackson didn’t feel like he’d gotten much better at all. Why didn’t anyone else seem to feel so pained and sick and exhausted by the moon? Why did it leave Jackson a wreck, desperate for relief and comfort but pride-hurt that he needed it?

Jackson would never, ever admit it out loud, but something about the way Isaac had fallen asleep pressed close to him (well, practically on top of him) yesterday had been… nice. Jackson had started to accept the fact that Isaac was going to keep invading his space, but this had been different. Jackson had wanted Isaac to be there, though he’d never ask for it. He had already gotten so used to Isaac’s presence that it was impossible not to be aware of his absence. Jackson had been so relieved when Isaac had stumbled in through the window after staying with the hunters that he’d lost the will to be pissed off at him. It would’ve been Isaac’s own fault if the hunters had hurt him, but still.

As much as Jackson appreciated the physical comfort his pack members happily gave him if he wanted it (and sometimes when he didn’t), it often stung his pride. Especially on full moons, when he was babysat by people whose control was so much better than his. And this time, with Josie and Rodger there, talking about him like he was some poor lost puppy who should be pitied and needed to be protected… It hadn’t left him feeling great about himself. It had also made him positive that he couldn’t tell Josie about Isaac. Not only was he sure that she’d tell Jackson to send Isaac away, but she’d also be disappointed in Jackson for not telling her. Jackson didn’t think he could bear that on top of her pity.

So maybe it helped that Isaac wasn’t in his pack, and that he was the same age and had been bitten when he was young, just like Jackson. Isaac didn’t see Jackson as lost any more than Jackson saw Isaac as lost; they didn’t see each other as young or victimized or pitiable. They were on the same level. Rodger’s hand on Jackson’s hair had been comforting, Bronagh lying on top of him in her wolf form had been calming, but Isaac’s closeness was just… soothing. The warmth and weight of Isaac on Jackson was like cool water on a burn.

It helped to know that Isaac felt some of that, too. It helped that Isaac had asked Jackson for comfort, that Jackson could give it (albeit reluctantly). It helped that, even though it had only been a few days, Isaac had started to feel like a fixture in the safe space of Jackson’s flat. It helped that Isaac wanted to be there with him.

And though Jackson would never, ever admit it out loud… he needed all the help he could get.

Chapter End Notes

Wooo, first full moon! Hope you guys are enjoying the fic and getting to know the OCs and so forth. Thanks so much for reading!

Savenna Cloverunner
You've Got So Far to Go

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER SEVEN: YOU’VE GOT SO FAR TO GO (The Alkaline Trio)

I heard everybody's voice cut out when you spoke,
and I watched all the lights go dim when your eyes opened.
Well, I can't believe you showed up.
What do I do now?

“Eighteen minutes. That might be a personal best,” said Isaac as he scraped the last of the bacon out of the pan. “And just in time.”

Nothing else had sounded good, so Isaac had just decided to fry all of the bacon he’d bought. Jackson didn’t seem to mind though, the way he attacked the plate.

Isaac couldn’t help but feel just a little smug about getting to snuggle with Jackson the night
before. He was also choosing to take getting thrown out of bed that morning as a good thing; a sign
that everything between them was getting better.

Unfortunately, all that teasing and cuddling meant he was also now hyperaware of Jackson: the
way his damp hair clung to his neck, his scent, all rich and clean and soapy, the way Jackson
absentmindedly licked the bacon grease off his thumb, causing Isaac to literally have to bite his
tongue to keep from offering to clean Jackson's fingers for him (because he knew it would not end
well).

Isaac tried to distract himself by scrubbing the pan.

“Dude, are you not going to eat?”

“Uh… Yeah, in a minute.” Isaac did not want to turn around until he was sure he wouldn’t do
something stupid. Like start sucking on his roommate’s fingers.

Okay, that was it. Isaac was going out tonight. He was pretty sure he’d lose his mind if he didn’t.

“Fuck, I’m hungry,” said Jackson after cleaning his plate. “No more skipping dinner.”

Isaac laughed. “Well, that’s what happens when you sleep through it.”

Even though the pan was spotless, Isaac kept scrubbing, anything to keep from turning around just
yet. He did his best to stay out of Jackson’s way while Jackson got up to make himself a bowl of
cereal.

“There’s coffee, too,” Isaac said lamely, as if Jackson wouldn’t have been able to tell.

“Thanks,” said Jackson, seemingly unaware of Isaac’s internal struggle. Jackson sat back down
and started eating his cereal. Halfway through, his phone chimed. Jackson picked it up and smiled
down at what Isaac presumed was text. Actually smiled.

“That’s a rare look for you,” teased Isaac, drying his hands. “Secret admirer?”

Jackson visibly schooled his features into a more neutral expression before looking up at Isaac.

“Friend,” he said evasively. He looked at his phone again and typed a response.

Isaac poured himself a mug of coffee, trying his best to mind his own business. A few minutes
passed in relative silence while Jackson texted back and forth with his ‘friend’ a few times. Then
Jackson set his phone back down.

“I might meet up with him later,” said Jackson. “We do homework together sometimes.”

Isaac felt an unexpected rush of relief. If Jackson was going to be out, that gave Isaac the perfect
excuse to go out on his own.

“That’s great,” he blurted out, causing Jackson to look at him funny. “I was thinking about going
out anyway, so you don’t have to worry about me.”

It wasn’t that Isaac didn’t want to hang out with Jackson or anything, but, well… he really might
go crazy if he didn’t get some contact soon beyond cuddling and a chaste, stolen kiss here and
there. Those things were nice, but not nearly enough when you were used to so much more.

“That works out, then,” Jackson stood up. “I guess I should get going.”
As Jackson headed to the bedroom to grab his school stuff, Isaac tossed the dishes in the sink to be dealt with later and, after a glance out the window to assure himself that winter had not miraculously ended early, went for his coat.

“You know,” Jackson said as he came out of the bedroom, shoving some disgustingly fat textbook into his backpack, “it’s fine if you want to stay here today while I’m gone. I mean, it’s not like you’re going to burn the place down or anything.”

Isaac stepped between Jackson and the desk for what had become part of their morning routine (Isaac trusted his own control at least enough for that). Jackson didn’t miss a beat, grabbing his notebooks from behind Isaac even as Isaac’s hands went into Jackson’s hair.

“I appreciate that,” he said, piecing out the silky strands of Jackson’s hair, “but I can’t play housewife today. I have stuff to do.” Isaac smirked at the way Jackson clenched his jaw. He was way too easy. Except where it mattered. “Speaking of, do you have a public library card?”

“Why?” Jackson asked as he pulled away from Isaac and headed towards the door.

Isaac followed him out and leaned against the door as Jackson paused to lock it behind them. “Need to do some research. I hear books are good for that.”

“I’m just shocked you even know how to read.” Jackson’s sly smirk took the bite off the insult.

“I know, right? Never had much time for reading growing up, though. The light in the freezer was pretty bad,” Isaac responded without missing a beat.

Jackson flinched so hard, for a moment Isaac thought he’d tripped.

“You okay?” Isaac held out a hand to steady him, but Jackson pulled away.

“How do you do that?” Jackson asked without looking at him. “How can you make jokes about that?”

Isaac shrugged, suddenly not sure if he wanted to go into all of this with Jackson right now. He didn’t mind talking about it, but it was obvious that Jackson did.

Stiles had once accused Isaac of milking his situation, like Isaac was trying to get attention out of it or something. But Stiles was wrong. The truth was that Isaac wasn’t trying to rub what he’d gone through in people’s faces; he was trying to deal with it in the only way he could. When it was happening, he’d been too scared to say anything, but now that it was out there, he didn’t want people to feel sorry for him, so he made jokes.

Another thing Derek had taught Isaac was to wear his scars like armor so nobody else could use them against him.

They were both quiet for the rest of the walk. Isaac could have turned off to go to the library at any point, but he wanted to make sure that he had time to think about what he wanted to say to Jackson.

By the time they got to the school, Isaac still hadn’t quite figured out what would ease the awkward tension that had grown between them.

Jackson interrupted his thoughts. “I’ll text you when I’m heading home.” He barely glanced at Isaac before turning to go inside.

“Jackson, wait.” Isaac grabbed Jackson’s coat sleeve. He half expected Jackson to pull away, or
look around like Isaac was making a scene, but Jackson just stopped and looked back, if a little impatiently. Isaac didn’t want Jackson to leave before he’d had a chance to explain. “If I laugh about it, nobody else can.”

He dropped Jackson’s coat, took a step back, and smiled, hoping to show Jackson that everything really was okay. “See you after school.”

Isaac hadn’t gotten more than a few steps away before Jackson’s loud and pointed sigh made him stop and look back.

Jackson held up his library card. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Isaac stared at the books on the table in front of him. Off of school for a few months and he'd completely forgotten how to study. Not that he'd ever been great at it even when he had attended, but still.

And this stuff was actually interesting. Myths and legends about old London and England in general, and Isaac had to admit, their monsters were pretty cool. Terrifying, but cool. But there was just so much of it, he didn't know where to start, and he didn’t exactly think he could ask the librarian to point him to the ‘monsters-who-eat-people-in-graveyards-during-the-new-moon’ section.

Jackson would probably have some ideas, he thought idly, glancing at his phone where it was lying on top of one of the many stacks of books in front of him.

Yeah, right. If Isaac texted Jackson it would *not* be to ask him for study advice. He could admit it: he wanted to distract Jackson…

After his phone buzzed for a fourth time, Jackson asked to go to the bathroom and hid in a stall so he could check his messages. He was worried something was wrong, that maybe it was Zach or Rodger or Josie trying to reach him. He rolled his eyes when he saw who it actually was.

*Isaac <3: jax have you been to this library??*  
*Isaac <3: its enormous*  
*Isaac <3: there are so many books!*  
*Isaac <3: like TOO many books*

Why was he surprised? Of course it was Isaac. Jackson rolled his eyes and typed a response.

*Me: Why the fuck would I have a card if I hadn't been there?*  
*Isaac <3: how should I know?*  
*Isaac <3: but seriously its huge!*  
*Isaac <3: jax I have no idea where to start*

Jackson waited for a pause in the burst of short messages that seemed to be Isaac’s texting style.

*Me: First, don’t call me that. Then put the phone down. Read a book. Then read another book*  
*Isaac <3: yeah yeah okay...*  
*Isaac <3: so what are you doing?*
Jackson bit back an irritated sound, so as not to draw attention from any other students who might be in the bathroom.

Me: SCHOOL. You know that
Isaac <3: yeah but what are you doing at school?
Isaac <3: what weird british indoctrination are they putting you through?
Isaac <3: are you learning spell casting?
Isaac <3: potions?
Isaac <3: you seem like youd be really good at that one sport on the brooms
Isaac <3: whats that called?
Me: Fuck off
Isaac <3: nah I think it starts with a Q
Me: Go read
Isaac <3: its going to bug me all day....
Me: I know the feeling

In spite of himself, Jackson found that he was fighting the urge to smile. This was not cute. Isaac was going to get him busted for texting at school and then Jackson was going to be in trouble for a conversation he didn’t even want to be having in the first place. Jackson told himself that he was only texting back because if he didn’t, Isaac would never stop.

But like hell was he going to admit that he knew the game was called Quidditch.

Me: You could look it up. You're in a library after all
Isaac <3: i know you know. just tell me
Isaac <3: if you tell me, i’ll be able to focus on my important research
Isaac <3: about unicorns
Isaac <3: do unicorns eat people?

Jackson stared blankly down at his phone. Unicorns. Isaac had to be messing with him. It had become clear lately that there were a lot more supernatural creatures in the world than Jackson had originally thought, but there were some things that just had to be myth. ...Right?

Clearly this was an exercise in futility and Isaac would never stop, no matter what Jackson did.

Me: Okay we’re done done here. Going back to class
Isaac <3: aww :(
Me: Turning off my phone now
Isaac <3: sure you are
Isaac <3: like youd ever do that

Jackson didn’t turn off his phone, but he did silence it so it would stop vibrating. He left it alone until the end of the school day, when he checked it and found:

Isaac <3: jackson?
Isaac <3: jackson??
Isaac <3: jacksonnn
Isaac <3: srsly these books smell weird
Isaac <3: nothing good on unicorns
Isaac <3: total bs
Isaac <3: never going to a library again
Isaac <3: 0 stars would not recommend

Again, Jackson caught himself smiling before he shook it off. There was a new message from Zach
Jackson frowned at his phone. He should say yes. Why wouldn’t he? Studying with Zach was always good for Jackson’s productivity, and Isaac had said that he was going out that night anyway. There was no reason to stay at home alone…

Except that Zach was in Jackson’s pack, and was therefore associated with Jackson’s guilt about keeping Isaac a secret. And what if Zach asked Jackson what he’d been up to, or who he’d been spending time with? In theory, Jackson could lie to Zach; Zach didn’t have werewolf abilities so Jackson’s heartbeat wouldn’t give him away. But Zach was intuitive and empathetic, and he had a way of sensing when something was going on with people. In any case, Jackson didn’t want to lie to Zach. Maybe it would be better to avoid the situation entirely, just to be safe.

Me: Thinking of staying in. Next time though

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and shouldered his bag, preparing to go home, when it rang.

“Standing me up, Jack?”

Jackson winced guiltily at the sound of Zach’s voice.

“No,” said Jackson. “I just don’t feel like going out. Too tired.”

“Why do I not believe you?”

“You don’t have to believe me, but that doesn’t mean I’m coming out.”

“You’ve been avoiding the pack. I don’t even live at the den, and I know that.”

That was not a good sign. If Zach knew that Jackson hadn’t been spending much time with the pack lately (except on the full moon, which was required), then that meant someone at the den had been talking to Zach about it, which meant that at least a few people in the pack were concerned. Rodger, maybe? Jackson hadn’t explicitly asked Rodger not to tell anyone, but Jackson had figured that Rodger’s advice (that Jackson should tell Josie what was going on) meant that Rodger would keep it to himself. Jackson didn’t think Rodger would talk to Josie behind his back. But then, hadn’t they been talking about Jackson when they’d thought he was asleep during the full moon?

“I’m not avoiding anyone,” said Jackson shortly. “I’ve just been busy.”

Zach clearly tried his best to hide the hurt in his voice, but didn’t quite succeed when he said, “Right, well. I can see I’m not going to get anywhere with you right now. You’re forgiven for tonight, but Jack… Don’t stay away too long, okay? It’s not good for any of us.”

“I know,” said Jackson in a softer tone. “I won’t. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah,” said Zach. “Later.”

Then he hung up. Jackson muttered a few curse words to himself, sent Isaac a quick text to let him know he was leaving school, put his phone back in his pocket, and headed home.

“You sure I can’t convince you to come out with me?” Isaac asked from beside the door.
Jackson barely looked up from his computer. "Are you kidding me? You leaving means I'll actually get some work done."

"Your friend can come, too."

"I have five papers I need to be working on."

"There's no way you have that much homework."

"Even if I didn't, I wouldn't be spending a Tuesday night at a club."

"I am going to corrupt you, Jackson. And you are going to like it," Isaac said, tying his scarf. "No teenager should be as focused on school as you are. Kick back, have some fun!"

"Clubbing isn't fun," Jackson muttered not-so-quietly under his breath.

Isaac scoffed. "Then you're clearly not doing it right." He blew a kiss to Jackson as he opened the door. "Have fun with your mysterious friend. Don't wait up!"

He heard Jackson grumble, "Wasn't going to," just as the door shut, which caused Isaac to smirk. It was a shame Jackson wasn't coming out with him, but he didn't mind the chance to get out alone.

Spending so much time with Jackson had really put a damper on his extracurricular activities. Not that he would have cared if Jackson saw him hooking up with someone, but when Jackson was around, everyone else kind of paled in comparison.

That had been an interesting discovery: how completely and utterly attracted he was to Jackson Whittemore. Of course, Isaac hadn't realized it until the night of the rave, when he and Erica had gone to distract Jackson and ended up getting completely distracted themselves. Or at least Isaac had. Something about the way Jackson had looked at him, really looked at him for probably the first time in their lives, had totally thrown Isaac off in the best way possible. Well, maybe the worst way, since he'd missed his opportunity to drug Kanima-Jackson and ended up with paralytic claws in his stomach...

Erica had asked him about it after, if there was something between them, but Isaac had just laughed it off as wishful thinking on her part.

Truth was, it had been wishful thinking on Isaac’s part. And now here he was, in London, living with his gorgeous, incredibly sexy neighbor from his hometown, with all kinds of conflicting desires. He did want Jackson, but he wasn't going to wait around for something that probably wouldn't happen, when there were so many more willing potential partners out there that he actually had a chance with.

And, after that morning, Isaac was definitely in the mood for something to happen. If not with Jackson, then with someone.

Which was how he found himself making out with a gorgeous boy with spiky silver hair and a sexy smirk that rivaled his own in the back seat of the boy's car two hours later. Isaac hadn't even had a chance to start dancing when this guy had walked straight up to him with several shot glasses and a bottle and asked if Isaac liked tequila.

Isaac wasn't really a fan, but when it involved body shots, he could usually be persuaded. Silver-Hair brought Isaac over to hang out with his group, who were celebrating something, and more than a few shots later, he dragged Isaac out to his car.

The kissing was great, but they didn't get much further since Silver-Hair's sober friend and
designated driver decided to call the party early. A female friend who couldn't hold her liquor ended up being sick in her hair and had to be carried out.

Silver-Hair's name turned out to be Travis, and he gave Isaac one last lingering kiss and his number before he left with his friends. Travis had offered him a lift (back to his place or anywhere else) but their car was already pretty full so Isaac had said that he was still in the mood to dance. He wasn't really, but he still went back in because the DJ was amazing.

Isaac headed back to Jackson's pretty soon after that. It was only one o'clock, more like twelve-forty he thought, quite proud of himself, when he snuck in through Jackson's window.

Jackson could’ve claimed that the sound of Isaac climbing through the window had woken him up… if he’d actually been asleep. But he hadn’t. After Isaac had left, Jackson had enjoyed the peace and quiet, at first. He’d finished his homework and gotten to bed at a reasonable time. But then he’d lain awake, wondering where Isaac was and what he was doing, and feeling like the bed was larger and colder than usual, even though both blankets were on it.

“Shower,” said Jackson as soon as Isaac entered the bedroom.

“Did I wake you up?” There was a genuine apology in Isaac’s voice, but also giddiness. Judging by the scent of sweat and alcohol and another guy’s pheromones wafting from Isaac’s general direction, it was clear that he’d had a fun night out.

“Shower or couch,” Jackson said more insistently. He’d rather sleep alone than have to endure being that close to Isaac while Isaac reeked of someone else’s arousal. Jackson was more than aware now that he wasn’t special; Isaac flirted with everyone and gladly accepted attention from almost anyone who offered it to him. But that didn’t mean Jackson wanted to know the details of Isaac’s sex life, let alone have to smell it.

“Okay,” said Isaac, sounding considerably less giddy. “Did you get a lot of work done with your friend tonight?” Jackson could hear Isaac digging through his duffel, for pajamas presumably.

Jackson considered trying to lie, or maybe just giving Isaac a half truth; Jackson had gotten a lot of work done, just not with Zach. “We didn’t end up meeting,” he said finally.

“See, you should’ve come with me after all,” said Isaac as he headed for the bathroom.

Jackson curled up and shut his eyes, willing himself to fall asleep as he listened to the white noise of the shower and tried not to think about the fact that Isaac was most definitely naked and he was washing off the scent of some other guy--a complete fucking stranger--who he’d probably gotten through at least one or two bases with, if not further.

Jackson wasn’t jealous. He had no right to be. He knew how Isaac was when it came to sex and he didn’t want to be a part of it. But it had been a long time since Jackson had been with anyone in a context that was remotely sexual, and he was a seventeen-year-old guy, with werewolf instincts, to boot. It was difficult not to be affected when someone who looked like Isaac slept in his bed, and it was difficult not to get a little territorial when someone who slept in his bed wanted to be somewhere else, with someone else.

All of that being said, Jackson refused to let on to Isaac that it bothered him. So he decided to act like it wasn’t a big deal; it was just that he didn’t want Isaac being covered in dried sweat while sleeping in his bed. He didn’t say anything about it when Isaac came back from the shower wearing clean clothes and crawled into bed with Jackson. There was a moment, when Isaac shifted
close to Jackson—not so they were touching, but if Jackson moved a fraction, they could be—that Jackson hoped Isaac would make a move. Not like *that*, just… like yesterday, maybe. Some kind of contact.

Then the moment passed, and Jackson was glad Isaac hadn’t done anything. If they did that tonight, there would be a precedent, and where would it stop? Would it be every night? What would happen, then, when Isaac inevitably left? There was no way it would end well. It would be best not to let things go any further.

Still, the bed felt like it was the right size again, warm and comfortable, and in spite of himself, Jackson was finally able to fall asleep.

For three days, they had a basic routine: in the mornings Jackson took a shower while Isaac made breakfast, then Isaac walked Jackson to school before (supposedly) going to the library to ‘research’ or kill his time in some other way. In the evenings they ate dinner while watching Breaking Bad (perhaps not the best choice of dinner entertainment), and then Jackson did homework while Isaac did some more ‘research’ with books (if Jackson was using his computer) or on the Internet (if Jackson was not using his computer). It was all very domestic, especially if you took into account the whole sleeping-in-the-same-bed situation.

By Friday night, though, Isaac was clearly ready to go out again, and this time, he was insistent on Jackson coming with him.

“You’re out of excuses,” Isaac declared smugly. “You don’t have school tomorrow so you don’t have to work on homework, and you already said you don’t feel like hanging out with your pack tonight.”

Jackson cursed himself inwardly for that comment. “Yeah, when I said that, I meant that I don’t feel like leaving the flat tonight. If I was going to leave the flat, it would be to see them, not to go to some stupid club.”

“Please, Jackson?” Isaac was resorting to puppy dog eyes and exaggerated pleading. “Please? I won’t even make you dance unless you want to.”

“You’re not going to shut up about this if I don’t go, are you?” said Jackson, more as a statement than a question.

“I think we both know the answer to that.”

Jackson heaved a deep, long-suffering sigh. “Don’t make me regret this.”

They were standing on the edge of the dancefloor, Jackson holding a half-drunk pint of lager and Isaac drink-free, looking delightedly out at the mass of writhing bodies lit by colorful beams that flashed in time with the beat of the music. It was about as awful as Jackson had expected it to be.

Isaac held his hand out to Jackson, but Jackson shook his head vehemently. Isaac pouted.

"Why did we come here if you don’t wanna dance?" he shouted near Jackson's ear.

The music was so loud that having super hearing was actually a drawback rather than a benefit for Jackson. It took a lot of concentration to sort through the ubiquitous *noise* and pick out individual
words, and Jackson was starting to feel the familiar anxiety and disorientation that complex mixtures of loud noises could cause sometimes.

"Because you made me," shouted Jackson irritably. His head was starting to hurt from the noise and his throat was getting dry thanks to the shouting. Jackson wouldn't have thought it was possible, but Isaac had found a club that was even louder than last time. "When can we go? It's too fucking loud!"

"What?" said Isaac, and Jackson almost took the bait and repeated himself, but stopped before the words came out, which made Isaac smirk.

Jackson glared at him. "Go dry-hump some skank for ten minutes so we can get out of here!"

Isaac gave him a curious look and mouthed some words that Jackson couldn’t hear. Jackson was convinced that Isaac was just messing with him now, but then the taller boy bent down so that his head was at the same level as Jackson's. He got his mouth so close to Jackson's ear that Jackson could feel his breath, even in the stifling air of the club. When Isaac spoke again, he was whispering instead of shouting.

"How's this?"

Jackson was surprised to find that he could hear Isaac perfectly. Much better, in fact, than if he'd shouted.

"Good," whispered Jackson in response, though he hadn't really believed he'd be able to hear his own voice. He could barely even hear his own thoughts.

"Awesome," said Isaac, voice still soft and quiet.

"Why does this work?" said Jackson in a similar tone.

Isaac shrugged. "On a different wavelength now, kinda. Easier to focus when it's not all the same volume."

Jackson focused on the sound of Isaac's voice, and suddenly it was like all other sounds were muffled and far away. It was a really neat trick, actually. Jackson was impressed.

Isaac kept his mouth close to Jackson’s ear, though Jackson suspected it wasn’t really necessary now. “Is that why you don’t like clubs? Too much noise?”

Jackson shrugged. There were a lot of reasons he didn’t like clubs. He was going to try to answer the question, but Isaac’s voice and the closeness of his mouth to Jackson’s ear were making it difficult to think properly.

“The trick is to find one sound that you can focus on,” said Isaac. “Then it all kinda separates out. If you can’t find one, make one. Talk, whisper, whatever. You’ll learn fast if you practice. And then if you intentionally stop focusing, places like this can be like one giant white noise machine. Clears my head.”

It was a good thing Isaac kept talking, because Jackson couldn’t think of a response. He couldn’t think of much at all with Isaac standing so close. It was silly to feel like this considering the fact that Isaac slept in Jackson’s bed on a regular basis and that they’d cuddled, but Jackson couldn’t help it. There was something about the atmosphere of the club--the darkness, the bewildering sounds, the mass of excited people covered in the scent of lust and alcohol and drugs--that made Jackson more susceptible to Isaac.
"Okay, so you don't wanna dance with me," said Isaac, returning to their earlier point of conversation. "I could find you someone else."

"No," said Jackson automatically.

"I could find you someone to *not* dance with," said Isaac suggestively, and the words whispered against Jackson's ear with hot breath seemed dirtier. He shivered reflexively, which made Isaac laugh. How could Isaac offer to find Jackson someone to hook up with while flirting with Jackson in literally the same breath?

"I'm not bringing anyone to mine," said Jackson.

"You could go to hers," reasoned Isaac, mocking Jackson's unintentional 'Britishism' by using it as well. Isaac, of course, added a horrible accent for good measure.

"How do you know this hypothetical girl doesn't have flatmates?"

"Even if she did, how do you know her hypothetical flatmates would care?" countered Isaac.

Jackson rolled his eyes. "Can we just go?"

"So *I'm* the lucky one you're taking back to yours tonight," teased Isaac. "That hypothetical girl must be reaaaally jealous."

The 'S' on the end of 'jealous' hissed against Jackson's ear in a strangely pleasant way, though he managed not to shiver this time. How was it that Isaac managed to make everything sound suggestive? Jackson imagined that, in Isaac's eyes, the entire world must be an orgy waiting to break out if he said the right thing to the right person at the right time, and that Isaac would be completely on board with that.

“You know, I could teach you.”

Jackson felt his cheeks flush, even though he knew Isaac couldn't have been responding to his train of thought. “What?”

“To focus your hearing,” Isaac said innocently, obviously pretending he didn’t notice the way Jackson was reacting (and he was standing so close, he had to have noticed). “You could pretend it’s homework, if it helps.”

Jackson pulled back to look at Isaac. “Why would that help?”

Isaac shrugged and leaned close again. “I just figured, since you’re so dedicated to your homework, you would do this with the same *enthusiasm.*”

The emphasis on the last word made it sound dirty, and Jackson flushed yet again, which was really starting to frustrate him (which, in turn, did not help calm him down). Despite the fact that he would rather forego sex for a year than let Isaac be his friggin’ wingman, Jackson was definitely starting to feel how long it had been since he’d last gotten laid...

Isaac suppressed a dark chuckle. Despite having an idea of what effect his words were having on Jackson, Isaac couldn’t get a read on him. He couldn't tell if Jackson was repressed, shy, or embarrassed by the idea of entertaining a sex guest when Isaac would be in the other room. It's not like he would listen, if that's what Jackson was worried about. Isaac might tease, but it was no fun to listen when you couldn't participate. It was why he didn't go for porn. In all his time staying with
Jackson, though, he still wasn't sure what Jackson did for release. Maybe Isaac really was getting in the way.

Isaac sighed and threw his arm around the Jackson's shoulder, leaning down again so he could whisper.

"Finish your drink. Let’s get out of here."

He pulled away and headed for the door, conscious of the way Jackson was watching him: suspicious of this sudden about-face. That didn't stop Jackson from downing his drink and following Isaac out the door.

They walked in silence down the street. It was Friday night and only marginally quieter outside than it had been inside the club. Screaming girls and rowdy boys danced on the street in the spillover of music from the club.

The farther they got from the club, the more the sounds and smells of the city washed over them. Man, Isaac could go for some curry right now. He was wondering if he could get Jackson to buy when his thoughts were interrupted.

"You know, we didn't have to leave. It was fine."

"Is not fine if you're not having fun, Jackson," Isaac said easily. "So. What do you like to do for fun? No wait, don’t tell me." Isaac snapped his fingers, spinning around and stopping Jackson in his tracks. “The library.”

Jackson rolled his eyes--although Isaac thought he detected a slight smirk--before stepping around Isaac.

“Seriously,” Isaac said, catching up to Jackson after a few steps, “let’s go to the library. I’m thinking glasses, like, a really cute, bookish girl. Is that it?”

“What are you talking about?” Jackson asked.

“I’m still trying to figure out your thing. What do you go for now? Still petit, ball-busting redheads?”

Jackson sighed loudly. “Stop trying to help me pick up chicks. If I wanted to go home with a girl, I’d go home with one. I just don’t, okay?”

“Come on, I feel bad for dragging you out if you didn’t have a good time. What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. You could do nothing. That would help.”

Isaac shrugged, undeterred. “I just don’t want to be putting a kink in your style. Unless you want me to, that is.” Isaac made a suggestive face that Jackson refused to acknowledge, although Isaac heard his pulse do something erratic.

"You're not," Jackson said resolutely. "I don’t. It's fine. There is no problem. Stop trying to fix it.”

Isaac smirked at Jackson’s obvious discomfort, but instead of teasing him about it, decided to be nice and change the subject.

“Okay. Tomorrow, we can do whatever you want to do. Anything at all. What is Jackson
Whittemore’s favorite thing to do in London?"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the likes and comments and for reading the fic in general! We really appreciate it :D

Savenna Cloverunner
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;  
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

CHAPTER EIGHT: PERFECT DAY (Lou Reed)

Just a perfect day.  
You made me forget myself.  
I thought I was someone else;  
someone good.

"Do I really have to wear a tie?" asked Isaac warily, leaning against the wall and watching as Jackson pulled shirts and ties out of his closet and laid them on the bed. He should’ve known Jackson would start planning his outfit like six hours in advance. Isaac surreptitiously typed out a text to Hannah while Jackson was occupied.

"Yes," said Jackson firmly. "It's the theater. You have to dress nice."
Isaac made a whiny, annoyed sound. Of course Jackson’s favorite thing to do in London was go to the theater. Why wouldn’t it be? And not just a normal play or a musical or something. Jackson wanted to see Shakespeare.

Isaac didn’t know the first thing about Shakespeare (except that the people were all impossible to understand). When they’d had to read Romeo and Juliet for ninth grade English, he’d used his copy for lacrosse target practice, only passing the class because nobody else had understood it either and their teacher had graded on a curve.

Not that Isaac really had a problem going--he enjoyed any chance to tease Jackson about the posh things he liked--but he wasn’t excited by the idea of having to dress up. Besides, he didn’t even have anything nice to wear. It wasn’t like he’d kept Chris’s suit from that botched attempt to get the scroll, and he’d never gone anywhere in Paris that had required anything better than designer jeans.

Plus, when he’d said they could do anything Jackson wanted, he’d been secretly hoping it would have something to do with the bed. So much for optimism.

His phone chimed in his hand. “Hannah says I don’t.”

Jackson’s shoulders visibly tensed at the mention of her name.

Isaac had brought Hannah up in conversation earlier that morning in an effort to be more honest with Jackson. Also because Hannah had threatened to never speak to him again if Isaac didn’t at least ask Jackson if he would get drinks with them some time. Jackson’s reaction had been a less-than-enthusiastic, blank stare that Isaac figured meant maybe.

It wasn’t like Isaac expected them to ever be friends or anything, but he hoped that once Jackson realized how fun and interesting Hannah was, he wouldn’t be so disapproving of Isaac spending time with her. Annoyingly, Jackson’s approval was starting to kind of matter to Isaac. Especially because Jackson was extra cranky when he disapproved of something.

Jackson recovered quickly. “Well, that’s because she’s uncultured swine.” He seemed determined not to acknowledge Hannah more than absolutely necessary.

Isaac sent Jackson's comment to Hannah via text and relayed her response.

“She says real Londoners don’t dress up for the theater.”

Jackson snorted. "Sounds like something someone who can't afford a decent suit would say."

"...Wow," said Isaac. "That might be the snobbiest thing you've ever said." Isaac looked down at his phone and typed a few lines into it. After a second, a response chime sounded. "Hannah agrees."

"First," said Jackson. "We both know for a fact that that is not the snobbiest thing I've ever said. Second, stating a fact is not snobby. And third." Jackson made a grab for Isaac's phone. "Keep your girlfriend out of our conversations!"

“Jealous?” Isaac dodged Jackson, holding his phone out of reach as casually as possible in order to annoy Jackson further (being taller helped a lot here). He didn’t even have to move away from the wall to do it. The phone chimed again while he was evading Jackson and Isaac laughed when he read the message.

"She just said, 'Tell your boyfriend to shut it.'"
Jackson froze and looked up at him. “Did she seriously just say that?”

Isaac shrugged and smirked. “Actually, she said, ‘Unless your boyfriend is going to do something useful with his mouth, tell him to shut it.’”

And as though someone had flipped a switch, Jackson turned bright red. He must have just realized that he’d been practically pinning Isaac to the wall trying to get his phone. Isaac tried to play off his own hasty retreat (he put about five feet between them in under two seconds) as simply being too good for the altercation, but Isaac knew better. He grinned and slouched against the wall, watching Jackson pretend to focus very hard on color coordinating his outfit for the evening.

“Please tell me you’re joking.” There was no way Isaac could be that stupid. If Isaac had mentioned something about what he and Hannah had been planning earlier when they’d been texting, Jackson would have told Isaac no. Emphatically and unequivocally. Now, all Jackson could do was stare at Isaac, stunned.

“It was her idea,” said Isaac. “One of Hannah’s foster uncles has an old suit she thinks will fit me. She’s given up trying to fight you about how it’s dumb to dress up for a play.” He glanced down at his phone and started quoting. “Well, if you’re going to dress up, you’re going to do it right.” Isaac smiled at Jackson, as if he expected Jackson to be pleased or something.

“And you told her she could come here to drop it off?”

“She volunteered. She’s going out with friends tonight anyway, so she said it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Isaac--” Jackson’s explanation for why it was such a bad idea for a hunter to know where he lived was cut off by the doorbell. Isaac jumped off the bed and practically ran to answer it. Jackson couldn’t tell if he was excited to see Hannah or escaping from Jackson.

Jackson grabbed his tie and stepped into the doorway to his bedroom just as Isaac opened the front door.

Hannah… wasn’t what Jackson had expected. For starters, she was small. Like, shorter than Lydia without heels. She was also (and there was no way Isaac hadn’t noticed this) exceptionally beautiful, but somehow cute at the same time. At first glance, she might have passed for a ‘normal’ teenage girl.

But on closer inspection there was absolutely no mistaking the fact that she was a hunter. Even if Isaac hadn’t told him, Jackson would’ve known. Maybe the pink T-shirt and floral-patterned jacket would’ve fooled a human, but Jackson could sense the strength and focus that had been trained into her. He could see it in her posture. Most importantly, that telltale scent of gun oil and metal clung to her clothes, as did a hint of a very familiar purple flower. Jackson nearly sneezed.

“Here,” she said, dumping the suit in Isaac’s arms as she stepped inside without technically being invited. “Sorry, no shoes, you have the biggest feet of anyone I know. Congratulations.”

Isaac smirked. “Well you know what they say about guys with big feet.”

“They have big, annoying mouths?” Jackson interrupted, walking out of the bedroom, tying his tie. “Get changed already. They won’t let us in till Intermission if we’re late.”

Hannah stopped admiring the apartment when Jackson walked in, instead focusing completely on him.
“Honesty, Wolf,” Hannah said without taking her eyes off Jackson, “I know you said, ‘could be a model,’ but I had no idea you meant it quite so literally.”

Jackson wasn’t sure how to take that, but he didn’t like the way she was sizing him up.

“I am getting an idea of your type, though.” She smiled and took a few steps forward, holding out her hand to shake. “You must be the infamous Jackson.”

Jackson pointedly ignored her. He didn’t want her to think she was actually welcome here, and he definitely didn’t want to shake hands with a hunter. (It was weird hearing someone with a British accent actually use his full name though.)

“Go get changed,” he snapped at Isaac.

Isaac shot Hannah a quick look that Jackson couldn’t interpret and ducked into the bedroom, only half-shutting the door, maybe to make sure he could intervene in the event of potential bloodshed. Hannah didn’t look like she was wearing any weapons, but when it came to hunters, that was kind of the point.

Hannah was still standing between the door and the couch, seeming to pick up on Jackson’s ‘I don’t want you here’ vibe, but not completely sure what to do about it.

“So you’re part of the Holborn Pack. Lived here long?”

If she was trying to fish for information about his pack, she was out of luck. Jackson wasn’t going to say anything.

She tried a different tactic. “You two went to school together back in the States, right?” Still nothing. “And you were bitten by the same alpha?”

“Sounds like Isaac’s already told you everything about me,” Jackson said shortly, despite his resolve not to speak to her.

“Well, our conversations about you have primarily revolved around how attractive you are.” Hannah smiled. “But if you like, we can always expand our list of talking points. I’m particularly fond of the ‘what animal are you’ conversation.”

“That’s easy,” Isaac called from the bedroom. “We’re werewolves.”

“I mean actual animal,” she called back.

“Fine, wolves.”

Hannah smirked at Jackson. “What do you think? Should we give him that?”

Jackson refused to acknowledge that she had said anything, instead continuing to glare at her with his arms crossed.

“Personally,” Hannah continued, “I agree in Isaac’s case. I think it’s his smirk. Something just a bit predatory there. A wolf pup, actually, since he’s so distractible and affectionate. What do you think?”

What did he think? Jackson thought that Isaac was an idiot if he’d been flirting or whatever the hell he’d been doing with this hunter that made her call him affectionate. Jackson wouldn’t have been surprised to find out that Isaac couldn’t resist being a fucking idiot and sleeping with a hunter.
Jackson bristled at the thought. Why was Jackson even trying to help someone who was clearly so determined to get himself killed? Who had no idea why hunters and werewolves shouldn’t be friends (or whatever these two were)?

What pissed Jackson off more than that, though, was that he agreed with her. Isaac did remind him of a puppy sometimes.

Hannah considered Jackson, tapping her lip thoughtfully. “You don’t really strike me as a wolf, though.”

Something about the way she said it made Jackson’s stomach drop. The intensity of her gaze suddenly struck him with the very unwelcome yet familiar feeling that she could see what he had been; that being the Kanima had left some kind of physical brand on him that people could recognize. He had to stop himself from checking for scales.

“No,” she said slowly, drawing out the word. “No, you are definitely a cat.” She nodded to herself, pleased, as if she’d solved some huge mystery.

“Oh my god, he is a cat!” Isaac shouted from the bedroom.

“Don’t encourage her!” Jackson glared at the bedroom door, despite the fact that Isaac wouldn’t be able to see him. He was not a cat. Still, at least she hadn’t said lizard or something.

Hannah smiled, undeterred. “Well, it was lovely meeting you, Puss. I hope I’ll see you around again. Enjoy the theater, Wolf!”

Isaac was laughing too hard to respond, and Jackson was too shocked by what she’d called him to do more than stare at Hannah as she let herself out. Even after the door closed behind her, Jackson listened to make sure she had really left. It wasn’t until she was well out of the building that he started to relax. He couldn’t believe a hunter had just been in his home. At least she was gone now. If Jackson had any say in it, she’d never come round again.

“See, Puss, that wasn’t so bad,” Isaac said when he finally managed to stop laughing.

“You are not going to start calling me that,” Jackson growled. He could hear Isaac trying not to start laughing again.

“Oh, come on, it’s a term of endearment.”

“It’s not going to be very endearing when I break your jaw.”

“Well, you wouldn’t be the first guy to break one of my bones, but you’d definitely be the hottest.”

Jackson couldn’t handle flirty Isaac right now, so he changed the subject. “Are you ready yet?”

Isaac came out with the tie draped around his collar, undone. “Can you give me a hand? I never really learned how to do this.”

Isaac cleaned up well. There was no getting around it, no point denying it. He pretty much always looked stylish these days thanks to his well-fitting (though still casual) Parisian wardrobe, but a suit was a different story. He was wearing sneakers with the suit since Hannah hadn’t brought shoes and there was no time to buy a new pair, but despite his outward irritation about it, Jackson didn’t really care. Isaac was young enough to pull off the look, and besides, why would anyone be looking at Isaac’s feet when they could look at everything that was above them?
When Jackson didn’t immediately help him, Isaac made a pathetic attempt at it. Jackson rolled his eyes and stepped close enough to swat Isaac’s hands away and start a single Windsor. Unfortunately, he soon found that it was impossible for him to do backwards. He sighed in resignation.

“Don’t move.”

Isaac obediently (for once) stood still. Jackson got behind him and tried to reach around his shoulders to get at the tie, but Isaac was too fucking tall.

“This is ridiculous,” Jackson grumbled.

“Sorry,” said Isaac. “Hang on.”

He went to sit at one of the bar stools near the kitchen island, so that he was at a reasonable height for this.

When Jackson put his arms around Isaac’s shoulders from behind, Isaac said, “I should wear ties more often.”

Jackson pointedly ignored him, taking the cloth in his hands and trying to use muscle memory to tie it. Isaac turned his head to look over his shoulder, but Jackson pushed it back forward.

After a few attempts, some of which were hampered by Isaac’s ‘helping’—leaning back against Jackson more than was necessary, making his own adjustments, deciding now would be a good time to button the cuffs of Jackson’s sleeves—Jackson managed to get the tie the right length with a respectably tidy knot.

Isaac stood and tightened the tie, murmuring, “Thanks.”

Normally Jackson disliked blue suits, which were coming back into fashion in a big way; generally only the high-end ones looked halfway decent, and most people couldn’t pull them off. But Isaac’s eyes and hair color made it work. It was a flattering cut on Isaac, too: European, so it was slimmer than an American one would have been. Jackson couldn’t even laugh at the matching vest for being overkill, because that worked on Isaac, too. White shirt, skinny grey tie. Like Isaac needed any more help turning heads…

Jackson cocked his head to the side, assessing his work. He must have stared just a bit too long, though, because Isaac started getting fidgety again.

"Is it really that bad?" Isaac asked as he nervously smoothed the tie down behind his vest. It was strange to see Isaac self-conscious, especially since the fact that he looked so good should have boosted his already inflated ego.

"No," said Jackson. "No, it, uh... It's not bad. Surprisingly not bad. Despite the shoes."

"Yeah, yeah," said Isaac. "If this whole thing is tolerable, you can buy me some ridiculously expensive shoes for next time."

Jackson rolled his eyes and started to step away.

Isaac grabbed him by the tie. “Wait a second.”

Jackson knew what was coming. He sighed loudly.
“Seriously, what did you do before I showed up?” Isaac asked as his blunt fingernails ran across Jackson’s scalp in a way that was not completely unpleasant.

“I didn’t get my hair messed up so much.” By now Jackson was more or less resigned to letting it happen, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t complain.

“It’s better and you know it. Not that it isn’t always sexy, but--”

Jackson finally ducked out of Isaac’s reach. “Come on, we’re going to be late.”

For a first time seeing a not-school play, Isaac had to admit it wasn’t as bad as he thought it would be.

The seats were kind of small—which Jackson claimed was because it was an old theater and people weren’t as ‘unnecessarily tall’ as Isaac back then--but Isaac didn’t mind so much because it gave him an excuse to be in Jackson’s space. Isaac kept his shoulder almost pressed against Jackson’s the whole time so he could make Jackson explain what was going on (which he did, reluctantly, in a clipped whisper). Then Jackson nudged Isaac’s knee with his to make Isaac stop fidgeting, which Isaac chose to take as permission to start playing footsie (much to Jackson’s annoyance).

But despite Isaac’s assumption that he was going to hate it and his best attempts to distract himself and Jackson, Isaac actually almost enjoyed the play. He’d started to follow along well enough by the end that he actually had a pretty good idea of what had happened, even without Jackson’s translations. He decided he wouldn’t hate seeing another play if Jackson forced him to.

That wasn’t going to stop Isaac from pointing out how ridiculous some of it was, though.

"Man, that duke guy was totally gay. Wanting to marry some rich old widow? That's like the perfect beard! And then he clearly had a thing for Viola before he knew she was a chick,” Isaac said as they were walking up the stairs of Jackson’s building. “Not to mention Viola totally should have just hooked up with that other girl. Now that would’ve been a good ending.”

Jackson had been quiet the whole taxi ride back. Isaac wasn’t sure if Jackson was annoyed about Isaac’s behavior at the theater--really though, what had Jackson expected?--or just being his typical, moody self, but Isaac felt that it was his responsibility to get a reaction out of Jackson somehow.

"But seriously, how did nobody notice that ‘he’”--Isaac mimed exaggerated air quotes--“was obviously a chick? I mean--”

“You can’t invite her to my flat again,” Jackson said suddenly.

It took Isaac a few moments to adjust to the abrupt change of topics. “Who, Hannah?”

“Who the hell else would I mean?”

“Sorry she called you Puss. I don’t think she meant it as an insult, though. She was trying to be friendly.”

“She’s not supposed to be friendly with me. And I’m not supposed to be friendly with hunters.”

“She’s harmless.” Well, not in that she couldn’t do harm, but that she wouldn’t. Isaac was sure of it.
“That’s not what my pack would say.”

“You could explain--”

“No. She’s not coming here again. Not even in our territory.”

Isaac didn’t think it would help to point out that Hannah had kind of invited herself and could go wherever she wanted to. “But--”

“I’m serious,” Jackson snapped, stopping just outside his door. “You can think I’m just being an asshole, but you don’t understand this shit like I do. It’s better for everyone if she doesn’t come back. She shouldn’t’ve been here in the first place.”

“I…” Isaac frowned. He hadn’t really thought about what it would mean for a hunter to move through a pack’s territory. “I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens when you don’t ask me first.” Jackson slammed the key home in the lock.

Isaac winced. He had already picked up on the fact that Jackson was breaking rules by letting Isaac stay with him. Now he wondered how much worse it would be for Jackson if his pack thought Jackson had hunter sympathies.

Isaac sighed. “You’re right.”

Jackson glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “…That’s it? You’re not going to keep fighting me on this?”

“It’s your flat, your pack’s territory. Guests shouldn’t invite other people over. For normal people that’s rude. For us, I guess it’s a lot more complicated.”

“If by ‘complicated’ you mean ‘might start a war,’ then sure.”

Isaac winced again, embarrassment setting in. “Fair enough. It won’t happen again.”

“…Good,” said Jackson suspiciously.

Isaac tried not to smile as Jackson spun around stiffly and headed towards the bedroom. Jackson clearly hadn’t expected Isaac to agree with him so easily.

“For what it’s worth,” said Isaac after a long moment of awkward silence, “I liked the play.”

“Seriously?” Jackson leaned out of the bedroom doorway, tugging off his tie. “You weren’t even watching.”

“Yes, I was,” Isaac protested. “I mean, some of the actors were really hot.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and ducked back into the bedroom. Isaac followed, smirking. He shrugged out of his jacket and then sat down heavily on the bed and started undoing the buttons on his vest.

“And look, one last thing.” Jackson’s tone was serious again.

Isaac looked up, but let his fingers keep working on the buttons. Jackson was looking at him with an odd expression, like he wasn’t sure he should say what he was thinking about saying.

“I get that you’re working with them, and you’re not going to stop just because I think it’s the
dumbest fucking thing a werewolf could do, but maybe at least make sure there aren’t any weapons within reach of her bed,” Jackson warned. There was no heat to it, though. If Isaac hadn’t known better, he would’ve thought Jackson was concerned. Then Isaac suddenly realized what Jackson was concerned about. Isaac and …Hannah?

Isaac almost laughed out loud. “Jackson. I’m not sleeping with Hannah.”

“…Oh.,” said Jackson. He shifted awkwardly. “Well… good.”

That time Isaac did laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Jackson asked, indignant.

“I can’t decide if it’s cuter that you’re worried about me getting hurt, or that you feel bad because you automatically assumed I was fucking her.”

Jackson’s awkward shifting had an edge of bristliness to it now.

“I mean, sure, she’s gorgeous,” Isaac continued. “Like, incredibly, undeniably, movie-star beautiful—”

“Okay, I get it. She’s attractive. What’s your point?” Jackson asked, turning back to the closet.

Isaac shrugged. “I just don’t see her that way.”

“Sorry,” said Jackson after a pause. “I mean, I guess I just assumed…” He trailed off.

“I have sex with a lot of people,” said Isaac matter-of-factly. “But I do remember how to be friends without benefits. It’s just more fun when there are. Like with us.”

Isaac couldn’t see Jackson’s face, but he enjoyed watching the flush creep up the back of Jackson’s neck.

“Sleeping in your bed, I mean. Your bed is really nice,” Isaac added innocently, standing up from said bed.

“You’re just lucky I don’t make you sleep on the floor,” Jackson grumbled. His neck turned an even darker shade of pink.

“Yes, I am,” said Isaac.

Jackson didn’t move when Isaac reached over his shoulder into the closet for a hanger. Isaac considered mentioning that if Jackson didn’t like Hannah’s cat comparison from earlier, a compelling case could always be made for a deer. But Isaac didn’t (mostly because he wasn’t sure how serious Jackson was about that floor comment). Instead, he hung up the vest and suit jacket and stepped back so he could take off his shoes. He briefly entertained the idea of continuing to undress in the bedroom with Jackson, but didn’t want to push his luck. So he grabbed some clothes to sleep in and headed toward the bathroom.

“I’m gonna shower,” he said to Jackson before he left the room. “Gotta wash all this culture off my skin before it sticks.”

“I forgot,” said Jackson over breakfast the next morning. “I have to go to an art museum today for school.”
“It’s Sunday,” said Isaac before taking a large bite of scrambled eggs. They’d had a nice “lie-in,” as Jackson called it (which was just a British way of saying that they had slept in, instead of what it sounded like: that they had spent the morning lying in bed together, which would’ve been much more enjoyable), and then Isaac had made a big Sunday morning breakfast for both of them: pancakes, eggs, bacon, the works.

“Yeah, it’s for homework. Guess they didn’t want to waste class time on a field trip.”

Isaac scoffed. “That’s kinda bullshit.”

“Well, that’s Britain,” said Jackson. He stood to take his empty plate over to the sink. “Anyway, it’s cool if you want to stay here alone. I’ll probably be gone for a few hours.”

“Can I come with you?” Isaac asked, quite unexpectedly.

Jackson assessed him with one eyebrow raised, skeptical. “Really?”

“Really. I did a rich white person thing yesterday. Figure I might as well keep it rolling. I’ve been meaning to brush up on my art history anyway.”

“‘Brushing up’ implies you already know something about it.” Jackson drained the rest of his coffee and grabbed his backpack. “I have to get some work done while I’m there. I don’t have time to babysit.”

“What if I promise to be on my best behavior? I won’t draw on the walls or snort coke in the bathrooms or anything. I’ll even wash my hands before touching the art.”

“And let me guess, if I don’t bring you with me, you’re just going to follow me anyway?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to say it, but...” Isaac smirked.

Jackson rolled his eyes and held the door open for Isaac, then followed him out of the flat.

Okay, he could do this. He was not going to freak out because it wasn’t a big deal and he could do this.

It was just the subway (or the Tube or the Underground or whatever they called it here). Jackson had refused to walk to the museum when there was a perfectly good public transportation system—“It’s a thousand times better than it is in the States,” Jackson had insisted--so here they were, heading underground.

Luckily, there wasn’t a crush of people using the subway on a Sunday morning, but Isaac still had to remind himself that the walls weren’t actively closing in on him. He pressed closer to Jackson, practically walking on the guy’s heels.

“Knock it off,” said Jackson, clearly irritated.

“Sorry,” Isaac murmured, but he didn’t even pretend to try to put space between them. When a fresh wave of people started coming towards them, Isaac even grabbed Jackson’s sleeve like a little kid trying not to get lost at a supermarket.

Once they got to the platform, there was a bit more space to spread out. Jackson kept shooting him looks, though, probably trying to figure out why Isaac’s heart was beating so fast. Isaac pretended to be completely absorbed in studying the map of three different lines that had no indication, as far
as he could tell, of which one they were actually on.

“So, which stop are we getting off at again?” Even to his own ears, Isaac’s voice sounded strained.

Jackson sighed deeply. “Dude, I’ve told you three times.”

“It’s not my fault the system down here is so confusing.”

“It’s not confusing if you remember your stop.”

“There are a lot of stops!”

“Which is why there’s a map.” Jackson pointed at the map Isaac was examining for emphasis.

“With tiny print and like twenty colors. Which one are we going on anyway? The red one?”

“Central,” Jackson corrected him firmly. “Only tourists say the colors.”

“I am a tourist.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not. If you’re going to stay here, act like you live here. Especially when I’m around.”

As the train pulled up to the platform, the screech of metal grinding against metal assaulted Isaac’s over-sensitive ears. He backed away to “allow passengers to alight before boarding,” as the recorded voice commanded. He was so good at allowing passengers to alight, in fact, that Jackson had to grab his arm and haul him into the train car before the doors closed.

“Pay attention, man. They have no problem leaving without you.”

Isaac nodded distractedly, staring down at his feet so he’d be less aware of how short the ceiling of the train car was. His knuckles were white where they gripped a bar to keep himself steady. He wanted to reach out for Jackson again, to cling to his jacket for reassurance, but he suspected that Jackson would probably be extra-touchy about the personal space rules since they were in public.

The people in the car were quiet for the most part, but the sound of the train zooming through the ground, the scrape of the wheels on the tracks, the air rushing past, was deafening. Isaac squeezed his eyes shut and listened for Jackson’s heartbeat, his breath. Both were calm and steady. He focused on those sounds, matching his own breathing to Jackson’s until he could slow his own pulse down, too. The train car didn’t feel nearly as small by the time Jackson was dragging him out of it; they’d reached their stop without Isaac noticing.

The weather was actually pretty nice when they exited the Pimlico station. Jackson had only been to the Tate Britain once before, but there were several clear signs along the road that led them in the right direction. The short walk was practically pleasant, especially once they got down by the river. Isaac was uncharacteristically quiet during the walk, but then, maybe that was part of what made it so pleasant…

When Isaac still hadn’t said more than a few words by the time they got to the museum’s front steps, however, Jackson turned to get a good look at him. Isaac seemed stiff, sort of hunched in on himself, and a bit pale.

“You okay?”

Isaac nodded quickly. A little too quickly, maybe. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.”
Jackson frowned at him, unconvinced, but then Isaac straightened himself up and said, “So what exactly are we here for?”

“I’m here to do research for a paper on art from World War One. You’re here to not touch anything and quietly look at art until I’m done.”

“Is that why I’m here? That doesn’t sound like me at all,” said Isaac, studying the map on the wall. “This place is huge.”

“Are you kidding? This is nothing compared to the National Gallery.”

“Please,” Isaac said dismissively, “you could totally get lost in here. That means it’s huge.”

Jackson snorted. “Maybe you could get lost here, but most people are intelligent enough to figure out maps.”

Isaac looked back at Jackson slyly out of the corner of his eye. “Is that a challenge, Whittemore?”

“Isaac--” Jackson warned. He would have said more, but the words stuck in his throat as Isaac turned slowly to face him with that predatory edge to his smirk that Hannah had mentioned. It made Jackson’s pulse speed up.

“Because that sounded like a challenge.”

“No, it--”

“Too late, challenge accepted.”

“What challenge? There was no challenge.”

Isaac continued as if Jackson hadn’t said anything. “And when I win, you have to make me a real breakfast from food that you buy at the grocery store all by yourself.”

“Win what?” Jackson asked, completely confused.

“That I can get lost in the building and you won’t be able to find me.”

Jackson stared at Isaac. “No. No freaking way are we playing hide-and-seek in a museum. I came here to do research.”


Jackson watched Isaac saunter away, feeling confused and helpless to stop whatever had just happened. He knew that if he forced Isaac to stay with him, Isaac would just hover over his shoulder and distract him, but he also didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of letting Isaac run amok.

But as Isaac disappeared around a corner, Jackson sighed, silently hoped that Isaac wouldn’t do anything to get thrown out, and headed to the room devoted to the 1910s.

Jackson actually managed to get quite a bit accomplished before he started getting suspicious of the fact that he hadn’t seen Isaac in--he checked his phone--almost forty-five minutes. He debated with himself for a moment, then decided to work for another ten or fifteen minutes before maybe taking a lap around the first floor to check up on Isaac. Jackson hadn’t realized he had been unconsiously listening for signs of Isaac’s whereabouts within the museum while he’d been working. He was just finishing up a halfway decent sketch when--
“Jackson.”

Jackson nearly jumped, his head instinctively whipping to the side, where he had been convinced Isaac was standing. But no one was there. In fact, he was the only person in the entire room. He cursed under his breath when he realized what Isaac was doing. After all, Jackson had done it to taunt McCall once, back before Jackson had been bitten.

“Language.” Isaac’s voice, though spoken softly from probably at least several rooms away, reverberated in Jackson’s ears now that Isaac had caught his attention. “There are kids here.”

“No, there aren’t,” Jackson muttered irritably.

“Well, there are kids here. And some really weird statues.”

Jackson bit back a retort, reminding himself that nothing good ever came from indulging Isaac’s childishness, and the only way to get Isaac to stop would be to ignore him. Unfortunately (and predictably), Isaac didn’t seem content with being ignored.

“So, how’s the research going?”

Jackson focused determinedly on his sketch. He was not going to let Isaac distract him. He wasn’t.

“I don’t get Modernism,” Isaac said suddenly, a few minutes later. “Like, it’s interesting, I guess, but what’s the point of a bunch of statues with holes in them?”

Jackson sighed deeply and rubbed at his face. It was impossible to concentrate with Isaac talking to him, even from what could be halfway across the museum. It occurred to him then that maybe Isaac wasn’t just trying to mess with him; he might be testing him. Like when he had whispered to Jackson in the club. It was an opportunity for Jackson to hone his supernatural hearing. Hell, maybe if he got good enough at it he could learn to tune Isaac out and actually get some work done...

“Jackson, you took Spanish in high school, right? So you never learned French.”

Aside from a few words, the rapidly spoken stream of words that Jackson heard next sounded like gibberish. Very pretty gibberish, but gibberish nonetheless. Jackson did have to say, Isaac’s French accent sounded much more natural than the terrible British accent he sometimes liked to tease Jackson with, but the voice in Jackson’s ear was still unmistakably Isaac’s.

Unfortunately, now that Isaac was doing it again, Jackson was quickly remembering how Isaac Whispering in his ear at the club had felt, which was kind of an inconvenient thing to be thinking about in the middle of an art museum. The tone of Isaac’s voice wasn’t helping; Jackson could hear him clearly, but that didn’t change the fact that Isaac was whispering. His voice was soft and low, and even though Jackson might not have had any idea what Isaac was saying, it sounded like it would be inappropriate for polite company (knowing Isaac, it almost definitely was), and soon Jackson’s cheeks felt hot.

Fuck it. The sketch was pretty much done anyway.

‘Statues with holes,’ Isaac had said. Jackson didn’t know a ton about art, but he’d been to the Tate before, and he was pretty sure Isaac was talking about Henry Moore. The guy had a couple of rooms dedicated to him, but they were pretty close together, and there were plenty of signs to lead Jackson in the right direction.

He tried walking casually, quietly, glancing at the art along the way. Jackson had no interest in
playing Isaac’s game, but he knew that the only way to stop Isaac from taunting him would be to catch him.

The wide doorways weren’t exactly made for stealth, but Jackson thought he did a pretty good job of staying out of sight behind a large group of people when he got to the first room. Looking around, he didn’t see Isaac, but he couldn’t be sure that Isaac wouldn’t be actively hiding either, so he had to circle the whole room to check behind the scattered statues. He had just gone into the second room to repeat the process when Isaac started whispering again.

“Too slow.”

Jackson whirled around, sure this time that Isaac was actually next to him, whispering in his ear, but it was still just his voice.

“How would you even know?” Jackson growled under his breath. Isaac didn’t answer, but Jackson could practically hear his smug smirk. “Come on, Isaac, I’m not going to chase you through the museum.”

“Admit it. You’re having fun. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

Jackson knew it was just a quote, but hearing his London nickname in Isaac’s voice was a strange experience.

“I am not having fun,” Jackson said, even as he fought back a small smile.


Jackson snorted. “You say ‘Marco’ when you’re the one looking, not when you’re hiding.”

“Polo, then.”

“I told you, I’m not playing.”

“No, you’re losing. Polo.”

Jackson didn’t even bother to explain how little that helped since he couldn’t tell what direction Isaac’s voice was coming from. Maybe if he were better at this he would be able to follow a sound to its source, but he wasn’t that good yet. So he picked a direction and started walking, hoping that Isaac’s unnecessary height would give him away.

Isaac started whispering in French again, interspersed with entertaining clues about which room he was in, clues that made it clear that he knew more about art than Jackson had given him credit for earlier. Isaac seemed to be able to recognize a few of the more well known painters, even sounding genuinely excited when he found the van Goghs, and although he could have been reading the cards, something told Jackson he wasn’t.

“Since when do you know so much about art?” Jackson said quietly to a random painting, so as not to look like he was talking to himself.

“Since I hooked up with an art student in Paris. He painted me a few times and told me all about his influences.”

Jackson was tempted to ask what kinds of paintings, but thought better of it. After all, Isaac really seemed to like to find excuses to take off his clothes, and even the mention of Isaac posing for a painting conjured images of ‘Draw me like one of your French girls’ scenarios.
It was only after he had gone downstairs that Jackson realized that he hadn’t heard Isaac say anything for several minutes.

“Isaac?” Jackson tested, then waited. Nothing. He exhaled heavily and gave in. “Marco?”

Still no response.

This was probably just a new form of teasing Jackson; Isaac was trying to make Jackson think he was up to something.

“Fine, you win,” said Jackson. “Meet you in the foyer.”

But after Jackson had waited there for nearly ten minutes, still with no word from Isaac, he decided to take one last round of the first floor. When he finally found Isaac, he was sitting on a bench in the “1840” room, calmly staring up at a group of paintings directly in front of him like he’d been there for hours. It irked Jackson that Isaac had ended up only a few rooms away from the World War I art, but at least he could stop looking now.

Isaac turned his head at the sound of Jackson’s footsteps approaching and gave him a disarming smile, which preempted Jackson’s victory smirk.

“I decided to let you win,” said Isaac. “I think I saw most of the cool art in this place anyway. You done with your project?”

“Yeah,” said Jackson, eyeing Isaac warily. It wasn’t like Isaac to concede so easily. “It’s lunch time. Want to eat out or go home?”

“Well,” said Isaac with a suggestive glint in his eye, “I do like eating out.”

“I should probably go the loo,” Isaac drawled when they were out on the front steps, purposefully emphasizing the ridiculous word that Jackson hated, “before we head out. Back in a few.”

Isaac headed back into the museum and took the stairs to the lower level, but instead of going to one of the surprising number of bathrooms, he went to the gift shop. He searched through the postcards of the various paintings that were on display at the museum until he found Ophelia. There was probably a poster-sized version, which would’ve done more justice to the detail in the painting, but Isaac didn’t have a wall to put it on, and he didn’t want to explain to Jackson why he felt so drawn to the painting.

That was where Jackson had found him earlier, completely absorbed by the tragic scene, the game forgotten.

To be honest, Isaac didn’t really know why he felt so drawn to it. Even looking down at the small reproduction in his hand, he felt an emotional response: a sense of devastating beauty mixed with profound sadness. That was as close as he could get to describing it, anyway. Isaac wasn’t great with words, and this picture really was worth a thousand of them. The placard next to the painting had said that Ophelia was a character in Hamlet, and Isaac supposed that maybe Shakespeare’s words would come a lot closer to capturing the image. (Not that Isaac would be able to understand half the words if he read the play.)

Jackson had probably read Hamlet. Hell, he’d probably seen it on stage. He probably understood all of it. Maybe that was why Isaac didn’t want Jackson to know how he felt about the painting: he was self-conscious. If he brought it up, Jackson might give him shit about it or something. And he didn’t want Jackson to ruin it for him. Isaac’s response to Ophelia felt very personal, private. Sure,
millions of people had seen the painting, but Isaac still wanted it to be something he could keep to himself in some way. He wasn’t ready to share that. Not even with Jackson.

So he paid for the postcard, slid it into his inside jacket pocket, and headed back outside.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again so much! We really appreciate all the kudos and comments. You guys are awesome :)

Savenna Cloverunner
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER NINE: WHAT A GOOD BOY (Barenaked Ladies)

I wake up scared. I wake up strange.
I wake up wondering if anything in my life is ever gonna change.

Jackson woke up with a growl in his throat, teeth and nails sharp, eyes burning bright.

“Jackson!”

Supernaturally strong hands held Jackson’s upper arms tightly to keep him in place. Jackson snapped his teeth at his captor and struggled to get free. He had to escape. They’d kill him if he didn’t. Claws in his chest, in his back. Excruciating pain, blood rushing into his punctured lungs, choking him. He remembered. He remembered all too well.

“Jesus, Jackson, it’s me! Calm the fuck down,” said a person with glowing gold eyes. A werewolf,
Jackson’s brain belatedly told him. A friend or an enemy, though? He wasn’t sure, and Jackson had good reason to be wary of werewolves.

“It’s me,” the wolf repeated. “It’s Isaac.”

Isaac. Isaac. Jackson stopped fighting immediately.

“There,” said Isaac, huffing out a sigh of relief as Jackson stilled. Isaac slowly loosened his grip on Jackson’s arms, but didn’t let go completely. Jackson shivered as his fangs and claws receded. The sheets were damp with sweat.

“Bad dreams?” Isaac asked tentatively after a long moment.

Jackson didn’t answer. He was used to nightmares. He’d been having them on a pretty regular basis for almost a year now, and he’d learned to deal with them. Usually he’d get up and watch TV all night so he wouldn’t have to risk falling back into the same dream. He’d be tired the next day, but he’d be fine. Now, though...

“Fuck, you’re shaking,” said Isaac.

Was he? Shit, he was. Jackson hadn’t noticed until Isaac had pointed it out.

Before Jackson could object, the same hands that had been restraining him were pulling him close to Isaac’s body as Isaac propped himself up against the headboard. He kicked the duvet away from them even though the air was cold, to help with the dampness of the sheets.

Jackson tried to protest as Isaac held him up against his side and started running his hands over Jackson’s arms and back. He didn’t seem to mind the sweat that coated Jackson’s skin, steeped in the scent of fear.

“It wasn’t real,” Isaac said soothingly, brushing Jackson’s hair away from his sweaty forehead.

But it was. It was real. Jackson didn’t need his imagination to come up with nightmares; all his mind needed to do was remember. And he wanted so desperately not to remember. He had tried so hard to forget, but he knew he’d never be able to. Not with the nightmares. Not with the fear and the guilt that followed, threatening to suffocate him, sometimes making him literally sick to his stomach.

Jackson shook his head and moved to pull away, but Isaac just shushed him and held him back. He pressed his forehead to Jackson’s temple and said softly, “What can I do?”

Jackson shrugged helplessly. There was nothing Isaac could do. There was nothing anyone could do. Jackson had done horrible things and he would remember them for the rest of his life. No matter what he’d done since then, he’d never be able to change the past.

“Here,” said Isaac. He shifted so he could take off the T-shirt he’d been sleeping in. Jackson was alarmed by this unexpected turn of events for a moment before Isaac handed it to him. It was warm and dry. Jackson nodded his weary thanks and stripped off his own sweat-soaked shirt to pull on Isaac’s clean one. He was too tired and dazed to feel weird about it. Even hunting through the wardrobe to find one of his own shirts sounded exhausting, and it seemed strangely rude to refuse.

“This bed is wrecked,” said Isaac. “Come on.”

Isaac crawled out of bed and grabbed the blanket that was on top of the duvet, motioning for Jackson to follow him out to the living room.
It wasn’t entirely clear to Jackson that he was actually awake. In fact, he was barely conscious of his feet moving him into the living room. Isaac was lying down on the long sofa, pressing himself against the back, leaving room for Jackson. Isaac liked being in Jackson’s space (usually to Jackson’s annoyance), but this didn’t feel the same. It wasn’t even the same as that afternoon after the full moon, when Isaac had insinuated himself into Jackson’s arms and essentially force-snuggled him. There wasn’t any flirting or smugness now. Just a silent offer of comfort. It wasn’t at all like the Isaac Jackson knew.

Jackson was hesitant, but he was also exhausted, and scared, and still shaking. He didn’t want to think anymore. He didn’t want to feel like this. So he stripped off his pajama pants, which were also soaked in sweat, leaving him in Isaac’s shirt and his own boxer-briefs. He didn’t care if Isaac saw him like that. He just wanted to be comfortable and safe. Somehow, without Jackson noticing that it was happening, he had become in danger of associating ‘comfortable’ and ‘safe’ with Isaac. What a ridiculous thought.

Jackson lied down on the couch as Isaac’s ‘little spoon’ and let Isaac pull the blanket over them. He barely registered Isaac’s fingers running through his sweat-damp hair as Jackson drifted back off into sleep.

Isaac didn’t say anything as he felt Jackson slowly relax against him and fall asleep, but even after Jackson’s breathing deepened and evened out, he kept petting Jackson’s hair. There was something about it that made Isaac feel better, too. It was nice to be able to help Jackson, for once.

Isaac wasn’t used to taking care of someone else—he barely felt able to take care of himself some days—but he knew how to deal with nightmares. He’d had a lot of them at first, staying with Derek in the abandoned subway car. Maybe it had been the immediacy of losing his dad, maybe it was the creepy location, maybe it was a lot of things, but it didn’t matter because Derek had always been there to help him.

The first time it had happened and Isaac had woken up with Derek’s red eyes glowing in his face, he’d started crying, apologizing and cringing, waiting to be hit, to be told to ‘shut up or else.’ But Derek hadn’t said anything. He’d just grabbed Isaac’s clawed hands so that he couldn’t hurt himself or Derek, and kept holding them even after Isaac had calmed down enough to put the claws away. Derek had let him cry without judgement or repercussion, let him grieve until he was too exhausted to sit up anymore and leaned his head against Derek’s shoulder. It hadn’t been a hug, but it was as much as Isaac had wanted at the time, and somehow Derek had known that (or maybe Derek just hadn’t wanted a hug either).

It had gotten better after Erica had joined them. She would brush Isaac’s hair back from his sweaty forehead (like Isaac had just done for Jackson) and curl herself around him, whispering in his ear over and over again that he was safe and loved and pack, until he drifted back into dreamless sleep.

That night with Jackson on the couch, for the first time since he’d left for France, Isaac dreamed that he was back in Beacon Hills. Isaac and Erica and Boyd and Jackson and Cora and Derek together, and they were all in the woods behind the old Hale house, and there was no Alpha Pack, or Kanima, or Darach, or any of the fucked up shit that had followed for them to deal with. They were safe and loved and they were pack.

Isaac woke up when Jackson squirmed out of his arms the next morning and fell on the floor, taking Isaac’s legs with him (which he clearly hadn’t realized had become all tangled together while they slept).

“Where do you think you’re going?” Isaac asked, too amused to be bothered by being woken up.
Jackson picked himself up and glared almost half-heartedly at Isaac, like he was glaring because he felt like he was supposed to, rather than because he felt any actual annoyance at the situation.

“School. I’m already going to be late.”

“So ditch,” said Isaac said, pressing his face back into the cushions. Late for school or not, it was too early for either of them to be awake after a night like that. He resisted the urge to drag Jackson back to the couch.

Jackson sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “I can’t.”

“And I can’t let you go to school,” Isaac said through a wide yawn, “so we’re at an impasse.”

Jackson snorted and crossed his arms. “And why exactly shouldn’t I go to school?”

“Because it’s just going to stress you out and make you feel worse. We’re going to do something fun,” Isaac said, finally sitting up but staying wrapped in the blanket.

“I’m fine.”

“Physically? Yes. God, yes. Emotionally?” Isaac made a face. “Not so much. But we can fix that. What do they call it when you play hooky here? Shiving off?”

“Skiving off,” Jackson corrected him. “And I’m not going to.” But he still hadn’t made another move towards the bedroom to get dressed.

“I was thinking we could see another play,” Isaac continued as if Jackson hadn’t said anything at all.

Jackson bit back his next retort and stared at Isaac for a moment. Isaac could almost feel Jackson’s indecision. He was so completely transparent: He liked the idea of skipping school and going to a play with Isaac. He just didn’t want Isaac to win the argument.

“Will you actually watch, or are you just going to distract me the whole time?” Jackson asked finally.

Isaac grinned, knowing he’d won. “I can do both.”

“Fine,” said Jackson. “But you’re explaining this to my dad if my grades drop. I’m going to take a shower.” He turned to head to the bathroom.

“Before you do, Whittemore...”

“What?” said Jackson, exasperated, as he turned back around.

“You look good in my clothes.” Isaac smirked. His shirt was a little long on Jackson, and a little tight in the shoulders, but it really did look good.

Jackson looked down at himself and flushed, apparently having forgotten that he was wearing Isaac’s shirt and/or that the only other thing he was wearing was underwear. He also seemed to have just noticed that Isaac wasn’t wearing a shirt, what with having selflessly given it to Jackson and all.

Still blushing, Jackson narrowed his eyes defiantly at Isaac. Very unexpectedly, he stripped off Isaac’s shirt. Then he threw it at Isaac, spun on his heel, and went straight to the shower without another word.
Isaac smirked to himself at the sound of Jackson locking the bathroom door behind him.

“Haven’t you ever ditched before?”

“Aside from the time I was locked in the back of a police transport van by a bunch of crazy people?” Jackson looked pointedly at Isaac.

The nightmares brought everything closer to the surface; all of the memories, the resentment, the pain. It was hard not to dwell on something like that. Especially with a pretty big reminder of it sitting next to you, staring at you innocently.

Isaac held up his hands in a defensive gesture. “I wasn’t even part of that.”

“No, you just tried to kill me, right?” Jackson said without heat.

Thinking about it, he didn’t really blame Isaac for anything that had happened. Isaac had mostly just been following Hale’s orders. Looking at Isaac now, Jackson still had a hard time believing that this was the same person he’d known in Beacon Hills; that kid had been really messed up. Jackson didn’t think that the Isaac from back then would have ever suggested going to a play, and no way would he have had the confidence to sit at said play, leaning on the armrest between them with his shoulder pressed firmly against Jackson’s. Jackson wasn’t sure if it was supposed to be flirty or reassuring, but Jackson didn’t lean away.

“But I didn’t,” Isaac said with a slightly embarrassed smile. “And since you’re not dead, you can tell me what this play is about.”

“Just read the program.”

“But I know you’ll explain it better. The light in here sucks anyway.”

Jackson refrained from making a comment about how werewolves were not supposed to have trouble seeing in the dark and instead asked, “You want me to explain the whole friggin’ play?”

“Come on, it’ll be fun! You love showing off. Drop some knowledge on me, Whittemore. Show off that A in English!”

Jackson sighed and proceeded to give Isaac the briefest explanation of *Much Ado About Nothing* he could manage while being constantly interrupted with questions of, “Why?” and “Who was that again?” until the lights went down. Jackson’s summary clearly hadn’t improved Isaac’s grasp of Shakespearean language or how not to be a dick at the theater because the questions didn’t stop when the play began. At least Isaac was whispering too quietly for non-werewolves to hear, but the same trick that made going to clubs bearable for Jackson was now making it impossible for him to focus on the play.

Not to mention the way Isaac kept letting his hand drift over the armrest to sit on Jackson’s knee. If Jackson hadn’t known better, he might have believed that it was because Isaac was just trying to get comfortable, but when his hand started sliding up Jackson’s thigh, Jackson grabbed it and shot Isaac a dirty look. Isaac just smiled sweetly and laced their fingers together.

The involuntary (on Jackson’s part) hand-holding seemed to be enough for Isaac to leave him alone for the rest of the play. Jackson wasn’t completely sure whether Isaac was intentionally rubbing his thumb across the inside of Jackson’s wrist; it might’ve been an unconscious gesture. Same with the way Isaac’s leg ended up pressed against his. (Isaac did have long legs, after all.) Jackson didn’t even realize that was happening at the time, and only noticed when they stood up for the
bows.

If Jackson had been surprised by Isaac’s running commentary after *Twelfth Night*, he was doubly shocked after *Much Ado*. Mostly because it actually seemed like Isaac had not only paid attention, but actually enjoyed it.

“Benedick,” Isaac said with derision over sandwiches at a nearby shop. It wasn’t really dinnertime yet, but they were too hungry to wait. “More like ‘being a dick,’ am I right?”

Jackson made an effort to roll his eyes at the pun, but inwardly he had to admit that it was funny. Only inwardly.

“But seriously, why the fuck would Hero still agree to marry that asshole Claudio after he embarrassed her at their wedding like that?” Isaac was glaring at Jackson like he was the one who had written the play. “He straight up accused her of cheating on him in front of all her friends and family!”

Jackson couldn’t help but laugh at that, which was poorly timed with a bite of sandwich. He took a long drink of water, then said, “You are taking this way too seriously. “

But Isaac didn’t seem to be kidding. “I don’t think you’re taking it seriously enough.”

“It was just a play,” said Jackson, finally cutting off the rant and causing Isaac to pout sullenly while finishing the second half of his sandwich.

Luckily, by the time they finished lunch, Isaac had calmed down about the parts of the play that pissed him off and was conceding the things he did like about it on the way back to Jackson’s flat. This at least reassured Jackson that Isaac hadn’t hated the experience. Isaac had been trying to do something nice for Jackson by dragging him to the play, after all.

Isaac had apparently put the sheets that Jackson had sweated through during his nightmare into the washer before they’d left for the play. Jackson decided not to give Isaac shit about how dumb it was to leave a washing machine running when no one was around, in light of the fact that Isaac had clearly done it to be considerate.

As Jackson was hanging the sheets near the largest heaters to dry, Isaac eyed him skeptically.

“Are you sure those are going to be dry in time for bed?”

“Yes,” said Jackson. “Just leave them alone.”

“How can you not have a dryer?”

“Plenty of people in Britain don’t have dryers.”

“How can you not have an extra set of sheets, then?”

Jackson sighed deeply and rubbed at his face. “I don’t need them.”

His obvious signs of irritation finally cowed Isaac into backing down. They settled in for an evening of more *Breaking Bad* and some pizza since Jackson, having skipped school, didn’t have much homework.

Jackson thoroughly enjoyed Isaac’s obvious disappointment at not being able to give Jackson an ‘I-told-you-so’ as they made the bed together with sheets that were perfectly dry.
HAMLET
Ha, ha! are you honest?

OPHELIA
My lord?

HAMLET
Are you fair?

OPHELIA
What means your lordship?

HAMLET
That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

Isaac, with great difficulty, resisted the urge to shout at the book held mere inches from his nose.

Hamlet you sick fuck,” he growled, “What are you doing?”

OPHELIA
Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

HAMLET
Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness: this was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. I did love you once.

OPHELIA
Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET
You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it: I loved you not.

“This is bullshit!” Isaac interjected again.

He was lying on Jackson’s bed, legs hanging over the side, a battered copy of Hamlet held directly over his face. He’d found a used book exchange just around the corner on his walk to the store that morning and had bought an annotated copy of Hamlet. Between seeing the painting of Ophelia on Sunday and going to Much Ado About Nothing two days before, Isaac had figured he could afford to give Shakespeare another chance. Maybe it was one of those things that made more sense on paper. And also when Isaac wasn’t actively trying to distract his date.

OPHELIA
I was the more deceived.

HAMLET
Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it
were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them

“Seriously girl, get the fuck out of there! This guy is clearly unstable!”

Ever since Isaac had seen that painting, he’d felt some kind of tragic connection to the drowned girl. Reading her story, watching her pine for a self-absorbed prick who clearly got his kicks by pretending to have feelings for her and then turning around and abusing her for having feelings back…

Isaac didn’t even care that his eyes were glowing because of a stupid book; Hamlet was pissing him off, and if he could, he would reach into the story and show that emo bastard what a real monster looked like.

He was so engrossed that he didn’t notice that Jackson was back from school until the front door shut, the noise causing him to drop the book on his face. Had he really been reading most of the day?

“Isaac?” Jackson called warily.

“Uh, yeah!” Isaac quickly tucked his Ophelia postcard into the book, marking his page, and chucked the book in the direction of his duffel--luckily it landed just behind it where Jackson wouldn’t see--before leaping off the bed towards the door. He got there just as Jackson did.

“Yeah?”

Jackson had loosened his tie at some point on the way home and unbuttoned his blazer. His overcoat was dripping by the door, prompting Isaac to glance outside at the storm that must have kicked up while he’d been reading. Isaac looked back at Jackson and decided that he looked surprisingly good with his backpack hanging off one shoulder and water dripping into his eyes.

His suspicious eyes. “What was that thump?”

“What thump? Oh, thump.” Isaac’s instincts were screaming at him to distract Jackson. He started running his fingers through Jackson’s dripping hair and said, “Me jumping off the bed maybe?”

Jackson caught Isaac’s hand and pulled it away from his hair, regarding Isaac like he was being weird--which, admittedly, he was--as he edged past Isaac into the room.

“Seriously, don’t make me worry about what you do in my flat when I’m not around.”

“You’re dripping all over the floor,” said Isaac, unnecessarily.

Jackson gave him a flat stare. “It’s my floor.”

He started grabbing dry clothes out of his closet. “And speaking of my floor…” He looked pointedly at Isaac’s duffle in the corner and Isaac had a moment of panic, wondering if Jackson had somehow seen the book after all.

“Get your shit off it.” Jackson jerked his thumb in the direction of his closet.

Isaac blinked, too surprised to say anything. As nonchalant as Jackson was being about it, giving Isaac a place to put his stuff away was kind of a big deal. At least, it felt that way to Isaac.
“I’ve got two extra shelves and hangers I’m not even using,” said Jackson with a shrug, “might as well do something with them.”

“Uh, thanks.” Isaac had been fully prepared to deny all knowledge of the book, but this was certainly an unexpected turn of events.

“I’m just tired of looking at that mess every morning,” said Jackson, heading to the bathroom and closing the door behind him. Isaac heard the shower turn on a few moments later.

It wasn’t that bad, Isaac thought, eyeing his bag. Sure, now that he’d been digging through it for two weeks, his clothes were kind of spilling out, but it was still contained to the corner at least.

Still, it would be nice to actually put his stuff away, even if it would only be for a little while.

Isaac had been putting off thinking about what would happen after the new moon, which was only a few short days away now. Between not finding any leads at the library or on the internet and all the fun he’d been having with Jackson, Isaac had ended up putting off his research for the graveyard monster. As it was, he had less than a week now to figure it out and discover a way to stop it from killing people.

Even the hours he’d spent poring over Lydia’s translated version of the Argent bestiary hadn’t revealed anything. There were thousands of monsters mentioned, most with only a minimal description at best. Even if he had come across it, without a name, there was no way to be sure.

Isaac went over to the corner and picked up the book first. The postcard must have come loose when he had thrown the book, because a corner was sticking out. It was a little bent, but Isaac didn’t mind. He flattened it as best he could, then tucked it back inside the book and grabbed his bag.

Jackson’s closet wasn’t huge by any means, but there was definitely room for Isaac’s stuff. It had built-in shelving along one side, and like Jackson had told him, the bottom two shelves were empty. Except for a bag shoved all the way in the back of the bottom shelf.

Isaac reached back to move it, and was surprised by how heavy it was. And how much it rattled.

Isaac might not have been particularly good at respecting boundaries, but he definitely felt at least a little bad about invading Jackson’s privacy and taking a quick look inside the bag.

It was pretty much what he’d expected; Jackson’s werewolf emergency kit, consisting of a length of chain, handcuffs, and a small black case containing several small, familiar, glass vials.

Wolfsbane tranquilizers. Isaac had seen these in Deaton’s stash at the clinic as well as Chris’s in Paris. They were just potent enough to knock a werewolf out for a couple of hours and leave them subdued for another few hours without actively poisoning them.

Isaac found himself wondering again how badly Jackson handled the full moon if Derek and Deton had thought something like that was necessary. Or maybe his new pack had given him the tranqs? But that wouldn’t make sense; as far as Isaac knew, Jackson spent every full moon with his pack. Why would he need tranquilizers if it wasn’t a full moon? They must have just been left over from before Jackson had joined his London pack.

The sound of the shower shutting off abruptly reminded Isaac that he was snooping through the private stuff of a very private person. He hastily put the tranquilizers back in the bag and shoved the bag back where he’d found it. He definitely didn’t want Jackson to think (well, know) that Isaac had been going through his stuff. He might revoke Isaac’s hard-won closet privileges, at the very
Isaac still needed to hide his copy of *Hamlet* though, so he turned his bag out, spilling his clothes out in a pile on the floor, before tucking the book carefully inside the bag and putting it in the back of the closet with Jackson’s bag. He had just started folding shirts when Jackson stepped into the doorway, drying his hair with a towel.

“Really? You can’t even put away clothes without making a mess?”

Isaac looked down at the pile at his feet, and then back at Jackson. “Is that a trick question?”

Jackson’s resignation was clear in the flat stare he directed at Isaac. “Get your shit put away so we can watch *QI*,” he said over his shoulder as he left the room.

Isaac didn’t even bother folding the rest of his clothes (even though he knew Jackson would take one look at the shelves tomorrow and demand Isaac redo them); he just shoved everything into the closet and followed Jackson into the living room.

What a weird couple of days.

Well, mostly one weird day and one or two normal days; Thursday had basically been just a regular school day, and so far Friday was pretty similar. But that almost made it weirder, in a way. Between waking up on Wednesday morning half-dressed on his couch in Isaac’s arms and spending the afternoon watching (and then actually discussing) Shakespeare with him, Jackson still wasn’t entirely sure that he’d woken up from that nightmare. Maybe the dream had just shifted into something slightly more pleasant? But no, Jackson’s mind wasn’t creative enough to come up with a scenario like this.

As they were sitting on the couch together now after Jackson’s shower, eating two-day-old leftover pizza and drinking shitty beer while watching *QI*, Jackson was forced to admit to himself that all of it—the spooning on the couch after the nightmare, the skiving off school, Isaac asking annoying questions and holding Jackson’s hand during *Much Ado About Nothing*—had actually happened. What the hell was Jackson’s life right now?

More importantly, what the hell was he supposed to do about it? Neither he nor Isaac had said a word about the whole snuggling-on-the-couch incident since Jackson had thrown Isaac’s shirt back at him before Isaac had convinced him to skip school. For the next two nights, Isaac had gone back to sleeping in bed with Jackson but kept a (relatively) respectful distance between them. Were they ever going to talk about it? Did Jackson even want to talk about it? Did Isaac, for that matter?

Like things weren’t confusing enough already! Jackson had to admit (but only to himself) that sleeping on the couch with Isaac like that had helped him deal with the nightmare. It had definitely been better than the alternative, in any case. But what if it had been a one-time-only thing? Or worse: what if it happened again, and Jackson got used to it, and then Isaac left? Wouldn’t that be worse?

It had taken Jackson a long time, but he had finally learned that relying on other people was okay sometimes. Or at least, relying on other wolves. On pack.

But Isaac wasn’t pack. And he wasn’t staying. Maybe it would be better if Jackson kept that in mind more often.

“It’s Friday night. We have to do something,” said Isaac while lying on the floor of Jackson’s flat
(he had given up fighting Jackson on the weird term for apartment) with his feet up on the couch, which he had abandoned when the last episode of *QI* had ended and some dumb reality thing had come on.

“Why can’t we do something here?”

Jackson had suggested more *Breaking Bad*--casually, which hadn’t fooled Isaac; he knew Jackson was hooked--but Isaac had done enough sitting around for one day and mentioned that they should go out now that the rain had stopped. Jackson, being Jackson, had told Isaac that he could go wherever he wanted, *alone*, and was now sitting at his computer.

“I told you,” said Isaac. “It’s Friday night. We should not be doing the exact same thing we do every other night of the week.”

“So come up with something that would actually be fun, not just something you think is fun.”

“All of my ideas would be fun,” Isaac insisted. “You just don’t usually like any of them. No offense, but I don’t think I can sit through three plays in one week.”

Jackson scoffed. “Suggest something I might actually enjoy and maybe I’ll consider it.”

“Jackson, are you asking me to be more suggestive?” Isaac raised an eyebrow.

A soft pounding on the door saved Jackson from having to respond and saved Isaac from impending boredom.

“I’ll get it,” Isaac practically shouted as he scrambled up from the floor.

Jackson had barely stood up from his desk, saying, “Don’t--” when Isaac opened the door to reveal what might have been the prettiest person Isaac had ever seen in his life.

“Whoa. Hi.” Not Isaac’s most eloquent of greetings, but his brain seemed to be shutting down from gorgeous overload.

The person was a little shorter than Jackson, with hair dyed bright orange-red and falling adorably over startlingly blue eyes looking out from a pale face with pixie-like features. Their neck and torso were a bundle of scarf and coat, and Isaac assumed there were legs and feet down there somewhere, but he couldn’t stop staring at their face.


Isaac blinked several times. “Who?”

“Hey, Zach.” Jackson pulled Isaac out of the doorway. “What are you doing here?”

“Making sure you’re not dead,” said Zach. “You said you’d see me later. That was over a week ago. I was half convinced someone had murdered you and stolen your phone and was sending texts to keep up the ruse.”

“Sorry,” said Jackson, and he really did look sorry. It wasn’t an expression Isaac was used to seeing on Jackson. “I’ve been busy.”

“I can see that,” said Zach, looking at Isaac pointedly and stepping inside. Jackson shifted uncomfortably, posture sagging with… guilt?

“Hi,” said Isaac dumbly.
“I think you’ve already said that,” said Zach.

“Don’t mind Isaac,” said Jackson, rolling his eyes. “He’s an idiot.”

“Nice to meet you, Isaac the Idiot.”

Isaac proceeded to blatantly stare as Zach took off--His? Maybe? ‘Zach’ was a guy’s name, right?--his coat and scarf, leaving him in skinny jeans, combat boots, and a tank top that was entirely inappropriate for the weather and clearly being worn to show off his many, many tattoos. Isaac picked out what looked like the top half of a large wolf pawprint over his heart and a DNA strand as a band on his left arm, but his right arm was absolutely covered in a collage of various images that gave Isaac the urge to spend an hour with Zach basking in his prettiness and cataloging each one.

Aaand there were piercings, too. Labret, slightly gauged ears, and probably a few Isaac couldn’t see. Who the hell was this guy, and how did Jackson know him and why hadn’t Jackson said anything about him before and--

“Wait, he’s not actually an idiot, is he?” Zach waved a hand in front of Isaac’s face, which snapped Isaac out of his daze. Partially.

“Jesus, Zach, is it like this every time you meet someone new?” Jackson sounded more than a little irritated.

“Yes,” said Zach flatly. “Though if I recall correctly, you were relatively unaffected.”

“You are… very pretty,” said Isaac to Zach. Because it was the truth.

“I know,” said Zach.

“No, like. Really pretty,” said Isaac.

Jackson snorted.

Zach shook his bangs out of his face and rolled his gorgeous eyes. “Yes. I know.”

Isaac spun on Jackson. “How do you know such a pretty person and why haven’t you introduced me to them before?

“Zach’s from my pack,” said Jackson, like that explained everything. Which it kind of did, actually. It definitely explained why Jackson would feel guilty about not telling Zach about Isaac.

“Really?”

Jackson hardly ever talked about individual members of his pack. Isaac hadn’t even considered that Zach might be a werewolf, but if he was in Jackson’s pack.

A slow smile spread over Isaac’s face as he considered the possibilities and turned back to Zach. “So you probably have all kinds of embarrassing stories about Jackson to tell me?”

“Well, I don’t--” Zach started.

“You are not--” said Jackson at the same time.

Isaac interrupted both of them by stepping up to Zach and throwing his arm around his shoulders, looking imploringly at Jackson.
“Jackson, don’t you think the two most important people in your life should get to know each other? Preferably over drinks?”

As Jackson snorted yet again, Isaac noticed something unusual about Zach’s scent. He blinked in surprise. “You’re human.”

“For all practical purposes, yes,” said Zach tensely. He brushed Isaac’s arm off and took a generous step away from him. “And since you just smelled me, I’m going to assume, firstly, that you are not human, and secondly, that you know I smell like a girl. I am quite aware of that fact. Can we leave it there?”

Isaac cocked his head to the side and focused on Zach’s scent for a moment. He did smell like a girl. He--Ohhh. Well, guy or girl, Zach was stunningly beautiful.

“Only if you let me buy you a drink,” said Isaac.

Zach raised an eyebrow at Isaac. “Jack, why is your new boyfriend trying to hit on me?”

“He is not my boyfriend,” Jackson sputtered.

“Oh, sorry. I just assumed, since you never have friends over.”

“Does that mean Jackson ever has more-than-friends over?” Isaac asked, genuinely curious. As far as he’d seen, Jackson didn’t interact with anyone aside from him and pack.

Jackson cut off any reply Zach could have made. “We went to school together in the States.”

“Oh? Well, welcome to London, Isaac the Idiot from the States. Looks like we can swap embarrassing stories about Jack, then.”

Isaac looked expectantly at Jackson.

“Sure you don’t want to come out with us?” Isaac smirked at Jackson, who paled slightly at the idea of them going without him.

That seemed to settle it for Jackson. After one last moment of hesitation, his expression shifted to one of reluctant acceptance.

“And let you gossipy assholes lie about me when I’m not there to defend myself? Yeah, right.”

As they left the flat, Isaac turned to Zach and tried again: “So about that drink...”

Zach shrugged. “You’re welcome to buy the first round, mate, but just so you know, you’re not my type.”

“I’m everyone’s type,” Isaac said blithely. Jackson gave him a strange kind of double-take, but said nothing.

“And that attitude has served you well, has it?” Zach raised an eyebrow at Isaac, looking slightly amused.

Isaac attempted what he hoped was a mysterious smile. It felt like Zach was trying to bait him into bragging or something, and it was more fun making him wonder. Besides, as much as he didn’t care whether Jackson thought he was kind of a slut, it seemed a little tacky to go into details.

“All right, Casanova,” said Zach, not quite able to stifle a laugh. “Find us a pub. We’ll sort out
whose type you are soon enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the late update! Work was insane this week for both of us, so it was hard to find time to write, both separately and together. Thank you for your patience. We hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Savenna Cloverunner
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)
CHAPTER TEN: SOMEONE NEW (Hozier)

There’s an art to life’s distractions,
to somehow escape the burning weight;
the art of scraping through.
Some like to imagine
the dark caress of someone else.
I guess any thrill will do.

Since Jackson refused to let them go to a club, the boys ended up wandering around looking for a pub that wasn’t impossibly packed with people watching the football (“Soccer,” Isaac insisted.) match.

Finally they ended up at a small pub on the South Bank, near the National Theatre. No TVs, so it
wasn’t packed, but the occupants were already well on their way to rowdy, so it was louder than Jackson typically liked. Still, it was a lot better than a club.

Isaac insisted on honoring his promise to buy the first round, and went to the bar while Jackson and Zach found a table in the corner.

As soon as they sat down, Zach fixed Jackson with a sharp look. “So.”

Jackson cringed, anticipating what Zach was about to say. Zach knew the rules about omegas in their territory even better than Jackson did.

“This is why you’ve been avoiding us,” said Zach. “I assume it’s a safe bet that you haven’t told Josie yet.”

Though Zach’s tone wasn’t particularly accusatory, Jackson still felt like he was being scolded. Zach couldn’t transform, but he was still a full-fledged member of the pack, and he was older than Jackson.

“He…” Jackson started, at a loss for words. “I…”

“Let me guess,” said Zach. “It’s complicated?”

Jackson glanced self-consciously toward the bar, where Isaac was chatting with the bartender, then looked back at Zach and nodded.

“I’m also guessing that you’d like me to keep this information secret from our alpha?”

When Zach said it out loud like that, it made the whole thing seem a lot more serious. “I--”

“It’s all right, Jack,” said Zach. “I won’t bring it up. But you know that if she asks me directly, I’ll have to tell her.”

“I know. Just… give me a little more time to figure it out,” Jackson said, then added after a moment, “Please?”

“‘Please,’ he says.” Zach laughed. “That’s a new one for you. You must be desperate. What exactly are you trying to figure out, though?”

Jackson was saved from having to answer by Isaac returning to the table with three double rocks glasses of something strong-smelling and dark.

He set the glasses down on the table, took a seat, and raised one to Zach and Jackson. “Cheers.”

Zach lifted one of the glasses in a small salute. “Cheers.” He took a sip, and Jackson watched his eyes widen. Zach raised his eyebrows, clearly impressed. “Springing for top shelf? Are you really that keen to impress me?”

Isaac shrugged, taking a sip from his own glass. “I don’t know what it is, but it was on the house.”


“Bartender’s going to grad school for Classical Art and thinks I look like that David statue thing,” Isaac said, like that completely explained the free drinks.

Even if that was the truth—which Jackson almost always assumed wasn’t the case with Isaac--Jackson doubted it was the whole story. He felt a brief flash of annoyance that the background
noise made it impossible to tell whether Isaac was lying, but it was probably just the noise in
general that was making him irritable. Why should it matter if Isaac was lying to impress Zach?

Still, Jackson found himself looking across the pub at the bartender when Zach did.

He was a good-looking guy--definitely looked like an artist--in probably his mid-twenties, who
Jackson thought very definitively seemed like someone Isaac would flirt with. Jackson quickly
glanced away before the guy could notice that they were staring at him.

Isaac examined his glass and licked his lips appreciatively. “Damn, that’s good. Can this be our
new place, Jackson?”

“First of all, we do not have a place. I have a place,” said Jackson. “Second, what’s wrong with
Lamb?”

“Well, I’ve never gotten a free drink there, for starters.”

“You’ve gotten free drinks there every time we’ve gone!”

“It doesn’t count when you’re buying.”

“Seriously? That’s how you wanna play this?”

“I meant that it’s different when a stranger buys you a drink. It means--”

“Not that you two flirting isn’t adorable,” Zach interrupted, “but are we honestly not going to
discuss the fact that this bloke is underage and supposedly just got three free drinks from the
bartender, who, incidentally, looks to be older than I am?”

Isaac laughed. “You’re the one who wanted to see what kind of game I have.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t see anything, so I still don’t believe you.” Zach turned to Jackson. “Did you
hear any of it?”

“Wasn’t paying attention,” said Jackson, shaking his head. Privately, the more he thought about it,
the more likely it seemed that Isaac was telling the truth. As much as Jackson hated to admit it, the
guy did have game. Jackson had seen it on more than one occasion now.

“Fine, maybe later I’ll put on another demonstration,” said Isaac. “You can take notes. First, I want
to hear the most embarrassing story about Jackson you’ve got.”

Since there was no way Jackson was going to be able to stop this from happening, he decided it
would be better to just focus on his drink (which was admittedly very good, though he couldn’t
identify everything that was in it) and try to tune them out. Unfortunately, determinedly not
listening to the people directly in front of him meant that Jackson had to listen to everything else.
His supernatural hearing kept shifting from sound to sound at random: the clinking of glasses
against one another, wooden chair legs scraping over the wooden floor, random snippets of
strangers’ conversations. It got to the point where he would’ve sworn he could hear people
stumbling drunkenly by outside on the street, the Thames lapping against the riverbank, the--

“You still with us, Jack?”

Zach’s voice snapped Jackson’s attention back to the conversation.

“Yeah, it’s just loud,” he said, rubbing his temple in small circles with the pad of his thumb.
Isaac leaned close with a smirk and whispered, “Do you need more practice, Jack?”

Like before, without even trying, Jackson immediately focused on Isaac’s words. It also made Isaac calling him ‘Jack’ that much more noticeable and reminded him that his Beacon Hills life and London life were colliding. It was not a thought he enjoyed.

Zach rolled his eyes. “It’s not polite to speak at volumes that not everyone at the table can understand.”

“I asked him if he needs more practice,” said Isaac, loudly enough for Zach’s benefit this time.

“Practice?” asked Zach, looking between them, aware that he was missing something.

Isaac leaned back in his chair and smiled innocently at Zach. “Jackson has trouble with loud noises, so I’ve been helping him learn how to concentrate and tune them out.”

“And how exactly do you do that?”

“Make him focus on something quiet.” Isaac looked back at Jackson and without moving, whispered, “Seems to be doing the trick.”

Jackson felt his own pulse speed up a fraction. He masked it (or at least tried to) by scolding Isaac. “Zach just told you not to do that.”

“Sorry,” said Isaac to Zach, though he didn’t seem remotely apologetic.

“What do you whisper to him, then?” Zach sounded genuinely curious. His nerdy interest in the science of werewolf abilities was clearly piqued.

“Usually things that will annoy him, obviously,” said Isaac. “Though that’s not really hard to do. What’s even better is that Jack here doesn’t speak French.”

“You speak French?” Zach looked skeptical.

Isaac proceeded to say something at normal volume that Jackson couldn’t understand, but which almost caused Zach to spit out the sip of his drink that he had just taken. Well, that was one way to find out that Zach spoke French, too...

“You waste lines like that on Jack?” Zach stared at Isaac, astounded. “Fuck, let’s go find someone else who speaks French in this place. You’ll be at their flat within twenty minutes.”

“What did he say?” Jackson asked, curious despite his better judgement. But the other two either didn’t hear him or were ignoring him, now speaking to each other in French.

Great. Now not only could Isaac and Zach gossip about Jackson, they could do it without Jackson having any idea what they were saying. This could only end badly. Luckily (or maybe not), Jackson wasn’t entirely left out of the conversation; Zach seemed to understand French better than he spoke it, because after a few exchanges, he switched back to English to respond to whatever ridiculous things Isaac was saying.

“Is that an offer, or just an example of what you say to him?” Zach asked, actually blushing at what Isaac had just said. That was no small thing considering the fact that Jackson was almost positive that Zach had no interest in guys.

“Wow, I didn’t even know you could do that,” Zach said when Isaac continued. “Do people do that
“in Paris?” Another stream of rapid French from Isaac. “What, three at once? How does that even work?”

“Okay,” Jackson said quickly as he got to his feet. “I’ll buy the next round if you guys knock it off.”

Isaac’s lips curled in a slow grin. He downed the last of his drink in a clear sign of approval of this idea. Not to be outdone, Zach slammed the last of his drink back, too, and nudged the glass towards Jackson.

“Cheers, mate.” Jackson would’ve thought from Zach’s smug grin that he had planned this, or that Jackson had just unknowingly proven something, even though Jackson couldn’t think of what that could possibly be. He grabbed the empty glasses and headed to the bar before Zach could find some other way to embarrass him.

When Jackson got back, Zach was sitting alone, staring in disbelief at something across the pub.

“How in God’s name does he do it? He’s seventeen.”

Jackson turned to see what Zach was looking at, and of course it was Isaac talking to a couple of pretty girls.

“I still don’t believe it,” Zach said again, shaking his head. “Which one is he flirting with?”

“Both.” Jackson snorted into his beer.

“How? If I chatted up a girl and her friend at the same time, I’d get myself slapped. What could he possibly be saying?”

Thanks to wolf-hearing and how Isaac had been training him to focus on Isaac’s voice, Jackson found it very difficult to keep from eavesdropping, even though what he heard made his ears burn.

“It’s not worth repeating,” he said evasively. Jackson had no interest in relaying Isaac’s pick-up lines, which ranged from cheesy to obscene, to his brother.

“Jack, I’ve got to know how he’s doing this.”

“They think his accent is cute,” Jackson summarized.

“You’ve got exactly the same accent. Why haven’t I seen you chatting up girls like that?”

Before Jackson was forced to respond, Isaac winked at him, making Jackson’s entire face flush. He heard Isaac wish the girls a pleasant evening and headed back over to Zach and Jackson.

“They didn’t buy you a drink,” Zach observed smugly the moment Isaac was back.

“Nope,” Isaac said before taking a long sip of the beer Jackson had bought for him.

“I believe your exact words were, ‘I’m charming enough to get anyone to buy me a drink,’” Zach mimicked, with an American accent that was much better than the British accent Isaac sometimes tried. (Jackson credited this to Zach’s obsession with watching American crime procedurals so he could yell at them about how inaccurate the science was.)

Zach’s smugness was short-lived, however. A minute later, the bartender came over with a round of shots for them.
“These are from a pair o’ birds that jus’ left. Said they were sorry they ’ad to go, but wanted to contribute to getting you lot properly soused.”

“You wouldn’t lie just to find an excuse to buy me another drink, would you, Oliver?” Isaac gave the bartender a sly smirk, which was received with a quick laugh. “Oliver, this is Jackson and Zach.” Isaac gestured to each of them in turn. “They’re the friends I’m visiting.”

“Lucky friends,” Oliver said smoothly, because apparently everyone in the pub had game except Jackson and Zach. Jackson felt Oliver’s eyes slide over him and found himself blushing again. He swore inwardly. “Or lucky you, maybe.”

“Definitely lucky me,” said Isaac. Jackson resisted the urge to hide his face in Zach’s shoulder until all the flirting ended. But that would be admitting that it bothered him, and Jackson absolutely refused to do that.

So he pretended to be very interested in his own drink while Oliver, Isaac, and Zach talked about art. After a few minutes of animated discussion, Oliver apologized and said that his break was over. Before he left, he got Isaac to hand him his phone so he could punch his number into Isaac’s contacts. Isaac gave the bartender one last flirty smile and thanked him for the chat before he left.

But as soon as Oliver had returned to the bar, Jackson watched Isaac delete the bartender’s number from his phone.

Jackson stared at him in disbelief. “Why did you do that?”

“What did he do?” Zach leaned closer, trying to see Isaac’s phone properly.

“Deleted the phone number.”

“What!” Zach rubbed at his own face, exasperated. “What is wrong with you? I am categorically not interested in sleeping with that man and I think I’d still go on a date with him. At least being seen with him would boost my ego a bit.”

“Isaac’s ego doesn’t need boosting,” Jackson drawled.

Zach heaved a deep sigh. He met Isaac’s eyes with a look that was half interest, half resignation. “All right, let’s have it. What exactly did you say to those girls?”

Isaac shrugged nonchalantly. “I told them you two were trying to get me smashingly drunk tonight and show me a good time, but none of us are from around here so we wanted to ask if they knew of any fun places nearby. What else,” Isaac took a sip of beer while he thought. “Yeah, that was about it.”

Zach made a disgusted noise and leaned back in his chair. “Fine then, keep your secrets.”

“Does that mean I won?” Isaac said smugly.

“Yeah, yeah, all right. I’ll buy you a drink. As agreed. Nothing over five pounds, mind.” Zach got to his feet, muttering. “Cheeky bastard,” under his breath in a way that was still clearly meant to be overheard.

They stayed for another hour, all of them continuing to drink but only Zach getting drunk. By the time they were ready to go, Zach was complaining that he didn’t want to go back to his flat because his neighbors were always having really loud sex on Friday nights. When Jackson suggested they take him to the den, Zach shook his head vehemently, which caused him to stumble.
“I’ll never hear the end of it if I show up there in this state. The pups’ll be asleep by now anyway. Ada’ll have my head if I wake them up.”

That was a fair point, actually.

So the three of them made the long walk across the river back to Jackson’s flat in an effort to help Zach sober up a bit, but he was still pretty woozy by the time Jackson and Isaac helped him stumble up the stairs and through the door. Zach immediately flopped down on the couch and patted the spot next to him to indicate that Jackson should sit down. Jackson couldn’t help smiling at that as he obeyed. Isaac said something about food and disappeared into the kitchen.

Since Zach had been raised by werewolves, he also behaved like them, despite the fact that he couldn’t transform. So when Zach started to nod off against Jackson’s shoulder, Jackson didn’t think anything of it, and when Jackson shifted on the couch to get more comfortable, it seemed natural that Zach settled in against Jackson’s side and started to doze. This wasn’t something Jackson and Zach were in the habit of doing, but whether it was scent familiarity or pack instinct or something else, it just didn’t occur to Jackson to be uncomfortable about it. He had come to learn over the past several months that personal space was basically nonexistent in a werewolf pack.

“Oh, sure,” drawled Isaac when he reappeared with a bacon-egg-and-cheese sandwich and a tall glass of water for Zach, “you don’t complain when he cuddles you.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “It’s not cuddling.”

“Dude, you have your arm around him.”

“Where else am I supposed to put my arm?”

Isaac laughed, setting down the glass and plate on the side table. “I wish I had a camera. This is adorable. Lemme see your phone.”

He made a grabby hand gesture at Jackson, but Jackson ignored him.

“Do you guys do this a lot, then?” said Isaac. “Friday night snuggles?”

“That’s not what this is,” insisted Jackson. “And no.”

“Just for my benefit, then?” Isaac teased. “Tryna make me jealous?”

Jackson bit back a comment about how Isaac was the one who had been drooling over Zach. He didn’t want to get into it, especially at this time of night.

“He only likes girls.”

“So do you,” countered Isaac. “Supposedly.”

The look Isaac gave him made Jackson blush almost as badly as Zach had done when Isaac had said whatever inappropriate thing in French to him earlier. If Jackson had ten pence for every time he’d blushed since Isaac had shown up in London, he’d have enough money to buy a gag to shut him up. ...Okay, that thought was not helping Jackson’s blush.

“Christ, just shag already,” murmured Zach sleepily against Jackson’s shoulder.

Isaac smirked and Jackson glared at him.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” Isaac said cheerily to Zach, grabbing the food and drink and thrusting...
them towards him. “Eat. Drink. I hear this helps.”

“What’s wrong with this bacon?” said Zach, peering suspiciously at the American-style ‘streaky’ bacon.

“What’s wrong with your bacon?” countered Isaac. “This is real bacon.”

“Just eat it,” said Jackson.

Zach, clearly still drunk, took an exaggeratedly cautious bite, but once he had chewed and swallowed it, his mouth broke into a grin.

“Good?” said Isaac. Zach nodded emphatically and resumed eating.

When Zach had finished eating and had drunk the entire glass of water at Isaac’s insistence, Isaac set the dishes on the side table and climbed onto the long couch with Jackson and Zach. Jackson raised an eyebrow at Isaac, but Zach lifted his legs and rested them on Isaac’s lap, so Jackson followed suit without comment. It was kind of ridiculous to sit like this when there were several perfectly good chairs nearby, but Jackson was too tired and comfortable to be bothered objecting.

After a few minutes, Jackson’s human packmate began snoring softly. Isaac smiled as he watched Zach and Jackson together, which made Jackson look away self-consciously.

“Sometimes I kinda wish we could get drunk,” Isaac mused in a quiet voice, conscious of not waking Zach.

Jackson snorted. “I think your inhibitions are low enough already.”

“No such thing,” said Isaac. “But seriously. I never got drunk as a human, and now I never will.”

“Wait, never? Not even once?”

“It wasn’t like I was getting invited to parties,” said Isaac. “And I wasn’t exactly going to risk raiding my dad’s liquor cabinet just so I could drink alone.”

Jackson said nothing. He never knew how to react when Isaac mentioned his dad.

“Camden snuck me some beer once, but I only had a few sips. Didn’t like it.”

Aaand now he was talking about his dead brother. Jackson fidgeted awkwardly, causing Zach to make a sound of protest in his sleep.

“Lighten up, dude,” said Isaac with a smirk. “If I can deal with it, you can.”

There was a short, tense pause.

“I wish we could, too,” Jackson confessed. “Get drunk.”

“...Do you miss it?”

Jackson thought he might have just imagined the careful way Isaac asked. Or maybe he hadn’t. It wasn’t like Jackson’s love of alcohol back in Beacon Hills had been much of a secret. Maybe Isaac thought he would offend Jackson by alluding to this part of his reputation? If he did, he was wrong. Jackson hadn’t cared what people thought about him drinking back then, and he cared even less about it now.
“I...” Jackson considered for a moment. “I miss having a way to not give a shit.”

Isaac scoffed, not unkindly. “You? Not give a shit? Sorry, can’t picture it.”

Jackson smiled in spite of himself. “I don’t miss how shitty I felt after, though.”

“What does it feel like?” said Isaac. “Being drunk, I mean. People look like they’re having fun, most of the time. Minus the barfing. He seems to enjoy it, anyway.” Isaac gestured to Zach.

“I dunno,” said Jackson. “It feels like it looks in movies and stuff, I guess.”

“I wanna hear how it feels to you,” Isaac insisted.

“Fine,” said Jackson, giving himself a minute to think about how to explain it properly. “It’s like… Like, not thinking past what’s going on right now. Feeling like you can do anything, and you should do it, because it would be fun. Like being numb. In a good way, though.” He shrugged. “Most of the time, anyway.”

Isaac gave Jackson a thoughtful look. “And when you want to be numb now that you can’t get drunk...” He hesitated. In the pause Jackson thought he heard Isaac’s pulse speed up for a few beats. But then he shrugged and continued. “Guess I’m lucky I don’t know what I’m missing. But that sounds kind of like what sex is like for me.”

Well, Jackson had definitely not been expecting that. He took a moment to consider his own sexual history, but found that he didn’t feel the same way.

“How?” he asked.

“Not thinking past the moment,” said Isaac. “Just letting myself have fun. I want them, they want me. It’s easy. Like the most basic thing in the world, but it never gets boring. ‘Numb in a good way,’ like you said. If I let go, then I can shut my brain off and just feel stuff. I dunno. Maybe that’s why I’m so slutty.”

He was smiling at Jackson, but Jackson felt a twinge of guilt. Maybe he’d been too quick to be judgmental about Isaac’s sex life. He hadn’t known that Isaac viewed it like that. Jackson found himself unintentionally reassessing his thoughts about Isaac’s long nights out at clubs, coming back smelling like strangers’ pheromones. Considered in that light, it wasn’t really much different from staying out drinking all night. The main difference was that alcohol wouldn’t do anything for Jackson anymore.

“...Oh,” Jackson said lamely.

“Anytime you want to try out my approach, Whittemore, you know where to find me.” Isaac grinned lazily.

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Probably at the pub, letting strangers waste their money trying to get you drunk.”

“Probably.” Isaac smirked back. “But I’m happy to let friends waste money on me, too.”

It had to have been close to three when Isaac finally dragged himself out from under the other two boys and headed to bed. He’d begun dozing off about the same time as Jackson, but Isaac had more training at keeping late hours and had resisted, talking about nothing and watching Jackson do that ‘I’m totally not asleep’ jerky head thing, until Jackson finally passed out with his cheek resting
against the top of Zach’s head.

Isaac grabbed the blanket from the bed and spread it out over Jackson and Zach, trying to cover as much of them as possible, but too tired to do much more than spread it out and shamble back to the bed. A quick calculation in his head proved that getting undressed would be a waste of time and heat, and he proceeded to burrow under the duvet, hoping that he would be too tired to be cold.

He had never slept in Jackson’s bed without him, Isaac realized as he pulled the overstuffed not-comforter that Jackson called a duvet around him, wrapping himself up until he was inside of a puffy cocoon. But Jackson was having pack time right now, and Isaac knew how important that was. It wasn’t like he had any claim on Jackson’s time anyway, or like there was any reason Jackson should choose to sleep next to Isaac rather than pack. So Isaac sighed and resigned himself to sleeping in the uncomfortably big bed alone.

Speaking of uncomfortable… Though the night had gone really well in the end, and Isaac liked to think that he and Zach were friendly now, he hadn’t failed to notice how Zach had reacted to him when Isaac had first opened the door. Isaac had also heard what Zach had said about their alpha not knowing about Isaac. Until that point, Isaac hadn’t really considered the implications for Jackson of having Isaac stay with him. Now that he thought about it, it did make sense that Jackson wouldn’t want his pack to know about him. Isaac was an omega, after all, and he knew enough about werewolves to know that that meant he wasn’t exactly welcome in another pack’s territory.

No wonder Jackson had been keeping Isaac a secret from his alpha, and was now making Zach do the same. He was breaking his pack’s rules for Isaac. Isaac’s stomach sunk with guilt at that thought. He shouldn’t have been staying with Jackson, making him lie to his alpha like that. And if Isaac had been a better person, maybe that thought would’ve made him resolve to leave. But it didn’t. Maybe it was selfish, but Isaac wanted to stay. He enjoyed spending time with Jackson, teasing him and flirting, even if his advances were never reciprocated. He liked getting the chance to maybe be Jackson’s friend, to leave the past in Beacon Hills and get to know the new versions of each other without all that baggage. But if staying there would get Jackson in trouble with his pack, then maybe...

A heavy weight hit the bed beside him.

“Jackson?” Isaac murmured, almost asleep now. “What are you doing?”

“Sleeping in my bed. What’s it look like?”

“What about Zach?”

“He snores really loud. Especially after drinking.”

Jackson tugged at Isaac’s duvet burrito, burrowing in with him and surprising Isaac by not even trying to keep any space between them. Jackson pressed himself up against Isaac’s side and draped an arm around him, similarly to how Jackson had been lying with Zach on the couch. It wasn’t just for warmth or because Isaac had demanded it; this was pack behavior. Isaac hadn’t experienced that in a long time, and it caused a dull ache in his chest.

There were a dozen reasons why Isaac never wanted to be in a pack again, the main one being that he didn’t feel the need; he really was fine on his own. But the most painful reason, the one he didn’t think about much, was how easy it was to end up relying on this—the closeness, that trust, feeling safe and wanted—and then lose it. Derek had explained what being pack meant, but to Isaac it had just been necessity: Look out for each other or everyone is going to die.
Maybe pack was what family was supposed to be. Granted, Isaac’s family had kind of sucked after his mom had died, and Isaac hadn’t exactly had many (any) friends until he’d become a werewolf, so he didn’t have much experience to base that theory on, but still, he didn’t necessarily see a distinction. And maybe that was the problem. Isaac could get by without the closeness of pack because he’d never really had a group of people he could rely on, or at least not since he was little. At the end of the day, Isaac was used to being alone. He was comfortable that way. Sure, there were flings, there were fleeting feelings and brief, important moments of connection, but nothing ever really stuck around. And that was okay.

Isaac felt more or less the same way about all of his friends back in Beacon Hills. Maybe that was only on account of the emotional trauma they had all suffered together, though. When Cora had shown up, Isaac hadn’t immediately felt any kind of special connection with her. She was just Derek’s sister. He’d grown fond of her as he’d gotten to know her (she was like an adorable, baby Derek; who wouldn’t?) but no more than anybody else. He hadn’t even been allowed to flirt with her (being Derek’s sister), although he’d still tried and had been shot down hard by her (being baby Derek).

Still, Isaac had appreciated their closeness while he’d had it. Erica, Boyd, Derek, Scott, and A—well, other people—had come to mean so much to Isaac in such a short period of time. They’d made Isaac a better person. Even with all the darkness and pain, there had been brotherhood and love. Maybe he didn’t need it, but he had gotten used to it. Having that kind of connection with anyone and then having it ripped away was something he refused to ever put himself through again.

But… Maybe he could make an exception for Jackson. Spending a lot of time with one other werewolf wasn’t the same as joining a pack, right? And when had Isaac ever passed up the opportunity to sleep in the arms of a pretty boy (or girl)? That would just be dumb.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late post! We’ve both been really busy the past couple of weeks. Thank you all so much for reading and leaving kudos and comments. You really brighten our days and keep us going :D We’re especially grateful for your positive feedback about our OCs, who we really love. We hope you continue to enjoy the story!

Savenna Cloverunner
Long Night

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER ELEVEN: LONG NIGHT (Guster)

It was a long night for everyone.
The moon yields to a sober sun and her virgin light.

The next morning, a groggy-looking Zach appeared in the doorway of Jackson’s bedroom and peered blearily at Isaac, who was still wearing his clothes from the night before and was resolutely curled up in the warm spot where Jackson had just been sleeping. The faint scent of steam and body wash wafting from the general direction of the bathroom conjured pleasant images of Jackson showering after lacrosse, which Isaac hadn’t realized at the time that he had stored away to think about later.

“This is ridiculous,” said Zach, gesturing to the bed. “I refuse to believe you two aren’t shagging. Werewolves or not, two guys who aren’t pack don’t voluntarily sleep together like this if they’re
“I don’t know what to tell you,” said Isaac with an exaggerated sigh. “He’s not interested.”

“How do you know?” said Zach as he climbed onto the bed and flopped down next to Isaac. He had brought ‘his’ blanket from the couch and was claiming Isaac’s pillow (since Isaac had claimed Jackson’s) for his own.

“Because…” Isaac shrugged. “Because he’s Jackson.”

“Then why do you keep throwing yourself at him?” Zach said with a yawn.

“Even if he never says yes, it’s still fun,” said Isaac, trying to sound like he didn’t really care. “And you never know, right?”

Zach rolled his eyes. “As long as your delusional optimism keeps you from hitting on me instead, you have my blessing.”

“Who says I can’t do both?” Isaac reached to brush Zach’s pretty hair out of his pretty eyes and got his hand swatted instead.

“Hands off,” said Zach firmly. “That’s for pack and for pretty girls, and you are neither.”

Isaac chuckled. “I have never been more disappointed to have a dick.”

“Swap you,” said Zach. “You have no idea how easy you’ve got it.”

“Not for a million shillings, or whatever the fuck you guys use around here for money,” said Isaac.

“Is this why you make other people buy your drinks?” Zach teased with a tired smirk. “Too thick to figure out our currency?”

“I was gonna make a joke about ‘too thick’—”


“Oh, God,” came Jackson’s voice from the doorway. “Tell me you two aren’t bonding.”

There was a tightness in Jackson’s tone, but Isaac wrote it off as him being grumpy about staying up late. Jackson was not a morning person. What Jackson was was sexy, especially wearing nothing but jeans and a towel draped over his shoulders, which he was using to dry his shower-damp hair.

Isaac made a suggestive face about the word ‘bonding’ to Zach, but before he could say anything Zach cut him off.

“I am not letting this boy within ten feet of me ever again if he has ropes,” said Zach to Jackson.

“Sadly, I had to leave them in France,” said Isaac. “Thought airport security might ask questions I couldn’t answer.”

“All right, we’re finished here,” said Zach. He crawled heavily (and, in Isaac’s opinion, somewhat melodramatically) out of the bed. He gave Jackson a hug at the doorway, despite Jackson’s obvious discomfort with being hugged, even by his packmate, while he was only half dressed.

“If my mum or dad… or Josie… or Sarah, or…” Zach sighed. “If anyone asks where I am or where
I was last night, I was up all night studying and now I’m at home asleep, right?”

“Right,” said Jackson, shooting Isaac a look that dared him to make a smart remark.

“And since I wasn’t here, I didn’t see any strange omegas staying in your flat without your alpha’s knowledge,” said Zach, arching an eyebrow at Jackson. Isaac felt a little twinge of guilt.

“Thanks,” said Jackson dryly. “See you later, Zach.” He patted Zach on the shoulder, and the hungover half-human left.

Isaac sighed with relief before rolling back over and covering his head with the pillow. Until Jackson pulled the nice warm blankets away.

“You’re not staying in bed all day.”

“Why not?” Isaac asked, curling up in a ball to preserve warmth. He thought staying in bed all day sounded like exactly what they should be doing. Preferably together.

Jackson took the pillow, too. “Because I’ve got errands to run.”

“So what you’re saying is that I can stay in bed all day.” Isaac smiled up at Jackson in what he hoped was a charming way.

Jackson didn’t seem charmed, though. “No, I’m saying get the fuck up. If you’re tired, it’s your own fault for staying up all night.” He threw the blankets and pillow in a pile beside Isaac and headed for the closet.

“I’d like to think we all contributed,” said Isaac, stretching languidly.

“Come on,” Jackson insisted, “we need to go to the shop, I’ve got to get some books from the library—”

“Oh shit.” Isaac sat up suddenly. “Today’s Saturday.”

“Well spotted,” Jackson said dryly, pulling on a shirt.

Isaac dragged himself to his feet. “No, I mean, there’s stuff I was supposed to have done by today.”

“You mean your research, or whatever?”

“Yeah. Shit.” Isaac scrubbed his hands over his face before smiling apologetically at Jackson. “Sorry, looks like I won’t be able to keep you company today.”

Jackson just rolled his eyes and grabbed his hoodie. “I only figured you’d want to go because you’re the one cooking. And because you always insist on following me everywhere. Text me if you think of anything you want from the shop.”

After Jackson left, Isaac took a quick shower, poured himself a bowl of cereal, and sat down at the table where he had spread out his research. The new moon was tomorrow night and Isaac was still no closer to figuring out what this thing was than when he’d arrived three weeks ago.

Running errands alone felt… weird. And noticing that it felt weird made it feel even weirder. Jackson hadn’t realized that he’d gotten used to having Isaac near him basically all the time except when Jackson was at school or if Isaac went out while Jackson was sleeping. Pretty much every spare moment of Jackson’s time now had Isaac involved in one way or another.
Including bedtime. Looking back on the previous night, Jackson was starting to regret his decision to not just stay on the couch with Zach. Up until that point, Jackson had done a fairly good job of separating Isaac from the concept of ‘pack’; they had been bitten by the same alpha, but that was as far as the connection between their wolf sides went. Even the sometimes excessive physical contact could be chalked up to instinct and Isaac’s shameless flirting.

But last night, Jackson had let himself forget that Isaac wasn’t pack. Being around a drunk, cuddly Zach had brought out Jackson’s pack instincts, and he hadn’t flipped the switch back off when he’d gone to bed. He hadn’t even given it a thought when he’d curled himself around Isaac like that. Jackson cursed himself for being so careless. What was Isaac supposed to think now? In one gesture, Jackson had undone all of the time he had spent trying to make it clear that he wasn’t interested in Isaac’s come-ons and didn’t like Isaac being in his personal space.

And now Jackson was faced with the possibility that maybe he didn’t really mind Isaac being in his space, and that maybe it had felt kind of nice to be close to him like Jackson was close to Zach. Those were dangerous thoughts. Zach finding out about Isaac changed nothing: Jackson’s pack life and Isaac’s temporary residence in his flat were two separate things. Isaac wasn’t pack, and he wouldn’t want to be. He was an omega, and he wasn’t staying.

Jackson had to juggle the grocery bags as he struggled to unlock the door to his flat. Isaac hadn’t answered when he’d knocked to get some help. Jackson’s mild irritation about this dissipated when he found Isaac fast asleep at the table, surrounded by books, papers, and Jackson’s laptop. Jackson decided to let Isaac sleep for a few more minutes while he quietly put the groceries away, then went over to the table to examine Isaac’s work.

Jackson hadn’t really paid attention to what Isaac had been researching. He’d heard the word ‘hunters’ and decided to stop asking questions, figuring that the less he knew, the better. But looking over the mythology books and maps of London--with what looked like graveyards marked on them--scattered across the table, Jackson wondered if he should have taken more of an interest.

A soft nudge to his hip alerted him that Isaac was awake.

“Hey,” said Isaac without lifting his head from the table. His voice was drowsy, but he sounded satisfied.

“Hey. Wore yourself out reading?” Jackson drawled.

“Yeah.” Isaac yawned and stretched. “But I think I figured out the pattern.”

“Pattern?”

Isaac gave Jackson a brief overview of what he’d been trying to help the hunters track down. Some kind of human-eating monster that liked to haunt graveyards during the new moon. Jackson was skeptical. How had something like this been running around London killing people on a regular basis without anyone knowing about it? Jackson supposed that was the point of the hunters, but it sounded like even they had no idea how to actually catch or stop it, which was not particularly reassuring.

“I thought maybe it could be a ghoul, since they eat people,” Isaac continued, “but the pattern is all wrong. I tried branching out from there, but nothing else even comes close. So I changed directions to looking into the locations where the bodies were found, trying to see what the places have in common, which is literally nothing except that they’re graveyards in London.”

“I thought you said you’d figured it out, though?”
Isaac grinned victoriously. “Oh, I did. Ever heard of Telluric currents?”

“No. Should I have?”

“Probably not. Sometimes I forget you left before all that.”

Jackson had no idea what Isaac meant by ‘all that’, but he didn’t have time to ask.

Isaac started thumbing through a pile of maps on the table. “When I was reading through some fairy lore, I started coming across this term, ley lines, which reminded me of Telluric currents. They’re supposed to be these naturally occurring energy sources that flow along really specific paths.”

He pulled out a map that Jackson didn’t recognize at first glance, but then realized it was a poor quality photocopy of a map of London, probably from a few decades ago. Isaac had highlighted several lines cutting directly through the city. Ley lines, apparently.

“Fairies tend to make their homes along them,” Isaac continued, flattening the map on the table. “The benevolent ones taking care of people and the malicious ones… well, taking care of people.”

Fairies. Because that was so much more plausible than unicorns...

“So you think a fairy is killing people?” Jackson asked flatly.

Isaac shrugged and opened one of the books on the table, flipping between post-it note tabs.

“Why not? According to this, there are hundreds of types of fairies, and more than a few of them eat people to punish them or because they’re sadistic and find it funny or whatever.” Isaac paused and looked up from the book. “Did you know that banshees are considered a type of fairy?”

“What’s your point?”

“Nothing. Just thinking maybe we could ask Lydia if any of her cousins have a taste for human flesh.” Isaac smirked, way too amused by himself.

“Isaac,” Jackson warned.

“Right,” said Isaac, finding the page he was looking for. “So, supposedly, there are all these creatures that draw power from the currents or ley lines or whatever you want to call them, and use them to move around. So I figured I should check if London has any ley lines.” He gestured to the old map. “Guess where a bunch of them intersect?”

“The graveyards where the attacks happened?” Jackson asked, even though the answer was pretty clear.

“Exactly!” Isaac exclaimed. “Plus four other graveyards, so I’m betting any one of those could be where the next attack will happen.”

Isaac handed Jackson the open book.

“This book has a whole thing about graveyards and ghosts and ley lines, so there’s always a chance that it could be some vengeful spirit shit, I guess, which would mean we’re kind of screwed because I have no idea how to stop a ghost. But I have no idea how to stop a fairy either, so there’s that. I’m hoping the hunters will have some ideas, but at least this narrows down the graveyards that we have to patrol. There are like fifty graveyards in London. Why does one city need fifty
graveyards?”

Jackson looked at the book without really seeing it, a bit overwhelmed by the reality of what Isaac had been dealing with lately.

“Wow. I think I might actually be impressed. I kind of thought you’d just been making this whole project up.”

Isaac laughed. “What did you think I’ve been doing while you’re at school?”

“Not this.”

“The only thing I can’t tie in is the timing,” Isaac said as he rifled through a few pages of notes. “Why during the new moon?”

“Should you really be questioning this thing’s helpfully predictable habits?”

“Probably not.” Isaac shrugged. “But it could give us a clue about what type of monster it is.”

Jackson was just thinking that Isaac had found more than enough information for the hunters to work with and that maybe he should just call it good, when Isaac continued:

“Not like it’ll matter if we catch it this weekend. Monday’s the new moon, but this thing has killed people the night before and after, so we’ll have to be out there every night just in case.”

Jackson stared at Isaac, convinced that he must have misheard him. “We?”

Isaac arched an eyebrow. “Yeah. I mean, not you, obviously.”

Which meant Isaac and… Oh, for the love of--

“So you’re going to be out there with them hunting this thing?”

“Of course I am,” Isaac said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Jackson found Isaac’s nonchalance alarming rather than reassuring. *Researching* monsters was one thing, but now that Jackson knew Isaac hadn’t just been dicking around pretending to look up information on unicorns, this was all starting to feel very real. Isaac was planning on actually going out in the field with a bunch of hunters. What was going to happen to Isaac when they decided they didn’t need him anymore?

“Shit, what time is it?” Isaac asked suddenly, glancing at the clock on the microwave. “I’ve got to go.”

“I thought you said the attacks wouldn’t start until tomorrow night?” Jackson asked as Isaac went to the bedroom.

“Yeah, but we still have to put together a game plan for the next few days. And I’ll probably just be staying with the Bristows until it’s all over anyway,” Isaac called back, before reemerging with his duffle. “Try not to be too bored without me.”

Jackson hardly heard anything past one familiar, blood-chilling word.

“The Bristows?” he nearly choked.

“Yeah.” Isaac flashed Jackson a quick confused look before focusing on the task of gathering up
the books and maps off the table and throwing them in the bag.

“The hunters you work for are the fucking Bristows.” The intense mixture of anger and fear that Isaac’s revelation sparked in him made his wolf threaten to surface. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me that?”

“You didn’t ask,” said Isaac simply. “Why, does that make a difference?”

God, he really was fucking clueless!

“Isaac, they’re one of the oldest hunter families in Britain. They have the most information, the best weapons, and the best-trained hunters. Josie’s warning to me was literally, ‘Watch out for hunters, especially the Bristows.’”

Jackson gritted his teeth. He should’ve known better. Of course the Bristows would be the hunters Argent had a good relationship with. Weren’t the Argents one of the oldest and biggest hunter families in Europe? Hell, he’d even heard Will mention the Argents once (but Jackson hadn’t been stupid enough to say anything about it), and when Zach had explained his ‘Ag’ tattoo to Jackson, he’d shared the ‘fascinating’ tidbit that the myth of werewolves’ weakness to silver actually came from the name of an old hunter clan.

Oh, fuck. This meant that a potential future leader of the fucking Bristow clan had been in Jackson’s flat. This whole situation just kept getting better and better.

“I’m coming with you,” said Jackson.

“What? No.” Isaac didn’t even look up from the old map he was carefully refolding and then gently shoved into his duffle. Jackson noticed there were some extra clothes in the bag already, too.

“It was bad enough that you spent the full moon with them. Now you’re going to go looking for other monsters, in the dark, with their best hunters and trackers armed to the fucking teeth, and just trust that they won’t shoot you by ‘accident’ or something?”

“Aww, are you actually worried about me, Jackson?” Isaac teased as he zipped up the bag, but Jackson remained deadly serious.

“You know what? Yeah, I am. You don’t have a fucking clue what you’re involved in. What do you think is going to happen if a werewolf gets hurt or killed because of the Bristows, or you get one of the Bristows hurt or killed?”

Isaac cocked his head to the side in that confused puppydog way of his. “What do you mean? Sure, it would suck, but we all know what we’re getting into. And it’s not like I haven’t done this before.”

Jackson felt his fists clench at his sides. “Look, I don’t know what it was like in fucking Paris, but most of the hunters and the werewolves here aren’t all ‘live-and-let-live.’ A lot of them are looking for excuses to start shit.”

“Jackson—”

“Let me make it clearer. If a wolf who didn’t attack a human got hurt because of a hunter, other wolves would get seriously pissed off. If a hunter got hurt because of a wolf for any reason, other hunters would get pissed off. Get it?”

“So throwing another wolf in the mix will magically make everything better?”
Jackson could tell that Isaac wasn’t trying to be a dick about it, but it didn’t help that he was being so fucking oblivious.

“No, but maybe I can keep you from getting yourself killed!”

Isaac’s wide-eyed stare made Jackson aware of how melodramatic his words had sounded. Before Isaac could say anything, Jackson rubbed at his face in irritation and said, “I like the way things are in London. I’m not letting you fuck it up.”

Isaac sighed, and for a second, Jackson thought he’d gotten through to him.

“Jackson, I get it. I know you think I’m clueless or that I’m ignoring the risks or just being stupid, but this is what I signed up for. I’m not just going to back out because things might get dangerous. I’ve dealt with dangerous before. We both have. I know there are a bunch of ways I could fuck this up, but maybe there are ways that I could make things better, too.”

“Name one,” said Jackson, crossing his arms over his chest.

“If werewolves and hunters realize they can work together, maybe they’ll realize they don’t have to be enemies.”

Jackson snorted. “Since when did you become a friggin’ hippie? You think you’re going to end a war that’s been going on for thousands of years by shaking hands with people who call murdering people like us ‘hunting.’”

Isaac made a tired, almost amused little sound. “What can I say? I guess I’m an optimist.”

That thought was so absurd that Jackson actually laughed. “Since when?”

“Since something good happened to me recently.” Isaac gave Jackson a disarming smile, then shouldered his bag. “I’ve got to go, though. I’m meeting James at the library. See, I learned my lesson about hunters in wolf territory. I’ll be okay.”

This was all so incredibly stupid and dangerous and most certainly not okay that Jackson briefly considered whether he was strong enough to knock Isaac out and chain him up so he couldn’t go. Probably not. And Jackson had already done everything he could think of to try to talk Isaac out of going.

Jackson let Isaac get almost all the way to the door before making up his mind.

“Isaac.” Jackson was almost surprised when Isaac stopped and looked back. Jackson sighed. It was too late to back out now. “Wait right there. And I swear if you move, I will fix the lock on that window and leave you out there to freeze.”

He pointedly ignored Isaac’s bemused grin as Jackson spun around and stormed to his bedroom. He dumped his school stuff out of his bookbag onto his bed and shoved a few shirts and his sweatpants in before ducking into the bathroom for his toothbrush.

To his credit, Isaac was still standing in exactly the same spot Jackson had commanded him to stay in, watching Jackson with that same bemused look on his face. Jackson brushed past him with barely a glance. He opened the door and made an exaggerated ‘after you’ gesture.

Isaac crossed the last few steps and stopped beside Jackson in the doorway, considered him intensely for a moment—long enough that Jackson was sure Isaac was going to keep fighting him—before quickly “fixing” his hair with a smirk, and walking out the door.
The whole way to the library, Jackson was convinced that Isaac would change his mind. He kept waiting for Isaac to open his big mouth and start arguing or spouting all kinds of reasons why Jackson shouldn’t come, each of which Jackson mentally prepared a defense for, just in case. But Isaac seemed content just to walk in silence.

It wasn’t that he specifically didn’t want Jackson to come with him--Isaac always enjoyed having Jackson around (not a thought he ever expected to have before coming to London)--but he could think of at least a dozen reasons why it was a terrible idea. Maybe not a dozen. But quite a few. The highlights on the list being: A) Jackson wasn’t wrong; it would be a dangerous and delicate situation, and B) Isaac had a feeling that Jackson’s pack wasn’t going to be happy if they heard about Jackson’s moonlighting with hunters.

And not just any hunters, apparently: hunter royalty. Hunters so well known and feared by the wolves of London that Jackson had been warned about them by name. How had Isaac not picked up on that? He wondered if having Chris on his side had warped his perspective of the seriousness of the situation, or if he just really hadn’t wanted to think about it.

And now Jackson was walking beside him into the lion’s den.

On one hand, Isaac was flattered that Jackson had taken such a personal interest in his well being--it was probably the main reason Isaac wasn’t living on the street--but on the other, Isaac didn’t need to be babysat. He had way more experience with hunters than Jackson did, and if it came down to it, Isaac was pretty sure he would be the one who had to defend Jackson from them.

As Jackson had held open the door to the flat, jaw set stubbornly, Isaac had been struck by an almost overwhelming urge to kiss him. He had wanted to drop his bag, knot one hand in Jackson’s shirt and the other in his incredibly sexy hair and kiss him until Jackson couldn’t even stand up on his own anymore, let alone scowl and berate Isaac for (supposedly) being an idiot.

As much as Jackson was trying to play it off like he was just doing this to keep war from breaking out between the hunters and the werewolves or some other bullshit excuse, the fact remained that Jackson didn’t need to come with Isaac. Jackson had a whole pack to back him up if things really did go south (which Isaac still thought Jackson was being overly paranoid about). If Jackson really thought hunters were that dangerous, then he’d know that going with Isaac was just as stupid as Isaac going alone: two wolves against an entire family of hunters wouldn’t be that much more effective than one. Which meant that the only reason Jackson would insist on coming with Isaac was because of, well, Isaac. And something about Jackson going all Valiant Protector was really doing it for Isaac right now.

Then again, maybe Isaac just needed to get laid.

Despite Isaac and Jackson being more or less on time, James was already waiting when they got to the library. Even from half a block away, Isaac spotted him almost immediately, sitting on one of the flights of steps in front of the library. He was impeccably dressed, as usual, and probably looked to the rest of the world like just another businessman.

Isaac knew better, though. He could tell the moment Jackson spotted him, too, probably recognizing the same qualities that Isaac had noticed the first time he had seen James at the Costa, although Jackson’s reaction was completely different than Isaac’s had been.

If Jackson had been a dog--or a cat, Isaac amended with an inward smile--Isaac was sure that his hackles would’ve been raised and his teeth would’ve been bared. As it was, Isaac was almost sure he could hear Jackson starting to growl quietly.
“Jackson, play nice,” Isaac admonished. “Don’t make me put you on a leash.”

“Just try it,” Jackson muttered darkly, his eyes fixed on James, who didn’t seem to have noticed them walking up yet.

Isaac’s eyebrows shot up. Jackson must have been seriously pissed for that thinly veiled threat/flirt to not even phase him.

“I didn’t realize you were into that kind of thing,” Isaac said lightly. “But I’m sure I can find a collar in your size if you don’t already have one.”

“Don’t push it, Lahey.”

The warning in Jackson’s tone was serious enough to make Isaac let it go. Besides, it was probably not a great idea to bait Jackson even more when he was already so clearly on edge. The last thing they needed was for Jackson to flip his shit on an expert hunter on the steps of the British Library.

Jackson physically flinched when James saw them, stood up, and began walking in their direction. Isaac heard Jackson’s heart rate pick up, and Isaac got ready to tackle him if Jackson decided that James was an immediate threat. When James came within fighting distance and Jackson remained (relatively) calm, Isaac slowly let out the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

James smiled and held his hand out to Isaac in his typical formal greeting. “Hello, Isaac. You’re looking well.” Isaac could feel Jackson tense as James switched his attention to him. “James Bristow,” he said, extending his hand to Jackson as well. “And you are?”

“Jackson.”

When he said it, Jackson locked eyes with James and stood up straight, squaring his shoulders and taking on a posture that Isaac knew was intended to show that Jackson wasn’t intimidated by the taller man. Luckily for Jackson, the hunter couldn’t hear how Jackson’s heart was racing or smell his anxiety. Isaac couldn’t help but be impressed by how well Jackson was controlling his fight-or-flight reflex. There was no way the ‘old’ Jackson would’ve been able to do that.

Still, there was a very tense pause before Jackson accepted James’s hand and shook it. Briefly.

“He’s a friend,” Isaac supplied. Jackson raised an eyebrow at Isaac, but didn’t comment.

“Of course, any friend of Isaac’s,” said James. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m here to help.”

“Help with?”

“The hunt, or whatever you call it.”

This seemed to amuse James, because he gave Jackson a slight (and very unexpected) smile. “Yes, that is generally what we call it.”

When Jackson didn’t respond, James gave him a visual once-over and said, “I take it that your similarities to Isaac go beyond the Hollywood accent?”

This was clearly code for, ‘I’m not going to say the word “werewolf” in public, but I know what’s up.’ Jackson did not take the remark kindly. Isaac could feel him bristling, and James must have noticed as well.
“You’ve nothing to fear from me or my family, Jackson,” said James, even going so far as to raise his hands a little in a small gesture of peace. “As I said, any friend of Isaac’s is a friend of ours.”

Isaac was pretty sure that being called a hunter’s friend was not something Jackson considered a compliment, but to his credit, Jackson continued to stay relatively calm. Still, it would probably be a good idea to keep this from escalating further.

“Is it okay if he comes with us?” Isaac asked, in as diplomatic a tone as he could manage. “He’s been helping with my research.” Not a total lie, Isaac reasoned. After all, Jackson had been letting Isaac use his library card. That had to count for something, right?

James took a long moment to assess Jackson, his expression somewhat difficult to read. But then he gave a small shrug and said, “I’ll have to call Pol first, but I don’t see why not.”

Jackson noticed Isaac sneeze several times as soon as they crossed the threshold (Mountain Ash, of course; walking through it made Jackson’s skin crawl) of the large manor house. He looked around and saw several vases full of a familiar purple flower. Naturally. Jackson rolled his eyes. Like having wolfsbane decorating someone’s house would be enough to stop a werewolf from attacking if the wolf felt like it was under threat. Guns loaded with wolfsbane bullets that at least a few of the hunters were sure to be carrying would be a lot more effective.

The second thing Jackson noticed was the sound of raised voices from a nearby room.

“No, no, no! One wolf is bad enough. I’ll not be ‘angin’ ‘round with another like nothin’s wrong. They’re bloody monsters. It’s mental to trust either of ’em.”

“Thank you, George, for that well-reasoned assessment of the situation.” A woman’s voice, older-sounding with a dry, ironic tone that could not have been more English. “Would you like to be made head of the family now, or should we wait until we have time to find a crown big enough to fit that enormous head of yours?”

“Now, Pol, you know I didn’t mean it like that, yeah? Chandra and I are both worried for the girls. For all the kids.”

Jackson knew Isaac could hear the conversation happening in the room ahead of them just as well as he could. (Hell, it was loud enough that you probably didn’t even need werewolf hearing to make out most of it.) He shot Isaac his best, ‘I told you this was a bad idea’ look, but Isaac ignored him.

As James opened the inner foyer door, Jackson couldn’t help but think that they had officially crossed the point of no return.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” James said to the occupants of the other room. “I hope we’re not interrupting.”

If meeting James had set off Jackson’s instincts, being introduced to the whole family at once made his instincts scream, to the point where it was almost painful. How did Isaac stand it? Had living with Argent desensitized him that much? At least that would explain why he was so fucking stupid about trusting hunters...

There were five of them scattered around the room: four women and a guy (presumably George). Jackson assumed Pol was the old woman, and from the sound of things, she was the one in charge. And based on the argument they had all been having when Jackson and Isaac had arrived, it seemed like, aside from James, she might be the only one who even wanted them there at all.
George scoffed, turning away from Pol to size Jackson up. He didn’t look particularly impressed.

“So, this is the wolf we’re meant to just trust? At least the first one ’ad a recommendation from Argent. We don’t know anythin’ about this one.”

Jackson bristled, but Isaac stepped between him and George. It was almost laughable. Jackson had insisted on coming to protect Isaac, and the first thing Isaac did was try to protect Jackson.

“He’s my friend,” said Isaac, “and I trust him. Besides, Chris knows him, too.”

_I trust him._ Something in Jackson’s stomach twinged at the words. Isaac trusted Jackson? Nobody trusted Jackson. Or at least, they never said they did. In fact, a lot of the people he knew, apart from his London pack, actively distrusted him. Hadn’t Derek called him a snake? If Jackson’s alpha would say something like that right to his face, it was a pretty safe bet that other people were saying the same (or worse) behind his back. Funny; that thought had never really bothered Jackson before now...

“Really?” George scoffed, “’ow convenient.”

Jackson stepped out from behind Isaac. He appreciated Isaac’s gesture, but the last thing Jackson wanted right now was to look like he couldn’t take care of himself.

“It is indeed,” said Pol, “considering the ease with which one can make a phone call these days. I phoned Christopher while they were on their way here. Jackson Whittemore, originally from Beacon Hills, California, now living in London. Christopher says we can trust him. Would anyone like to interrupt an Argent during his Saturday breakfast to confirm what I’ve said?”

Nobody seemed excited about openly challenging Pol’s authority like that, and the room got quiet with awkward tension.

“Glad to hear it,” said Pol. “Welcome to our home, Jackson.”

“Thanks,” Jackson managed to say, even with everyone’s attention on him. He stared down George until the hunter looked away with a sniff.

Despite Jackson’s determination to look strong in front of the hunters, the wolf in him was soothed a little when Isaac slipped his hand around the cuff of Jackson’s coat sleeve and squeezed his wrist to reassure him. If Jackson had been less on edge, he might have been embarrassed or irritated. As it was, he was just happy to not have gotten shot or stabbed yet.

The subtle gesture did not go unnoticed, however. The pretty—or she would have been pretty without the sneer on her face—Indian woman stood up from the couch.

“They’re like puppies, aren’t they? So precious when they’re young,” she said derisively, eyeing Jackson and Isaac like they were a potent combination of dangerous and disgusting. “Then they start _teething_.”

With one final glare at Pol, the woman stormed out of the room.

One of the other hunters, a tall woman who was leaning casually against what seemed to be the doorway to the dining room, gave Jackson a level, appraising look. Jackson’s already heightened sense of danger was now setting off warning bells in his head as his instincts identified her as the biggest threat. She wasn’t as openly hostile as George or the woman who had just left, but there was a reason for that saying: ‘It’s always the quiet ones...’
“Don’t mind Chandra, Jackson,” said the tall woman. “What a relief it is to all of us that Argent vouches for you. However, the question still must be asked: Why are you here?”

Even her voice was unsettling, especially in its directness, but Jackson refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing how stressed out (okay, genuinely scared) he was. He tried to keep his tone level as he said, “Because Isaac’s an idiot.”

The woman arched one eyebrow. “And you’re not?”

“Not as bad as he is. A wolf being here at all is a really stupid idea, but a wolf being here alone is fucking mental.”

Jackson looked directly at George when he said that last word. He didn’t care if the chavvy prick knew they’d heard what he had said, and clearly George didn’t care, either. He just continued to stare at Jackson with his arms crossed over his chest.

The wolf in Jackson was ready to take that as a challenge, but knowing that he and Isaac would never walk out of there alive if he did helped Jackson keep a lid on it. Barely.

The unsettling woman shrugged, as though she had no opinion on the werewolves being there or not. “What one person calls insane or idiotic, another might call brave.”

Jackson snorted. “A lot of brave people end up dead.”

“Yeah but they also end up as statues,” Isaac interjected smoothly. “I would make an awesome statue.”

Jackson was reminded of the bartender from the night before who had (according to Isaac) made that comment about Isaac looking like the Statue of David, and had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. But before Jackson (or anyone else) could respond, Isaac continued:

“Anyway, that’s why Jackson’s here, Wendy. So I don’t end up dead.”

No one had to add the words ‘because of hunters’ to the end of Isaac’s statement. Though Isaac had phrased it so that it could mean he might be killed by the monster they were after, it was clear that everyone in the room understood who the real threat to the werewolves in this situation was.

“Let’s do what we can to avoid that, then, shall we?” The unsettling woman--Wendy--replied lightly, in that same nonchalant manner. Jackson couldn’t be sure if it was supposed to sound reassuring or threatening, though. Not being able to get a read on her contributed to his suspicion that she was far more dangerous than the others.

“Well, then,” Pol spoke up suddenly. “If you’re all quite finished posturing, might I suggest we begin making plans? The longer we stand here dithering, the less time we have for strategizing.”

Pol came over to Jackson and, much to Jackson’s surprise, took his arm. “Don’t you know it’s not polite to keep an old woman on her feet so long? Be a dear and help me to my study.”

Even though he was supposedly steadying her, in reality Jackson was practically being pulled further into the house. Not that he was resisting. Jackson knew what Pol was doing: showing clear signs of support and putting herself between Jackson and the rest of the hunters. Jackson was torn between gratitude for her help and annoyance at being protected by an old lady.

A moment later, Isaac was on Jackson’s other side.

“Where are the monkeys?” Isaac asked, looking around. Jackson took this to mean the children.
“Playing with Hannah and Tobias outside,” said Wendy shortly.

AKA: being kept away from the potentially dangerous werewolves, Jackson translated.

Once they were all reasonably settled in the study, James turned to Isaac. “What has your research turned up?”

Jackson let Isaac explain what he’d found—it wasn’t like Jackson actually had anything to contribute anyway—nodding and agreeing with Isaac if anyone looked at him. When Isaac got to the part about the monster likely either being some kind of fairy or ghost, he opened it up to the hunters to see if any of them had any experience fighting either. Pol mentioned stopping a Shellycoat (a bog monster) up in Scotland in her field hunting days, but that was the closest thing to a fairy any of them had ever had to fight. Apparently there were some things that even hunters didn’t believe in, and those things included fairies and ghosts. (Jackson wondered idly if the jury was still out on unicorns.)

Despite that, the hunters now had a few other ideas of what it could be, thanks to Isaac’s research and only four specific locations to patrol instead of the entire city of London.

At one point, the suggestion was made that Isaac and Jackson could each work with a different team, in order to more evenly distribute resources (and probably to better keep an eye on them), but the idea was met by resistance from almost everyone else.

“No way!” Jackson and George both snapped at the same time. While he hated to agree with that prick, he was glad nobody seemed especially keen on the idea.

Inevitably, there was plenty more bickering before they finally solidified their plans. At one point, Jackson dared to suggest that he might be able to help track by scent if they had anything from the victims, but was cut off by George after the word “help.”

“Oh yeah? And ‘ow’s a runt like you gonna ’elp, eh?”

Jackson had had more than enough of the overly hostile hunter’s bullshit. Jackson had been trying his hardest not to let it get to him, but he was already incredibly on edge from the effort it took to fight his instincts, and he wasn’t that great at anger management under the best of circumstances. He felt a tingling at the back of his eyes and squeezed them shut immediately. If a hunter saw the color they glowed, Jackson was fucked. Argent’s good opinion wouldn’t be enough to save a wolf who had killed innocents.

“You ever hear of a kanima?” Isaac said casually, his tone clearly meant to diffuse the tension between Jackson and George. While it did draw the other hunters’ attention away from Jackson (buying him time to get his wolf under control), hearing that word come out of Isaac’s mouth made Jackson’s blood run cold. What the fuck did Isaac think he was doing?

Jackson could tell by the murmurs that the Bristows had, in fact, heard of kanimas.

Isaac continued: “Jackson helped us stop one of those back in Beacon Hills.”

Some of the hunters appeared skeptical for a few moments, but to everyone’s surprise, George seemed to be impressed. He looked Jackson over like he hadn’t seen him properly before.

“Well if that’s true, maybe ‘e won’t be as useless as ‘e looks.”

Jackson decided, grudgingly, to take that as a compliment. It was clearly the best he was going to get.
After another hour or so of discussion, the group finally had a decent plan. It was decided that they would split up into several teams to cover the graveyards—it turned out that there were at least a dozen other hunters under the Bristows’ employ that would be out there, too—and that Jackson and Isaac would stick together (partly because Jackson refused to let Isaac out of his sight and partly because no one trusted Jackson on his own).

Then Pol ‘excused’ Isaac and Jackson (which meant that they were basically required to leave) so the other hunters could discuss what kind of weapons would be most effective. Though nobody said it aloud, it was clear that neither of the werewolves would be trusted with additional weapons on top of their natural teeth and claws.

“Chris used to let me have a crossbow,” Isaac complained to Jackson after the doors were shut behind them. “Or at least a couple of knives. What’s the point of training with weapons if you’re not allowed to use them?”

Privately, Jackson didn’t see much reason for a werewolf to carry a weapon (beyond the fact that maybe they would look slightly less conspicuous using a bow and arrow than with glowing eyes, sharp teeth, and pointy ears). Jackson trusted the wolf in himself much more than a gun. At least his natural weapons couldn’t get knocked out of his hands!

Isaac heaved a deep sigh and rubbed at his face wearily. Jackson could empathize; that kind of intense, detailed planning would have been mentally exhausting even if it hadn’t been with a room full of people who didn’t trust them (and had been raised to want to kill them).

“Come on,” said Isaac, and surprised Jackson by slinging his arm around Jackson’s shoulders. “Let’s go find Hannah.”

Chapter End Notes

The hunt is on! Thank you all so much for reading and leaving kudos and comments. We appreciate every one of them :D We hope you continue to enjoy the story!

Savenna Cloverunner
Temptation Waits

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWELVE: TEMPTATION WAITS (Garbage)

You are a secret,
a new possession.
I like to keep you guessing.

If possible, the back yard--if you could call it that--was even more impressive than the front yard. Hannah said it was hardly an acre of land, but to Isaac, who had grown up in the suburbs and was lucky to have had a pool, an acre seemed pretty damned big. Plenty of space to practice being a hunter, anyway. There was a shooting range on one side and an obstacle course on the other.

“Plus, a few generations back they gutted the garden and started using it for training,” Hannah said with a nod toward the far end of the yard, where the lane disappeared into what looked like a forest.
“What kind of training?” Isaac asked.

Hannah, Jackson, and Isaac were all sitting on the top of the steps which led down to the path that wound through the yard and into the cover of the trees, with Isaac in the middle. The kids (or ‘monkeys,’ as Hannah liked to call them) were all running around playing some game. They had invited Isaac to play, but since it involved chasing, he thought he should probably sit this one out. Isaac suspected that hunter parents were likely to shoot first and ask questions later if they thought a werewolf was after one of their kids.

Besides, Jackson probably would’ve killed him if Isaac tried to leave him alone with Hannah. As it was, Jackson was sitting on Isaac’s right side, somehow managing to simultaneously sit too close to Isaac to seem comfortable and too far away for Isaac to reassure him. Clearly Jackson was taking his role as Isaac’s protector very seriously.

Hannah grinned wickedly. “Think hide-and-go-seek, but if you’re caught, you’re tied up and have to escape before you’re killed.”

Isaac faked a laugh. “Yeah, that sounds super fun.”

Hannah shrugged and went back to picking at the grass growing through the cracks in the steps. “It’s not supposed to be fun, Wolf. It’s training, not a game.”

Isaac thought back to Hannah’s smile, though, and had to remind himself that despite what she might say, Hannah did enjoy hunter training. She had told him about all the stuff she wanted to do, sky diving and spelunking and other insane, adrenaline junkie activities, and he knew it wasn’t about the hunting or the killing. Hannah’s idea of fun was just a little bit more hardcore than Isaac’s was. (When it came to outdoor thrill-seeking, anyway; Isaac considered himself to be plenty adventurous in other areas.)

If Jackson hadn’t still been in ‘I refuse to even acknowledge that this girl exists’ mode, Isaac was sure he would have made some comment at Hannah’s statement. After all, Jackson didn’t know all that stuff about Hannah that Isaac did. To Jackson, she was just the hunter who knew where he lived, and who probably knew a dozen ways to kill a werewolf and wouldn’t hesitate to use any or all of them without provocation. Unfortunately, Isaac had no way of getting Jackson to believe otherwise, other than to maybe force them to spend time together until Jackson saw it for himself. Which seemed like a bad idea, even to Isaac.

When Isaac and Jackson had found Hannah playing with the kids earlier, she had thankfully been smart enough to pretend to have no idea who Jackson was. Jackson hadn’t needed any prompting to do the same for her, what with being in ‘I refuse to even acknowledge that this girl exists’ mode already.

Hannah’s act had caught Isaac off guard at first, until he had realized that Tobias was there, too. Glaring at all of them, Hannah included. Isaac had tried to include Tobias in the introductions, but Tobias had just stomped off back into the house. In retrospect, it had probably been for the best. Jackson was hostile enough around a hunter who was openly friendly; there was no telling what he might do if he were actually provoked by one.

Despite that, though, sitting there on the steps between Hannah and Jackson, Isaac experienced a rare moment of… peace. Sure, Jackson was still a little on edge and more than a little sullen, but no one was in an active conflict, which was a step up from most interactions between hunters and werewolves. The sun was sinking down into the trees on the horizon, various birds and bugs were making pleasant nature noises, and there were laughing children running around. It was definitely one of the most surreal moments Isaac had experienced in a while (and one he would not have
expected to be happening right outside a building full of people who, admittedly in the past, probably would’ve been more than happy to kill him on sight).

For Isaac, real peace was about as common as Stiles being able to keep his mouth shut for five consecutive minutes. Isaac had experienced peaceful moments, like after sex or sometimes when he was cooking or walking home alone after dancing in a club all night, moments when Isaac felt satisfied and removed from real life. But those moments usually passed too quickly to sink in. But in that moment, time felt stretched like taffy, and Isaac thought it might go on forever. He hoped it would. There were worse moments to be stuck in.

Hope was even rarer than peace. And yet, here Isaac was, literally the only thing between two people who were prepared to kill each other if they had to. Isaac absently played with the silver ring Chris had given him. If ever there was a symbol of hope for peace between hunters and werewolves, that had to be it, right? Isaac wasn’t as much of a ‘hippie’ as Jackson had accused him of being earlier, but he could definitely get behind the idea of a little less unnecessary murder based on ancient feuds.

The peaceful minutes stretched on with none of them saying anything. Isaac glanced down from the sunset to find that his right hand was resting on the steps next to Jackson’s left one, less than an inch from touching it. It would be so easy to bridge that gap. No one would even notice except Jackson. Isaac suddenly felt an intense urge to just say fuck it and take Jackson’s hand in his. Not like in the theater, where he’d baited Jackson into doing it. Just normal, stupid, silly, innocent (if that word could ever be used to describe anything Isaac did now) hand-holding. Just for a minute or two. To see what it felt like.

“Oi! You lot! Inside!”

Tobias’s still very obviously annoyed voice broke the silence so abruptly it made Isaac wince.

“That’s Toby’s way of saying that supper’s ready,” said Hannah as she stood up and stretched.

Isaac got to his feet and extended his hand to Jackson in a silent offer to help him up. But Jackson just rolled his eyes at Isaac’s friendly grin and got up on his own. He glared at Hannah and waited for her and Isaac to go into the house first (after the stream of babbling kids who rushed past them and shoved their way through the door) before following them.

Maybe Isaac could start his peacekeeping mission by pointing out to Jackson that Tobias had just saved Jackson from the horrible fate of having his hand held...

Dinner was... tense. Jackson survived it by keeping his eyes resolutely fixed on his own plate and ignoring all conversation in case he heard something that pissed him off (which was extremely likely). When the scrape of chairs alerted him to the fact that the meal was over, Jackson looked up to find that there wasn’t any sign of a major altercation between Isaac and a hunter, so he decided to call the experience a win.

The adults went straight back to strategizing after dinner, which left Jackson standing awkwardly in a corner of the kitchen while Isaac and Hannah took charge of the washing up, which mostly meant that they directed the older kids to keep the younger kids from breaking any dishes. Tobias was conspicuously (though not unexpectedly) absent.

When the kitchen was about as clean as it was going to get, Isaac helped Hannah herd the children into a playroom, where officially they were supposed to be watching a movie, but in reality were ignoring the movie completely in favor of continuing the ‘games’ they had been playing outside.
Jackson sat himself down on the couch that was farthest away from the kids and watched as Isaac let them chase him around with little rubber band bows and cardboard arrows and other makeshift toy weapons.

Objectively, it was nothing. Human kids played war games all the time, and most people seemed fine with that. It certainly hadn’t seemed weird to Jackson before. Except now, looking at the hunter kids, he was reminded of Justin and Colin, and suddenly the whole thing turned his stomach. These children, though they didn’t know it yet, were being trained to hunt Dominic’s and Eva’s sons someday. It was wrong. How could Isaac see it as anything else? How could he possibly think that there was any hope of making peace with people who raised their children like this?

“Howdy!”

A high, enthusiastic voice alerted Jackson to the fact that there was a little girl standing near his knee, staring up at him like he was the most fascinating thing in the room.

“Uh… hi?” Jackson shifted awkwardly to the side as the girl bounded up onto the couch to sit next to him. He didn’t really know how to act around normal children, let alone hunter children.

“Can I see your eyes?” She hastily corrected herself: “May I see your eyes?”

Jackson blinked at the little girl, confused. “My eyes?”

“Yeah!” she said brightly. “Will you make them glow like Isaac does? Please?”

Something in Jackson’s chest went cold. It was such an innocent question, from the little girl’s point of view. She had no way of knowing that there would be any reason why Jackson would refuse such a simple request, especially after Isaac had evidently done it (much to Jackson’s irritation). Turning her down would make it seem like a bigger deal, but it was too dangerous to risk that she might mention it to an adult later.

He was just starting to panic when Isaac rushed to his rescue.

“Howdy, Annie.” Isaac came over to the couch with a boy Jackson might have heard be called Grayson. “We’re going to try to figure out what happens to my teeth when my fangs come out. Wanna help?”

The little girl clapped her hands excitedly and hopped back down on the floor, her interest in Jackson almost instantly forgotten. Jackson watched as Isaac let the two kids examine his human teeth and then, a few moments later, his fangs. Once the fangs were out, several of the other kids wanted a look, too, and suddenly Isaac was giving a demonstration on werewolf teeth. Jackson couldn’t have thought of a more inappropriate distraction for the young hunters, but he was still incredibly grateful for it.

As it almost always did, thinking about the color that his eyes glowed twisted Jackson’s stomach into knots of anxiety and guilt. He needed to keep the hunters from seeing them, at all costs. Even if they gave him the chance to explain—which Jackson highly doubted they would—he didn’t have a particularly compelling case; letting yourself become a mind-controlled, murderous monster probably wouldn’t be considered much better than just being a murderous monster of your own accord. The reason didn’t really matter if the result was the same.

What the fuck had Isaac been playing at earlier when he’d brought up the Kanima and said that Jackson had helped them stop one? Why would he even mention that, let alone lie about Jackson’s
part in it? There were plenty of other ways to convince the hunters that Jackson could help them. What if they had asked Jackson for details about it? He would have been better off with them thinking that he was some inexperienced kid than them knowing he had any kind of connection to that.

Of course, as soon as the older hunters realized that a werewolf was entertaining their children by showing off his very sharp teeth--probably alerted by Tobias--they announced that it was bedtime. As the children reluctantly shuffled off to bed, one of the friendlier-looking hunters (though the bar for that was pretty low) suggested that Isaac and Jackson get some sleep while they had the chance since it would be a long few days.

After a quick goodnight to Hannah, Isaac led Jackson upstairs to the room they would be sharing. It was definitely on the small side, but Jackson didn’t think that would be an issue until he noticed something else.

The bed was a Brit-style (annoyingly narrow) single. Great.

Before Jackson even had time to feel awkward about it, Isaac was already dropping his bag in the corner, kicking off his shoes, and saying, “I’ll take the floor.”

Jackson looked at him, surprised by Isaac’s unexpected display of chivalry. “You sure?”

It was a fairly reasonable plan, Jackson supposed. The house was kept at a much higher temperature than Jackson could afford to keep his loft (read: comfortable), and even if it hadn’t been, they’d been given plenty of blankets.

Isaac looked back with a wry twist to his mouth but sincerity in his eyes. “Yeah. I’ve slept in worse places.” There was no self-pity in his tone. To him it was just a fact.

“Uh, okay,” Jackson said awkwardly. “Cool.”

Jackson sat down on the bed and untied his shoelaces while Isaac dumped several blankets on the floor to create a makeshift sleeping bag and burrowed into it. Jackson had brought more comfortable pants to sleep in, as well as his toothbrush, but changing in the same room as Isaac might feel weird, and going back out into the hall was a daunting prospect, so he decided to sleep in his clothes and forego brushing his teeth until morning. Isaac hadn’t bothered to undress or brush his teeth either anyway. Jackson took off his shoes and set them on the floor near the foot of the bed.

“Can you get the light?” Isaac’s voice came from somewhere beneath the mass of blankets.

The switch was only a few feet away from the bed, in a straight line, yet somehow after turning off the light—as if by fucking magic—Jackson managed to trip over Isaac’s discarded trainers.

“I swear to God, Lahey, if I trip over your fucking shoes again, they’re going out the window.”

Isaac’s only response was to shift in his blanket nest.

Jackson fell into bed, suddenly feeling a lot more exhausted than he’d expected. (Spending an entire day fully on your guard could do that, he supposed). He was almost asleep when he realized that Isaac hadn’t stopped shifting. Surely the floor couldn’t be that uncomfortable, Jackson thought, although the sentiment was ungracious.

As he listened to the sound of rustling blankets and the muted thumping of Isaac turning over a bit at a time, Jackson’s mind returned to the question that had been plaguing him since earlier that day.
He tried to make himself let it go, but it was stuck in his head, making him feel vaguely ill and more than a little confused. And if he did want to ask, this was probably his best chance. He wasn’t going to get a less awkward opportunity.

“Why did you say that?” Jackson asked the dark.

“Might need a little more detail,” said Isaac, finally going still. “I say a lot of stuff.”

“About the…” Jackson hesitated. He hated saying the word. Some paranoid part of him equated it to Beetlejuice or Bloody Mary: if the name was said out loud too many times, it might come back. “About the Kanima. Me helping you stop it. Why did you lie to them?”

There were more rustling sounds, and Jackson could make out Isaac shifting to face the bed before he spoke.

“I wasn’t lying,” said Isaac. His voice was even, earnest. “You did help.”

Jackson snorted. “Yeah, I’m sure all that mindless murder was reaaally helpful.”

“First off,” said Isaac, “that wasn’t you. That was two sick fucks using you. Second, if you hadn’t helped, you’d be dead.”

“I’m not following your crazy-person logic.”

“Scott said... Sometimes the shape you take reflects the person that you are,” Isaac said slowly, like he was quoting it. “The Kanima’s gone, but we didn’t kill it. You did.”

Jackson had no idea how to respond to that. Isaac’s logic was starting to seem slightly less nonsensical, but Jackson was having a hard time taking comfort in it. Isaac was so ready to forgive Jackson, and Jackson wasn’t sure how or why Isaac would even care.

“And bonus,” said Isaac, tone significantly lighter, “now that you got through your mid-lizard crisis, you’re the second sexiest werewolf from Beacon Hills.”

Jackson felt his cheeks heat up a little. The smallest comment from Isaac (even one where Isaac complimented himself, too), said in the right tone of voice, could make Jackson blush. The flirting was doubly disarming since it had come right on the heels of a very sincere statement. Isaac was definitely the most confusing person Jackson had ever met, and he didn’t become any easier to figure out over time. At least, he hadn’t yet.

When Jackson didn’t respond, Isaac rolled back over and resumed the very noisy process of trying to get comfortable on the floor. Jackson hesitated for half a minute or so before sighing deeply and saying, “Get up here.”

Isaac stopped moving. Maybe he was trying to decide if he had actually heard Jackson correctly over all the rustling. “‘Up there,’ as in…?”

“Yeah, anything to make you settle down. I’m never going to be able to sleep if you keep making all that noise.”

Jackson shifted himself so he was lying with his back up against the wall, making room for Isaac to lie down next to him. Isaac seemed to be aware that Jackson wouldn’t extend the offer twice, and was in bed with him before Jackson could reconsider.

“So who’s going to be little spoon? You did realize that’s the only way we’re going to fit, right?”
Jackson did realize that. He just didn’t want to think about it too much.

“Isaac,” Jackson said irritably. “Stop talking. This is not a slumber party.”

“Fine. Me then.” Isaac lay down with his back pressed against Jackson’s chest.

It was a strange reversal of that night on the sofa (and this bed wasn’t much wider than that). Jackson wasn’t wearing Isaac’s shirt this time, but he was still surrounded by Isaac’s scent, which had become familiar enough to be comforting but was still foreign enough to affect Jackson. Jackson didn’t stop his own arm when it slipped down around Isaac’s stomach. Where else was he supposed to put it? And hadn’t he put his arm around Isaac the night before, after Zach had fallen asleep? They were werewolves; they just had a different concept of personal space now. It didn’t mean anything...

Jackson’s face was pressed into the short, wavy beginnings of curls at the base of Isaac’s skull. They smelled good, he thought idly as he drifted back into consciousness. They tickled his nose. Jackson shifted his head on the pillow he was sharing with Isaac in order to fix that problem.

Isaac didn’t move. Good. Jackson was just the right temperature (much warmer than usual, actually), and just tired enough that his brain hadn’t fully woken up and started thinking about reality again yet.

Maybe if he pretended he was still asleep, Jackson could stay like this, sandwiched between the wall and Isaac’s back in the ridiculously tiny bed. He was almost too exhausted to be embarrassed about how tight his jeans felt and how being the ‘big spoon’ made that really inconvenient. If he were lucky, Isaac wouldn’t notice how that realization made Jackson’s pulse speed up. With his arm still draped across Isaac’s waist and his head in the crook of Isaac’s neck, cheek pressed into his hair, the whole situation was uncomfortably intimate.

Except, no. No, it wasn’t uncomfortable. It was the exact opposite. It was warm and soft and soothing, lying there with Isaac, even as his wolf-hearing registered the sounds of the hunter family stirring and greeting the day. Fuck the fucking day, Jackson thought. He wanted to sleep through it. He wanted to stay there with Isaac and pretend that this was all perfectly normal and not a big deal, like Isaac would no doubt behave about it. Maybe Isaac had it right: sometimes it was okay to just do what felt good and worry about the consequences later...

Isaac woke up with a hard-on pressed against his ass.

This fact, while not particularly unfamiliar, was somewhat surprising considering the identity of the owner of said hard-on.

Though it might not have been the wisest decision, Isaac couldn’t resist snuggling back into the comfort that comes with being the little spoon of any cuddling session. This motion had the unintended effect of eliciting a soft moan from Jackson--yes, Jackson, Isaac remembered hazily--whose mouth was just behind Isaac’s ear. Well, this was definitely an unexpected development. Not so much Jackson’s proximity, but his obvious reaction. Sure, they’d slept in the same bed before, but this was very different. Maybe Jackson wasn’t so indifferent to Isaac’s shameless advances after all...

The faint, hot breath against the shell of his ear felt desperately good--God, it had been way too
long--and Isaac shifted his hips again almost before he knew what he was doing. Jackson managed to bite back the moan this time, but Isaac’s werewolf ears could hear the small, strangled sound of it in Jackson’s throat and the skipping of his heartbeat. Isaac bit his lip and tried not to enjoy this (even though he really, really was), but it was Jackson. Isaac practically had to pinch himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. This was obviously too good to be true.

Isaac could feel Jackson’s internal conflict. The muscles in his arm had tensed up where it was resting on Isaac’s waist, and his pulse stayed elevated. He was clearly trying so, so hard to pretend like he wasn’t reacting, which of course made it even more fun for Isaac. Isaac had almost forgotten just how much fun even little things like this could be. Jackson’s breath was still puffing against Isaac’s ear intermittently, and unlike Jackson, Isaac had no issues with expressing that he liked it. He emitted a moan of his own, which made Jackson’s pulse skip again. Isaac savored the new scent escaping Jackson’s pores. Breathing it in felt like breathing properly for the first time in weeks, soothing a nervous tension Isaac hadn’t realized he’d been feeling so strongly.

Isaac wanted more. Like, a lot more. And if Jackson had been anyone else (and they hadn’t been in a house full of hunters and minors), Isaac would’ve gone for it. He would’ve shamelessly grinded back against Jackson until Jackson gave in and pounced Isaac. He would’ve begged for it if he had to. It would’ve been sooo much fun. But it was Jackson, and Isaac knew better than to believe that Jackson wouldn’t freak out. Jackson would totally freak out, and that would be the opposite of fun.

Of course, what was life without a little risk…

Carefully, so he wouldn’t fall out of the tiny bed, Isaac shifted to turn and face Jackson, who was apparently determined to pretend he was still sleeping. Isaac couldn’t resist testing Jackson’s resolve, still clinging to a faint hope that Jackson would unexpectedly give him some kind of green light. Isaac wedged his hand between their bodies and began sliding it down Jackson’s chest, over his stomach, down to--

Jackson’s eyes snapped open. Isaac stilled his hand, but noted that Jackson’s pupils were wide, and grinned at him in victory. He leaned his head closer to Jackson’s, only stopping when their mouths were maybe an inch apart. Jackson was holding his breath.

It would have been so easy to lean in just a bit more, or to roll over so he was on top of Jackson, or to do any number of things to the gorgeous, fascinating puzzle who was already practically pinned between Isaac and the wall. Isaac thought about how good kissing Jackson would feel right now, how good it would feel to have Jackson kiss him back for once…

Then Jackson’s scent took on a nervous bitterness, and that was enough of a ‘No’ to close the door on that fantasy. Isaac hid his frustrated disappointment behind a smirk.

“That’s what you get for playing chicken with me,” he whispered. And before Jackson could respond, Isaac pulled back, winked at him, and got out of bed.

He could envision the look on Jackson’s face even without seeing it. Isaac smirked to himself as he picked up his shoes and placed his hand on the doorknob. Before he opened it, though, he glanced back over his shoulder and said, “You should probably take care of that before you come downstairs. Don’t worry, I’m the only one who’ll be able to hear.”

Isaac managed to duck out the door before Jackson threw the pillow at him.

Chapter End Notes
This one is a mixture of "Aaa!" and "Aww!" We hope you enjoyed it! Thanks again so much for reading. It's such a joy each week to hear what you guys think :)

Savenna Cloverunner
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;  
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: CLAUSTROPHOBIA (Choir of Young Believers)

Where do you go when it all goes down?  
You battle balance,  
your parents,  
back to all the thoughts that they guilt your youth.  
No one deserves this.

“Why can’t I use a flashlight again?” Isaac asked quietly while they were walking through the graveyard. Despite all the time that Isaac had spent in graveyards growing up, he still would’ve been more comfortable being able to see.

“Because it’ll screw with my night vision and then we’ll both be useless.” Jackson had been way too amused when Isaac had admitted earlier that he didn’t have proper werewolf night vision, or at
least had never gotten it to work how it was supposed to.

“Plus it’s literally a beacon for that monster to follow straight to you,” Jackson continued. “But hey, if seeing is really that important to you, go right ahead.”

“Can I hold your hand so I don’t trip over something?” Isaac asked sweetly.

Jackson’s only response was a sound that Isaac interpreted as ‘I think you know the answer to that.’

“You know, you’re taking all the fun out of monster hunting.”

Jackson laughed humorlessly, “Yeah, well. Sorry. Why don’t you try using some of your other senses? You know, smell, hearing?”

“You asking me to help you practice more?” Isaac whispered. “I’m running out of French dirty talk.”

“I’m trying to keep you alive. You remember the thing that might try to eat us tonight, right?” Jackson snapped in the same hushed tone he’d been using before. Then he sighed deeply and said, “Never mind.”

Their team had ended up being the smallest, consisting of George, Hannah, Jackson, and Isaac. Isaac wasn’t sure how the other teams had been broken up, but he got the feeling that James and Pol had planned it this way so that there would be less opportunity for misunderstandings and accidents.

Though they had ended up with the smallest graveyard, they still had a fair amount of ground to cover. Because of the hunter tradition of having the women be the leaders and strategists, Hannah was actually in charge of their team (not George, thankfully), and it was her idea to split up into two teams of two. They could patrol more efficiently that way, plus it meant that neither Isaac nor Jackson had to spend more time with George than absolutely necessary: something both wolves appreciated.

They were on their third pass of the perimeter and so far hadn’t seen anything. Hannah was checking in by phone every fifteen minutes with updates from the other teams, who hadn’t seen anything yet, either. It was looking like it would be a quiet night spent among the graves. As long as the rain they were supposed to get later held out until morning, it might even be a pleasant night, thanks to the temperatures warming up a bit.

“Don’t say I never take you anywhere nice,” Isaac teased.

Jackson snorted. “I like the theater better.”

Isaac started trying to read the names on the graves they passed, which was difficult with so little natural light to work with.

“Making friends?” Jackson asked.

“Just curious. And bored.”

“Only you would be bored when a human eating monster could be watching us right now from the shadows.”

“Well if you’d let me use a flashlight...”
Isaac could practically hear Jackson roll his eyes.

“No, but really,” Isaac insisted. “It’s a nice night. Fresh air, exercise,” Isaac rapped his knuckles on one of the headstones, “new friends. We should definitely do this more often.”

Isaac heard Jackson laugh a little, seemingly despite himself, and smirked. Making Jackson laugh was a rare enough experience. It gave Isaac a feeling of satisfaction every time he did it.

They finished the rest of their pass in silence and had almost made another full rotation before Isaac spoke up again.

“So, Jackson, now that you’ve met the people I’m working with, maybe--”

“Don’t.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.”

“You’re not meeting my pack,” Jackson said shortly.

“I met Zach,” Isaac protested.

“Look.” Jackson stopped walking and turned to face Isaac. “Me coming with you, getting involved with all this,” Jackson gestured around them, “was a terrible idea. You going to the den to meet my pack? That would be the worst idea. Ever. Of all time. Drop it.” He started walking again.

Isaac had to jog a few steps to catch up and fall into step again beside him. “Okay, just figured I’d try.”

“Well, maybe try to focus on not getting eaten tonight instead.”

“You’re really hung up on this whole monster thing, huh?”

“Now why would you say that?”

Jackson clearly hadn’t meant it as a serious question, but Isaac decided to treat it like one.

“Because you’ve mentioned it just about every time you’ve opened your mouth tonight.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Isaac, but it’s kind of why we’re here.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean we’re why it’s here. If it’s here at all.” Isaac shrugged. “Personally, I don’t think we’re going to see any action tonight.”

Jackson looked at Isaac. Even with very little light, Isaac could see Jackson’s skepticism written all over his face. “What makes you so sure?”

“We have a twenty-five percent chance of it choosing this graveyard tonight. Less, if I’m wrong about the ley lines thing. Plus, I’ve done this stuff before, remember? My instincts about this stuff are getting pretty good, and they’re telling me we’re in for a long, boring night.”

As if on cue, a scream rang out in the darkness somewhere off to their right.

“You were saying?” Jackson said flatly as they took off running towards the source of the disturbance.

Hannah and George must have been closer because they were already at the apparent source of the
scream when Jackson and Isaac ran up.

“What happened?” Isaac asked Hannah, who was standing in front of a small crypt with George, looking annoyed. “You guys okay?”

“Yes,” said Hannah. “Just some drunken idiots having a laugh. They’ve gone now.”

Jackson rolled his eyes at the smug ‘I told you so’ look Isaac sent his way. Isaac expected a smartass response, but when Jackson looked back toward him a moment later his eyes were wide with fear.

“Look out!” Jackson shouted a split second before something knocked Isaac off his feet and into the side of the crypt. The sound of crossbow shots filled the night, but in the few seconds it took Isaac to stagger back to his feet and blink the stars out of his eyes, everything had gone still again. At least until everyone started shouting.

“What the fuck was that?!” Jackson asked George.

“I’ve no idea!” George spat back. “But whatever it was just shrugged off at least a dozen crossbow bolts like they were nothing!”

“Did anybody else notice that that thing didn’t seem to have a head?” Hannah sounded seconds away from hysterics and Isaac was right there with her. Hunter training or not, headless monsters went way beyond even his broad definition of what was possible.

“It had to’ve had a head,” Isaac said, even though he hadn’t even gotten a glimpse of it. Everything had a head, right? “It must’ve just been tucked down or something. It charged us, right?”

Isaac looked at Jackson, hoping that the werewolf with night vision would back him up, but he wasn’t particularly reassured by Jackson’s wide eyed stare.

“Doesn’t matter.” George was in full hunter mode again: serious, focused. “Form up.”

Hannah and Isaac immediately turned so they were standing back to back with George. Jackson was only a few beats behind them, following their lead, so that the four of them stood in a tight circle facing out. No way for that thing to sneak up on them this way.

In theory.

“It went this way.” George gestured with his crossbow. “Come on.”

The four of them slowly, cautiously, moved as a unit in that direction, keeping their eyes peeled in all directions for any sign of movement, listening for any sound, but the graveyard was eerily still. If Isaac hadn’t known better, he would’ve sworn they were alone there.

A sense of *déjà vu* suddenly swept over him, and he remembered the last time he was in a graveyard at night. That had been the night he’d been almost killed by one werewolf and turned by another. Isaac found that he had mixed feelings about the whole thing.

“There!” George and Jackson both suddenly shouted at the same time, and took off in two separate directions, both clearly expecting to be followed.

Hannah and Isaac both looked at each other, confused and unsure what to do.

“Think there could be more than one of these things?” Isaac asked, putting his back to Hannah’s
again and scanning the graveyard.

“I don’t know. It’s always possible, but I think there would be a lot more victims if there were,” Hannah reasoned.

“Well, Jackson can see in the dark,” said Isaac. “So we should follow him.”

“But what did George see, then?”

“I have no idea, but we can’t just stay here. We have to do something.”

A snarl, rumbling like thunder through the headstones, made up Isaac’s mind for him, and he took off after Jackson, ignoring Hannah’s cry of, “Isaac!”

That had definitely been Jackson. The fear that Jackson was probably trying to fight that thing on his own made Isaac run faster than he had in a long time, hurdling over headstones and looking around frantically for any sign of Jackson or the monster.

...Which was why he was especially surprised to crash directly into Jackson, sending them both to the ground in a collision not unlike the one that had happened a few weeks back when Isaac had first arrived in London. (Except with considerably more dead people in the vicinity.)

“Isaac, what the fuck--?”

“Where is it?” Isaac asked, eyes frantically searching the area.

“I don’t know, I lost track of it after a few seconds. I was just coming back to find you guys. Can you get off me now?”

Isaac hastily scrambled to his feet and pulled Jackson up a moment later.

“So you weren’t fighting it?”

“No, like I said, I lost sight of it almost immediately. Why?”

“I heard you growling,” said Isaac. “It sounded like you were in trouble.”

“It wasn’t me, and I didn’t hear anything.”

“Then what--?”

“’annah!”

Isaac’s question was cut off by George’s shout.

“You heard that, right?” Isaac asked Jackson.

“Obviously.”

They were both taking off in that direction a moment later.

What the hell was this thing? Isaac wondered. And how was it messing with their heads? Because if Isaac hadn’t heard what he’d thought he’d heard, then maybe Jackson hadn’t seen what he’d thought he’d seen. What if it was still messing with them?

But it turned out that Isaac didn’t need to worry, or at least not about that, because when they found
Hannah, she was on the ground with the monster on top of her, struggling to push it off. George was running towards her, crossbow at the ready, but clearly worried that he might miss the shot and hit Hannah.

Before any of them could get to her, though, she managed to wedge her legs between herself and the monster and deliver a kick that launched it off of her. As soon as Hannah was clear, George started shooting.

Even under a barrage of crossbow bolts, the monster managed to struggle to its feet, giving Isaac his first good look at the human-eater.

Its fish-belly pale, leathery flesh seemed to absorb what little light there was, making Isaac wonder how they’d had a hard time spotting it before. Dirt clung to the beast in clumps and the smell of wet, freshly tilled earth was overwhelming. It was also resilient; George’s barrage seeming to annoy it more than anything. When it stood up to its full height, which was a good several inches taller than Isaac, it was pretty impressive to behold.

In a disturbing, nightmare-inducing kind of way.

It turned out that Hannah had been right when she’d said that she thought the thing didn’t have a head, but before Isaac could wonder how it was eating people without a mouth, the monster turned around, revealing the freakiest thing Isaac had ever seen: a large face centered on the thing’s chest, complete with a giant mouth over its stomach. It was absolutely horrifying. (Although, maybe there was something efficient about cutting out the middleman between mouth and digestive system.)

The second George paused to reload, Isaac and Jackson lunged for it, fangs and claws ready to tear into the headless freak.

The monster screeched: a sharp, piercing sound that reminded Isaac of Chris’s sonic emitters, and caused him and Jackson to cover their ears in pain as the full force of the sound was directed at them. Out of the corner of his eye, Isaac saw Jackson drop to his knees. In the split second he took his attention off the monster, everything went to hell. Well, even more than it already had.

Isaac was pelted in the face with dirt; it was in his eyes, his nose, his mouth… He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see, and all he could hear was the sound of shifting dirt. The ground felt like it was moving beneath his feet, and the heavy assault threw him off balance and made it impossible to counter anything the monster might do. If the monster were to attack him, Isaac knew that he’d be dead, and that made him angry. If he was going to die, he refused to let it be when he was covered in graveyard mud! Isaac lashed out blindly towards where the dirt seemed to be coming from, fighting through it, but as suddenly as it started, it was over.

Scrubbing the dirt from his eyes and spitting out mud, Isaac waited tensely for an attack that never came. When he was finally able to see he realized that, once again, the monster had gotten away. Jackson, still on his elbows and knees with his head in his hands, was covered in dirt, but seemed to have been able to avoid the worst of the attack. George had managed to put himself between Hannah and the monster before it started kicking up dirt, so she seemed to be no worse off for it, but George looked like a mess, coughing up dirt as well. Isaac could only imagine how bad he himself must have looked.

Having reassured himself that Jackson and Hannah were in no immediate danger, Isaac looked again towards where the monster had been standing a few moments earlier. The only sign that it had been there at all was a hole in the ground where all the dirt they were now wearing had come from.
This time, Isaac was sure that the monster was really and truly gone. He wasn’t sure if that thought was more reassuring or frightening.

“What... the bloody hell...” Hannah groaned from the ground.

Isaac jogged over to Jackson and knelt beside him, putting his hand on Jackson’s back. “You good?”

“I’ll live,” Jackson muttered without lifting his head. Isaac stood up and jogged over to where George was helping Hannah sit up.

“Dislocated for sure,” George said, examining her shoulder and frowning. “You’re lucky it wasn’t any worse.”

“Lucky would be if we’d stopped that... thing.” Hannah winced at the strain that moving put on her arm. Despite that, she held her uninjured arm up to Isaac, which he took and used to pull her to her feet. “What happens now?”

“Now?” George scoffed. “Now we call in reinforcements. That thing might still be lurkin’ ‘round. This was a real bloody mess. All because somebody thought it’d be a brilliant idea to include werewolves in hunter business.”

“Now hang on—” Hannah started, but George shouted over her, turning on Isaac.

“Argent’s tame wolf,” George sneered. “I thought you were s’posed to be ‘elpin’ us, not ‘elpin’ the monsters get away.”

Isaac’s mind froze at this sudden, unexpected attack. He’d been trying to help. Sure, Isaac knew George didn’t trust him, but how could George think that Isaac hadn’t done everything he could to stop that monster?

“If you and your mate there ‘ad followed me instead o’ runnin’ off like that, maybe we could’ve done something more’n get dirt in our eyes.”

“And maybe if you’d let him have a crossbow he would’ve been able to help us take it down before it could attack us properly.” Hannah stepped up beside Isaac. “Besides, you went ‘runnin’ off’ yourself!”

“I was chasin’ the monster!”

“I don’t think any of us were chasing it,” Isaac managed. “I think it tricked us somehow, making us think it was where it wasn’t.”

George rolled his eyes. “And ‘ow exactly did it do that?”

Isaac looked away uncomfortably, his hands fidgeting at his sides. He didn’t have an answer for that. Yet. But he could figure it out. He just needed time.

“Back off, George.” Hannah warned.

“What? It’s not my fault ‘e’s a bloody idiot who doesn’t know what ‘e’s doin’. Gonna get ‘imself killed. You, too, if you insist on trustin’ ‘im.”

Isaac felt like he still had dirt clogging his nose and mouth. It was getting hard to breathe and his throat felt like he’d been eating sandpaper. He wanted to explain, he wanted to say that he could do
it, that he could catch the monster. He just needed another chance. He wasn’t a failure. He wasn’t a loser. He could fix it.

Isaac found himself looking at Hannah’s injured arm. It was his fault. He was such a dumbass for running off like that. Why hadn’t he stayed with her?

George still wasn’t done. “God, I ‘ope I’ll be in the ground before our family’s run by a girl who’s got no problem workin’ with armed werewolves.”

“Agreed,” Hannah spat. It seemed harsh coming from her, but Isaac supposed that even Hannah would have a hard time keeping her temper when in that much pain. “Now are you going to keep wasting everyone’s time, or are you going to fix my fucking shoulder so we can report in?”

George was glaring daggers at Hannah, but he seemed to realize how stupid it would be to let the injury start swelling before they had the chance to get it popped back into place.

“‘old her still,” he commanded gruffly in Isaac’s direction.

Isaac nodded and immediately went to Hannah’s side, desperate to redeem himself. He got one arm around her waist and one holding her other shoulder against his chest, his hand holding hers, giving George space to get the proper angle. Isaac had never seen someone fix a dislocated shoulder before, but he had a general idea.

“Ready?” said George.

“Yeah,” said Hannah. She gritted her teeth in anticipation of the pain.

“One, two--” George pulled sharply on Hannah’s arm before saying ‘three’. Hannah made a small pained sound and gripped Isaac’s hand tightly, but didn’t cry out or anything like that. She was pretty damned tough, Isaac thought, impressed.

Isaac loosened his hold on Hannah, but he didn’t pull completely away as she gingerly rolled her shoulder. It clearly still hurt, and would probably be swollen for a while, but she seemed a little more comfortable than she had been. It wasn’t until he found himself wincing that Isaac realized he was unconsciously taking Hannah’s pain where he was still holding her hand.

The pain-induced tension in Hannah’s muscles eased and she breathed a small sigh of relief and let some of her weight rest against Isaac’s body. Isaac was exceedingly grateful for the darkness of the graveyard and the fact that he was wearing long sleeves, so George wouldn’t see what he was doing. It was a few more seconds before Hannah realized what was going on. She looked up at Isaac with a startled expression, and opened her mouth, but Isaac shook his head sharply and whispered, “I’ll explain later.”

The sickening pop of Hannah’s shoulder going back into place was what finally made Jackson try to get to his feet. He still felt nauseated by whatever that thing had done, making that noise. Jackson had felt like his eardrums were going to explode. And then all that dirt...

And Jackson hadn’t been able to do anything. Not a single thing. While Isaac had run into the dirt cloud, Jackson had covered his head and braced himself against it. What the fuck was Jackson even doing out here? Clearly this wasn’t his world. If anything, he’d done more harm than good by getting in the way.

His ears were still ringing, but he could tell from the way George was shouting at Isaac that he thought the whole thing was Isaac’s fault. Like the giant monster they’d just tried to fight had...
Jackson stared at Isaac and Hannah, eyes flitting intermittently from them to George as he tried to force down his own agitation. He didn’t want to cause any more problems for Isaac.

“We should go after it,” said Isaac, and Jackson could hear something almost desperate in his voice. “There’s still time.”

“Not a chance! You’ve done enough,” George said coldly. “That thing is probably out there chewin’ on some other innocent ‘uman right now because I got sent out here with two werewolf pups instead of proper back-up.”

Jackson bristled. It wasn’t like he’d been keen on wasting his Sunday night with some whiny hunter prick, either, and from an outsider’s perspective, Isaac had been doing just as good a job as the hunters. George seemed to have conveniently forgotten that the only reason they had even known to come to this graveyard in the first place was because Isaac had figured out the pattern all on his own. Honestly, Jackson was surprised Isaac hadn’t said as much already.

“I can help!” Isaac insisted. “Please, just let me try again. We can still catch it tonight.”

“Go ‘ome, wolf. We don’t need your ‘elp. I don’t care what Pol says, you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

“But--”

“Leave! Now!”

Isaac went quiet, swallowing any other objections he might have had. Hannah gave him a sympathetic look, but said nothing. Both of them clearly recognized that Isaac wasn’t going to win this one.

George turned his back on Jackson and Isaac like they had suddenly become invisible and pulled out his phone. He began walking back toward the graveyard’s main entrance as he talked to the other hunters.

Hannah sighed deeply. “George is a bellend, but he does have a point. Now that we know that thing was here, we should call in the others. Just wait here, okay? When my dad gets here we can sort it all out.”

“Right,” said Jackson irritably. He had far less faith than Hannah did in her father’s ability to smooth all this over. Honestly, Jackson wasn’t even sure he wanted it to be smoothed over. He just wanted it to be done.

Hannah took off after George, presumably to make sure George wasn’t exaggerating Jackson’s and Isaac’s role in ‘helping the monster get away.’

Less than a minute after George and Hannah were out of sight, it began to rain. Jackson took that as his cue to call it a night. He turned around to ask Isaac if he was ready to go, but Isaac had disappeared. Jackson felt a little spike of reflexive panic before he spotted Isaac by a cluster of tombstones about thirty feet away.

Within the few seconds it took Jackson to jog over to Isaac, it began pouring. Like, bucket-over-your-head rain, drops the size of peas. But Isaac didn’t even seem to have noticed. He barely looked at Jackson when he caught up with him; he just kept walking and turning in circles like he was looking for his car in a packed parking lot and not a bloodthirsty, mutant freak.
“Maybe we should just go home,” Jackson whispered under the roar of the rain. He figured Isaac would appreciate that, but Isaac didn’t seem to have heard. Jackson tried again at regular volume. “Isaac.”

“Yeah, you go,” Isaac said distractedly. “I’m going to keep looking for a while.”

He sped up, staying just ahead of Jackson, not letting him catch up. Jackson didn’t understand why he was being like this. George was an asshole, but so what? He’d been an asshole to them since before they’d even walked through the front door of the manor.

“Isaac,” Jackson repeated, but there was no response. Isaac just continued walking aimlessly forward. This was starting to get more than a little irritating.

“Isaac, stop!” Jackson finally shouted.

And just like that, Isaac froze.

“We’re not going to find anything in this,” Jackson said, coming up beside Isaac and gesturing around them. “Even if there was something to find, the rain’ll have washed away any trace of it by now.”

Isaac’s shrug was a small, helpless thing. Jackson stepped in front of Isaac, but Isaac kept his eyes on the ground and wouldn’t look at Jackson. Jackson frowned. It was tough to hear over all the rain, but he would’ve sworn that Isaac’s pulse had spiked, that his breathing was getting shallow.

Jackson tried to soften his tone, starting to feel like there might be something else going on here. “Come on, we’re getting soaked. Let’s go home.”

Isaac swallowed, then nodded quickly. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s go.”

But instead of following Jackson, Isaac started walking in the opposite direction of the nearest Tube stop.

“Where are you going?”

“Home,” said Isaac.

“The Tube is literally around the corner,” said Jackson, cursing himself for not wearing a coat that had a hood. “Why the fuck would you walk home?”

“Does it matter?” Isaac looked away and rubbed at the back of his head, and Jackson couldn’t tell if it was to wipe some rain away or if it was that thing he did when he felt awkward.

“Don’t be an idiot, it’s raining,” said Jackson. “I know you think this whole ‘the Tube is way too complicated’ thing you have going on is funny, but now would be a really good time to make an exception. Let’s go, I’m cold.”

Jackson grabbed Isaac’s arm and pulled him toward the station, but Isaac planted his rain-soaked shoes into the ground and wouldn’t budge.

Isaac shook his head like he was objecting to what was going on, but couldn’t articulate it. Droplets of water to flew out of his hair with the motion.

“You okay?” Jackson asked tentatively, because this definitely wasn’t just Isaac being obstinate now. But Isaac just wrenched himself free from Jackson’s grip and ran off.
Jackson hesitated for a moment, considering going after Isaac, but decided that he had done his best already. Isaac clearly wanted to be alone. So Jackson turned away and dashed for the Tube.

When he got home, Isaac was already there. He must’ve climbed in through the window again. Jackson was seconds away from snapping at him for leaving muddy footprints all over the place when he found Isaac sitting on the floor outside the bathroom, shivering and cursing to himself. Jackson approached him warily.

“Isaac?” said Jackson, and Isaac’s head snapped up to look at him like he hadn’t realized Jackson was there. His pulse was racing.

“Sorry,” said Isaac, cringing. “I was gonna take a shower, but…” He trailed off and stared into the bathroom doorway.

Jackson followed his gaze, but there was nothing out of the ordinary about the bathroom that he could see. “But what?”

“It’s… small,” he said feebly, quickly looking away from the bathroom.

Jackson still didn’t really understand what was going on, but he could tell it was serious. Slowly, so he wouldn’t scare him, Jackson crouched down in front of Isaac and tried to catch his eyes.

Isaac was still looking determinedly away as he muttered, “So stupid. Great legacy, Dad. Can’t take a fucking shower…”

Dad. Jackson’s stomach sank when he made the connection. Isaac’s dad used to lock him in a freezer in the basement. No wonder Isaac didn’t like being in a metal car full of people underground. Or, right now, a small room full of cold porcelain.

“It’s, uh… Don’t worry about it right now,” said Jackson.

He got up and went to the closet, looking for the sweatpants Isaac slept in, before realizing they were probably in the bag Isaac had brought to--and left at--the Bristows’. Jackson managed to find a clean pair of basketball shorts of his own that wouldn’t fit Isaac too badly--even if they wouldn’t be that warm--and grabbed one of Isaac’s shirts. Isaac took them from Jackson with a grateful nod, and Jackson left Isaac to change while he changed into his own pajamas. Considering that he was almost as muddy and wet as Isaac, Jackson would’ve liked to take a shower beforehand, but taking one when Isaac couldn’t do the same felt like kind of a dick move. So Jackson just crawled into bed and pulled the blankets close around himself to help with his own shivering. When Isaac didn’t immediately follow, Jackson called out, “You coming, or what?”

Isaac appeared in the doorway and gave Jackson a small, almost shy smile--a very strange look for him--then crawled into the bed with Jackson. Even though he was still shivering harder than Jackson was, Isaac didn’t make his usual move of shamelessly invading Jackson’s space. Jackson tried to leave it at that, but Isaac’s pitiful shivering kept him from sleeping (and, truth be told, he was pretty cold himself still). After a few minutes, Jackson gave up and moved over into what had unofficially become Isaac’s side of the bed.

Isaac gave a little jump when Jackson’s hand touched his arm, but he started to relax when Jackson pressed his chest against the taller boy’s back and pulled the blankets tight around both of them. Isaac, very uncharacteristically, didn’t say a word. He just lay there with Jackson, pulse slowly calming, until both their shivering subsided.
Intense! Action sequences are a pain! We've been looking forward to posting this chapter, so hope you like it!

Savenna Cloverunner
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;  
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.  

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: BARELY BREATHING (Duncan Sheik)

I’ve come to find  
I may never know  
your changing mind.  
Is it friend or foe?

The scalding hot water almost made him forget the tightness of the shower. Almost.

Isaac still couldn’t take a deep breath, but at least he wasn’t hyperventilating anymore, which made it easier to stay calm. The steam of the shower, which was slowly replacing the too-thin air, allowed him to imagine he was in some tropical jungle, somewhere muggy and hot and far away where there were no cities with suffocating skyscrapers or cramped underground transportation
He had been getting better. Ordinarily, he could manage the Tube if he had to, and if it wasn’t rush hour. It wasn’t fun, but he rarely panicked. Last night, though... Just the idea of it had been too much after what had happened.

George had been right: Isaac had fucked up. He had been there to do a job, and he’d failed, and someone had gotten hurt. Someone he cared about. Hannah’s injury had been Isaac’s fault, and of course George shouting had reminded him of his dad, and suddenly Isaac had been convinced that he was back in that house, about to be locked in that freezer.

Isaac didn’t even remember getting back to Jackson’s flat after that. The last thing he remembered was Jackson grabbing his arm in the rain... and then nothing until he was sitting on the floor outside the bathroom. He wasn’t even sure how long he had been sitting there before Jackson had gotten home. Isaac must have slept at some point after Jackson got him to go to bed, but he didn’t feel rested. He just felt like he was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. For the freezer lid to slam shut.

Forcing himself to get out of bed and take a shower that morning had been a good idea, but it really had taken effort. Isaac had opened his eyes to Jackson’s sleeping face, gorgeous and serene and absolutely covered in dried mud. Remembering why it was there, how Jackson had gone to bed without a shower because Isaac couldn’t take one, made Isaac want to press close to Jackson again and stay there like that all day. Hell, he wanted to stay there forever... which was exactly why he shouldn’t.

In a way that probably would’ve seemed pathetic to most people, Isaac was fiercely proud that he was standing in that tub. Jackson would probably bitch at him for using all the hot water, but it was worth it to regain control of himself. Isaac wouldn’t be able to fix things with the Bristows if he didn’t clear his own head first.

When he finally left the bathroom, Jackson was still snoring softly, tangled in the dirt-smudged blankets, and Isaac was just beginning to feel like himself again. (He made a mental note to wash the bedding later.)

He had just finished cleaning up the trail of muddy footprints leading in from the window--and around and around the flat, signs of pacing that Isaac couldn’t remember doing--and had started making breakfast when his phone buzzed from the floor, where he must have dropped it at some point last night. Isaac was just glad it had made it back with him at all, and that it hadn’t been ruined by all the rain and mud. Caller ID read ‘James’.

Isaac picked it up and returned to whisking his eggs before answering. “Hello?” he asked with only a slight hesitation.

“Good morning, Isaac. How are you feeling today?” James didn’t seem particularly upset at him. At least, Isaac didn’t think this was how James sounded when he was upset, but it was hard to tell with the British accents sometimes.

“Uh, not great.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We’ll need you at the peak of your abilities tonight.”

“Tonight?” Isaac was surprised they even wanted him to stay in the city, let alone go on another hunt with them.
“Of course. After you left last night, we were able to quarantine the area and do a full sweep for our monster, and we believe that we found something you might be able to catch a scent from.”

Isaac couldn’t think of what that might possibly be, but he wasn’t about to question it. Now that he was more in control of himself again, though, he could defend himself.

“Listen, about George—”

“George was feeling protective last night,” said James. “You may have noticed he has a bit of a temper. But after having time to cool and gain perspective on the evening, he admitted that what happened was no direct fault of yours.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s...” Isaac didn’t really have a word for what that was. Even if George actually felt that way, and genuinely didn’t blame Isaac—which Isaac seriously doubted—Isaac still blamed himself. That didn’t change the fact that Isaac hadn’t been able to take down the monster and Hannah had gotten hurt in the process.

“Of course,” James continued, “the fact remains that your team did not work well as a unit and as such, we have decided to try a different configuration.”

Isaac had a feeling he knew what that meant, but he still had to ask. “Yeah?”

“It means we felt that it might be for the best if your friend didn’t join us.”

Isaac could hear Jackson stirring in the other room. He wasn’t surprised that they didn’t want Jackson to be there. After what had happened to Hannah, George had probably tried to convince them that Jackson was just one more werewolf around to potentially get one of the hunters hurt. If he was honest, Isaac wasn’t sure he wanted Jackson to be there, either. Jackson had been absolutely miserable yesterday anyway, and he had only come to look out for Isaac, which Isaac hoped Jackson now saw was unnecessary.

“Yeah, no, I understand. Definitely for the best.”

“Glad to hear it. Chandra and I will meet you at the same graveyard as last night at sunset.”

“Is Hannah—?”

“She’s fine,” said James shortly, which made Isaac wince. “But she won’t be joining us tonight.”

“Okay,” said Isaac. “Same graveyard. Got it. I’ll uh, I’ll see you there.”

Isaac had barely hung up the phone when, “What the hell, Isaac!” rang out from the bedroom.

Isaac’s mind frantically searched for what he could have done to annoy Jackson now, until his eyes landed on the microwave clock. Shit. It was Monday. With all the near-death experiences and mud and emotional trauma, neither of them had remembered to set an alarm for Jackson to get up for school.

“Fuck, I’m sorry!” Isaac set down the bowl whisked eggs (which he would now be eating alone) and scrambled to Jackson’s room. “Uhh, how can I help?”

“Find me a fucking bag to put my fucking books in,” Jackson snapped, though it was clear his anger wasn’t directed at Isaac. “I left my fucking backpack at the fucking hunters’ house.”

“I’m fucking on it,” said Isaac with a grin that earned him an irritated glare from Jackson. He went
to the closet and rooted around until he found an old tote bag. Not very stylish or manly, but probably better than a grocery bag or something. Isaac took the bag to the bedroom and hurriedly packed all of Jackson’s school stuff--which had been thrown on the floor so the bed could be used--in it.

The combination of running water and swearing coming from behind the closed bathroom door signaled to Isaac that Jackson was dealing with the Mud Situation, and Isaac was starting to feel maybe a tiny bit guilty about using up all of the hot water now. He rooted around Jackson’s room and found all the components of his school uniform and laid them out on the bed. Then, figuring it was best to stay out of Jackson’s way now, Isaac went back to the kitchen to hunt for some kind of food that Jackson could take with him for breakfast since he wouldn’t have time to eat the food Isaac had been making.

Jackson emerged five minutes later wearing his uniform and an epic scowl on his face. It was so pronounced that Isaac had to stifle a smile. He held out the tote bag and a granola bar to Jackson, who snatched them up. He put the granola bar in the bag and stood in front of Isaac for a moment. Automatically, Isaac fixed Jackson’s hair (to the best of his abilities, considering that it was still pretty wet and Jackson hadn’t actually managed to scrub all of the mud out). Then Jackson stepped away and headed for the door.

“Don’t burn the place down,” Jackson said to Isaac as he tossed him the keys.

Isaac caught the keys, and answered him with a smirk. “I’ll see what I can do.”

One thing was for sure: if Isaac was going out again that night, he would need a lot more sleep. He finished making the eggs and ate them, then threw the dirty sheets and his and Jackson’s muddy clothes in the washing machine. Since the bed was now out of commission, he curled up on the couch and made himself as comfortable as he could.

With his eyes closed, Isaac had a hard time forcing back all of the oh-so-pleasant memories that George’s screaming had dredged up. To combat them, Isaac thought about the good parts of the ordeal: Jackson getting clean clothes for him, not saying anything about the muddy footprints, going to bed covered in dirt because Isaac would be, too. Actively inviting Isaac to sleep in the bed with him. Holding him until he stopped shivering, until he fell asleep, warm and protected. And after all that, not saying a single word about it in the morning, so Isaac wouldn’t feel guilty.

Isaac’s mind shifted again to the image of Jackson’s face when Isaac had woken up. It was so… surreal. That face belonged to someone who was so different from even the version of Jackson who Isaac had gotten to know in London, let alone the one he’d known in Beacon Hills. The Jackson from last night had been kind and understanding and gentle.

Isaac fell asleep wondering if he would ever see that Jackson again.

Five hours later, Isaac woke up feeling considerably more like himself. Now that he was in control again, though, he had some stuff to deal with. Most notably, finding a way to tell Jackson that he wasn’t invited on the hunt tonight without offending him. This issue plagued Isaac for most of the afternoon, which he spent trying to distract himself with various household tasks. He did his best to hang the clean bedding to dry the way he had helped Jackson do the other day, then made himself a late lunch, watched some QI, and read for a while--he had finished Hamlet and was on to Much Ado About Nothing--but his fear of how Jackson was going to react when Isaac told him kept creeping back in.

“I’m not going to text,” Isaac muttered to himself. “I’m not. I’m going to wait here and tell him he’s not coming with me tonight like an adult, even though leaving and texting him would be sooo
Being an adult sucked. Isaac stared at his phone—which was lying on the stripped bed where he’d thrown it twenty minutes ago—and paced around the apartment, determinedly keeping himself from picking it up again. Isaac had to tell him. He knew that. And, as excruciating as it was, waiting for Jackson to get home from school and telling him in person that he was being kicked out of hunt club would be better in the end than if Jackson ended up reading it in a text.

Besides, after being trusted with Jackson’s keys, the last thing Isaac wanted to do was lock Jackson out of his own flat.

The sudden pounding of a closed fist on the front door made Isaac jump, even though he knew it would be Jackson. Or maybe because he knew it was Jackson. In any case, there wasn’t any way to escape it now.

Isaac took a deep breath, stood up, and went to open the door.

It wasn’t so much the fact that Isaac had decided that Jackson shouldn’t come on the hunt that bothered Jackson as the fact that Isaac would be going hunting again at all, especially after what had happened the previous night. Logically, Jackson knew that it wasn’t an insult; the way Isaac had phrased it made it pretty clear that Isaac just didn’t think Jackson needed to bother wasting his time going hunting again.

But Jackson had gone way out of his way to make sure Isaac wouldn’t be alone on a hunt with the Bristows, and now that was exactly what he was doing. Just because no one had attacked Isaac or let him get hurt on the first night of the hunt, that didn’t mean it wouldn’t happen tonight, when Jackson wasn’t there. As far as Jackson was concerned, Isaac would be in just as much danger tonight as he had been before. Except this time he might be around the hunter who had blamed him (loudly and aggressively) for something that wasn’t his fault, and Jackson wouldn’t be there to defend him.

Jackson had said and done some pretty shitty things to Isaac, but at least he’d never sent him into a PTSD-induced state of trauma. He had never made Isaac that scared, that small, that fragile-seeming. And thinking about it now, Jackson really hoped he never would. It wasn’t right for anyone to be able to make Isaac feel like that. Jackson felt his eyes flash for a split second.

Maybe it was a good idea for Jackson not to be around the hunters again; he was starting to feel a strong urge to punch that chavvy douchebag in the face.

Of course, there was no way in hell Jackson was going to tell Isaac any of that. They’d already been through the reasons why Jackson thought it was stupid for Isaac to be around the hunters alone anyway, and Isaac still wouldn’t listen. What would be the point in dredging it up again if it wouldn’t make a difference.

“That’s cool. I was going to see my pack tonight anyway,” Jackson lied. If Isaac noticed that he wasn’t telling the truth, he didn’t let on.

“Then that works out. It’s going to be another late night,” said Isaac, already at the front door. “So I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” said Jackson, slouching against the wall beside the door and trying to keep his pulse steady so it wouldn’t betray his nervous anger. He failed.

Isaac paused with his hand on the doorknob.
“Jackson, if you have something to say, just say it.”

Jackson shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal even though it really, really was. “It still doesn’t feel right. Working with hunters. Why should you risk your ass for them, again, after what happened last night?”

“First off,” Isaac said irritably, “I’m not risking my ass for them. I’m doing it for the people this thing could kill. Second, working with the hunters is the whole reason I’m here.”

Jackson nodded, but there was a little twinge in his chest at the last few words. The whole reason. And when the job was done, Isaac would have no more reason to say in London. No more reason to stay with Jackson… Wasn’t that supposed to be a good thing? Jackson would get his space back, his life back, and things would go back to normal.

But Jackson still couldn’t let it go.

“How do you know they won’t turn on you when the job’s done? Sure, you’ve been useful to them so far, but they’re still hunters at the end of the day, and you’re still a monster.”

Isaac shrugged, unfazed. “They haven’t tried to kill me yet, right? And like I told you before: Chris trusts them and I trust Chris.”

“Yeah, and he’s the only Argent who hasn’t tried to kill you or me, right? Even Allison—”

He broke off when Isaac winced reflexively at Jackson’s unexpected mention of that name.

“Never mind,” said Jackson quickly. “Okay. Right, see you tomorrow.”

Isaac nodded, ‘fixed’ Jackson’s hair (though Jackson wondered if at this point it was just out of habit), and gave him a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’d say don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, but that’s a pretty short list.”

With that, he was gone.

It only took twenty minutes after Jackson got out of the shower (and finally got rid of the rest of the mud) for him to realize that there was no way he’d be able to stand being at home alone while Isaac was out risking his life for a bunch of assholes who didn’t deserve his help. He tried to do some homework, but ended up staring blankly at the same page of his History textbook for a full five minutes without taking in a single word. Upon realizing this, Jackson swore and slammed the book closed. Then he threw on his coat, picked up his keys, and left.

“What’s the matter, Jackie Boy?” said Rodger almost as soon as he’d opened the front door of the Den.

“Nothing,” said Jackson.

Rodger rolled his eyes. “Christ, you must’ve lied a lot as a human to still do it this much around werewolves.”

“Can we go for a walk?” Jackson asked abruptly.

‘Go for a walk’ was werewolf code for ‘go somewhere out of superhuman hearing range’.

Rodger frowned at Jackson, but nodded and grabbed his coat. They walked in silence for a while, past Bloomsbury Square and up toward the British Museum--places Jackson had been excited
about when he’d first gotten there but now were just part of his pack’s neighborhood. He and Rodger leaned against the fence surrounding the grounds of the museum (which had closed for the night) and watched passersby. It was good to be out in the city if you wanted to have a private chat; a lot of background noise made eavesdropping difficult.

“You gonna tell me what’s weighing on you now?”

Jackson sighed deeply before saying, “Isaac.”

Rodger gave him a quizzical look. “Isaac?”

“His name is Isaac,” said Jackson. “The guy who’s staying with me.”

“Ah, your mysterious bedfellow!” said Rodger with a smirk, but Jackson bristled.

“He’s not--”

“I know, I know,” said Rodger placatingly. “So what’s going on with this bloke? Isaac.”

“He just...” Jackson sighed deeply. “He does stupid shit. Dangerous shit, sometimes. And he doesn’t even think about it. He just acts like everything will be fine.”

“What kind of dangerous shit?” said Rodger.

“He...” Jackson hesitated. “If I tell you, you have to promise not to tell anyone in the pack. Not even Bronagh, and especially not Josie.”

Rodger frowned. “That would put me in a very difficult position, Jack.”

“I don’t know what to do,” said Jackson. And he really, really didn’t. “Or if I should even do anything. I tried talking to him and he doesn’t fucking listen.”

“I couldn’t lie to Josie if she asked me about it,” said Rodger. “You know that. Even if I wanted to, which I don’t. No good comes of lying to your alpha.”

“Why would she ask?” said Jackson.

“Give her some credit, Jack,” said Rodger. “You don’t get to be an alpha as young as Josie if you’re not sharp. Not much gets past our Josie. And it hasn’t gone unnoticed that you don’t drop in as often as you used to. Even the twins have asked after you.”

Jackson felt a twinge of guilt on top of his fear and frustration about Isaac.

“Fine,” said Jackson. “I won’t ask you to lie to her. Just... tell her to talk to me instead. If she asks.”

Rodger looked torn. He rubbed at his forehead, considering. “All right. Tell me. I’ll do what I can to help.”

So Jackson gave Rodger a short account of the situation: why Isaac was in London, how he was working with the hunters (he neglected to mention that the hunters were the friggin’ Bristows), that they were chasing a mysterious monster, and so forth. Rodger’s expression turned more and more grave as it went on, and by the end Jackson could feel anxiety twisting in his own stomach.

“...Are you out of your fucking mind?” said Rodger after taking a moment to digest what Jackson had just told him.
“Probably,” said Jackson miserably. He was suddenly very glad that he had also left out the part about how he had gone to the Bristows’ manor with Isaac and helped with the hunt.

“Shit,” said Rodger. “Having an omega staying with you in our territory is one thing, but a hunter?”

“He’s not a hunter,” Jackson insisted. “He’s a werewolf.”

“Jack, I don’t care if he’s on all fours chasing rabbits and howling at the moon. If he’s working with hunters, he’s a hunter.”

Jackson’s heart sank, fear creeping into him as he realized the implications of that logic. He stared down at his shoes as he said quietly, “Then what does that make me?”

Rodger took a deep breath and sighed it out before he answered. “Listen, pup…”

The pet name made Jackson feel small and young and vulnerable. Rodger’s knuckles under Jackson’s chin, slowly pushing his head up so Jackson would meet his eyes, didn’t help with that.

“You won’t be forced out,” Rodger said in as gentle a tone as Jackson had ever heard him speak. “I’ll fight for you if it comes to that. I promise. But you need to be careful. When you put yourself at risk, you endanger the pack as well.”

Jackson nodded. His throat felt tight and his eyes stung. Rodger slung his arm around Jackson’s shoulders and gave him a rough half-hug.

“You should tell Josie soon,” said Rodger, voice still gentle but definitely serious. “It’ll be worse for the both of us if you don’t.”

Jackson nodded again and wiped at the corner of his eye. He was grateful to Rodger for not commenting on it.

“Come on,” said Rodger, tone back to normal. “Let’s go home.”

“I…” Jackson hesitated. He could go back to the Den with Rodger. He could be with his pack. He wouldn’t have to be alone in his too-quiet flat with too much to think about. But he’d still have too much to think about no matter where he was. At least if he was alone, no one would ask him about it.

Jackson shook his head and shrugged out from under Rodger’s arm. “That’s okay. I should go back to mine. Homework and stuff.”

If Rodger noticed Jackson’s half-lie, he didn’t mention it. He did frown, though.

“Jack, you…” Rodger paused, like he was choosing his words carefully so he wouldn’t put Jackson off. “I know you like your privacy. No one faults you for that. But it’s okay to need other people sometimes. Especially if you’re a wolf.”

Jackson nodded, eyes fixed on his shoes again. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

“I’m only saying… What I mean to say is that the whole point of pack is so you don’t have to--”

“I know,” Jackson finally said. His voice was tight, strained. He didn’t want to talk anymore. Rodger couldn’t make this better. Nobody could. Maybe it had been a mistake to even say anything in the first place. What difference did it make?

“I--” Rodger started, but Jackson cut him off.
“It’s fine,” he insisted. They both knew it was a lie. “I’ll see you later.”

“Jack…” Rodger reached for Jackson’s shoulder, but Jackson stepped away. Then he took another step back, then turned and kept walking.

Even when Rodger called his name again, he didn’t stop.

Isaac and the hunters were all in a good mood when they got back to the manor. The sun was rising by the time the cars pulled up the drive, but Isaac felt way too wired to even think about sleeping.

Hannah met them at the door.

“How was it? How did it go?” She began questioning them before they were even inside, as if she hadn’t been receiving updates with Pol all night.

James kissed the top of her head as he went past. “Hello to you, too. Let everyone get inside first.”

Hannah stepped aside to let the stream of hunters in. Isaac was the last. She pulled him into a half hug and he had to remind himself to be careful of her injured shoulder. Admittedly, he had become pretty spoiled by his own superhuman healing.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” he asked.

“Bored to tears. Would’ve much rather been out with you lot than sitting around being useless here. Honestly, if this is what being the head of the family entails, Wendy can have it.”

Personally, Isaac would have preferred Hannah to be in charge than Wendy, but he didn’t say anything as Hannah pulled him into the house and shut the door behind them.

Hannah didn’t stop pestering them until she had gotten every (boring) detail. She was pretty mad about having been left behind and wasn’t shy about making sure everyone knew it.

Isaac was amazed, actually, at the quality of her guilt tripping. The only adult who seemed unaffected was Nina, who probably had the most experience dealing with the kids and their moods since she stayed home to look after them. Everyone else looked some degree of uncomfortable until James mentioned something casually about ‘when Hannah joined them the next night’, and Hannah, satisfied, dropped it and let them focus on what they’d found.

Overall, the night had been incredibly quiet. There was no sign of the monster in any of the graveyards, which led to the theory that either it was lying low and licking its wounds or it had changed its pattern and had gone to a different graveyard altogether, in which case, there went Isaac’s ley line theory.

Either way, they would likely know tomorrow--in a few hours--depending on if a new victim was reported or not.

In the meantime, they had a tooth to study. A giant, disgusting monster tooth that the hunters had found the night before and Isaac had been able to catch a scent off of tonight.

Isaac still couldn’t get the rotting smell of monster halitosis out of his nose. He’d followed the scent all around the graveyard, but hadn’t been able to figure out where the monster had come from or where it had gone. He’d spent the rest of the night at the other graveyards trying to catch the scent of the monster, but still had no luck. Even at the sites of the other attacks, it had been too long to find anything that could lead them to it.
“Can I see it?” Hannah asked when the tooth was mentioned. She’d been immediately given painkillers and put to bed the night before and had missed out on the discovery, then they’d taken the tooth to a lab that one of the hunters who didn’t live at the house worked at for analysis until using it on the hunt.

Hannah seemed way too excited to Isaac as she examined the large, blunt canine (molar? Isaac wasn’t sure how to tell), but that could’ve just been his exhaustion kicking in. Isaac tried to cover his yawn, but Nina, ever motherly, caught it and suggested that was enough for one night. A few of the hunters whose names Isaac had never caught shook Isaac’s hand on the way out the door and thanked him for his help, reassuring him that they weren’t all like Chandra and George, who seemed content to glare at Isaac until he excused himself from the room.

After helping himself to a large portion of breakfast--courtesy of Nina and the kids--Isaac went straight up to the little bed in the spare room with the intention of snagging an hour or two of sleep before going back to Jackson’s. Isaac’s phone had died at some point during the night and he’d apparently forgotten to pack his charger, so he couldn’t call to let Jackson know how it had gone, but he figured he’d see Jackson after he got home from school and before Isaac headed back out anyway, so he wasn’t worried. He had wanted to bring Jackson’s backpack back to him before Jackson left for school, but a quick glance at the clock in the kitchen had made it clear that that wouldn’t be happening. Jackson would have to make do with the tote bag for one more day.

As Isaac fell face first into bed, absolutely exhausted, his last, hazy thought before falling asleep was how nice it was that Jackson’s scent was still on the pillow.

“Isaac.” A soft, low voice brought Isaac out of whatever dream he’d been having, but he was too tired still to place it. It was a nice voice, though.

“Isaac,” the voice insisted, closer now.

No. Bed. Sleep. Maybe sex. Isaac could usually be persuaded to wake up for sex.

Without opening his eyes, Isaac reached out towards the source of the voice and was satisfied when his fingers tangled in tight curls and his palm landed on a smooth neck. He made a low pleased sound and tried to bring them closer.

“You had better still be asleep, Wolf,” the voice said pleasantly, “or else I’m going to have to break your hand.”

It was the now familiar nickname that made Isaac open his eyes. Hannah was sitting on the edge of the bed, an amused twist to her mouth as she regarded him.

He looked at his hand cupping her neck curiously. “Huh, how did that get there?”

“You put it there. Probably thinking I was Puss. You were saying his name in your sleep.”

Isaac pulled back his hand and sat up, stretching. “Yeah, right.”

Hannah did what was apparently her ‘sleeping-Isaac’ impression: “Jackson, you saved my life, how can I ever thank you enough?” She switched back to her own voice. “I decided to wake you when you started trying to snog the pillow.” She gave him a lofty look, as though daring him to call her a liar. Which Isaac didn’t. For all he knew, he had been trying to make out with dream-Jackson.
There was enough drool on the pillow in any case.

“What time is it?” Isaac asked, yawning.

“Almost time for supper.” Hannah stood up to give Isaac room to get off the bed.

“That’s lunch, right?”

“Nope, dinner.” She regarded him curiously. “It’s nearly four o’clock.”

“Shit.” Isaac tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes with the heels of his hands. “I meant to go home before tonight. My phone’s dead.”

“You can use mine.”

“I don’t know Jackson’s number. It’s fine, though. I’ll see him tomorrow.”

Hannah frowned. “You sure? Puss is probably worried about you.”

“Not much I can do about it now. Besides, I’m sure he’s just assuming it’s one of those, ‘No news is good news’ scenarios.”

“Hope you’re right, Wolf.” Hannah shrugged and headed for the door. “Come on, we leave in an hour.”

Isaac paused to grab his and Jackson’s bags to leave in the car during the hunt, and followed Hannah out.

Chapter End Notes

An early chapter! This is because Savannah and I are headed off on vacation/holiday in a few days so we won’t be keeping to our regular once-weekly posting schedule, sadly. We’ll be writing while we’re away, but Internet access will be very limited and we’ll both be very busy. We will also both be moving around the end of the month, so that may cause some delays as well. But rest assured that we have no intention of abandoning this fic. We intend to see it through to an awesome conclusion!

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting and leaving kudos! You are wonderful. We’ll see you soon :)

Lenna
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; 
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: HOME (Daughter)

Now he’s moving close,  
my heart in my throat.  
I won’t say a word,  
but I think he knows  
that I’ve hardly slept.

It had been almost twenty-four hours since Isaac had left, and Jackson hadn’t received so much as a text message from him since then. At first, Jackson hadn’t thought much about it. Isaac was busy, and Jackson had been resolutely keeping himself occupied with school and homework. But the longer the radio silence (so to speak) stretched on, the more anxious he became. Jackson would’ve at least expected to hear something after the hunt on Monday night. If it had gone well, Isaac would’ve probably wanted to brag about it. So if Isaac hadn’t contacted him, the logical
conclusion was that maybe things hadn’t gone so well...

When Jackson couldn’t handle worrying about it anymore, he picked up his phone and typed out a few words:

Me: Are you dead?

After pressing ‘send,’ he threw the phone down onto the couch and sat next to it, staring blankly at the TV that usually played a British quiz show or Breaking Bad, but was now eerily black. The flat was too quiet. It made Jackson antsy, to the point where he was unconsciously shaking his leg and tapping his foot. He thought about maybe watching something, but that didn’t sound good. Neither did reading or going out or anything else he could think of. What had Jackson done with his time before Isaac had lived with him?

He could go to his pack. Usually that helped when Jackson felt shitty. But he couldn’t explain to them what was wrong without risking them finding out about Isaac (especially since Rodger already knew), and if they asked questions he couldn’t truthfully answer, it would just make things worse because they’d know he was lying or keeping something from them. And after the way Jackson had walked away from Rodger yesterday, he wasn’t sure he’d get a warm welcome from all of them.

It looked like Jackson was on his own.

Or so he thought, until there was a knock at his front door.

For a brief, stupid second, Jackson thought it might be Isaac, but he immediately kicked himself. Of course it wasn’t going to be Isaac. Isaac wouldn’t bother with the front door.

Still, it was all Jackson could do to contain his momentary disappointment when he met Zach’s smiling face in the doorway, not Isaac’s.

It wasn’t that Jackson was disappointed to see Zach. On any other day, Jackson would have been pleasantly surprised to see his brother--especially when he came bearing food--but tonight Jackson wasn’t in the mood to be social, or to be forced to explain why he wasn’t in the mood.

“I was in the neighborhood,” Zach said by way of greeting.

“No, you weren’t.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Zach admitted. “But I’m in the neighborhood now.”

“Rodge sent you.”

“He’s worried about you,” said Zach. He looked Jackson up and down, no doubt noting that Jackson looked a little worse for wear thanks to all the worrying. “Didn’t say why exactly, but given the state of you, I think he had cause.”

Jackson cursed Rodger internally. Of course he had talked to Zach. Jackson had asked Rodger not to tell Josie or the rest of the pack about Isaac, but he hadn’t explicitly said not to tell anyone that something was wrong. Rodger knew that Zach was the person Jackson was most likely to open up to. Well, Jackson didn’t feel like opening up.

“I brought food.” Zach held up the bag of takeaway that Jackson’s nose had identified as Indian before he’d even seen it. “Eat, drink, and be merry. If you can’t manage that last one, at least tell me what’s wrong.”
“I’m fine.”

“You are quite clearly not fine.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“All right. You eat, I’ll talk.”

Zach all but shoved the bag into Jackson’s hands as he pushed past him to get inside the flat. For anyone else, this would have been a clear intrusion of Jackson’s home and personal space, which he would’ve taken great exception to even before he’d gained a slightly territorial wolf side, but it was more or less typical for Zach. (Last time had been an exception thanks to him being caught off-guard by Isaac.) There was an unspoken understanding that Zach could visit Jackson’s flat whenever he wanted, though he generally called or texted first. Being the closest member of the pack in age to Jackson, Zach was the one who was most like the brother that Jackson had never had: something that was never more obvious than when he was trying to look out for Jackson’s well-being.

“Where’s Isaac tonight?” Zach asked, shrugging out of his heavy coat. He didn’t bother to try to make the question sound casual. Having been raised in a family of people who could tell when someone was lying, Zach wasn’t the kind of person to dance around an issue just to be polite, especially with pack. He also wasn’t stupid.

Jackson shut the door. “Out.”

The strong smell of garlic and various spices wafting from the bag in Jackson’s hands reminded Jackson’s stomach that he hadn’t eaten all day--he’d been too worried, he grudgingly admitted to himself--so he headed for the kitchen.

Zach followed him. “Isaac seems to go ‘out’ quite a bit.”

Jackson made a noncommittal noise and grabbed plates and utensils from the drying rack.

“You didn’t feel like going out, too?”

“Obviously not,” Jackson said shortly.

“Tired of watching him stealing all the game?” The way Zach asked the question made it clear that he was pretty sure that wasn’t the case, but was trying to coax the truth out of Jackson in stages.

“Like I care how many phone numbers he gets,” Jackson said, a bit forcefully, as he started scooping out curry onto his rice.

“Jack, I realize it might not be my place--”

“I really don’t want--”

“But what exactly is going on between you two?”

Jackson sighed deeply and put down the piece of naan bread he’d broken off.

“If you came here to talk about Isaac, you’re wasting your time,” he said, trying to keep his tone from betraying how anxious he was. “I can’t right now. So just… don’t.”

Zach chewed on his lower lip in the way he did when he was trying not to argue.
“You know that saying things like that only makes me more worried for you, right?” Zach said finally. “But I will respect your idiotic wishes and simply remind you that I’m here if you want to talk, like any good, supportive older brother.”

When Jackson said nothing, Zach started serving rice and curry onto his own plate. “So, did Rodge go all Supportive Older Brother on you, too?”

There it was. That was what Zach had really been working up to. Jackson could tell by the way his voice changed, becoming just a bit too nonchalant. This wasn’t just about Isaac. Zach had come to talk to Jackson about his behavior toward Rodger last night. Jackson wasn’t particularly surprised, but just because Jackson was resigned to it happening, didn’t mean that he was going to participate. He picked up his plate and went back to the couch.

Zach followed him again. “I hate it when he does that. It’s unnatural for Rodge to be serious.”

As Jackson lifted his fork, he wondered about when Rodger might have had serious discussions with Zach like the one he’d had with Jackson. Sometimes Jackson forgot that Rodger had known Zach since Zach had been born, and that Rodger was much more like Zach’s ‘real’ brother than Jackson’s.

“You should’ve seen him when I told him about wanting to change my name--well, change my everything. Bronagh had to tell him to ease up before we all dissolved into a puddle of tears.”

Jackson took a bite of his curry. Maybe if he didn’t participate in the conversation, Zach would leave off.

“My turn to be Supportive Older Brother, I suppose.”

He should’ve known that Zach wouldn’t be put off by Jackson ignoring him. Unable to help himself, and knowing it would be a lost cause to try to ignore Zach forever, he gave in:

“I don’t need--”

Zach interrupted Jackson quickly enough that it was clear he’d prepared what he wanted to say to him beforehand. “What you need is for someone to tell you to stop your crying and--”

“I’m not--”

“Metaphorical crying, and man up.”

Jackson snorted. “‘Man up.’ Isn’t that kind of sexist?”

“Some of us have worked very hard to be able to ‘man up,’ thank you,” Zach said, arching an eyebrow at Jackson to emphasize his point.

Jackson immediately shut his mouth. Since Jackson had only met Zach less than a year ago, it was easy to forget that he hadn’t always been ‘Zach,’ and while that usually helped their relationship (Zach liked being around people who only knew him as the person he currently was), Jackson felt like a dick every time he put his foot in his mouth over it.

“Your life is good, Jack,” said Zach. “You have a comfortable home, clothes on your back, three meals a day, and, most importantly, a pack who love you want want you to be happy. You’re new at being a wolf, so we’re patient with you, but refusing help from a packmate is like slapping them in the face. So stop behaving like a child and think about someone apart from yourself.”
Zach’s words were harsh, but there was a note of affection in them, and a hint of a smile on his lips.

There was a pause before Jackson shot Zach an exaggerated eye-roll.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Brother,” Zach said firmly. “And you’re welcome, you whinging little shit.”

They finished the rest of their meal talking about Zach—how his research project was going, if the couple in the next dorm room over were still as loud as they used to be, what had happened to that one teacher who’d lit the chem lab on fire a while back—and Jackson realized how out of touch he really had become. For better or worse, he had let Isaac kind of consume his life. Even when Isaac wasn’t physically around, he was there.

The evening was relatively pleasant, but Zach couldn’t stay late, seeing as it was a school night and all, so at half-eight, Jackson once again found himself alone in his flat, pacing the living room.

This whole situation was doomed. Either the hunt would go badly—Isaac might get hurt, the hunters might yell at him again, or any number of other worse things that Jackson was refusing to think about could happen—or it would go well and the hunters wouldn’t need Isaac’s help anymore, and then… and then Isaac would leave.

That thought made Jackson’s stomach knot with apprehension, which made him angry, which made everything even worse. He hated feeling this way. It had taken Jackson a long time to be okay with needing pack and accepting their support, but that, at least, had made sense: It was instinct. Isaac wasn’t pack, though. Jackson didn’t need Isaac like he needed pack. After all, Isaac had only ended up staying with him because he’d happened to be in London and had nowhere to go. It was always going to be temporary.

Jackson didn’t need Isaac. He didn’t. He couldn’t.

He just needed to sleep. That was it. He’d make himself sleep and then he wouldn’t have to think about Isaac. He wouldn’t have to think about anything. And maybe things would be better in the morning.

By now, Isaac had probably spent more time in graveyards than almost anyone else his age. That being said, he was more than ready to not need to hang out in one for a while. After three nights in a row spent patrolling the same graveyard, Isaac was starting to feel a little cliché: Seriously, a werewolf stalking around a cemetery in the middle of the night? Totally overdone. Needless to say, Isaac was relieved that it was their last night.

He was also relieved that Hannah was back with them. Everything had been fine the night before while she had been at home recuperating, but it was better having her there, especially since it was just the two of them with two other hunters that Isaac barely knew. James was driving between each of the graveyards, keeping an eye on things. George and Wendy were off with other teams (which suited Isaac just fine), and it was Chandra’s night to stay home with the kids.

Isaac and Hannah were doing the rounds, same as Isaac and Jackson had been doing Sunday night, and if everything stayed quiet, they would probably be packing up and heading home in just a few more hours.

Giving Hannah plenty of time to barrage Isaac with questions.
“So you were taking my pain into yourself?” she asked eagerly. This was the first chance they’d had to speak about what had happened on Sunday night, and Hannah had had two days to realize what had happened, if not quite what it meant.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” said Isaac.

“Good, because it sounds pretty awful,” said Hannah. Her expression was a combination of fascination and awe. “I’d no idea werewolves could do that.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s some kind of pack thing,” said Isaac. “Bonding, stronger together, the whole party line. We can do it to animals, too.”

Isaac decided not to mention to Hannah his first experience with taking pain. It had been an intensely personal moment, helping relieve a little bit of that dog’s suffering. In some ways, for Isaac, who had encountered so much pain in his life, that was his most valuable ability, though he rarely used it. Being strong and powerful and confident were all awesome, obviously, but being able to help someone who was hurting, even temporarily… It made Isaac feel good, even if it involved causing himself pain indirectly.

“That makes sense, actually,” said Hannah. “Perhaps something to do with animal empathy as well. I wonder if my family know.”

“Well, if they’re anything like the Argents, they do.”

“So why have they never told us? That’s amazing.”

“Probably because it makes us seem less like monsters, and…” Isaac rubbed at the back of his neck. “I like your family, but they definitely don’t want the ‘monkeys’ to forget I’m a monster.”

“How anyone could think you’re a monster after meeting you is beyond me,” Hannah said earnestly. Isaac sometimes forgot that Hannah only knew him as the harmless werewolf who worked with hunters and played games with their kids. It was a very strange thought.

Isaac scoffed. “Thanks for that, but you didn’t know me last year. There are plenty of people who would’ve disagreed with you.”

“But people change,” said Hannah. “It isn’t about who you were, but who you try to be. You can’t change the past, but that doesn’t mean you have to let it define you.”

“You sound like a fucking fortune cookie,” Isaac said with a small laugh. “Or did you get that from one of those motivational posters with the kittens?”

“Laugh if you like, but I am wise beyond my years.”

“Oh, I know,” said Isaac, still smiling. “You’ve told me before.”

“I can’t help being aware of my own brilliance,” Hannah said with an answering grin.

Isaac’s retort was cut off when he saw a dark shadow dart across the path a ways ahead of them.

“Did you see that?” he asked Hannah under his breath, wishing again that he had a flashlight.

Hannah looked over her shoulder towards Isaac and shook her head. She had been watching behind them during the patrol since neither one of them really wanted to be snuck up on by anything.

They continued carefully forward. Isaac might have complained about not having night vision, but
his eyes were still sharp, and he quickly picked out movement in the darkness.

“I think it was just a dog.” Isaac breathed a sigh of relief.

Hannah froze. “What kind of dog?”

“I don’t know.” Isaac shrugged. “A big one, black maybe—”

“Did you smell it?” Hannah’s tone was unexpectedly serious. “Did it smell like a dog?”

“What? I don’t know, it wasn’t close enough, but it looked like a big dog.”

“Isaac,” Hannah started hesitantly, “we have a name for a large, black dog that hangs around in graveyards. It’s called a Black Shuck. They’re portents of doom.”

Isaac would have laughed if Hannah had looked like she was joking.

“Portents? What are you—”

“If you’ve seen Harry Potter, you may have also heard it referred to as the Grim.”

Isaac stared at her for a second. “Wasn’t that some dog demon that, if people see it, means they’re going to die?”

Hannah slowly nodded and bit her lip.

“How should I know? Legends vary depending on which one you saw.”

“Keep your voice down!” Hannah hissed. “It may be too late for you, but I don’t want to end up something’s dinner tonight.”

Isaac did not find Hannah’s attitude to be particularly reassuring. If she was lying, she was doing a pretty impressive job of hiding it. Then again, she was a hunter, and probably had some training in
controlling her pulse. Maybe hunters knew something about creepy death dogs that werewolves didn’t.

The only way to be sure would be to find that dog and prove that that was all it was. Isaac spun around and took two steps in the direction he’d seen it go. His third step was interrupted by the fact that he almost fell directly into a large hole in the ground, which was partially obscured by some bushes and the fact that the dislodged dirt had fallen back into it.

“Hannah,” he said, motioning her over. All thought of the Shuck was pushed to the back of his mind for the time being. “Remember all the dirt the other night when we were fighting that thing? Like, it was everywhere. I swear I can still taste it.”

“So?”

“So check this out.”

Isaac crouched down at the edge of the hole and investigated the dirt, trying to see if he could catch a scent of anything unusual.

“That’s certainly a lot of dirt,” said Hannah. Hunter tracking skills at their best. “Is it possible that this is a partially dug grave?”

Isaac shook his head. “I used to dig graves. You’d never put one in this spot, plus these days people use a machine to—”

“Hang on,” said Hannah. “You used to dig graves?”

“It’s a long story,” Isaac said dismissively. “My point is, there’s no way this is a grave. And considering all the dirt that got kicked up when we fought that thing…”

“You think the monster dug this,” Hannah finished for him.

“Not exactly,” said Isaac. “I think it came through it.”

“Through it?” Hannah crouched down next to Isaac. “Like a tunnel?”

“Exactly like a tunnel,” said Isaac. He sifted through some of the dirt with his hands, and when that yielded no results he resigned himself to another mud bath and basically jumped into the hole.

“What are you looking for?” Hannah asked as Isaac rooted around in the dirt, casting aside various rocks and pebbles.

“Gimme a sec.”

It took another minute, but finally Isaac closed his hand around what he’d been looking for. He brushed as much of the damp earth off it as he could and presented it to Hannah, grinning victoriously.

“Another tooth!” Hannah’s grin matched Isaac’s. “I’d say you’ve got a strong case about the hole, then. Well done you!”

They called the other hunters over to show them what they’d found, earning a round of—if not open congratulations and thanks—nodded approval in Isaac’s direction and a distinct lessening of tension from the hunters standing closest to Isaac as he explained. He had experienced the same basic thing when the Baudins down in France had finally started warming up to him, but it was still more than
a little satisfying. Isaac couldn’t wait to tell Jackson that he’d been worried for nothing.

Isaac and Hannah ended up going through their theory about the tunnel twice more for the hunters that hadn’t been in the graveyard with them, the last time being for George and James and another woman Isaac was sure he’d met, though he couldn’t remember her name.

“That’s the reason I had a hard time tracking it by scent,” Isaac continued with his explanation. “It spends so much time underground that it mostly just smells like the rest of the dirt.”

“Makes that wolf nose a bit useless then, eh?” George said with his usual disdain for werewolf abilities, despite the breakthrough Isaac had just made.

“Yeah,” Isaac admitted, “but I’ve still got wolf hearing.”

George eyed him skeptically. “How’s that meant to help us?”

“It uses tunnels, right? I think if we got down in one I could hear the thing moving around. Sounds echo pretty well in tunnels.”

James raised an eyebrow at Isaac, apparently impressed. “You could do that?”

Isaac shifted nervously under the scrutiny. “I mean, I’ll probably get some interference from the subway and stuff, but yeah, I think I can do it.”

“Well, it’s certainly worth a try,” said James. “The only major problem I foresee is that we might not have much luck with that until the next new moon. I’ll send a team to investigate this hole just in case, but we might need you to stay another month. Would that be possible?”

Another month? Isaac had to suppress a proud smile. The hunters were impressed enough with his abilities that they wanted him to stick around, even though they could probably take it from here on their own if they had to. They (well, at least James and Pol) thought Isaac was a valuable member of the team now.

“Sure,” said Isaac, trying to act like it wasn’t a big deal. “Paris can probably survive without me for another month.”

“Good lad,” James said with a smile. He gave Isaac’s shoulder a rough pat of approval. “Why don’t you go home and get a bit of sleep? It’s been a long few nights. We’ll speak with Pol and the others and call you when we’re planning our next move.”

It was still dark when Isaac got home. He’d kind of been hoping that Jackson would be awake so he could share how excited he was about how well the last two nights had gone, but Jackson seemed to be pretty unconscious. He hardly stirred when Isaac accidentally slammed his hip into the bedroom doorknob when he slipped in after taking a quick shower. One of these days Isaac really needed to figure out this whole night vision thing...

Jackson didn’t make a sound until Isaac was crawling under the covers next to him.

“Cold,” Jackson grumbled groggily.

“Go back to sleep,” Isaac whispered.

“Could if you’d stop making so much fucking noise,” Jackson countered. He sounded completely exhausted.
“I stayed up all night and you’re the cranky one?” Isaac settled in close to Jackson’s side, appreciating how warm he was, even though Isaac felt way too excited to even think about sleep. He was unreasonably pleased that Jackson was sleeping in the middle of the bed because it gave Isaac a good excuse for being so close if Jackson decided to complain about his proximity.

Jackson made a sleepy, irritated sound, but he didn’t move away. He barely moved at all, actually. “You stay up all night all the friggin’ time.”

“Shut up,” Isaac said amiably.

“You first,” said Jackson. Because apparently they were both five years old.

Isaac rolled his eyes. All right, Jackson had officially brought this on himself. Isaac leaned up and got an arm on Jackson’s other side so he was looking down at Jackson. The few short inches between them and all the reasons this was a bad idea were suddenly nothing. He only gave Jackson enough time to make a confused sound before kissing him. Isaac kept it brief: a little longer than he’d kissed Jackson in the club, but still short enough that Jackson didn’t have time to react. Isaac felt the little rush of excitement that always came with the gamble of kissing someone when he wasn’t sure how they’d react. Combined with the high he still had from the hunt, it was almost intoxicating. But while this was a lot of fun, he didn’t want to get himself kicked out of Jackson’s bed, either. Especially when he’d seen a death omen and this might be his last day alive!

When Isaac pulled back from the kiss to look at Jackson, Jackson was staring blankly up at him with those gorgeous blue eyes in half-dazed silence.

Well, that shut him up. Maybe Isaac should use that tactic more often…

Jackson still didn’t object when Isaac settled back in, throwing an arm and a leg over Jackson’s body and forcing him over enough that Isaac could lay his head next to Jackson’s on the pillow.

He’d apologize in the morning if Jackson decided to get weird; say it was adrenaline or something, sleepwalking. Sleepkissing? Whatever. For now, Isaac was too pleased that Jackson wasn’t even trying to push him away to worry too much. He had long grown out of overthinking it when something good happened.

Chapter End Notes

We managed to get a chapter done amid all this madness! Our holidays are over and now we’re both packing and getting ready to move across the country. Between our two schedules this means that the next chapter may well be delayed as well. But we’ll get there! Thank you for your patience and all of your wonderful comments and kudos and just for reading in general. We appreciate all of it!

Savenna Cloverunner
Sick, Sick, Sick

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;  
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: SICK SICK SICK (Bayside)

You made a mess of things.
My, what a mess you’ve made!
I hate the way you make me feel.
I hate the way you make me...

At first, Jackson almost hadn’t been sure if Isaac coming back the previous night had been a dream or not. After not hearing from Isaac for two days, Jackson had expected to be alone when his alarm went off for school. Instead, he had woken up with Isaac practically using him as a body pillow. The irritable part of Jackson’s brain had wanted to object, to tell Isaac to fuck off, but Jackson’s body was so heavy, and he was so tired, and Isaac was warm, and Jackson really, really didn’t want to go to school today…
But he couldn’t afford to miss more class. Very reluctantly, Jackson tried to pull away from Isaac’s grasp, which caused Isaac to stir. Jackson froze. He didn’t want Isaac to wake up. He was afraid of what Isaac might think, what he might say. Jackson just needed to get up, get ready, and go to school without disturbing Isaac. They could talk later.

When Jackson tried pulling away again, Isaac let him go in favor of rolling over and pressing his back against Jackson instead. Although he was now free, Jackson found that this new position wasn’t that much better when it came to keeping his resolve to get out of bed, especially when he caught his body reflexively wanting to curl up around Isaac’s.

He stopped himself before he did, though, and finally managed to sit up. Jackson reminded himself of how Isaac had let him worry for days, and suddenly it was easier to drag himself out of bed, despite still feeling heavy and sluggish and cold.

“Dude, are you okay?” Isaac’s sleep-thick voice was barely understandable, but Jackson got the idea.

“Just tired,” Jackson said dismissively. If he could just stand up and take the few steps to the bedroom door then he wouldn’t have to deal with Isaac until after school. Even sitting on the edge of the bed with his feet firmly on the floor, though, Jackson felt like the room was spinning. He didn’t know how he was going to stand up.

“You really don’t look good,” said Isaac, rolling over onto his back and peering blearily up at Jackson. Isaac’s eyes widened when he realized how that sounded, and he hastily backtracked. “I mean, you always look good, but you know what I mean.”

“Right.”

“You should stay here and sleep. With me,” Isaac added with a smirk. Even exhausted, Isaac never fucking quit.

Apparently embarrassment was a good counter for dizziness because when Jackson stood he didn’t throw up, and eventually managed to take several shuffling steps towards the door.

“Missed too much class already.”

“But--”

“Isaac,” Jackson said shortly, cutting him off. “Drop it.”

Jackson lingered in the doorway for a second, bracing himself while his body fought to regain a bit of composure. As he glanced back toward the bed, he found himself wanting to demand an explanation from Isaac. An apology. Or hell, maybe to give one himself. Something to make things feel less shitty and awkward. But he forced the impulse back down, turned away, and went to take a shower.

“I got your backpack back,” Isaac said from the other side of the door after Jackson had finished his quick shower. “Want me to put your school stuff back in it?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

He continued getting ready for school, but a few minutes later, Isaac was back. “Want me to make you some food?”

“Not hungry.”
“Okay…” There was a short pause. “I’m gonna go back to bed then.”

Jackson didn’t answer. Isaac couldn’t be bothered to text Jackson back, so Jackson didn’t feel the need to answer Isaac, either. Besides, Isaac could do whatever he wanted. Clearly he was going to anyway, Jackson fumed as he ran his damp hands through his hair.

He spent extra time on his hair that morning, actually styling it in some semblance of his old look. His ‘pre-Isaac’ style. His hair was significantly longer than he used to wear it, but Jackson managed. He didn’t need someone else doing his hair for him.

When he was satisfied--and couldn’t put it off any longer--Jackson opened the bathroom door and almost ran into Isaac, who had his hand raised to knock on it.

“I thought you were going back to bed,” Jackson muttered as he brushed past Isaac.

Isaac moved to get out of Jackson’s way. He started rubbing at the back of his neck with his already raised hand, almost like he was trying to play off the motion. Jackson had started to notice, though, that it was sometimes an indication that Isaac felt awkward or uncomfortable. Good.

“Yeah… I was just… kinda worried. You were in there a long time.”

Jackson stared at Isaac. He couldn’t believe this guy. Jackson taking too long in the bathroom worried him, but Isaac didn’t even think about texting after spending two nights away?

Jackson couldn’t deal with this right now. He needed to go to school, he needed to be somewhere far away from a certain idiotic, oblivious asshole. He turned away from Isaac and went to the couch where his backpack was sitting. Isaac drifted over behind Jackson while Jackson was checking to make sure he had everything he needed. True to his word, Isaac had re-packed all of Jackson’s school stuff in his backpack. Of course, Jackson refused to acknowledge this.

“Well, you look good,” Isaac offered.

Jackson decided not to dignify the comment with an answer. Isaac didn’t really mean it. Even if he actually did think it looked good, they both knew what the hairstyle was: a ‘Fuck you’ to Isaac. Somewhere in the back of his head, Jackson was aware that it was a stupid, childish thing to put so much effort into, but he didn’t care. He hoped his small rejection of Isaac’s attention hurt Isaac. He hoped Isaac felt shitty. Isaac deserved to feel shitty.

The walk to school was excruciating. Despite Jackson’s insistence to Isaac that he wasn’t hungry, an empty stomach probably wasn’t helping how he felt right now. He had hoped that maybe some fresh air and movement would make his nausea or the headache ease a little, but so far he didn’t feel that much better than when he’d stumbled out of bed.

Jackson could’ve stayed there, he thought bitterly. He could’ve curled around Isaac like he’d wanted to, warm and comfortable. He could’ve decided to just let go of how angry he was with Isaac for ignoring him and just enjoyed the fact that Isaac was safe and back at the flat. Jackson could’ve done all that. Maybe he should’ve. Maybe if he had, he wouldn’t be so miserable right now.

But that would’ve meant letting Isaac get away with being a selfish prick. And fuck that. Jackson wasn’t going to swallow his pride and let Isaac off the hook when Isaac was clearly in the wrong. The fact that Isaac hadn’t contacted Jackson was bad enough; that he didn’t realize it was such a shitty thing to do was even worse. Fuck him.

Still, Jackson’s pride wouldn’t be much of a consolation when he had to fight his way through
every excruciating minute of class that day. What was the term?

Cold comfort.

Jackson shivered and pulled his jacket more closely around himself.

Cold fucking comfort.

Isaac woke up from his long nap feeling a lot better than when Jackson had left that morning. Normally he didn’t like sleeping in Jackson’s bed alone, but it felt different when Jackson had just been in it with him; the blankets were still warm and smelt strongly of Jackson’s scent. It had taken Isaac over an hour to fall asleep after he’d crawled in with Jackson last night since he’d still been so wired from the hunt, but Isaac hadn’t minded. It had been nice to lie there in the dark with Jackson, shamelessly invading his space without any protest from Jackson, even when Jackson had kissed him.

Thinking about the kiss had kept Isaac’s mind pleasantly occupied during his last hour of pre-nap consciousness. True, Jackson still wasn’t really reciprocating (and certainly not initiating) kisses, but Isaac felt like he was making progress. He didn’t want to push Jackson too much, but it was a lot of fun. Isaac hadn’t really ever had someone he’d shared space with or spent this much time with on a regular basis before, especially not the sharing-a-bed-and-sometimes-snuggling part, and he was really getting used to it. He liked whatever it was that he and Jackson had right now, and he wanted more if he could get it. If only Jackson weren’t so temperamental sometimes…

Isaac rolled over to check the time on his phone, which he had finally been able to plug in to charge before he’d gone back to bed earlier that morning. It turned out that there were several text messages he had missed while the phone had been off.

The first one was from a little under a day after Isaac had gone to the Bristows’:

Whittemore 37: Are you dead?

Isaac blinked at the phone, then found himself smiling a bit. He certainly would not have expected what was clearly Jackson’s version of a worried text. Isaac tentatively made plans to tease Jackson about it later, but then he read the ensuing texts, which were spread out with several hours between them.

Whittemore 37: Seriously though, it would be great if you could take a sec to prove you’re alive. Not like you’re doing anything stupid and reckless that I need to be worried about

Sarcasm. Just Jackson’s way of showing he cared.

Whittemore 37: Not that I’m worried. You’re going to do stupid and reckless things regardless

Then, surprisingly, there was one from Zach:

Very Pretty Person: Stop being a twat and call my brother. He won’t talk to me and something tells me you’ve got something to do with it.

Isaac frowned. Maybe Jackson had been more worried about him than he’d originally thought. If it was bad enough that Zach had noticed something...
Whittemore 37: Don’t be dead okay? I don’t want to deal with the paperwork and I hear shipping bodies overseas is a fucking pain

The last couple of messages were from late last night, within a few minutes of each other:

Whittemore 37: Don’t do this okay
Whittemore 37: Just
Whittemore 37: Come home already
Whittemore 37: Please

Guilt sank heavy in Isaac’s gut. He hadn’t realized Jackson had been so worried. Hell, he hadn’t thought Jackson was even capable of being that worried about him. It definitely explained Jackson’s behavior that morning, anyway. Come home already. Please. That kind of sincerity from Jackson was probably not a good sign.

Fuck.

Isaac immediately hit the call button next to Jackson’s name. He knew that Jackson was still at school, but maybe there was a chance that he might answer anyway. As he listened to the tinny ringing, Isaac tried to figure out what he was even going to say. Sorry for being an idiot and forgetting my phone charger. Who would’ve thought you’d actually be concerned if a giant monster had killed me?

The call went to Jackson’s voicemail. Isaac almost left a message, but hung up when he heard the beep. He really couldn’t wrap his head around the idea that Jackson fucking Whittemore had been worried about him.

Isaac tapped his phone thoughtfully against his chin and sighed.

Well, he was just going to have to apologize and try to make it up to Jackson later. There wasn’t much he could do about it now except wait. It would’ve been nice to do the waiting half-asleep in Jackson’s bed where it was cozy and smelled good, but this late in the day, without Jackson there, it just didn’t feel right.

Isaac was still tired though--Clearly, all that monster-hunting adrenaline junkie shit was starting to catch up with him--and by the time Jackson got home from school, Isaac had managed to drag his exhausted body all the way to the couch.

“Why aren’t our TV shows this good?” he asked as Jackson shut the door. “QI is literally the best thing ever.”

Jackson, definitely still pissed but looking less like death warmed over, said nothing and dumped his backpack in the desk chair before heading to the bedroom and not-quite-but-almost slamming the door behind him. When Jackson emerged wearing jeans and his Beacon Hills lacrosse hoodie (‘Whittemore 37’; another twinge of guilt flickered as Isaac remembered the texts), Isaac sat up and patted the newly available couch space beside him.

“Sit. Watch with me. I feel like I haven’t seen you in like a week.”

“Not my fucking fault,” said Jackson, going to the kitchen. “Also, not true.”

“Come on, I have to tell you about this creepy black dog I saw in the graveyard,” said Isaac, smiling in what he hoped was a winning manner. “Hannah says it’s the Grim, like from Harry Potter. So you should start being nicer to me ‘cause I’m probably gonna die soon.”
“She’s having you on,” said Jackson dismissively, sounding extra Britishy. (It was worst on school
days.)

Isaac frowned. He had thought Jackson would at least find it kind of funny, but Jackson’s mouth
didn’t even twitch toward a hint of a smile. Of course, Isaac had figured that Hannah had probably
just been messing with him. That didn’t necessarily make her wrong, though. It wasn’t like creepy
black dogs were a good sign.

“Yeah, like a ghost dog or whatever is sooo unbelievable,” Isaac drawled, determined to keep the
mood light if he could. “Jackson, we’re werewolves. Stiles got possessed by a friggin’ Japanese fox
demon a couple months ago.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Death omens aren’t the same thing as supernatural creatures. You’re just
gullible.”

“And you’re sexy as fuck,” Isaac said matter-of-factly. “Doesn’t make me wrong about this.”

“Can you knock that shit off for once?” Jackson shouted, catching Isaac completely off guard.

Isaac could only stare at Jackson, too stunned to speak. He’d known Jackson was in a bad mood,
but this was pretty extreme, even for him.

Jackson put the heels of his hands against his temples, looking like his outburst had surprised him,
too.

“You just… Fuck.” Jackson ran his hands through his hair. Now that Isaac’s attention was drawn
to it, it looked like Jackson had been doing that to his hair a lot all day; it wasn’t at all like it had
been styled that morning. “Look, I’m not your mom or your babysitter or whatever, but if you’re
going to ignore your phone, maybe don’t do it while you’re hanging out with a bunch of hunters.”

Isaac protested on reflex. “Jackson, my phone died. I wasn’t ignoring you. I didn’t think--”

“No, you didn’t think. You were just being a fucking idiot,” Jackson snapped.

Isaac wanted to snap back at Jackson, to remind him that not everything was about Jackson, but
then he remembered the texts again.

Come home already. Please.

Isaac sighed deeply. “You’re right. That was kind of a fucked up thing to do. I should’ve tried to
get another charger or something. I’m sorry.”

Jackson considered Isaac suspiciously, like he was expecting more of a fight or wondering if this
was some kind of trick--which almost made Isaac laugh. What had he ever done to make Jackson
distrust him so much?--before shrugging and muttering, “Whatever, it’s not a big deal.”

“Clearly it is, so I’m sorry.”

This time the apology made Jackson look even more uncomfortable, and Isaac was tempted to
apologize a third time just to see if he could make Jackson blush, but Jackson changed the subject--
terribly--before he could.

“So, does this death omen bullshit just predict your death, or is it supposed to kill you?”

“Just wondering if I’ll get any kind of warning,” Jackson said casually. “I wasn’t kidding about that paperwork.”

“I’ll bet. But Chris might help out if you ask nicely,” Isaac said with a laugh.

Jackson snorted. “Yeah, that’ll be the day.”

There was an awkward pause where Jackson was standing near the couch but neither of them were saying anything. Then Jackson made a noise that sounded kind of like irritated resignation and sat heavily down next to Isaac, leaving half a cushion’s length of space between them.

“You know I’m just kidding, right?” said Isaac after an increasingly awkward minute, because the silence needed to be broken and it was the only thing he could think to say. “Like, I’m pretty sure it was just a dog.”

“Yes, I know,” said Jackson. “I don’t actually think you’re an idiot.”

“That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.” Isaac smirked.

Jackson didn’t exactly smile in response, but his expression was definitely closer to neutral than annoyed now, which Isaac considered a victory.

Isaac’s attention was brought back to the TV by the abrasive sound of live studio laughter. He’d almost forgotten QI was still on. Jackson turned his focus on the TV as well, and they slipped back into silence for another few minutes. Thankfully, it was significantly less awkward than before.

“Do you have homework tonight?” Isaac asked tentatively during the next commercial break. “I can turn this off if you want.”

“Yeah.” Jackson nodded, eyes still fixed almost too intently on the TV. “After this episode, though.”

“Oh, and turned his own eyes back on the TV as well. Every now and then, though, he stole a glance at Jackson to see if his mood was improving. Jackson’s hair was completely disheveled, and not in a cute post-sex and/or post-sleep way. Isaac’s fingers twitched to fix it, but he suppressed the urge. The peace between them right now felt very fragile, and Isaac was afraid that he’d fuck it up if he did anything to annoy Jackson further.

Which was seriously frustrating since less than a day ago Jackson had let Isaac kiss him and shamelessly invade his space, and it had felt like real progress. Now it was like they’d taken a huge leap backward, and apart from making things tense between them as roommates or friends or whatever the hell they were, it also left Isaac with a very attractive guy sitting inches away from him who he wasn’t allowed to touch.

And Isaac really wanted to touch someone right now. For the past few days he’d been focused pretty much entirely on hunting, but now that he had a break from the job, his mind was drifting back to its usual preoccupation. His body had gotten enough sleep to recover from the hunt and was ready to get back to another kind of hunting. If his preferred prey wasn’t taking the bait, he’d have to try somewhere else.

It was two episodes later when Jackson finally got up and moved to his desk to start his homework. Isaac decided to use that as his cue to turn off the TV and start making dinner. The apartment was quiet except for the sounds of Jackson’s pen scribbling and various cooking noises.

“I don’t have that much homework tonight,” Jackson said suddenly after a little over a half hour.
“We could watch more Breaking Bad after dinner if you want.”

“Oh.” Isaac rubbed at the back of his neck. Jackson was quickly becoming the King of Mixed Signals. While it was nice that Jackson was extending the offer to hang out, accepting it would mean an entire evening of sexual frustration and pent-up energy for Isaac, probably followed up by platonic snuggling, assuming Jackson didn’t get pissed at Isaac again. But maybe saying no would piss Jackson off… “I mean, I was going to go out, but if you want me to stay in--”

“And keep you from hitting your free drink quota?” Something in Jackson’s tone made Isaac uneasy, but then Jackson gave a casual shrug and an almost-smile. “We can watch it later. As long as ‘go out’ means ‘try to get laid’ and not ‘hang out with hunters,’ that’s cool.”

Isaac nearly breathed a sigh of relief. Jackson didn’t even really seem disappointed, let alone pissed off, which was definitely a pleasant surprise after the tension that had been hanging between them all evening. As much as Isaac enjoyed watching TV with the most fuckable person that he was never going to get to fuck, he really, really needed to expend some of the energy that had built up inside him as soon as he possibly could. There would be time for Breaking Bad once Isaac could actually sit still next to Jackson without feeling the maddening urge to pounce him. A night out would go a long way toward solving that problem.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short(ish) chapter, but we're still in the middle of a bit of chaos: I just finished moving across half the country and Savannah is about to move across the entire country, so there's a lot going on. But we hope to be able to get back to a regular posting schedule soon. Lots of exciting stuff coming up that we've been waiting to post for months! Thank you all for reading and for your kudos and comments. We appreciate every single one of them :D

Lenna
I Want You

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

**MINOR TRIGGER WARNING:** See endnotes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: I WANT YOU (Savage Garden)

Come stand a little bit closer, 
breathe in and get a bit higher.
You’ll never know what hit you 
when I get to you.
Oo, I want you.
I don’t know if I need you, but 
oo, I’d die to find out.
Events of the next few days (and nights) after the new moon were almost a blur to Isaac. After being asked to stay another month by the Bristows, he felt lighter than he had in a long time. Isaac had actually been useful. Not just useful, but fucking crucial to getting as close to that thing as the hunters had, and now he had its scent and he had figured out how to listen for it. When the monster showed its ugly not-face next month, they would be ready for it. If only they knew what exactly it was, maybe they’d be able to fight it better… There was still time to figure that out, though. But the best part was that, as far as they could tell, the monster hadn’t killed anyone this time around.

That alone was cause for celebrating. After all of the stress and trouble of the last few days, Isaac had needed to get out and do something fun, and more importantly, someone. Or maybe a few people. Isaac had long since learned to trust the part of himself that needed that kind of attention, and it had been screaming at him for days. Hannah and Jackson both had school, so Isaac was looking forward to getting out on his own.

By the time he left Jackson’s on Wednesday night, the whole ‘death omen’ thing had mostly faded to the back of his mind, but he did use it to get a couple free drinks from a pair of amused girls. Got him a little bit more than that, even. Fooling around in a dark corner of the club with two pretty girls was definitely a nice way to spend an evening, but it turned out they were more interested in each other than in Isaac, so he moved on. Isaac ended up staying out way too late with a cute redhead with a thick Irish accent and a wicked tongue. She had a dark sense of humor, a quick laugh, and a knack for picking locks. They spent most of the night on the roof of the club with a “borrowed” bottle of champagne.

After getting chewed out by Jackson for waking him up by coming home too late Wednesday night--early Thursday morning--Isaac really had tried to be better Thursday night. But even trying to keep track of the time, Isaac still found himself getting back to Jackson’s closer to sunrise than midnight.

Isaac really had planned on leaving by one o’clock at the latest, but then this guy with the most amazing tattoos had bought two drinks and an hour of Isaac’s time, explaining the various images that were visible and hinting at ones that weren’t. He had half-convinced Isaac to come home with him and take him up on his offer to show Isaac the rest of his tattoos, but Isaac had recovered some of his resolve and (after getting the guy’s phone number and a knee-weakening kiss) had politely declined. Then, just as he had finished what he was sure would be his last drink, Isaac’s favorite song came on, and he’d only have to stay five minutes to hear it, but there was this girl who told him she’d been wanting to dance with him all night, and before Isaac realized it the music was being turned off and the lights were being turned back on.

Jackson was awake and just getting out of the shower by the time Isaac got back and stumbled, exhausted but thoroughly pleased, into bed on Friday morning.

“No,” Jackson said firmly, walking into the room a few minutes later. He was wearing his school uniform pants and dress shirt, which he was in the process of buttoning up. “You do not get to sleep in my bed smelling like you nearly-but-didn’t-quite fuck six different people while in a pool of cheap whiskey mixed with cheaper cider. Out.”

Isaac had never particularly had a thing for uniforms before--the way they tried to turn rowdy teens into Stepford clones always kind of creeped him out--but Jackson somehow managed to make it work. Maybe it was the way he always stood out no matter what. Plus the tight white Oxford was kinda really doing it for Isaac right now. Especially with the tie that was painstakingly matched to the crest on Jackson’s jacket. If would be so much fun to just grab that tie and--
“Are you even listening to me?” Jackson asked before swatting the back of Isaac’s head with said tie. Isaac managed a few more moments of fantasy as he watched Jackson tie it around his neck with practiced ease, still thinking how easy it would be to pull him down onto the bed by it and--

“Isaac, could you just pay attention for like two fucking seconds--”

Wow, Jackson was seriously cranky this morning. This was beginning to become a trend… Isaac decided that placation might be the best strategy. “So I’ll wash the sheets while you’re at school.”

“No, you won’t,” Jackson snapped. “You’ll sleep all day, like you did yesterday and the day before, and then I’ll have to do it once I get back. So get. Out.”

Isaac made sure to make lots of tired, complaining noises as he dragged himself out of bed and melted onto the floor, where he continued to lie face down.

Jackson made an exasperated sound. Some of his irritation seemed to sort of fizzle out.

“You can sleep in the bed if you take a shower.”

“Can’t stand up that long.”

“So take a bath.”

“Do you want me to drown?”

“Right now? Kind of.”

“Hey, words hurt.”

“A punch in the face hurts more, and you’re on your way there.”

“What’s the domestic violence hotline number in London?”

“0-800-F-U-C-K-Y-O--”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” said Isaac dismissively. “This is why you should come out with me. Then you wouldn’t be all uptight and cranky and also you’d be there to make me leave in time for you to get your beauty sleep or whatever, which I’m pretty sure you’re not getting anyway.” Isaac added that last bit as he rolled over onto his back and looked up, finally noticing how tired Jackson looked. Seriously, Isaac was the one staying out all night, so why had Jackson looked like he was coming down with something the last few days?

Before Isaac could say anything, Jackson glanced at a nearby clock and swore. “I’m fucking late. Either shower or wash the sheets after, I don’t give a shit. I have to go.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” said Isaac as Jackson gathered up his things. “I didn’t mean to screw up your morning. Let me make it up to you tonight, okay? Come out for one drink, then we’ll come back and watch more Breaking Bad. I promise.”

“Have a wonderful day,” said Jackson, voice dripping with a level of sarcasm only someone who’d been living in Britain could manage.

The door slammed before Isaac had the chance to respond. He frowned. Even for Jackson, that was harsh.

“You, too,” Isaac murmured to the silent flat.
Since the bed wasn’t an option, Isaac seriously considered taking a quick nap on the floor (he was already there, after all), but decided that a shower would be more satisfying in the long run.

He also decided that it was probably time that he unpacked the bag he had taken to the Bristows’ house and return all the books to the library that he wasn’t using anymore. The last thing he needed was to rack up a bunch of late fees on Jackson’s card.

So after his shower, Isaac threw the bedding in the wash (for the second time in a week, even though he’d only lain in the bed for a few minutes), and with it almost all of his clothes. He hadn’t realized how long it had been since he’d bothered doing his own laundry.

Next on his list of errands, Isaac filled his bag with the books he wouldn’t be needing anymore and headed to the library (feeling a little like Santa, climbing out the window with a heavy duffel, since Jackson hadn’t left Isaac the keys to the flat). After the library was a trip to the grocery store, since a quick look in the fridge had shown that Jackson hadn’t done more than order takeout since the weekend.

The washing machine was finished by the time Isaac crawled back in the window (and retrieved the groceries from where he’d left them outside Jackson’s door. He hadn’t been crazy enough to try carrying them in through the window). He had some trouble finding places to hang everything, but he was proud of himself for managing to unfold the wire rack thing by himself with minimal trouble.

Not bad for a day’s work, and running on next-to-no sleep.

Luckily Isaac had time for a nice long nap while everything dried, so he grabbed the blanket from the bed and promptly passed out on the couch.

His dreams were somewhat disjointed (as nap dreams often were), but the main theme was distinctly Jackson-y. Pleasant scenes involving Jackson’s mouth were featured significantly, especially in relation to kissing. Isaac’s imagination was aided by the fact that Isaac had already stolen several kisses from Jackson in real life, but his subconscious mind was kind enough to dream up what it might be like if Jackson actually kissed back. It also came up with some scenarios involving parts of Jackson that Isaac hadn’t had the pleasure of getting to know yet...

Isaac woke feeling disoriented, but surprisingly well-rested (with a bit of extra energy, actually, thanks to his dreams). Even after checking the time and reassuring himself that Jackson was still at school, Isaac felt a lingering sense of surprise that Jackson wasn’t there. He chalked it up to dream logic and got up to check if any of the laundry was dry yet.

How a country could become a world superpower and not have dryers was beyond him.

The sheets were still sort of damp, but at least most of his clothes were dry enough to put away in the closet. Isaac had gone back to living out of his duffel since getting back from the Bristows’, simply for the sake of convenience, but it was nice to be moving back in again.

When Isaac opened the closet doors, though, he saw that Jackson’s werewolf emergency kit bag had been pulled forward on the shelf. Weird. Maybe Jackson had been doing some rearranging while Isaac was gone.

Isaac knelt down to pull the bag out and check if Jackson had stored anything behind it. As the contents of the bag shifted, Isaac realized too late that the bag wasn’t zipped up all the way. A small black case fell out and popped open when it hit the ground, spilling its contents everywhere.
“Oh shit!” Isaac exclaimed as he watched the wolfsbane tranqs roll and scatter all over the floor. He carefully scrambled to grab them all and put them back in the case. However, after grabbing all the ones he could find, there still seemed to be some missing. Isaac checked under the bed, under the dresser, even searched out in the living room on the off chance that the tranqs had managed to escape all the way out the bedroom door, but he couldn’t find any more.

Isaac wondered if maybe that was really all the tranqs, but he was pretty sure that the case was decidedly less full than it had been before. It wasn’t like Isaac had thought to count how many tranqs had been in there, but he was pretty sure he would’ve noticed if it had been half empty when he’d come across it last week.

At the time, Isaac hadn’t thought anything of it--sometimes werewolves needed a little unconventional help during full moons to keep it together--but… there hadn’t been a full moon between then and now. And if Jackson actually needed these for that, wouldn’t they be at his den, with his pack, where he spent every full moon?

Surely Jackson wouldn’t… But the evidence was hard to ignore. It would explain Jackson looking so sick the last few days, his behavior…

Isaac smacked his forehead with his open palm. “Fucking idiot,” he muttered. No wonder Jackson hadn’t said anything about Isaac kissing him that night after he’d gotten back from the hunt: Jackson had probably been drugged out of his friggin’ mind. He probably hadn’t even realized what had been happening, let alone remembered it after the fact.

Isaac wanted to crawl in a hole. He couldn’t believe he’d taken advantage of Jackson like that. Even if he hadn’t known that Jackson had drugged himself with wolfsbane, Isaac should’ve noticed something was wrong. But he’d been too wrapped up in everything that had happened--with the hunters, with the monster--to pay attention to what was happening with Jackson.

Jackson had even told Isaac that he “missed having a way not to give a shit” that night they had hung out with Zach. Isaac had found the tranqs before that, but still hadn’t really put the pieces together. He’d assumed they were for full moons, for maintaining control, not… recreational use.

Isaac considered the slim syringe in his hand; the yellow wolfsbane seemed to give off a sickly glow in the afternoon sunlight, and Isaac’s stomach turned just looking at it. How could Jackson even think about using something that was literally poison to him? Maybe he didn’t know Jackson as well as he thought he did...

One thing was for sure: Isaac wasn’t going to let Jackson stay home alone tonight. Isaac wasn’t even going to let Jackson out of his sight if he could help it, at least not until he’d had time to confront Jackson about why he was using fucking poison like he was the lycanthropic version of a 1950s housewife on Valium or something and tell him… well, tell him whatever Isaac was about to do with the tranqs. Because there was no way Isaac was just going to leave them there this time.

He just didn’t know what he was going to do with them yet.

Just as he was picking up his phone to call Chris and ask about safe disposal of wolfsbane, Hannah called.

“Ask Puss if I can come up,” Hannah said before Isaac could even greet her.

“Hello to you, too.”

“Hi. Now ask him. I’m outside.”
“He’s not here,” said Isaac, rolling the syringe absently in his palm.

“Well then, where is he? I need to talk to him.”

“I don’t…”

“Wolf, it’s important.”

Isaac doubted Hannah would be waiting outside Jackson’s flat, asking to see him in that tone, if it wasn’t. He sighed. “All right, I’ll find out. Stay there, I’ll be right down.”

Isaac hung up and looked down at the poison in his hand, still considering his options.

Well, Isaac was of the opinion that it was better to ask forgiveness than permission...

It was a nice ritual, doing homework with Zach, and one they hadn’t done in a while. Jackson had no illusions about the fact that Zach had most likely invited Jackson to meet him at the nearest Caffè Nero because he was worried about Jackson, but Jackson was glad he’d agreed to come. Especially because checking the text invitation from Zach had inadvertently caused Jackson to check the most recent texts he had sent to Isaac.

Texts he didn’t remember sending…

Me: Don’t do this okay
Me: Just
Me: Come home already
Me: Please

Discovering the forgotten texts had left Jackson feeling sick with embarrassment. Could he have sounded more pathetic? Reading over them, Jackson had been genuinely surprised that Isaac hadn’t given him shit about how melodramatic they were. It was out of character for Isaac to just let something like that go without comment.

Zach’s quiet presence and the white noise of murmuring voices and coffee and tea mugs clinking on saucers (Jackson had gotten much better about this kind of thing since Isaac had trained him with the whisper technique) soothed Jackson’s anxiety, though, and soon Jackson was making good progress on his homework.

Until his pocket buzzed.

Isaac <3: When are we going out?

Jackson sighed deeply. Apparently Isaac intended to make good on his threat to get Jackson to go out for a drink with him tonight.

Another buzz.

Isaac <3: Gotta make sure I make time to get all dolled up

Jackson snorted. He wasn’t in the mood for this. Without responding, he set his phone on the table, screen side down. Isaac could wait.

But Jackson’s phone buzzed again. And again. After the fourth message notification, Zach looked up and raised an eyebrow at Jackson inquiringly. Jackson ignored both Zach and the phone.
It buzzed a fifth time, then a sixth.

“Someone’s popular today,” Zach said archly. Like he knew exactly who was texting Jackson. Who else would it be, anyway?

Jackson resisted the very strong urge to tell Zach to shut it. He’d been enough of a dick to Zach lately. The guy deserved a pass. As long as he didn’t push it.

Resigned to the onslaught of texts, Jackson finally gave up and picked up his phone again.

Isaac <3: Seriously though clubbing tonight right?
Isaac <3: I washed the sheets AND took a shower
Isaac <3: So your bed smells fantastic
Isaac <3: Thought you’d want to know
Isaac <3: What are you doing?
Isaac <3: ?
Isaac <3: ???
Isaac <3: ????????

Jackson glared down at his phone. It was no use: Isaac clearly wasn’t going to stop until Jackson answered. He gritted his teeth and began typing.

Me: Out with Zach

There was a pause of about thirty seconds—just long enough to get Jackson’s hopes up that his response might have made Isaac stop—before Isaac texted again.

Isaac <3: … when will you be done?
Me: Is this about going out later?
Isaac <3: No but I’m glad you remembered

Jackson rolled his eyes at his phone, trying to mentally transmit the expression to Isaac in some way.

Me: I never said I’d go
Isaac <3: So you’re gonna be a while?
Me: Maybe

The pause before Isaac’s next text was longer, to the point where Jackson almost thought that that would be the end of it and he could get back to studying. Then his phone buzzed yet again.

Isaac <3: ...can I come say hi?

‘Say hi’ probably meant ‘distract Jackson from his homework in some obnoxious way,’ but since the texting was already obnoxiously distracting Jackson, he decided there was no point in saying no.

Me: If you want
Isaac <3: Where are you?
Me: Coffee
Isaac <3: That narrows it down

It wasn’t Jackson’s problem that Isaac was being annoying. Well, it was, but he didn’t have to participate or encourage it. If Isaac really wanted to find them, he would. Jackson had learned that the hard way.
A few seconds later, Zach took his own phone out of his pocket, tapped out a brief pattern with his thumbs, and put it away. A few seconds after that, Jackson’s phone went off again.

Isaac <3: Be there in five

Jackson gave Zach a pointed look. “You didn’t.”

“I’m not going to help you hide from your boyfriend.”

“He’s not--”

“There’s a heart next to his name in your phone.”

“What?” Jackson flushed. “He’s the one who put his name in there!”

“Uh-huh,” said Zach skeptically. “Even if that’s the case, I suspect it is well within your power to edit your contacts list. You should’ve seen how he put his name in my phone before I changed it.”

“I didn’t know it was a heart,” Jackson insisted. “I thought he was just being weird. That’s what he does.”

“How can you not know that less-than-three is a heart? Do you use the internet at all?”

“Of course I use the--”

“And for that matter, all you’d have to do is turn your phone to the side to see it. See?” He took Jackson’s phone from him and turned it to the side to emphasize his point. “Christ.”

Jackson snatched his phone back. “Zach, just--”

“Holy shit,” Zach said suddenly, cutting Jackson off. His tone was startled, breathless.

He was staring at the front door to the coffee shop. Jackson followed his gaze to see Isaac walking in. At first, Jackson couldn’t understand why Zach would be reacting to Isaac that way. Then he saw the girl standing next to Isaac. Hannah. Of course. What the hell was she doing here?

Jackson watched Zach’s eyes widen at the sight of Hannah. His muscles were stiff, body frozen like a deer in the fucking headlights, heart pounding. The effect she had on him made Jackson uneasy. Could Zach somehow tell she was a hunter?

She saw them before Isaac—who was busy unwinding his fucking ridiculous scarf--did, and said something to Isaac. He looked up and said something back, before ushering her towards the table.

“Jackson, don’t be mad,” Isaac said as they walked up, “but Hannah wanted to talk to you.”

Jackson wasn’t mad, though. Oh, no. He was furious. Jackson might have appreciated how Hannah had stood up for Isaac back in the graveyard, but that didn’t mean he had changed his mind about her being in his pack’s territory, and it certainly didn’t mean that he was okay with her being around any of his packmates. Isaac had known Jackson was with Zach, and he had still thought it would be a good idea to bring her here?

At least Isaac had the decency to look guilty about it.

Even though Hannah had supposedly come to talk to Jackson, she wasn’t even pretending to look at him. Her attention was focused absolutely on Jackson’s magnetically attractive packmate. Who was staring back at her. So, not instincts; hormones. Brilliant.
Hannah stayed standing while Isaac made himself comfortable in the chair across from Jackson on Zach’s other side. His expression was slowly turning into something like a fascinated half-grin, looking between Hannah and Zach like he was watching a movie, eagerly waiting to see what would happen next.

“Hiya, Jackson.” Hannah finally looked at him, flashing a dazzling smile his way. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is my brother Zach,” said Jackson, without thinking. All of his packmates usually referred to each other as siblings, but seeing as how Jackson was American and he and Zach looked nothing like each other, it might spark more questions from Hannah than Jackson wanted to answer at the moment.

“Older brother,” clarified Zach, who seemed eager to come off as mature and sophisticated as possible. Jackson knew Zach was a little self-conscious about being shorter and younger-looking than he would’ve liked to be, especially since he was in college.

The corner of Hannah’s mouth curled into a pleased smirk as she looked back at Zach. “You must be the pretty wolf-boy Isaac’s been going on about, then. Nice to meet you, Mowgli.”

“Yeah,” said Zach, turning a nervous shade of pink that clashed terribly with his hair. “You, er, you, too. Very nice.”

“You had something you wanted to say?” Jackson asked, more in the interest of cutting off whatever was happening than out of any desire to hear whatever it was she had come to say to him.

“Yes.” Hannah finally focused completely on Jackson, and he found the weight of her attention intimidating enough that he almost wished she would go back to looking at Zach. She was going to make a formidable hunter someday. “I wanted to apologize for my family’s behavior. Nothing that happened on Sunday night was your fault and it wasn’t fair of my family to dismiss your input and refuse to let you come back to help.”

Jackson blinked at Hannah. That wasn’t what he had expected at all. So it hadn’t been Isaac’s idea to leave him at home, after all. Jackson couldn’t really say he was surprised, but hearing it made him strangely relieved. Thinking that Isaac would just decide to ditch him like that had upset him more than he wanted to admit to himself.

But Hannah wasn’t done. “And I’m sorry you both took the blame for something that was beyond your control. I’m sorry I didn’t try harder to make George see that no one was at fault. Or maybe everyone was, I don’t know. But it’s in the past now and the only thing we can do is try to move forward.”

Jackson could tell she was trying to pick her words carefully. He wasn’t sure if she had just been taught not to talk about this kind of stuff in public or if Isaac had warned her not to use the word that started with ‘H’ and sometimes involved the suffix ‘er’ in front of Zach--Jackson really needed to ask what Isaac had been doing “going on about” Zach to a hunter anyway, and what that had entailed--or if Hannah was just really good at reading situations, but he appreciated it.

After seeing her compared to her family, Jackson understood what Isaac had meant when he had said that she wasn’t a threat. Not the way George or Wendy were, anyway. If there was a hunter that could possibly become an ally to werewolves, it would probably be Hannah, Jackson thought grudgingly. Maybe her formidable-ness could work in their favor.

As if she could sense his train of thought, Hannah smiled at Jackson. “So, could we maybe try
again?” She extended her hand the way she had done the first time she’d met Jackson at his flat. “I’m Hannah. You must be the infamous Jackson.”

Jackson considered her for a long moment. He didn’t even need to listen to her steady heartbeat to tell that she was being genuine. He took her hand.

“I’ve heard a lot of good things from Isaac about you,” Jackson admitted, shaking her hand. Hannah’s smile brightened just a bit more and Jackson realized how this couldn’t be an easy situation for her either.

“Likewise.” Hannah gently squeezed Jackson’s hand once before releasing. She then cleared her throat and tucked her abundant curls behind her ears, where they immediately bounced right back to where they’d been before. “Anyway, I should be going. Got a million things to do tonight, just needed to say my piece to Puss. Aaand now I have and now I’m off.”

She ruffled Isaac’s curls affectionately and smiled at the other two sitting at the table, her dark eyes lingering on Zach just a moment longer. “Bye, puppies.” She gave a short wave and was out the door.

“Puss?” Zach asked Jackson as soon as Hannah was gone.

“Don’t ask me about that, or the apology, and I won’t ask you about the complete ass you just made of yourself.”

“...Fine.” Zach switched to Isaac. “You’ve been going on about me to that girl?”

Isaac pretended to think about it. “Umm… No. Not really.” He gave Zach a look that was supposed to be innocent. “I’m going to grab a drink. Anybody want anything?”

Zach grabbed Isaac’s arm before he could stand up. “If you leave this table before you tell me what you’ve told that girl about me, I will start growing lichen cultures in your bed and make sure that you never get a good night’s sleep again.”

Before Jackson could complain that it was his bed, too, Isaac gave up the act.

“Oh, with Hannah. Yeah, we’ve talked a lot about you. But I’ve only been telling her the terrible things, so you’re safe.”

“God help you if you ruin this for me, Isaac,” said Zach.

“Ruin what?” Isaac asked, still trying to play innocent.

Zach scoffed. “Please, we are not in primary school. I at least am mature enough to admit when I’m attracted to someone.”

Jackson’s ears burned, but he refused to be baited and suddenly became very invested in his schoolwork.

Isaac laughed. “Why would I ruin it? This is awesome. You guys would be the most gorgeous couple ever.”

“Rodge and Bronagh might fight you on that one,” said Zach.

“Who?”

“Other pack,” Jackson said shortly. “Zach, didn’t you have to go?”
“Not until I hear more about Hannah. She called me ‘wolf-boy.’ How does she know about werewolves? I can tell she isn’t one.”

Now that he knew for sure that Zach was unaware of Hannah’s hunter affiliations, Jackson wanted to keep it that way.

“Isaac has a big mouth,” Jackson said evasively, preempting Isaac with a swift kick to his shin.

There was a short beat where Isaac gave Jackson a quizzical look before he recovered and said with a cocky grin, “You should let me show you how big sometime.”

As usual, Jackson didn’t have a response, so he just settled for meeting Isaac’s grin with a glare and worked on keeping his pulse steady. He told himself it was just because Isaac was saying something like that in public where anyone could hear. Blue eyes regarded Jackson curiously for another second--Jackson could practically see Isaac wondering why Jackson was trying so hard to keep Zach in the dark--before turning back to Zach.

“How already knew about werewolves.” Isaac shrugged. “And she shares my appreciation for pretty things. I needed someone to swoon over you with me since Jackson wouldn’t.”

Zach looked back towards the door a bit wistfully. “There was swooning involved?”

Jackson couldn’t believe what was happening. Zach couldn’t be attracted to Hannah. That would literally be the worst thing ever. Even if she liked him back, that would be the epitome of a doomed relationship. It wasn’t like Zach could exactly bring her home to meet his parents...

No. Jackson needed to cut this off before Zach started to obsess over her the way he always did over girls that he liked.

“Isaac, didn’t you say she was moving?” Jackson attempted to kick Isaac’s shin again as a warning to play along, but Isaac had moved his legs.

Isaac arched his eyebrow in a challenge that Jackson took to mean ‘And what will you give me if I play along?’ to which Jackson responded with a subtle look that he hope conveyed, ‘I won’t kick your ass later’.

“Uh, yeah,” said Isaac. “Study abroad in Antarctica. No phone or Internet access except for emergencies. Sorry, man.”

Jackson shot Isaac a look for his completely unconvincing performance. Zach didn’t look terribly convinced either, but he apparently decided to let the matter drop. Thank God.

“Right,” Zach said reluctantly as he began packing up his things. “I really do have to go. Project meeting with some classmates, and they’re hopeless without me.”

Jackson was about to say goodbye when Zach paused for a moment.

“Do you think you might… bring her round again?” he asked Isaac tentatively. “Before she moves to Antarctica, of course.”

Oh, for the love of…. Jackson was going to kill Isaac later.

Isaac’s eyes darted to Jackson before he answered. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Yep. Jackson was definitely going to kill Isaac.
“Brilliant,” said Zach. A small, dreamy sort of smile turned up the corner of his mouth. A familiar pretty-girl-related smile that filled Jackson with a sense of foreboding.

“Oh, and Jack,” Zach added as he slung his bag over his shoulder, “about that thing we were talking about before?”

Jackson could only assume Zach was back on the heart-next-to-Isaac’s-name thing.

“Yeah?” he said reluctantly.

“It means something. You need to figure out what it means to you.”

Jackson shifted uncomfortably. Even if he’d been able to think of something to say in response, he wouldn’t be able to say it around Isaac. Zach had guaranteed himself the last word. Bastard.

The second Zach was out the door, Isaac looked back at Jackson, a little pityingly. “Moving? Oh Jackson, did you think that would really put him off? He’s clearly got it bad.”

“He doesn’t even know her,” Jackson grumbled. “He only saw her for like three minutes!”

“So?” Isaac shrugged. “It’ll be fine. Did you see how good they look together?”

“Because that’s how it works,” Jackson said flatly.

“Lighten up, it’s cute.” Isaac laughed.

“Yeah, it’s all cute and funny until someone gets shot with a crossbow.”

“He’s practically human.”

“He’s half wolf,” Jackson said seriously. “He grew up in a pack. Have you asked the hunters what their policy on people like him is?”

“No, but--”

“Isaac. Don’t get involved.”

“Honestly, if you want to keep them away from each other, you should’ve just told him she’s a hunter.”

Jackson snorted. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.”

“Why not?” said Isaac. “I’m pretty sure that would encourage him to keep his distance.”

“You can’t figure out why I don’t want someone from my pack to know I’m hanging out with hunters?”

“But Zach’s cool,” Isaac insisted. “He would understand if you explained.”

“Sure, he would understand,” said Jackson. “Then he’d run straight to my alpha. No, Isaac, we’re not telling him.”

“Okay, it’s your call. Now can we please go somewhere with loud music and people who want to try to get me drunk?”

“Why is me coming out with you tonight so important?” said Jackson. “If you want to hook up
with strangers, won’t it be easier if I’m not there?”

“Easier, maybe, but I want to hang out with you.”

“So let’s hang out at home.”

“No,” Isaac said a little too quickly. “You need to get out of the flat”--Jackson appreciated Isaac’s use of the word, if not his tone--”more often. Have some fun.”

“And if I don’t have fun tonight?”

“We can go back and watch Breaking Bad and I’ll never make you come out with me again. I promise.”

What would it take to make this guy take the hint? This was not Jackson’s scene. If it ever had been, it certainly wasn’t anymore. He didn’t know why Isaac kept dragging him out like this, or rather, why Jackson kept letting himself be dragged out.

Because even Jackson wasn’t stubborn enough to pretend like he couldn’t have stayed home after he had changed and dropped off his stuff if he had really wanted to. Isaac wasn’t going to force him. How could he?

So why was Jackson standing here, in a club, watching some girls grind against each other while looking his way, hoping to catch his attention, probably wanting him to come over and dance with them?

Or maybe they were just looking at Isaac. Everyone seemed to be looking at Isaac, even though Jackson knew that was literally impossible.

Isaac, who hadn’t left Jackson’s side at all, even accompanying Jackson to the bar instead of pulling his usual disappearing act the second they walked through the door.


Despite practically gluing himself to Jackson’s side, Isaac hadn’t even tried his little whispering trick once, even though it seemed like he had something to say.

“Look, if whatever’s going on with you is about Hannah earlier,” Jackson whispered, “it’s fine. And if you’re going to be hanging out with her more, that’s fine, too.” Jackson impressed himself by almost sort of meaning it. “As long as it’s not at their place,” he amended quickly. “Or around Zach. He’s impressionable and you’re already a bad enough influence.”

“I doubt Zach’d want you talking about him like he’s a kid,” Isaac whispered back. “He’d probably say the same thing about you. He’s an adult, remember?”

Jackson grudgingly admitted internally that Isaac had a good point, but didn’t say so out loud.

“Yeah, well, adults do stupid shit all the time,” said Jackson. “Especially when they’re--”

Isaac cut him off. “Shut up and dance with me.”

“No,” Jackson said automatically. By his count, this was the fourth time that night Isaac had tried to get Jackson to dance with him.

The frown Isaac gave Jackson this time had an edge of frustration to it. What did Isaac expect,
though? That after saying no every single time Isaac asked, Jackson would suddenly change his mind?

“Give me one good reason why not,” said Isaac.

Irritated now by Isaac’s persistence, Jackson looked him squarely in the eye and said, “Because I don’t want to.”

The words sounded harsher out loud than Jackson had intended, but Isaac looked more resigned than offended. He heaved an exaggerated sigh of disappointment, then, unexpectedly, smiled.

“Fair enough. Guess I should go bark up a different tree.”

Jackson snorted. “Not literally, I hope.”

Isaac’s eye-roll didn’t have its usual air of playfulness and Jackson almost missed it; he wasn’t even sure if he was supposed to have seen it. It gave Jackson a bad feeling, but he couldn’t pin down why exactly.

The feeling only got worse when Isaac was almost instantly swept up in the madness on the dancefloor. He barely spared Jackson a backward glance before pairing up with the nearest willing dance partner (and there were many).

I promise.

Jackson snorted in disgust at the memory of those words juxtaposed with what he was looking at. One drink, Isaac had said, and if Jackson didn’t have fun they’d go back to Jackson’s flat. And now Isaac’s attention seemed to be focused exclusively on the insanely attractive girl who had basically fallen into his arms. It was like the second Jackson was out of Isaac’s sight, he was out of Isaac’s mind as well. Typical Isaac: only conscious of whatever was in front of him at the time. Like a friggin’ dog.

For all his talk about making things up to Jackson and wanting to hang out with him, Isaac was (unsurprisingly) making things worse.

It had been a mistake to let Isaac drag him out to the club. The evening could only go downhill from here. Jackson might as well go home and get an early start on his homework or try to get some sleep without Isaac hanging all over him in bed. Jackson cursed to himself, stood, downed the rest of his drink in one swig, and pulled on his coat.

“Hey, where’re you going?”

Jackson turned around to find Isaac standing a few feet away, head cocked to the side in confusion.

“Home,” Jackson said irritably. “Where the hell else would I be going?”

Isaac frowned. “You ditching me?”

Jackson narrowed his eyes at Isaac. The fucking nerve of that asshole!

“Me? Ditch you?” He scoffed. “I’m surprised you even made it over here with that chick’s ass stuck to you like that. You should probably get back there.”

“What—her?” Isaac looked back over at the dance floor where the girl he’d been dancing with was pouting, and shrugged. “She’ll be fine without me. Body like that? I give her five minutes before
someone else is buying her a drink, tops.”

“Dude, are you insane? She’s the hottest girl in here,” said Jackson. “Go home with her before someone else does.”

“I don’t wanna go home with her,” said Isaac, like Jackson was being silly. “Breaking Bad tonight, remember?”

Jackson’s chest felt tight with anger and irritation. Was Isaac serious? Why would he practically dry-hump a gorgeous girl like that and then suddenly ditch her to go home and watch TV with Jackson? Nothing Isaac did ever made sense!

“What the fuck is your game, Lahey?” Jackson growled, voice not loud but aggressive.

Isaac looked taken aback. “My game?”

“Don’t play dumb, asshole,” said Jackson. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Isaac considered Jackson for a moment before answering calmly, “Most games take at least two people to play.”

“I’m not interested in playing,” said Jackson vehemently.

“No?” said Isaac, a note of irritation seeping into his tone. “How can someone as smart as you be so fucking oblivious? You are playing, Jackson. Coming to clubs with me? Letting me sleep in your bed, comfort you, flirt with you? Letting me kiss you, for fuck’s sake, on more than one occasion, and barely saying a word about it? You don’t get to strut out on the field with all your gear on and act like you thought you were going to a picnic or some shit.”

“I’m not--” Jackson started to protest, but Isaac caught the front of his shirt in one fist and dragged him in for a kiss. This time it wasn’t soft or chaste. It was insistent, deep, demanding, and though Jackson didn’t actively accept the kiss, he didn’t reject it either. The kiss was intended to prove a point, and Jackson realized only belatedly that the fact that he didn’t pull away from it proved Isaac’s point for him.

Jackson was speechless--hell, he was breathless--when Isaac broke the kiss and let go of his shirt.

“Clear enough for you?” Isaac whispered calmly. “Let me spell it out, just in case.”

Isaac moved his mouth close to Jackson’s ear and said lowly, “We can fuck, if you want. I want to. Bad. I’ve wanted to for a long time.” The words and the tone in which Isaac said them made Jackson shiver and his eyes slide closed. “Or we can not fuck, and you can kick me out of your bed. Or we can do anything in between.”

Jackson opened his mouth to speak, but no words came, and Isaac continued. “But you can’t keep pretending that you don’t know what’s going on and then get pissed at me for having fun. I’m gonna have fun no matter what. I need to. And you need to decide whether I have fun with you. It’s okay if you’re not interested. But I can only go for so long without someone who is.”

Isaac stepped back out of Jackson’s space. Jackson clenched his jaw, frustrated, embarrassed, and--if he were honest--more than a little turned on in spite of himself.

“Moment of truth, then,” said Isaac. “Do you really want me to go home with her? ‘Cause I think those five minutes are almost up.”
MINOR TRIGGER WARNING: Mentions of drug use.

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Oh man, you guys have no idea how long we've been waiting to post this chapter! The last scene was drafted a long time ago, and it's one of our favorites. Can't wait to hear what you guys think of it! Thanks again so much for all of your kudos, comments, and just for reading in general :)

Savenna Cloverunner
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: EVERYTHING HITS AT ONCE (Spoon)

But I can still change my mind tonight.
I gotta change my mind somehow.
I go to sleep alone but think that you’re next to me.
Everything hits at once tonight.

Jackson couldn’t answer. Even if he’d had any idea what he wanted to say, he wouldn’t have been able to; his throat was tight, his heart was pounding in his chest... He didn’t know how he felt, and he didn’t have time to figure it out before Isaac needed him to make a decision.

He could still feel the pressure of Isaac’s lips on his, and there was an ache in the pit of his stomach urging him to get more. He could take Isaac home, they could do as much or as little as Jackson wanted. They could have fun, like Isaac wanted to.
It was undeniable: Jackson was interested.

He was also terrified.

Isaac might have kissed Jackson a couple of times, but Jackson hadn’t really considered Isaac’s invasion of his bed and personal space as serious advances. He’d just figured it was Isaac being Isaac, trying to get a reaction out of Jackson for fun. Jackson had never been told so bluntly that someone wanted to sleep with him, and definitely not by a guy. Isaac propositioning him in the middle of a dark room full of strangers while he was covered in some random girl’s pheromones was a little too much for Jackson to process. His fear and discomfort overwhelmed the excitement and curiosity in him.

Maybe Jackson didn’t want Isaac to go home with the girl. Maybe he really, really didn’t want that. But he wasn’t ready to deal with what telling Isaac not to go home with her would mean.

“Okay,” said Isaac after Jackson’s silence had stretched on for about ten seconds. “I’ll see you later.”

He didn’t sound angry or annoyed or even particularly disappointed, and Jackson wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Isaac even gave him a small smile and waved goodnight before he returned to the dancefloor and found the girl again.

Jackson shook his head to clear it, buttoned his coat, and headed out into the damp, chilly night.

At first, he intended to go home. He even got as far as the top of his street. But then he saw the rest of the night ahead of him unfold in his mind: a cold flat, an empty bed, silence... Jackson didn’t even need to imagine it; he had lived it during those nights that Isaac had been with the Bristows, and he didn’t want to go back to it.

He had become too dependent on Isaac always being there. Isaac’s presence had spoiled Jackson. Before, even the few times that Isaac had stayed out late clubbing and hooking up with strangers, Jackson had known he’d be back by morning. But for whatever reason, things had changed after Isaac had come back from the last night of the hunt. Staying out all night, stumbling in just as Jackson was leaving for school, after not coming home at all for more than twenty-four hours just a few days before? Jackson couldn’t decide if Isaac was being intentionally spiteful, or just incredibly thoughtless, but either way, Jackson wasn’t going to be the one left alone tonight. Not this time.

He didn’t need Isaac. Let Isaac go screw whoever he wanted to. Jackson changed course and headed for the den. He had other people in his life. He had a whole pack of them, in fact. A pack that he’d been avoiding way too much lately, especially Rodge and Zach, not to mention Josie. Jackson had felt bad enough just having Isaac around when he wasn’t supposed to, but using the “only in case of emergencies and even then be extremely careful” tranquilizers that Deaton had given him for the full moon, which Josie had specifically forbidden him to use “under any circumstances, I don’t care what that bloody idiot emissary told you,” had made him feel even worse.

He needed to come clean. He needed to tell Josie the truth, about everything. Whatever the consequences would be, Rodge was right: it was better to just get it over with.

By the time he got to the top of the den’s street, Jackson had almost convinced himself that he was actually going to do it; that he would be fine when Josie inevitably kicked Isaac out of Holborn, that Jackson could go back to the way things had been before and not mind at all, that things might
even be better that way.

Still, when he found himself standing on the flat’s stoop, Jackson knew, despite how angry he was with Isaac, he wasn’t going to say anything to Josie. At least not tonight.

Eva greeted him at the door, sleepy but happy to see him. Jackson had a key, but he couldn’t think of a single time that he’d actually used it. Someone was always at least half awake in the den, no matter what time of day or night, and what with werewolf hearing, they’d know it was him before he even got to the top step and let him in.

“Hiya, Jack,” Eva said with a smile, and gave him an unexpected hug. Jackson was more receptive to it than he would’ve thought. “Everything all right?”

Jackson nodded. He could tell that Eva didn’t entirely believe him, but she was kind enough not to prod him, and he was very grateful for that.

“You look exhausted,” said Eva. “Rodge and Bronagh are out for the night. Why don’t you have a kip in their bed? They won’t mind.”

“Thanks, Eva,” said Jackson.

She smiled again and patted his shoulder before he climbed the stairs. It occurred to Jackson then that he had never been to Rodger’s room before. Despite being a part of the pack for months, Jackson had mostly spent his time at the den downstairs in the common areas or (once a month) the basement. But it was easy enough to find Rodger’s and Bronagh’s room by scent.

Jackson kicked off his shoes and crawled under their duvet, noting how Rodger’s and Bronagh’s scents combined pleasantly. Both of them were comforting smells to Jackson since they were both his packmates, but there was something about the two scents together that just...fit.

Sleep was elusive. As comfortable as his packmates’ bed was, Jackson couldn’t lie still. All he could think about was Isaac—the kiss, his words, the way he had looked dancing with that girl. Things might’ve worked out so differently if Jackson had just given Isaac the smallest sign that he didn’t want him to go home with her. Isaac belonged at Jackson’s flat. That’s just how things were now.

He must’ve drifted off to sleep eventually, because he was roused just before dawn by Rodger’s voice, low and hushed with a note of amusement in it. “I think I’ve found our prodigal son.”

Jackson made a sleepy, irritated sound and rolled away from them onto his stomach, hiding his face in a pillow. He was too tired to feel guilty about taking over the bed.

“Sleeps like an angel,” said Bronagh in her Northern Irish lilt. “You’d never guess what a hellion little Jack can be.”

Rodger chuckled. “Budge up, Jackie Boy,” he said, prodding Jackson’s side.

Jackson obeyed, sliding toward the other side of the bed so Rodger could lie down next to him.

“Where’m I meant to go, then?” said Bronagh, feigning offense. It made Jackson smile sleepily. Rodger and Bronagh were disgustedly perfect for each other.

Without warning, Rodger got his arm around Jackson’s waist and hauled him back so that there was space on Jackson’s other side for Bronagh. She slid in under the duvet and settled next to him. The bed was only just big enough for the three of them, and Rodger had to lie on his side to make it
work, but Jackson was surprisingly comfortable.

The nearness of his packmates caused a small ache to form in Jackson’s chest that he didn’t quite understand, and soon his eyes were stinging. Maybe it was just because he hadn’t slept, but…

“It’s all right, dear one,” Bronagh whispered soothingly near Jackson’s ear. Her fingers found his hair and smoothed over it, petting him. It brought up unwelcome memories of Isaac ‘fixing’ his hair incessantly. “Whatever’s troubling you, we’ll sort it out together.

Rodger’s large hand gripped Jackson’s shoulder in a gesture of support. “Get some sleep. Nobody likes Jack when he’s cranky.”

Jackson nodded and let Bronagh pull him close. He drifted back into sleep to the sound of her humming a lullaby.

When Jackson woke up again, sunlight was streaming through the East-facing windows.

“What time is it?” he mumbled to no one in particular.

“Time for you to shut it so you don’t wake my mate,” Rodger whispered from behind Jackson.

Hearing Rodger’s voice instead of Isaac’s momentarily disoriented Jackson. A sinking feeling settled in his stomach when he remembered their argument (or whatever it had been) from the previous night. He tried to pull the duvet up over his head and escape back into sleep, but Rodger got hold of his waist and dragged him from the bed and out of the room. Jackson only just managed to grab his shoes before Rodger closed the door behind them so Bronagh could sleep undisturbed.

“I’m still tired,” Jackson complained.

“So sleep in your own bed,” said Rodger, not unkindly. “Unless someone has taken it over completely now?”

Rodger was just teasing him, but Jackson frowned and looked away. He tried to imagine Isaac curled up in his bed, waiting for Jackson to come home, but all he could see was Isaac in that girl’s bed instead. It made his stomach turn. He knew he had no right to be so territorial about Isaac, but it still bothered him... which bothered him even more.

“Listen, pup,” said Rodger. Jackson didn’t even have it in him to be irritated about the patronizing term at that point. “Whatever’s happened between you and him, it can be mended.”

Jackson bristled. Despite his brief resolve to come clean about everything the night before, he didn’t want to talk about Isaac with Rodger. He didn’t want to talk about Isaac with anyone. What Jackson needed to do was talk to Isaac.

Rodger must have sensed that Jackson wasn’t going to offer up any more details than he already had, because he sighed deeply.

“Have it your way, then. Just… don’t wait much longer to tell Josie. She’s got a right to know, and she won’t thank you for keeping secrets.” He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “Particularly tall ones with who follow ridiculous Continental fashions and keep bad company,”
Rodger said meaningfully.

Jackson felt his ears burn. Rodger had clearly gotten a look at Isaac at some point, either before or after Jackson had admitted his name and what Isaac was doing in London. (Jackson found himself hoping that it was before; neither one of them had been in particularly good shape the past few days.) But when and why didn’t matter. Rodger might have seen Isaac, but, for whatever reason, he was still respecting Jackson’s decision to handle the situation on his own, which Jackson appreciated.

Rodger’s hand was heavy on Jackson’s shoulder when he patted him. Rodger ducked his head so he could make Jackson meet his eyes—How come everyone got to be taller than Jackson?—and said, “You don’t need a reason to come to us, Jack. You might not live here, but it’s still your home. All right?”

Jackson nodded half-heartedly and murmured a feeble “Thanks, Rodge” before putting on his coat. He said goodbye to his packmate and left the flat.

Isaac had gone home with Cara after all. He might’ve said he didn’t want to, but that hadn’t been entirely true. He had definitely wanted to, but there were other things he wanted more.

But Isaac needed those things (more like one particular ‘thing’) to want him too, and events of this past week—culminating in a particularly risky advance on Isaac’s part—had not left Isaac feeling very wanted by Jackson.

So what if Jackson had been a little worried when Isaac had been out with the hunters? That didn’t mean anything. People worried all the time about all kinds of things. That didn’t mean Isaac was special or that Jackson really cared. For all Isaac knew, those last few texts could’ve just been the drugs talking.

So instead of keeping an eye on Jackson like Isaac had promised himself he would, he had left with someone who actually reciprocated his interest.

Isaac spent a long time thinking about that while lying in her bed, naked and holding the equally naked and perfectly soft, sleeping girl. He idly played with her long hair and considered waking her up for another round. He wanted to stop thinking. To stop worrying about what Jackson would do when he went home to find out his stash was gone. But Isaac didn’t want to use Cara like that. Sex might be a good escape, but it had to be about the person he was having it with, not the person he wasn’t, or else what was the point?

And it had been so easy to focus on Cara completely, to shut everything else out for just a little while. They’d actually spent more time talking last night than anything else. Talking interspersed with kissing and oral and moaning, of course, but neither one of them had been too concerned with pushing themselves. It was all slow and pleasant and relaxing. Isaac hadn’t realized how much he’d needed that. How much he’d missed being with someone who wanted to please him as much as he wanted to please them.

There was no getting around it: sex was a very important part of Isaac’s life now. In Paris, it had become a puzzle to him, and he had become a solver. A code-breaker. Everyone had quirks, likes and dislikes, turn-ons and turn-offs, and Isaac delighted in figuring them out and using them to the mutual advantage of himself and his partners. Everyone was different, but they all had potential. Sometimes Isaac couldn’t crack the code, and the sex wasn’t as good, but there was no harm done. Either they’d try again sometime or he’d find someone else. There were so many people out there. So many puzzles to solve, and so much fun to be had solving them.
Cara, incidentally, was a wonderful puzzle. And not just the sex-related stuff. One of the downsides to sleeping with French people was that, well, they spoke French. Most of them spoke some English, sure, and Isaac’s French had gotten decent by the end, but he didn’t often find someone he could carry on an easy conversation with. Cara was a rare exception. They’d talked about a lot of things: Cara’s classes, places Isaac had lived, their philosophies on life and sex (which they realized were fairly similar), favorite places in London, and then…

“That was quite a lovely boy you kissed before you came back over to me,” Cara had said with a teasing smile.

“Oh, that-- It’s--” Isaac had cut himself off. What was he going to say? ‘It’s not like that’? He wasn’t even sure there was an ‘it’ between him and Jackson, let alone what Cara was probably thinking about ‘it.’ She didn’t seem mad or anything, but Isaac had still found himself feeling like he owed her some kind of explanation.

“You’re not like a back-up choice or anything,” he’d said earnestly. “I’m not that kind of guy.”

“I know.” Cara had waved the comment off, still smiling. “That’s why you’re here. I have far too much self-respect to invite someone back to mine if I think they’re only interested in me because they couldn’t go home with someone else. I’m only curious. It seems like there’s a story there.”

Isaac had sighed and sketched patterns on the skin of her stomach with his fingernail, not sure where to start. Not sure how much he actually wanted to get into. “I’m actually staying with that guy right now. I just can’t get a read on him. I don’t know what he wants.”

“What about you two…”?

“Not really. I’ve kissed him a couple times now, I guess, but he’s never done anything one way or the other.”

Then Cara had leaned up and started kissing underneath Isaac’s jaw. “He’d have to be dead not to have some reaction to you kissing him.”

That had started everything all over again and left Isaac in his present state of easy unease, with Cara asleep in his arms. She was curvy and kind and wanted him and knew how to give a fantastic blowjob, and usually that was enough to keep him totally in the moment, but after she had fallen asleep, Isaac had found his thoughts once again going back to Jackson.

He’d have to be dead not to have some reaction to you kissing him.

Jackson had reacted to Isaac, just not in any way that mattered. Jackson might have gotten excited a few times (heart rate and scent don’t lie to werewolf senses), but if he had any real interest, he would’ve said something or reciprocated, right? Isaac needed more than someone who tolerated his flirting and put up with his advances. A guy usually liked to be kissed back every once in a while, for example...

The whole thing bothered Isaac more than it should have. Maybe some people would’ve called it wounded pride or something, but it didn’t feel that way to Isaac. He wasn’t offended that Jackson didn’t want him. He was just… disappointed. Like he was missing out on a really great opportunity.

One of the things Isaac had learned early on during his adventures in puzzle-solving was just how much he enjoyed sex. Granted, most teenage boys really enjoyed sex, but to Isaac it wasn’t just about getting off. It was all of it: the attention, the flirting, the whole game (as Jackson had called
it). It was all wonderful.

Sure, sex on its own was fantastic, but what mattered more to Isaac was the connection. Turning his attention solely on one person made him forget everything else. It cleared his head and helped him focus. Just being with another person, just being entirely and completely with them, helped everything make sense for a little while. The entire world narrowed down to just ‘me-and-you.’ And that was good. More than good. It had become essential to how Isaac navigated his life.

All-in-all, his time in Paris had been a very satisfying few months of self-discovery. Plus Isaac had learned a lot of French during the process, so that was a neat perk. (Even if it had led to some awkward conversations with Chris, who had to add a clause about ‘oversharing’ to his ‘not in my house’ rule regarding Isaac’s sex life.)

Honestly, there hadn’t been a major downside to any of it, until now. Now Isaac had this puzzle around him every day, and he had no idea where to begin solving it. Jackson might as well have been one of those no-edges, double-sided ones that was also missing a bunch of pieces. This was some Expert-level shit, and Isaac was starting to worry that maybe in his enthusiasm to figure out the very pretty, very fuckable boy whose bed he slept in, he hadn’t stopped to consider whether Jackson had any interest in being puzzled-out, so to speak. Despite all the time they’d been spending together, Isaac still wasn’t sure if Jackson even considered him a friend. Maybe Isaac should focus on that relationship before pushing for more...

Cara woke up early, suggesting another go, but Isaac knew he needed to get back. They took a hot shower together (hot for several reasons) and Isaac walked back to Jackson’s, arriving just as the street lamps were starting to go out.

Isaac found himself getting sleepy the second he snuck in through the living room window and tiptoed into Jackson’s bedroom, trying not to wake him, until he noticed that both blankets were on the bed, but Jackson wasn’t wrapped up in them.

That stopped Isaac short, his heart suddenly pounding. Had Jackson not come home last night either? Or had he been back and left? Did Jackson know his drugs were gone?

Standing in the doorway, Isaac looked at the big, empty bed, feeling like a selfish idiot. Why hadn’t he stayed with Jackson like he had meant to? It had just been so much easier to go home with Cara. To get his own fix, he thought, somewhat bitterly.

Isaac leaned against the bedroom doorway, unsure what to do. Jackson must have been really upset, Isaac thought, feeling like his ribcage was shrinking around his lungs, making it hard to breathe. Jackson had needed Isaac to keep an eye on him, and Isaac had fucked up. Why did he always fuck everything up?

He grabbed the top blanket and headed back to the couch, not even bothering to change his clothes (barely thinking to kick off his shoes) before lying down and covering his head to make a little cocoon that kept the light out of his eyes. Maybe it was a little pathetic waiting by the door like a dog who missed its owner, but Isaac needed to know the moment Jackson got home.

Thankfully, it wasn’t too long before Isaac heard the front door key turning in the lock. The rush of conflicting emotions came and went before he had time to catalogue them all, and he was left feeling vaguely numb with cold feet and eyes sandy from lack of sleep.

Now that Jackson was back, Isaac’s earlier intentions to confront him immediately disappeared. He didn’t pull the blanket down as the door opened, and he halfway hoped Jackson would think he was asleep and leave him alone. Isaac wasn’t in the best shape for a confrontation right now.
“The one time I’m not here, you decide to sleep on the couch? That makes absolutely no sense.”

The contrasting scents of rich, bitter coffee and sugary fruit pastries had Isaac peaking out from under the blanket before he knew what he was doing. Jackson was balancing two to-go cups and a paper bag that was just barely going transparent with grease as he flipped the lock on the door and kicked mud off his shoes. “I know it’s not French roast or whatever prissy shit you drank in Paris. And the pastries aren’t as good, but they’re never going to be, so shut up and eat.”

Jackson dropped the bag on Isaac’s stomach and held one of the cups towards his face. “Here.”

Isaac suspiciously brought his hand up to take what would probably be a mediocre cup of coffee but was still an incredibly thoughtful gesture from someone he thought might hate him now. Jackson seemed calm, though, or at least no more steeped in angst than usual. He looked just about as tired as Isaac felt, but didn’t seem to be coming down off of tranqs”.

“Dude, you look like shit,” Jackson stated as Isaac sat up slowly, rubbing his face with one hand and cautiously cradling the dangerously hot beverage with the other.

“Yeah... I feel like shit, actually. Thanks for noticing.” Isaac smirked a bit, almost despite himself.

“Well that’s what the sugar is for. Are we going to watch Breaking Bad or what? Move.”

Isaac looked at Jackson, kind of bemused, and drew his knees up to his chest.

“Not like that, dumbass. I want to lie down, too.” Jackson sat down heavily at the other end of the couch and stretched his legs out, wedging them between Isaac and the back of the couch.

Who was this guy, and what had he done with Isaac’s angsty, self-absorbed, reluctant flatmate?

Isaac slowly stretched his legs out and tentatively shared the blanket with Jackson, who was setting up Netflix and either didn’t notice or chose not to comment.

Jackson started the episode and settled back into the couch, pulling up the blanket to his chest while Isaac practically dove face first into the bag of pastries, suddenly starving.

“Don’t touch all of them, just grab one.”

“I’m looking to see what my options are.”

Settling on a cheese danish, Isaac passed the bag to Jackson, who just took whatever was on top, his attention fixed on the show, and tossed it back to Isaac, who planned to eat the rest while Jackson was distracted.

He never got the chance, though. Isaac ended up falling asleep maybe a minute after wolfing down the danish, coffee untouched.

Isaac woke with the late afternoon sun in his eyes. He yawned and stretched, feeling something digging into back. He was on the couch. They were on the couch, he realized, having both fallen asleep watching Netflix that morning. Isaac shut his eyes again, enjoying the moment.

“Your feet reek.” So much for the moment.

Isaac considered shoving his feet in Jackson’s face, just to see what would happen. Maybe last week he would have, but after everything that had happened since Jackson had come with Isaac and the hunters to the graveyard that night...
Isaac sat up and pulled his knees to his chest.

Jackson stirred at the movement and gently nudged Isaac with one of his feet (which was still trapped between Isaac and the couch). “Dude, I didn’t mean move. I was warm.”

“Sorry,” Isaac said, more quietly than he’d meant to.

“Whatever,” Jackson mumbled. “Just stop hogging the blanket.”

“No, it’s not that. I’m sorry for…” Isaac wasn’t even really sure what he was apologizing for. Moving? Getting rid of Jackson’s drugs? Kissing Jackson at the club? Kissing Jackson in the first place and starting this whole thing?

No. Not that. Whatever happened because of it, Isaac didn’t regret kissing Jackson. If anything, he regretted how unlikely it was that he would get to do it again.

Jackson opened his eyes and regarded Isaac in a tired, bleary way. “For what?”

Isaac took a deep breath, figuring he shouldn’t put it off any longer.

“I found the tranqs.”

Jackson stared at Isaac, not quite comprehending what he had said at first. The idea that Isaac would somehow know about that… How had Isaac found them? When? How long had he known?

A flush of shame heated Jackson’s cheeks, which sparked his anger. He wanted to snap at Isaac for invading his privacy. This was Jackson’s flat, and Isaac was lucky that Jackson was doing him a favor and allowing him to stay there. He had no right to snoop through Jackson’s stuff!

But when Jackson’s eyes automatically drifted in the direction of the closet, he remembered: he had told Isaac to put his stuff in there. Jackson hadn’t even thought about the fact that the tranqs were in the closet. He might as well have put them right under Isaac’s nose.

“So what?” said Jackson, daring Isaac to get all high-and-mighty about it.

“I’m not judging you, I swear,” Isaac said hastily. He was avoiding eye contact with Jackson and fidgeting with the blanket. “I just… I don’t want you to get hurt.”

If Isaac’s words snuffed out Jackson’s anger, it was his obvious concern that disarmed Jackson completely. A long silence fell between them, threatening to become painfully uncomfortable until Isaac spoke again:

“That night, when Zach came over… you talked about wanting a way to stop thinking. Is that your way?”

Jackson thought about denying it, or feigning ignorance, or attempting to deflect by asking what Isaac had been doing going through Jackson’s stuff. But all he did in the end was shrug.

“Full moons can really suck—” Isaac started.

“Yeah, I can tell they’re so difficult for you.” Jackson scoffed.

“I know how hard it was for Erica and Boyd,” Isaac insisted. “I saw how hard they had to fight to keep even a shred of humanity. The way Erica described the pain… She said she would’ve killed to make it stop.”
The heavy silence fell between them again.

“It’s not the pain that gets me," Jackson said finally. “It’s... the memories.”

A reflexive shiver ran through Jackson, even though he wasn’t really thinking about the specifics. Just the sensations. The violence, and... how it had felt right, in a way, to do those things at the time. Even the few glimpses of his own face half covered in scales were enough to disgust him now.

Isaac must have felt Jackson shudder because a moment later he put a reassuring hand on Jackson’s leg.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Isaac said earnestly.

What really surprised Jackson was that Isaac wasn’t pointing out the obvious: There hadn’t been a full moon recently. He didn’t know why Isaac wasn’t trying to figure out why Jackson had used the tranqs or how often... But he was grateful for the out Isaac was giving him.

Jackson found himself mimicking Isaac’s earlier action, tugging at loose threads in the blanket. It wasn’t even his. Almost everything in the flat belonged to his dad’s work friend who was renting out the place to Jackson for the year. Jackson’s only real contributions were whatever was on the desk and in the closet. Even though he’d been living there for months, Jackson suddenly realized he hadn’t started thinking of it as home until recently. Somehow, Isaac’s invasion had made the flat feel more like Jackson’s, in some strange way.

Jackson cleared his throat and smoothed the blanket down. “So how come it’s so easy for you?”

“I don’t know.” Isaac shook his head before laughing weakly. “Maybe because I’ve had a lot of practice suppressing anger and finding ways to keep myself from going crazy.”

“You’d have to be sane in the first place for that,” Jackson teased with a weak smirk.

“Hey, I think my mental health is probably above average for Beacon Hills. Have you heard how many of our friends have ended up in Eichen House?”

It seemed weird to be joking about something like that, but Jackson felt his smirk threatening to become a laugh. After everything they’d all been through, it was hard not to develop a bit of a morbid sense of humor.

Any chance of laughter faded fast, though, when Jackson remembered what they were really talking about. Jackson’s terrible coping mechanism. Part of him was convinced that any second now, Isaac would start giving him shit about the tranqs. But he seemed so genuinely concerned...

Zach’s comment from yesterday came back to Jackson. It means something. You need to figure out what it means to you.

“Hey, let me see your phone,” Jackson said suddenly.

Isaac looked at him, suspicious. “Why?”

“What? Do you think I’m going to take a selfie and steal your contact information?” Jackson asked pointedly.

Isaac smirked and handed over his phone without another word.
Jackson debated checking Isaac’s messages or his contacts, and decided to go with the least invasive option. He tapped the contacts icon and was surprised to only find five names in the directory.

*James Bristow* was the only normal one. Apparently Isaac drew the line at strange names when it came to his employer. The rest were easy to identify: *Little Red* (obviously Hannah), *Uncle Chris* (Argent, Jackson assumed), *Very Pretty Person* (again, obvious from the way Isaac had been going on about how attractive Zach was), and finally his own. Jackson had been prepared for any number of weird nicknames or sexual innuendos, so he was caught completely by surprise to simply read, *Whittemore 37*. Just his name and lacrosse number, no weird symbols or winking faces or anything.

He looked up to find Isaac staring at him, his gaze level and focused. Jackson could only meet Isaac’s eyes for a few seconds before he found himself blushing under Isaac’s serious scrutiny, and looked back down at the phone just to escape it.

*Whittemore 37.*

“Find what you were looking for?” Isaac asked after Jackson had done nothing but stare at the screen for close to a minute.

“Yeah.” Jackson exited to the phone’s home screen before handing it back to Isaac. He considered asking about it, asking what it all meant to Isaac; 37, <3, the kiss...

But Jackson couldn’t do it. He couldn’t open his mouth to ask one little question. One little question that would definitely change everything between him and Isaac forever. Things seemed almost normal between them now. What if he screwed it up?

“Yeah,” Jackson repeated. “Your phone is a piece of shit.”

Isaac laughed—to Jackson’s relief—and set his phone back on the floor. “It was cheap. You should’ve seen my last phone. Now *that* was a piece of junk.”

“At least it’s not a flip phone.”

“Hey, flip phones are cool!”

“Flip phones are useless. Only hipsters use them now.”

Isaac laughed. “I’d probably have to grow an ironic mustache and drink PBR in that case.”

“I’m not sure I could still be your friend if you did either of those things.”

“Guess I’d better not then. I wouldn’t want to do anything to mess that up.”

Jackson could hear the unspoken question in Isaac’s tone. Had Isaac already messed it up? Jackson sighed, relieved that he wasn’t the only one who seemed to be fucking clueless about whatever was between them.

*I’m not sure I could still be your friend.* Jackson had said it thoughtlessly, automatically. An implicit confession that he did consider Isaac his friend. Was that what they were? Friends?

When it came down to it, nothing had really changed between last night and today. Not really. Jackson might have finally realized (or Isaac had made it extremely clear) that there was a serious offer on the table, but for all he knew, that ship had sailed. Either way, Jackson didn’t know what to do about it.
So, like usual, Jackson decided not to do anything at all.

“I guess if I’ve put up with you for this long, I probably wouldn’t kick you out over stupid facial hair and questionable drink choices.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Jackson shrugged, unsure what to say to that. Isaac’s hand was still on Jackson’s leg, which made Jackson realize that one of his feet was digging into Isaac’s back. He thought about moving it, but there wasn’t much room and Isaac didn’t seem uncomfortable, so Jackson stayed still.

“So, anyway, I, uh. I get it,” said Isaac, clearing his throat and going back to their original conversation. “I really do. No judgment.”

Jackson nodded awkwardly.

“But I flushed your stash. So next time you wanna get numb, you’ll just have to do it my way. Like, do it, do it. You know. With sex.”

There wasn’t an eye-roll expressive enough to combat Isaac’s wicked grin.

After that, there hadn’t been much more to say. They watched an episode of QI--Isaac conscious of Jackson’s feet at his back the whole time--and then Isaac had let Jackson do his schoolwork without distracting him. He even went out to pick up dinner for them both from the Indian place Jackson liked as an added assurance that Jackson would forgive him.

Isaac was also careful about staying on his side of the bed that night, even though he didn’t want to. At least Isaac understood Jackson a little bit better now, and maybe that would help him cope with the idea of just being platonic friends with the gorgeous, anxious, sometimes condescending and selfish but mostly not, boy sleeping beside him.

Isaac spent the next day primarily sleeping, walking between the shop and Jackson’s flat, and re-reading *Hamlet*. Even with everything else going on, he’d managed to also get through the two that he and Jackson had gone to see, *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, but he kept coming back to *Hamlet*.

Not that he was ever planning to let Jackson know how much he was actually enjoying Shakespeare, but he had done a bit of reading up on the guy and picked up a couple more plays that seemed interesting (supposedly, they were among his bloodier plays). Maybe Isaac would demand that Jackson take him to one of those next time (assuming there was a next time).

Despite their apparent reconciliation, Isaac still felt like something was… off.

Jackson had left early to spend the day with his pack. That was normal. Wolves needed a pack. *Werewolves* needed a pack.

That was something Isaac had thought about more and more since unofficially moving in with Jackson; hearing how Jackson talked about his pack, seeing how he interacted with Zach… Isaac could tell how good Jackson’s pack was for him, which made Isaac feel bad that Jackson had been spending less time with them because of him. Isaac resolved to encourage Jackson to spend more time with them in the future.

Thinking about Jackson’s pack bond made Isaac think about his own lack of one, and how not bothered he was by that. He couldn’t figure out if he’d ever really felt it. With Derek, and then with
Scott… Those hadn’t been choices. They had been more like gravitational pulls. Pack meant not facing unbeatable odds alone, and that was what they had done over and over again in Beacon Hills. Isaac had been grateful to Derek and cared about Scott, but looking back, it didn’t feel the same as what Jackson seemed to have with Zach and the rest of his pack.

Going to France was like someone turned the volume down on his life. Nothing seemed as intense anymore, as unbeatable, as it had in Beacon Hills. For the first time, Isaac had had control over his own life. No dad, no alpha… He had Chris, but somehow that didn’t count; Chris had needed space, too. He hadn’t been looking to be Isaac’s surrogate anything when he’d invited Isaac to leave Beacon Hills with him. Chris had just recognized a familiar pain.

No dad meant orphan, no alpha meant omega. Isaac knew how much pain the twins had been in after they had lost their alpha status and their pack. They had worked hard to become part of Scott’s--despite borderline hating the guy at one point--just to avoid being on their own.

But no pack also meant no one to lose. No Boyd killed while Isaac watched, no Erica found dead in a closet, no Allison-- No standing by uselessly while the people he had let himself care about were taken away from him.

Sometimes, when he was dancing in a club, he felt like Erica was with him. That had been their thing during the good times (not to mention that one time with Jackson during the Kanima debacle). Since they had both had their various issues growing up, getting the bite from Derek had initiated Isaac’s and Erica’s sexual awakenings. They had fooled around a bit at first, then realized they enjoyed fooling around with other people more. Erica had stuck with Boyd, and Isaac had discovered that he liked… variety.

In a way, Erica’s death had been the worst. She had been the first real friend he’d ever had, and she had died alone, underground, refusing to play by anyone’s rules ever again. And Isaac had barely even gotten the chance to mourn her before Boyd had been taken from him, too.

Isaac didn’t feel like not needing a pack meant that he was broken or something. He felt strong, self-sufficient, at peace with himself. Kind of how he hoped Erica had felt, standing up to Kali, even though she must have known what would happen. Maybe that was what Isaac was doing, too, fighting back against someone else’s rules. And maybe eventually he would get slapped down, forced back into the system, but for now, he really did feel comfortable being on his own. Being an omega.

Maybe he and Jackson were just too different. Isaac rubbed like sandpaper across all of Jackson’s rough edges, but was he wearing him down naturally, or just forcefully imprinting himself into Jackson’s life? Did Jackson actually want him there, or was he just putting up with him, doing something nice because he knew it was temporary?

Isaac could always leave before his job was up, maybe try a little harder to find someplace outside of a pack’s territory and settle in for the next month. He wasn’t worried about being on his own again, but he enjoyed being with Jackson. After he had left Beacon Hills, Isaac had stopped questioning the good in his life, learning to take pleasure when and where he could get it. Up until now he’d been so careful, though. He had tried to never put himself or anyone else in a position to be hurt, made sure everyone knew where the lines were. Maybe Jackson really hadn’t realized there had been a game going when he’d walked onto the field.

Maybe he hadn’t even known there was a fucking field.

Isaac sighed. Enough introspective bullshit. He’d confront Jackson tonight when he got home and that would be it: either the moody jerk would kick him out or he wouldn’t. No matter what, Isaac
knew he would be okay. He always was.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't hate us! We promise that your patience will be rewarded, but we're dealing with some very stubborn boys here. It'll get better really soon!

Thank you again so much for all of your lovely comments and kudos, and really just for reading. You're all wonderful!

Savenna Cloverunner
Trouble

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: TROUBLE (STRIPPED) (Halsey)

And I’ve got my mind made up this time.
Go on and light a cigarette, set a fire in my head.
Set a fire in my head tonight, tonight, tonight.
Set a fire in my head tonight.

Jackson still wasn’t quite sure why he’d done it; decided to let go of how angry he was with Isaac and hope that, against all odds, Isaac would be at the flat when Jackson got home from the den; that they could somehow forget about last night and just go back to how things had been before.

In a way, it had been automatic. Jackson had passed his favorite bakery, and the smell of fresh pastries had called him in. He had only intended to order himself some food and a coffee, but his mouth had ordered enough for two people. He had become used to ordering for two. When exactly
had that happened?

As he juggled the bag of pastries and two cups of coffee and stepped back out onto the street, Jackson had suddenly been hit by how tired he was. Tired in every sense of the word, down to the marrow of his bones. A kind of tired that sleep couldn’t fix. Most of all, he was tired of being angry with Isaac. Tired of being tense and irritable in his own home. Tired of trying to make Isaac understand why he was so upset.

Tired of… being wrong. Because, as hard as it was to stomach, Jackson was starting to realize that Isaac had had a point last night. Jackson, unconsciously or not, had been acting like he had some kind of claim on Isaac. Isaac had only been doing what Isaac always did: going out and having a good time. Isaac hadn’t changed. And it wasn’t fair for Jackson to punish Isaac for not changing. Isaac didn’t owe Jackson anything.

It had been more than likely that Jackson would return to his flat and find it empty. His contingency plan for that likelihood had been to eat all the food and drink all the coffee himself and take a nap (for better or worse, caffeine didn’t stay in a wolf’s system long).

But his flat hadn’t been empty. And the fact that Isaac had been there waiting for Jackson (even though Isaac smelled conspicuously like a girl’s body wash) had somehow made things (mostly) okay again. Even the conversation about the tranquilizers hadn’t been nearly as awful as Jackson would’ve thought. Isaac hadn’t been judgmental or preachy about it. He’d just been honest about his concern for Jackson. Which was kind of nice, actually, if a bit confusing.

Jackson could do this. He could be friends with Isaac, or whatever they were, and try to enjoy it until Isaac left. Which would be soon.

Jackson just needed to stop playing the game.

But as much as Jackson wanted things to be like they were before, some words couldn’t be unheard.

*We can fuck, if you want. I want to. Bad. I’ve wanted to for a long time.*

Even if they stopped the game, Isaac had lain all his cards out on the table, and, for better or worse, that had changed things. Isaac had still slept in Jackson’s bed after their amicable afternoon on the couch, but it wasn’t lost on Jackson that Isaac had stayed out of Jackson’s space. Maybe he would from now on. Which begged the question: Did Jackson really want him to?

As Jackson lay in bed, watching the morning sun creep slowly toward Isaac’s sleeping face, he decided that it was too much to figure out right now. Things were okay between him and Isaac again, and that was good enough for the moment. Maybe it was time he made sure things were okay between him and everyone else.

*You don’t need a reason to come to us, Jack. You might not live here, but it’s still your home.*

Rodger was right. It had been too long since Jackson had gone over to the den for no particular reason. It was Sunday morning, which meant most of the pack would be home. It would be nice to spend some time with them when it wasn’t a full moon (and when Jackson wasn’t having a personal crisis).

His mind made up, Jackson got up and put on his clothes as quietly as he could, so as not to wake Isaac. He left a note under Isaac’s phone explaining where he’d gone and that he probably wouldn’t be back until after dinner, then pulled on his jacket and headed out.
“Cousin Jack!” Colin’s face lit up the moment he opened the door. The very young wolf turned his head and hollered in the direction of the stairs: “Justin! Jack’s here!”

Ada appeared behind Colin, looking cross. “Colin, what has your mum told you about answering the door without knowing who it is?”

“But I did know!” Colin protested, as if being scolded for this was an outrageous injustice.

Ada crossed her arms over her chest, skeptical of her mate’s son. “Did you, now.”

“I did!” Colin insisted. “He always knocks the same way. And I could smell his scent.”

Colin pushed at the brass slot in the front door, through which mail was delivered, demonstrating how he could open it from inside and check the scent of someone who was outside.

“I’ll admit, he’s resourceful,” said Dominic, who had just come into the foyer, sandy-eyed and sipping from a steaming mug. “Definitely didn’t get that from me.”

“Perhaps a bit too resourceful.” Ada did her best to sound stern, but there was affection in her voice.

There was a thundering of small feet as Justin ran down the stairs and--without warning--launched himself at Jackson. Before Jackson knew what was happening, he had a five-year-old werewolf hugging each of his legs.

“All right, boys, that’s enough now,” said Ada. “Let’s at least get Cousin Jack a cup of tea before you climb all over him like squirrels in a tree.”

Reluctantly (and with much pouting), the twins let Jackson go, and Dominic and Ada led the way to the kitchen, where Ada put the kettle on.

“It’s good to see you, Jack,” said Ada, smiling warmly. “I was sorry to’ve missed you last night. Eva said you looked a mess. Burning the candle at both ends?”

“Something like that,” Jackson said evasively.

“Ahh, to be young again,” said Dominic. His wistful smile stretched the scar along his jaw a bit.

Ada snorted. “Nic, you’ve scarcely just passed ‘young’ yourself.”

“I’m old enough to be this one’s dad.” Dominic gestured to Jackson with his mug.

“Thank heaven you aren’t,” said Ada. “I don’t think I’d be up to helping you and Eva raise another boy.”

“Not to worry, Ada.” Rodger’s voice. Jackson turned to find him entering the kitchen, still in his pajamas. He gave a great yawn before continuing. “I’ll look after this pup. Though he’s acquired the bad habit of crawling in bed with Mum and Dad.”

Rodger answered Jackson’s glare with a mischievous grin.

Coming over to the den turned out to be one of the best decisions Jackson had made in a long time.
Everyone was happy to see him. They gave him attention without giving him crap about not visiting more often. Helen made a late breakfast for Jackson, and Dominic, who was usually pretty quiet and therefore didn’t talk to Jackson much, surprised Jackson by sitting down at the kitchen table next to him.

“How’re you getting on, then?” he asked, nudging Jackson’s shoulder with his own.

It was strange how not strange it felt to have casual physical contact with a pack member, even one he’d hardly had a conversation with. Out of the entire pack, Jackson had probably spent the least amount of time with Dominic, actually. Jackson suddenly remembered what Josie had said to Rodger on the last full moon (when they had thought Jackson was asleep): that Dominic had been eighteen when he’d gotten the Bite. As far as Jackson knew, that was the closest in age any of the other pack members had been to Jackson when they’d been bitten (if they hadn’t been born wolves). Maybe Jackson should make more time to get to know Dominic.

“Can’t complain,” said Jackson, shrugging. “It’s--”

“Nonsense,” said Zach, appearing in the doorway. “You’re excellent at complaining.”

Dominic looked up and gave Zach the same paternal smile that Jackson had sometimes seen him give his sons. Jackson often forgot that Zach had been born into the pack, and that most of the wolves in it had known him since birth. Will and Helen had raised Zach and Sarah, but so had Dominic, Rodger, Eva, and some of the others, just like the pack was raising Justin and Colin now. Jackson couldn’t fathom what it would’ve been like to be raised in a family like that.

“When did you get here, pup?” Dominic asked Zach.

“Just now,” said Zach, squeezing in to sit at Jackson’s other side. “Dad and Ada picked me up on the way back from patrol. They’ve both gone up to bed.”

“I don’t envy them the Saturday night shift,” said Dominic.

“Rodger says Fridays are the worst,” said Zach.

“Which is why Josie keeps giving them to him,” said Dominic. He hid a small smile in his mug of tea.

The sound of excited shrieking echoed from the living room, loudly enough to make even Zach wince.

“Right, that’s my cue,” said Dominic. He got up from the table and set his mug in the sink. “Maybe Bronagh will put that fancy true wolf form of hers to good use and chase my pups around the flat until they’re too exhausted to make that awful sound anymore.”

Dominic heaved a long-suffering sigh and went out to the living room, presumably to help manage the twins. This left Jackson and Zach alone in the kitchen.

“So you sort of fell off the map yesterday,” said Zach. “I assume you got my texts?”

Shit. Jackson had gotten texts from Zach. He’d just been a little preoccupied having a major personal crisis and then sleeping on the couch all day with Isaac to respond. The texts hadn’t been anything unusual, just Zach checking in to say hello, like he sometimes did.

“Yeah,” said Jackson, “sorry. I was busy. Why, did you want to talk about something?”
“Sort of. I mean, someone,” Zach said casually.

Jackson felt a twinge of anxiety. There was only one ‘someone’ Zach would want to ask Jackson about.

“Let me guess,” Jackson said flatly. “Hannah?”

“Obviously,” said Zach.

“What about her, exactly?” Jackson asked, though he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

“Well, everything, essentially,” said Zach. “How does Isaac know her? What does she do for a living? Is she single? If so, do you think I have a chance with her? You know, the basics.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. One of the unexpected (to Jackson, anyway) side-effects of growing up in a wolf pack was a level of bluntness that came from constantly being around people who would know if you were lying. Zach, like most of the pack, rarely bothered beating around the bush. It was seen as a waste of time and an insult to the listener’s intelligence. Jackson still wasn’t entirely used to it.

“Fine,” said Jackson. He ticked off four fingers one at a time as he answered each question: “She’s his friend. She’s in secondary school. I have no idea. Maybe.”


“If I said eighteen, would that make you less of a cradle robber?”

“I’m not that much older than eighteen!” Zach protested. “Come on, tell me.”

“I don’t know,” Jackson said honestly. He had never thought to ask Isaac, and it hadn’t come up. Jackson had figured Hannah was at least a mature sixteen or seventeen, but it was hard to say.

“I could always text Isaac…” Zach said slyly.

“No!”

Jackson cursed Isaac internally. There was no way out of this. Zach wasn’t going to let it go, and if he talked to Isaac instead of Jackson about it, Isaac might let something slip. Like, you know, the fact that Hannah was a hunter and a Bristow. No big deal.

But instead of continuing to fight Jackson on the issue, Zach did something worse. He heaved a half-defeated sigh and turned serious.

“Look, I’m not completely thick. I know I’m not likely to have a chance with her, even if she’s not seeing anyone,” said Zach. “I just want to find that out for myself. You don’t need to protect me.”

Oh, God. Zach thought that Jackson was keeping Zach away from Hannah because Zach might get his heart broken if she didn’t want him. The reality was that Jackson was far more worried that Zach would get other parts of his body broken (by hunters) than his heart. Of course, Jackson couldn’t tell Zach that.

“It’s not like that,” said Jackson. “It’s just--”

He broke off when he heard the distant sound of the front door of the flat opening and closing. There were only two people who could have just arrived: Sarah, who was supposed to be at rehearsal, and...
“We can talk about this later, okay?” Jackson said to Zach.

“What?” Zach frowned at Jackson, understandably confused. “Why not now? It’s not every day I bare my soul, Jack.”

Jackson got up from the table, only having enough time to give Zach an apologetic look before Josie entered the kitchen. She looked surprised to see Jackson. Surprised, but pleased.

“Hello, Jack,” said Josie, and gave him a fond smile.

Jackson hardly had time to say “Hi” before Josie pulled him into a hug. She was shorter than he was, with a considerably slighter figure, yet Jackson still felt small in her arms. When was the last time he had seen her? The full moon? That felt like so long ago.

It only took one inhalation of his alpha’s scent to make the weight of Jackson’s guilt and worry come crashing down on top him, so hard he nearly staggered from it. He was hit palpably with the absolute, instinctive certainty that he had been wrong to keep Isaac a secret from her, and that he needed to tell her right now because good betas didn’t hide things from their alphas.

Jackson was so overwhelmed by the need to confess his disobedience that he was sure he was about to just blurt it out right there, within hearing distance of almost the entire pack, which would make things even worse. He wanted to tell Josie alone, and let her decide his punishment before the others (except Rodge and Zach, of course) found out.

“C-can we…?” he started, voice a shaky whisper against her shoulder. It was a struggle to get the question out.

“Go for a walk?” she finished, guessing correctly.

Jackson nodded vehemently.

“Of course we can,” said Josie. She gently broke the hug and took Jackson by the hand, leading him to the front door.

If any of the other pack were curious as to why Jackson and Josie were clearly going out to talk privately, none of them gave any sign. It wasn’t unheard of for a pack member to want to talk to her alone. Jackson and Josie left the den together and, arm in arm, started walking down the street.

A full ten minutes went by with them walking together in silence through Holborn, which was half-deserted, seeing as it was Sunday. They were nearly to the edge of their territory by the time Jackson had worked up the nerve to speak.

“Josie, I…” Jackson swallowed thickly. “I need to tell you something.”

Josie stopped walking and sat down on the front steps of an office building that was closed for the weekend, gesturing for Jackson to sit next to her. “Go on.”

“I-- There’s…” Jackson turned his face away from hers, choosing to look instead at the building across the street.

Josie said nothing, just waited patiently for Jackson to continue.

“There’s an omega staying at mine,” he said finally.

Saying the words out loud made the crime seem more real, which made Jackson feel even more
guilty, so before Josie could say anything, he rushed on:

“His name is Isaac and he went to school with me in the States and we were made by the same alpha. He just kind of showed up and he needed a place to sleep, so I let him crash at mine and then he just… stayed.”

Josie remained quiet, like she was expecting Jackson to say something else. There was really only one more important thing to say.

“I’m…” Jackson finally got the nerve to look back toward Josie. His eyes burned beta blue when he said, “I’m really sorry, Josie.”

There was a tense pause where Josie regarded Jackson, expression unreadable. Jackson’s heart was pounding with anxiety. Why wasn’t she reacting? Was there something else he was supposed to do or say? He wished that she’d just get it over with: yell at him or punish him or something.

In a last, desperate attempt to show her how sorry he was, Jackson averted his eyes, tilted his head, and bared his throat to his alpha. He could practically feel the wolf inside him cowering.

A warm palm pressed against his cheek and guided his face back toward Josie, who was smiling at him, if a bit sadly.

“There’s no need for that with me, Jack,” she said. Her thumb slid soothingly back and forth over his cheekbone a few times before she drew her hand away. “Far more intelligent people than you have done far more idiotic things for tall boys with pretty eyes and smart mouths.”

Once the words had registered in his head, Jackson gaped at his alpha, dumbfounded. “How did--?” He closed his mouth for a beat, then opened it again. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew,” said Josie. Her tone indicated that Jackson’s question was ridiculous. “It’s my job to keep a lookout for strange wolves in our territory. That’s how I found you, remember?”

Jackson frowned. He did remember. Why hadn’t that occurred to him before?

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

Josie shrugged. “I thought there must be some reason you were keeping it from me. I hoped that if I gave you time, you’d trust me enough to tell me. Took you a bit longer than I would’ve liked.”

A wave of guilt rushed hot through Jackson and he hunched in on himself. It seemed so pointless now, so selfish, not to have told Josie about this sooner.

“Rodge knows, doesn’t he?” Josie asked. When Jackson stared at her, she quickly added, “He hasn’t said anything to me. He’s just been particularly protective of you lately, and a bit nervous around me. And I know you and he have become close.”

“I had to tell someone.” Jackson flinched at the realization of how it sounded that he had picked someone in the pack to confide in, and that it wasn’t his alpha. “I mean--”

“You needed to tell someone who you weren’t afraid would punish you,” said Josie.

Josie was far more perceptive than Jackson had given her credit for. “Don’t blame Rodge. I made him promise not to tell anyone.”

“Does anyone else know?”
“Zach,” Jackson admitted. “He found out by accident.”

Josie nodded to herself, like she was making her mind up about something.

“Look, Jack.” Josie put her hand on Jackson’s knee. “I understand that you’ve had bad experiences with alphas in the past, and that you still don’t really know how a proper pack works. But I can only give you so much leeway.”

“So… what happens to me now?” Jackson asked hesitantly.

“Well, when it comes down to it,” said Josie, “this isn’t really about you. It’s about the omega staying in my territory without permission.”

The spark of alphaness that Josie so rarely showed was evident in the word ‘my.’

“What are you going to do about him?”

“You know the rules, Jack,” said Josie. “He has two choices: join us or leave.”

Jackson had never considered the idea that Isaac might be allowed to join his pack. He had tried so hard to keep Isaac completely separate (and secret) from them. He hadn’t wanted those two parts of his life to intersect, but... Things would be so much easier--and Jackson would feel so much less guilty and anxious--if Jackson didn’t feel like he was juggling two separate lives anymore.

But it wasn’t like Isaac was planning on staying in London. Would an invitation to join Jackson’s pack change his mind? Probably not. Isaac had told Jackson that he was happier being an omega: *I’m alone because I want to be*. Why would he change his mind now?

“He doesn’t want a pack,” Jackson said finally.

Josie scoffed. “All wolves want a pack.”

“Not him.”

“Be that as it may, I can’t just let an omega run around unchecked.”

“He’s not unchecked,” said Jackson. “He’s with me. You can trust him.”

“That’s not the point,” said Josie. “If another pack thinks we don’t control our territory, we’ll look vulnerable. They might try to challenge my authority as an alpha.”

“But--”

“I don’t mean to belittle your feelings, Jack, but I can’t put my pack at risk just because you fancy him.”

That word--*fancy*--triggered an immediate response. “What? I don’t--”

“You can’t lie to a werewolf, Jack,” said Josie, like she was reminding him for the thousandth time. “Especially your alpha.”

“It’s not like that,” Jackson insisted, though not with as much conviction as he had hoped.

“I think you might actually believe that,” said Josie. “Funny.”

Jackson could only stare at Josie. He wanted to keep objecting, but for the life of him, he couldn’t
think of anything to say.

“If he won’t join, he’s got to go,” said Josie. “I’m sorry, but that’s how it has to be.”

“He’s leaving soon anyway,” said Jackson.

“I need more than ‘soon,’ Jack. I need a date.”

“Okay,” said Jackson, knowing he was fighting a losing battle. “Okay, I’ll ask him.”

“Trust me,” said Josie in an uncharacteristically serious tone. “I don’t want to have to intervene here. You don’t want me to, either.”

The implicit threat in her words reminded Jackson of an important fact: There was a reason Josie was an alpha. She might be bubbly and affectionate most of the time, but there was real power and a fierce protectiveness underneath it. The safety of her pack had to come before what an individual member wanted. And she was right; the last thing Jackson wanted was for Josie to ‘intervene’ with Isaac.

“I really am sorry, Jack,” said Josie. She placed her hand on his shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. “You’re a good beta. I hate making things hard for you.”

Jackson nodded his acceptance. “I get it. I do. I’ll… I’ll figure it out.”

It was just after nine o’clock when Jackson got home. He figured Isaac would still be up and Jackson would be able to just ask him point blank when he was leaving, but Jackson found him passed out on the couch beneath the duvet from the bed. Maybe all those late nights in clubs were finally catching up to Isaac.

Seeing Isaac there unexpectedly eased some of the pressure that had been making Jackson’s chest feel so tight since he’d talked to Josie.

“Seriously, how come you only sleep on the couch when I’m not here?” he said, half to himself, as he looked down at Isaac’s deceptively peaceful-looking form.

Isaac stirred, but didn’t bother opening his eyes. He just sat up enough to make room for Jackson on the couch. He heaved a sleepy sigh and murmured, “Feels weird without you.”

Jackson went to sit down, but found a book on the couch cushion where Isaac’s head had been. He picked it up and examined the cover. It was an annotated edition of *Hamlet*. And it wasn’t Jackson’s.

Sitting down was unconscious; Jackson was still focused on the book. He barely registered Isaac laying his head in Jackson’s lap and making himself comfortable there. Jackson wanted to ask Isaac about the book. Why was he reading it? How long had he been reading Shakespeare? Why would he hide it from Jackson? Pride? A surprise?

The explanation somehow didn’t seem to matter all that much, though. Jackson set the book on the side table.

“Sit up,” he said to Isaac. Isaac sleepily obeyed, though he still leaned his weight against Jackson’s
“Isaac?” said Jackson, though he had no idea what he wanted to say.

“Yeah?” Isaac still had his eyes still closed.

Jackson thought about Josie’s ultimatum. Isaac was going to have to leave soon. Jackson really needed to get a firm date from Isaac so he could tell Josie. And then Isaac could either find another place to stay outside of Holborn pack territory, or leave London entirely. Isaac said they had only commissioned him through the new moon. Now that that had passed, surely that meant his work with the hunters was done, right?

It probably wasn’t even worth suggesting that Isaac join the pack; the odds that Isaac would even consider it were pretty damned low. In any case, it would be best to get this settled now, so everyone would know where they stood. They had both known this was temporary anyway.

Still… Maybe it could wait a little bit longer. Jackson was tired and stressed out. It couldn’t hurt to let himself have a few more hours--maybe a day, even--to just have Isaac there without counting down the time until he left. Could it?

*You fancy him,* Josie had said. And Jackson really had believed he *didn’t* when he’d objected. Sexual attraction was involuntary, especially when someone was always in your space, touching you, flirting with you, *kissing* you. Jackson hadn’t really thought that it meant he *fancied* Isaac.

But it wasn’t like Jackson had never lied to himself before…

Had Isaac really not just been messing with Jackson that whole time? Sleeping in Jackson’s bed, flirting, kissing, coming dangerously close to touching him sometimes in ways that Jackson hadn’t found entirely unappealing (he still vividly remembered that morning at the Bristows’). Hell, even early on there had been that night when Jackson had had that dream that had led to him (unintentionally) fantasizing about dancing with Isaac and Lydia while he’d gotten himself off.

And then there had been the quieter, sweeter moments: Isaac comforting Jackson after he’d had a nightmare, Isaac waiting up all night for him, worrying about the tranqs (even though Jackson still felt uncomfortable about that whole situation), Jackson unthinkingly going to sleep in his bed with Isaac and treating him like pack when Zach had crashed on his couch.

Maybe… Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to admit how he felt about something, about *someone*, for once. Especially if he didn’t have that much time left with that someone.

Jackson took a deep breath, then sighed it out before saying, “Thanks.”

Isaac lifted his head and looked at Jackson, confused. “For what?”

“Not finding another place to stay.” Jackson shrugged. “Freeloading. Invading my space.”

“What can I say?” Isaac said with a tired smile. “I’m a charitable guy, always looking to help the less fortunate.”

Jackson snorted. “There aren’t many people less fortunate than you, Lahey.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Isaac, yawning widely.

There was a pause during which Isaac laid his head on Jackson’s shoulder. The tension in Jackson’s chest was gone now, being slowly but powerfully replaced by something warm and
soothing. Jackson thought about letting the rest of the conversation go. But if he didn’t say it... if he didn’t do it now, he wasn’t sure when he’d get the nerve again.

“I mean it, though,” said Jackson, trying to sound sincere, which didn’t come easily to him.

“I know,” said Isaac. He pulled up the duvet so it would cover Jackson as well.

“I...” Jackson broke off. He swallowed nervously.

When Jackson didn’t finish speaking, Isaac lifted his head again and regarded him curiously. With Isaac’s face so close to his, words failed Jackson. But really, he didn’t need them anyway. It was easy, natural, when he leaned in and bridged the several inches between his mouth and Isaac’s.

Isaac made the smallest sound of surprise in his throat, but a second later he was responding to the kiss. He pressed his lips into Jackson’s while letting Jackson lead, which was a relief. Jackson had been worried that Isaac would take over, try to turn it into too much too fast. But it was... Jackson didn’t know what it was exactly, but Jackson liked Isaac’s scent, and the way he tasted when the kiss deepened a little. Jackson’s pulse was racing: part fear, part excitement. He didn’t really know what he wanted and he wasn’t sure what Isaac expected from him. This was new territory for Jackson but not even a remotely big deal to Isaac, and there were few things Jackson hated more than being at a disadvantage.

It was Isaac’s fingers sliding into the short hair at the back of Jackson’s head that made him pull back. Just a little bit, and only on instinct, but Isaac took that as a signal to let go.

“I know I push you,” Isaac whispered, his mouth a hair’s breadth from Jackson’s, “but I won’t rush you.” He gave Jackson a short, chaste kiss before pulling back far enough to look into Jackson’s eyes and said, “I promise.”

The look in Isaac’s eyes and the sincerity of his tone were meant to reassure Jackson, but the last two words soured the sentiment.

“Don’t,” said Jackson.

“Don’t what?” Isaac’s forehead crinkled in concern.

“Don’t promise,” said Jackson. He didn’t say it with malice or bitterness. He understood why Isaac made promises, and why he broke them. But Jackson wasn’t going to buy into them anymore.

Isaac chewed his own lower lip as he regarded Jackson thoughtfully for a moment. Then he nodded and said, “Okay.”

Because he was Isaac, he seemed unable to resist kissing Jackson again. It was the slightest bit more intense than the last one, but Isaac remained respectful of Jackson’s boundaries (for the most part). Jackson found that he was disappointed when the kiss broke.

“Sincerity is a good look for you, Whittemore,” Isaac said with a smile. “Very sexy.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and shoved at Isaac’s shoulder. “You had to ruin it.”

“Sorry,” Isaac said, without even a hint of an actual apology in his tone. “So does this mean we can cuddle again?”

Isaac must have sensed Jackson’s indecision, or heard his heart speed up, because a few moments later, Isaac stood up and was grabbing Jackson’s hand, tugging him towards the bedroom.
“I promise your honor is safe. For tonight.” Isaac gave him a tired smile. “I couldn’t do anything to you anyway, despite the fact that I really want to. Caught me in a rare moment of sleep-sounds-better-than-sex.”

Jackson couldn’t quite tell if he was relieved or disappointed that Isaac wasn’t going to press his advantage tonight. In any case, it definitely gave Jackson time to think about that kiss as he curled up in bed little-spoon-style against Isaac.

Tomorrow Jackson could worry about asking Isaac when he was leaving. Tonight, he was just going to enjoy the fact that he hadn’t left yet.

In a very welcome turnabout, Isaac woke up with Jackson half sprawled across his chest. After their conversation the previous night, Isaac had decided that open season had just been declared on Jackson Whittemore. And, that being the case, he might as well not waste any more time.

Isaac considered his first move carefully, gently brushing Jackson’s hair off his forehead. He ran his thumb along a faint crease in the skin there, smoothing out the pout that Jackson seemed to wear even in his sleep. Jackson made a waking up noise and nuzzled into Isaac’s chest, turning his face away. Isaac took this as a sign that Jackson was awake enough to justify making a move.

He didn’t want to freak Jackson out, just address the shift in dynamic between them. Well. Maybe he wanted to freak Jackson out a little.

In one smooth motion, Isaac rolled Jackson onto his back, straddled his hips, and began kissing his neck, starting with the dip in his collarbone and working up.

“What are you doing?” Jackson asked blearily, still only half awake.

Isaac smiled. “Saying good morning.”

He kissed Jackson the way he’d been wanting to for longer than he’d realized, pleased when Jackson kissed him back without hesitation. It was like talking at someone for weeks and then finally having a conversation. Isaac could feel Jackson pulling himself out of sleep, pulse speeding up, muscles working so he could shift beneath Isaac and settle there. Jackson’s palm coming to rest on the back of Isaac’s chest, turning his face away. Isaac took this as a sign that Jackson was awake enough to justify making a move.

Isaac began slowly rolling his hips into Jackson’s and was rewarded by Jackson responding very positively. It felt almost unconscious, natural: Jackson lifting his hips up to meet Isaac’s while he deepened the kiss, starting to take control of it. Isaac was happy to let him. Of course, if they were going to keep going down this path, Isaac should probably remind Jackson of a very important fact. He gently broke away from the kiss and licked up the shell of Jackson’s ear.

“It’s Monday,” Isaac whispered.

“Hmm?” Isaac waited for Jackson’s distracted brain to catch up, which only took a few moments.

“Shit! What time is it?”

Jackson struggled to sit up in bed, which Isaac felt no compulsion to make easier for him. He made himself more comfortable on Jackson’s lap and dipped his head so he could go back to kissing Jackson’s neck.

“Early enough,” he murmured against Jackson’s skin.
Jackson shivered and half-heartedly pushed at Isaac’s chest. “I can’t be late.”

“You won’t be,” Isaac insisted, pressing his palm to Jackson’s shoulder to get him to lie down again. “Five minutes. You won’t regret it.”

Jackson groaned as Isaac grinded his hips down firmly into Jackson’s, which made Isaac grin happily.

“You’re hard,” he said against Jackson’s ear. This much was obvious to both of them, but Isaac wanted to say it anyway.

“Wonder why,” Jackson said irritably, but gasped when Isaac moved his hips again. Isaac was delighted to see Jackson’s cheeks and ears flush pink. Fucking adorable.

“You’re pretty,” said Isaac, taking a moment to admire Jackson’s features: his half-lidded, wide-pupiled blue eyes, flushed skin, mussed-up hair, sharp cheekbones and jawline. Isaac had spent a fair amount of time imagining what Jackson might look like in this kind of situation, but hadn’t actually believed that he might have the opportunity to experience it firsthand.

“Pretty?” said Jackson, sounding affronted.

“Very,” said Isaac. He smothered any protests from Jackson with another kiss.

Jackson made a scoffing sound that was undermined by the kiss.

“Thought I’d tell you since you get jealous when I say Zach and Hannah are pretty,” Isaac added.

The look of complete indignation on Jackson’s face made Isaac smirk.

“I do not get jealous.”


When Jackson raised an eyebrow, Isaac added, “And hot. Gorgeous. Irresistibly fucking sexy.”

“Better,” said Jackson, and leaned up to kiss Isaac as a reward.

JACKSON

It was slightly longer than five minutes later that Isaac finally stopped making out with Jackson and let him start getting ready for school, but Jackson couldn’t honestly say that he minded. When Isaac teasingly asked if Jackson wanted company in the shower, Jackson surprised himself (and probably Isaac, too) by responding, “Maybe next time.”

What was even more surprising was that Jackson wasn’t entirely sure that he was kidding. Even a few days ago, the idea of Isaac joining him in the shower would have seemed laughable, but now… Now it was appealing (though maybe a little intimidating). More than appealing, Jackson realized as his imagination kicked into overdrive, conjuring images of what Isaac might do to him if Jackson finally let him. Things that would be done without clothes on because, well, shower. Just-before-school was not the time, though, so Jackson pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind.

It was weird how easily Jackson’s brain had shifted into interested-in-Isaac mode now that he had accepted that he was, in fact, interested. Jackson could now admit, at least to himself, that he was attracted to Isaac, even that he wanted him. It helped that Isaac definitely hadn’t made any secret about wanting Jackson; it was much easier to admit that you wanted someone when you already
knew they wanted you.

Jackson had thought that becoming a werewolf was a strange experience. It was nothing compared to how strange it was to start his day by enthusiastically making out with Isaac Lahey, with the promise that it would be a regular thing, and that there would likely be a lot more than kissing soon.

At least until Isaac left. Jackson frowned and turned off the water. Until Isaac went back to France or wherever the hell Isaac wanted to go that wasn’t London. Jackson still had to carry out Josie’s order to find out when that was going to be, which was likely days from now at best.

It didn’t matter right now, though. Jackson had already decided to worry about the consequences of whatever this was later. Isaac was all about having fun; that was what this was going to be. Jackson could let himself have fun, too, for once.

“Oh, before I forget,” said Isaac as Jackson was in the process of getting dressed. “I’m gonna grab some groceries today. Want anything in particular?”

Jackson stopped halfway through buttoning his shirt and stared at Isaac, confused.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, as casually as he could. “We’ve got enough for a few more days, right? You don’t need to get groceries for me.”

Isaac blinked at him. “Dude, I get groceries all the time. It’s not a big deal.”

“No, I mean, you don’t have to buy food you’re not going to be around to eat.”

“...Am I taking some kind of trip I don’t know about?” If it was possible, Isaac looked even more confused than Jackson was, except Jackson was starting to get irritated.

Jackson tried to keep his annoyance out of his voice as he said, “Well, I’m pretty sure you know about it.”

“Okay,” said Isaac, “either you’re fucking with me or I’m all fuzzy-headed from the awesome makeout session, because I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Was Isaac serious? If anyone was being fucked with right now, it was Jackson. Isaac must know exactly what Jackson was talking about. Why was he being a dick about it?

“You’re leaving soon, right?” Jackson said shortly. “The new moon’s over. You said that’s how long you were staying.”

“Yeah, that’s how long I’m staying,” Isaac agreed, like he was at a complete loss as to where the miscommunication was happening. “Till the next new moon.”

...What?

Chapter End Notes

Squeeeeee! Are you happy? We're happy :D

Thank you so much for reading and for all the kudos and comments. We love every
single one of them!

By the way, if you're a reader of the fic that I (Lenna) write on my own, *Divided Loyalties*, I am happy to be able to report that I have FINALLY posted another chapter! If you don't read DL, I'm just going to shamelessly self-promote and ask you to consider checking it out. It's Stiles/Jackson, so I understand if that's not your bag, but I'm very pleased with it and love hearing what people think of it.

Anyway, thanks again so much!

Savenna Cloverunner
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY: SEEIN’ RED (Unwritten Law)

What I do to get through to you...
but you’d only do it again.
So follow the leader down,
swallow your pride and drown.
When there’s no place left to go,
maybe that’s when you will know.

Something weird was happening, and Isaac had no idea what it was.

Jackson had frozen, staring at Isaac. “What?”

Isaac looked at him quizzically. “What?”
“You’re staying another month?” Jackson’s tone was unreadable, even to werewolf senses.

“I told you that,” said Isaac

“No, you didn’t.”

Isaac took a moment to think over the past few days, and realization hit.

“. . .I might’ve forgotten to tell you.” Jackson snorted, and Isaac hurried to continue. “But in my defense, we haven’t really talked in days, because of all the drama and then the kissing.”

Jackson just rolled his eyes and turned away to grab his tie and blazer. “Whatever. I have to go.”

“Jackson--”

“Later,” Jackson said shortly, and strode toward the bedroom door.

Isaac stared at Jackson in disbelief. Was Jackson seriously just going to walk out and leave things like that between them, over some stupid miscommunication?

Fuck that shit.

Isaac used a bit of werewolf speed and was standing between Jackson and the exit before Jackson had time to react.

“No way,” said Isaac, crossing his arms across his chest. “I know for a fact now that you have a tongue, so the least you can do is use it to talk to me.”

Jackson’s gaze was fixed on a point somewhere over Isaac’s left shoulder.

“I have to go to school,” Jackson said in a completely even tone.

“Well clearly, we have to talk,” said Isaac. “Is me staying longer a problem?”

Jackson swallowed. “No.”

Isaac didn’t even need werewolf senses to know that that was a lie, but he wanted to hear Jackson out before jumping to conclusions.

“So what is the problem?”

“I just--” Jackson started before cutting himself off. “When did that happen? You staying? Did you just decide to, or...?”

“James and Pol asked me Wednesday morning if I could stay and help catch that thing during the next new moon, and I said yes. Jackson, what--” Isaac took a step towards Jackson, who took an equal step back.

And that’s when it hit him, why Jackson was being weird: because they were now a them. Because they’d been cuddling and making out that morning, and the only reason any of that amazingness had happened was because Jackson had kissed Isaac the night before, and it was starting to look like the only reason that had happened was because Jackson had thought that Isaac was leaving. Immediately, from the sound of it.

Isaac supposed he couldn’t really blame Jackson for only wanting something quick and easy and simple. After all, those were the things Isaac looked for in every aspect of his life now.
“So, you kissed me last night because you thought I was leaving soon,” Isaac said, not bothering to make it a question. When he thought about it, that actually made sense. After the way Isaac had been throwing himself at Jackson for weeks, it had been kind of strange for Jackson to just suddenly give in…

It had to be because expiration dates made everything easier. Jackson had probably thought that since it was almost Isaac’s last night in London, what would the harm be in a little bit of indulgence? Especially with someone he was unlikely to ever see again, at least for a long time. Isaac could hardly blame him for that; he probably would’ve done the same thing (except acted on it way earlier).

Jackson stayed silent—maybe he was nervous, maybe he was embarrassed; Isaac knew how uncomfortable Jackson was with confrontation—so Isaac decided to push a little more.

“Look, it’s totally fine if you’re not looking for anything serious. Dude, that’s practically my mantra. A night, a weekend, a month… As long as you want. Or not,” Isaac added gently after a moment. “If you want this to be it, that’s cool, too. I’m not trying to complicate your life, but I’m having fun and I want you to have fun, too. If you want to.”

He caught the way the muscle in Jackson’s cheek moved when he clenched his jaw, like Jackson was forcefully restraining words that were trying to get out.

Isaac sighed. He knew he couldn’t make Jackson open up to him, but maybe he could try to make sure Jackson knew that Isaac wanted him to.

“All I’m saying is, if you want to be with me—as friends, or whatever you want—you should probably talk to me. Trust me, there’s a lot less drama when people talk. So if there’s something bothering you, tell me. If you want something, tell me.”

Isaac stepped in close and dug his fingers into Jackson’s hair, tugging his head back just a bit, making Jackson hiss in surprise. It was a good surprise, judging by the look in Jackson’s eyes.

“One last thing, then I’ll let you go to school. If you still want to,” Isaac added with a smirk. He leaned down so his lips were just brushing Jackson’s. “I’ll be staying in London for another month. Question is, do you want me to stay here?”

Isaac released his grip on Jackson’s hair, but before Isaac could even bring his arms down, Jackson’s lips were fiercely pressed against his. That was definitely a good enough answer for Isaac.

He allowed Jackson to kiss him breathless, and when the kiss broke he decided he’d never been more disappointed about needing to breathe.

“So until the next new moon?” Jackson asked between kisses.

“That’s the plan.”

Jackson sighed against Isaac’s lips. “Okay.”

That word should have sounded final, should have sounded like an ending, but it didn’t. It might have had something to do with the way one of Jackson’s hands had become tangled in Isaac’s shirt and the other had settled on the back of Isaac’s neck. It could’ve been because of the way Jackson kissed him again, clearly not ready for this to be it, either.

“So what now?” Jackson pulled back just far enough to ask. For a guy who had been insisting he
needed to leave a few minutes earlier, he sure didn’t seem to be in a rush to go now.

“Now, you go to school. Unless…?” Isaac trailed off, hoping that Jackson would suggest a more fun course of action for the day.

“Right. School,” said Jackson. He looked a little dazed, which made Isaac smirk.

Isaac could sense Jackson’s indecision, as well as his reluctance when he finally made up his mind to go. Jackson kissed Isaac again, almost like he just wanted to prove that he could, then stepped around Isaac and started backing away towards the door.

“So what are you going to do while I’m at school?” Jackson asked pointedly.

It was pretty damned obvious what Isaac was going to do the second Jackson was gone. Isaac bit his bottom lip and groaned, causing a slow smirk to spread across Jackson’s extremely kissable lips. Isaac wasn’t ready to let the smug bastard go quite that easily.

Isaac took one step forward for every step Jackson took back, staying just a pace away, stalking his prey until Jackson’s back was against the bedroom wall. A step to his left and Jackson could have easily escaped; the fact that he stayed there pleased the part of Isaac that wanted to dominate Jackson. Not in a wolfy way, necessarily, and definitely not in an alpha way, just regular old (really fun and sexy) power play.

Isaac stopped when Jackson did, pinning him to the wall without even touching him.

Jackson’s scent was intoxicating; there was no fear or even the familiar nervousness, just the undeniable evidence that Jackson wanted Isaac, and it was all Isaac could do to let him leave when they were so close... But that was part of the game, wasn’t it?

“You sure you want to go?” Isaac asked lowly. It couldn’t hurt to try one more time.

Jackson’s slow nod looked painful, but it was definitely a yes. Isaac heaved an exaggerated sigh of disappointment.

“You, Jackson Whittemore, are a fucking tease.” Isaac reached out and ran his fingers slowly through Jackson’s hair.

“Takes one to know one,” Jackson said as his eyes slipped closed.

When Isaac had finished fixing Jackson’s hair and Jackson opened his eyes, things felt a little more like normal again (or whatever passed for normal between them). There was definitely a change, though. A good change. Isaac couldn’t wait to see what other changes would come next.

Josie was regarding Jackson from across the table, arms crossed over her chest, one eyebrow raised in a kind of stern skepticism that made Jackson more than a little uneasy.

“So you’re telling me that you can’t give me an exact date for when your omega is leaving because he’s in town for work and doesn’t know when he’ll be done, except that it will be some time after the new moon?”

Jackson winced. It really hadn’t sounded any better or less complicated when he’d said it, either. “Pretty much.”

“You are killing me, Jack.” Josie closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.
Josie hadn’t even waited for Jackson to ask to take a walk when he had showed up at the den after school that day. Jackson had only taken one step inside before Josie—correctly guessing what had brought him back so promptly—had immediately spun him around and nudged him back out the door.

She had pulled him into the Costa around the corner and ordered drinks for both of them, talking about nothing in particular until they were settled in a corner booth. Jackson knew it had been meant to put him at ease, but he couldn’t say it helped much.

“Okay,” Josie finally said, opening her eyes. “Call him.”

Jackson stared at her. “What?”

“Call him. On your phone. Tell him to meet us here.”

“You want to meet him?”

Maybe Jackson had misheard her somehow, or maybe if he asked her she would change her mind. The idea of Josie meeting Isaac filled Jackson with an irrational dread. He wasn’t ready. But it wasn’t like he had a choice.

“If he’s going to be hanging ‘round, then yes, I need to meet him, Jack. Right now. And he’s got to ask my permission to stay in my territory. That’s basic stuff. Honestly, how has he survived this long on his own without knowing anything about pack etiquette?”

Jackson shrugged uncomfortably. “I guess things were different in France?”

Josie made a disrespectful noise. “French werewolves. There’s his problem. No manners, the lot of them.” Josie eyed Jackson over a sip of coffee. “You’re not calling.”

Jackson quickly excused himself and stepped outside to make the call.

“You know we’re only three episodes away from the end of season one of Breaking Bad?” Isaac said by way of greeting. “We could easily finish it tonight.”

“I’ve got homework,” Jackson replied automatically. “What are you doing right now?”

“Right now? Lying on your bed. Ask me what I’m wearing.”

“If you say ‘nothing,’ I’m hanging up,” Jackson said irritably. He did not have time for this.

“Killjoy.”

“You know the Costa where I was doing homework with Zach?”

“I know of it.” Isaac’s voice was amused.

“I need you to meet me here.”

“So you didn’t just call for phone sex?”

“Isaac.” Jackson’s ears burned, and he was suddenly very relieved that he had gone outside to make the call. Hopefully Josie couldn’t hear them.

“Alright, alright. I’ll meet you there. What’s the occasion?”
Jackson debated lying, but knew it wouldn’t actually help anything. “My alpha wants to meet you.”

There were a few seconds of silence on the line.

“Isaac?”

“Why?” Isaac finally asked.

“What do you mean, ‘Why’?” said Jackson. “I told her about you and now you have to ask for permission to stay another month, okay? It’s not a big deal.”

Isaac went silent again.

“So I’ll see you here in few minutes?” Jackson asked warily. He was starting to worry about what the hell Isaac was doing that was more important than answering a simple question.

“Yeah. I’ll be right there.”

Then Isaac immediately hung up. Which was a great sign.

“On his way?” Josie asked as Jackson sat back down.

“Pretty sure,” said Jackson, though he wasn’t sure at all.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, Josie drinking her coffee and Jackson watching the door intently, wanting in equal parts for Isaac to hurry up and get there but also to never show up.

“He doesn’t have anything to be nervous about, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t you… intervening, is it?” Jackson frowned.

Josie laughed and put her hand on Jackson’s shoulder. “No, Jack. If I’m ‘intervening,’ you’ll know.”

“…That’s not very reassuring.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

They slowly sipped their coffees while they waited, mostly in awkward silence, during the ten minutes it took Isaac to get there. When Isaac showed up, he didn’t bother to smile or say hello or introduce himself or anything; he just plopped down in the empty chair next to Jackson and looked at Jackson expectantly.

“Josie, this is my, uh…” What was Jackson supposed to call Isaac? His friend? “This is Isaac. Isaac, this is Josie, alpha of the Holborn pack.”

Jackson had decided that it would be best to give Josie as much respect as possible, considering that he had fucked up and he was asking her to do him a favor.

Isaac raised an eyebrow at Jackson. He didn’t look terribly impressed by Josie. Although, Jackson supposed it was hard to take anyone who was practically half your height and dressed like a Green Day groupie as a serious threat. Jackson just hoped that Isaac knocked off whatever bullshit he was trying to pull soon, or else Josie might change her mind about letting him stay.
Josie held her hand out for Isaac to shake, which Isaac did, but only briefly and without much enthusiasm. If it bothered Josie, though, she ignored it, choosing instead to get right to the point.

“So, Isaac. I understand that you might not know how things are usually done around here, so I’ll fill you in. Most alphas wouldn’t let you stay in their territory as long as I have without some kind of reassurance that you’re not here to cause trouble. Are you here to cause trouble?”

“Define, ‘trouble’.”

There was a tense (at least on Jackson’s part) pause before Josie continued.

“I can see you think you’re quite clever, pup, and maybe you are, but so far, I haven’t seen any sign of it. So you can drop the attitude, because I’m not impressed.”

Isaac shrugged. “I’m not really here to impress you.”

“I didn’t think so,” said Josie, “but that does get us to my main question. Why are you here?”

“Work,” Isaac said, like it was all the explanation that was necessary.

“What kind of work?”

“I’m a werewolf consultant,” Isaac replied without missing a beat. Jackson practically choked on the sip of coffee he’d just taken. What the fuck did that idiot think he was doing?

“A werewolf consultant,” Josie repeated flatly.

“Yeah,” said Isaac.

Josie blinked. Then she started laughing. “If you say so.”

Isaac looked like he didn’t know whether to be offended or relieved that Josie didn’t seem to believe him. At least, that was how Jackson felt. He didn’t know what they would tell Josie if she started asking more specific questions. It wasn’t exactly like Isaac could lie to her about working with hunters. She would know.

“So why London?”

“Like I said, work.”

“Right.” It was clear that Josie wasn’t really (at all) satisfied with Isaac’s explanation, but, to Jackson’s immense relief, she didn’t press Isaac for a more detailed answer. “Were you and Jackson close back in the States, then?”

There was no way that Isaac could have been prepared for Josie’s abrupt change of topic, but if it confused him, he did a damned good job of pretending like he didn’t care. Or maybe Isaac just really didn’t.

“I wouldn’t say we were best friends or anything, but we did grow up together.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and cut in, “We grew up across the street from each other and went to the same schools. That’s about it.”

“Until you were both bit by the same alpha? That sounds like more than coincidence.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew how small Beacon Hills is,” said Jackson.
“You were pack,” said Josie. “That’s quite a strong bond.”

“Mm,” Isaac made a thoughtful sound. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Jackson’s not really a ‘joiner’. He never exactly settled in with the Hale pack. Then again, Derek wasn’t the best alpha.”

“I’d gathered as much from the whole biting-sixteen-year-olds thing,” Josie said dryly.

Jackson winced, but Isaac only shrugged. “For what it’s worth, London seems to be a lot better for him. You seem to be a lot better for him.”

Josie gave Isaac a long, searching look, like she didn’t really know what to make of him. Jackson could relate.

“Not hard to be,” she said finally, “but I’ll take the compliment. Jack’s a good beta, anyway.”

“I’m still here, guys,” said Jackson. As relieved as he was that Isaac seemed to have stopped mouthing off, he was tired of them talking about him like he wasn’t there. Unfortunately, his relief was short lived.

“I dunno,” said Isaac, “I’m not sure you know Jack.”

A pun. A fucking pun. Jackson was going to murder Isaac.

“Damn it, Isaac!” Jackson hissed. He had had enough. “This is serious!”

“Is it?” Isaac interlaced his fingers and put them behind his head, clearly trying to look as uninterested as possible. “Because it feels like a joke to me.”

“Could you get over your ‘Lone Wolf and Proud’ bullshit for like two seconds and ask my alpha if you can stay with me?”

Jackson felt his eyes flash beta blue, but before he could so much as growl, Josie laid her hand on his arm, bringing him back. Isaac watched their interaction impassively. There was another tense moment before he spoke again.

“Fine,” Isaac said finally. He turned to Josie. “Will you bend your arbitrary, weird old-fashioned rules so I can crash at my friend’s house for a couple more weeks?”

Murder was too good for Isaac, Jackson decided then. He was going to lock Isaac in a cage made out of mountain ash and wolfsbane and make him live off Weetabix for twenty years.

At Jackson’s furious glare, Isaac added, “Please?”

Josie considered the matter for about thirty seconds, during which Jackson didn’t breathe. He couldn’t fathom why Isaac had to be such an unbelievable asshole about this situation. Of all the times for him to revert to being a huge douchebag, this was one of the worst possible scenarios. Jackson was sure that Josie was going to say no. How could she not, after Isaac had behaved like that?

“He can stay,” said Josie, “but there are a few rules that I expect both of you to follow.” She turned back to Isaac. “Number one, you can’t go anywhere in our territory on your own. Jackson needs to be with you at all times unless you’re at his.”

Isaac just blinked at her. “Is that supposed to be a punishment? And if so, for who?”

Jackson jabbed Isaac in the side with his elbow, but Isaac continued.
“What if Jackson’s at school and I need to go somewhere? Could Zach be with me?”

“I s’pose,” Josie agreed. “Number two, you’re to tell me if any non-Holborn wolves seem to be paying too much attention to you. Either of you,” Josie added, looking between them.

“Sounds great. Anything else?” Isaac drawled.

“Don’t you want to thank her for letting you stay?” Jackson asked through clenched teeth. He couldn’t believe Isaac was acting this way.

“I’m not sure ‘want’ is the word I’d use.”

Jackson gave Isaac another fierce glare before turning back to Josie. “Thanks, Josie. Really.”

Josie shrugged. “Of course, I reserve the right to revoke my permission at any time if any issues should arise. But I’m sure none will.”

“That’s fair,” Jackson said quickly, before Isaac could say anything else to fuck up the situation. “There won’t be any issues.”

Jackson shot Isaac a pointed look, which Isaac ignored.

“Oh, and Jack,” Josie added, her tone a little less stern, “I was also going to say it’d be a good idea for you to keep your scent on him, so other wolves would know he’s associated with Holborn, but from the smell of him, you don’t need to be told.”

Jackson flushed deeply. To Jackson, having your alpha imply that you were having sex with someone was almost as bad as your mom doing it. Isaac smirked.

“Well, if that’s everything, Jackson needs to walk me home.” Isaac stood up and headed for the door. He didn’t even say goodbye to Josie, let alone thank her.

Jackson stood up and pulled on his coat, but before he could follow Isaac out, Josie grabbed his arm. “One last thing, Jack.”

Jackson turned around, cringing.

“I’m pleased to see you’ve accepted that I was right,” said Josie. Her tone was decidedly smug. “He’s perfect for you.”

The heat that had just started fading from his cheeks came back full force as Jackson was reminded about how fiercely he had denied Josie’s comment from just the night before about fancying Isaac.

If the situation were any different, Jackson might’ve had some kind of comeback to that, but Josie deserved to give Jackson as much crap about Isaac as she wanted to. It was a small price to pay for her letting him get away with disobeying her, and for bending the rules for Isaac on top of everything else.

“Thanks, Josie,” Jackson said again, and added another “I’m sorry” for good measure.

“Water under the bridge,” said Josie. She pulled Jackson down for a hug, which Jackson gratefully accepted. Josie had forgiven him. It was like a physical weight had been lifted from his chest.

Now there was only anger there.

Jackson said goodbye to Josie, then headed outside, where Isaac was waiting on the sidewalk.
“I think that went pretty well,” said Isaac casually as they started walking toward Jackson’s flat.

“Why the fuck were you acting like that?”

If Isaac heard the fury in Jackson’s tone, he didn’t react to it.

“Like what?”

“Like a goddamned asshole! Do you know how embarrassing that was? She’s my alpha. And you’re fucking lucky she’s still letting you stay!”

“I just don’t understand why it’s such a big deal,” said Isaac.

“That’s because you’re not even trying to understand it,” Jackson growled. “You’ve made it pretty damned clear you don’t give a fuck about pack territory and werewolf politics. I get it. But I do give a fuck. That shit can be life or death around here.”

“I can take care of myself,” Isaac said dismissively.

“Yeah, well I can’t. I need my pack. I thought you would’ve figured that out by now, but if you had, you wouldn’t have been such a dick to my alpha.”

“Jackson--”

“She should’ve kicked you out,” said Jackson, talking over Isaac. “I broke the rules. I didn’t tell her about you right away. She should’ve kicked you out and punished me, but she didn’t. And you didn’t even thank her.”

Isaac opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He frowned and rubbed at the back of his neck awkwardly before he spoke again.

“I don’t have anything to thank her for,” Isaac said softly. Jackson briefly considered storming home and locking Isaac out of the flat, but then Isaac continued: “I should thank you, though.”

Jackson searched for a response to that, but came up empty. At some point--Jackson couldn’t quite pinpoint when--they had stopped walking, and now Jackson was standing with his back to a wrought-iron fence. Isaac took a step toward him.

“I didn’t mean to get you in trouble,” said Isaac. His tone was startlingly earnest. After all the bravado, it caught Jackson off guard.

“Yeah, well…” Jackson was sure that he had planned on saying something. He had started to say it. Where had the rest of the words gone?

Isaac was closer to him now. A lot closer. Isaac stepped into Jackson’s space, bracing his hand against the fence and ducking his head down to Jackson’s height.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. Then he kissed Jackson.

It wasn’t fair, Jackson thought as he couldn’t help but give in. It wasn’t fair that with ten words and a kiss, Isaac could make Jackson (mostly) not care that Isaac had spent half an hour being absolutely fucking horrible when it had really mattered. It wasn’t fair that Isaac smelled and tasted so good.

Jackson hated that someone had that kind of power over him. Or he should’ve hated it. A few weeks ago, he would’ve. Now he just wanted to go home and enjoy how good Isaac smelled and
tasted and not think about how it made things complicated for his pack or how he only had a few weeks of it left. If he only had a few weeks, what was the point of being pissed off?

Even if Isaac had been an unbelievable asshole.

“You owe me,” Jackson said when the kiss broke.

“Fair enough,” said Isaac. “Name your price.”

Jackson considered for a moment. “We’re going to go back to mine, you’re going to order and pay for takeaway, and then you’re not going to say one fucking word while we finish Breaking Bad.”

“I think I can do that,” said Isaac. He gave Jackson another long, deep kiss, then said, “I’m sure I can find something else to do with my mouth anyway.”

Jackson crosses his arms over his chest and glared up at Isaac in a way he hoped would convey ‘You are on seriously thin fucking ice, asshole.’

It sort of worked. Isaac heaved an exaggerated sigh and said, “I meant eating food, pervert. God, get your mind out of the gutter.”

Then he winked, slung his arm over Jackson’s shoulder, pointed them in the direction of home, and started walking.

Isaac mostly kept his hands and his mouth to himself during dinner and TV, apart from some sporadic making out that Jackson had to put an end to when he came to his senses and realized he was missing important plot points. They finished up the season just before Jackson’s school night bedtime.

The restful sleep Jackson had been looking forward to after an exceptionally stressful day was undermined, however, by the fact that Isaac casually took his shirt off before coming to bed.

On instinct, Jackson was alarmed at first, unsure if this meant Isaac was going to make a move or something (and unsure if he wanted Isaac to make a move, and if so, how far he wanted it to go).

“You’re cute when you’re nervous,” said Isaac as he crawled under the duvet.

“I’m not--”

“I like sleeping without a shirt better,” Isaac explained over Jackson’s protest. “Figured maybe I didn’t have to worry about you being weird about it anymore.”

It was reasonable logic. Actually, Jackson liked sleeping without a shirt on better, too. He just hadn’t been able to go without one in a while because it had been so cold in the flat. And supposedly Isaac’s initial invasion of Jackson’s bed had been about body heat. Hadn’t Jackson heard somewhere that body heat transfer was more effective without clothing anyway? It wasn’t a big deal.

Jackson shrugged and took off his own shirt as well before joining Isaac in the bed. Once he was there and Isaac was snuggling up to his side, however, it didn’t feel entirely like it wasn’t a big deal. There was a lot more of Isaac’s skin touching a lot more of Jackson’s skin than usual: warm, soft, smooth. This was probably something Isaac didn’t bat an eye at, which made Jackson feel awkward and self-conscious.

“You’re still nervous,” Isaac observed. Of course, he didn’t do anything to help the situation by
trailing his fingers slowly over Jackson’s bare shoulder and upper arm.

Jackson didn’t bother trying to deny it this time. “Can’t help it.”

“Maybe this is kind of messed up,” said Isaac, “but when people are nervous around me, I usually take it as a compliment.

“Why?” Jackson asked distractedly. He was mostly focused on how Isaac’s fingers were moving back up his arm.

“Because most of the time, it either means that I’m trying to scare them and it’s working,” he said with a smile in his voice, “or they want me.”

Jackson swallowed thickly. He wasn’t fooling anyone: of course he wanted Isaac. That had been pretty well established now. But wanting something wasn’t the same as actually getting it. And if just having Isaac touch his bare torso--Isaac’s hand was sliding down from Jackson’s shoulder to his chest--affected him like this, then he might be in serious trouble.

Isaac shifted up a little so he could dip his head and kiss Jackson. On instinct, Jackson leaned up into it, returning the pressure of Isaac’s lips. Though it still made him a little nervous, at least kissing was something he was familiar with and was pretty sure he was good at.

“Tell you what,” said Isaac when the kiss broke. He was looking down into Jackson’s eyes now. “I won’t do anything to you that you don’t do to me first.” Then he amended, “Well, at least for tonight, anyway. Would that make you less nervous?”

Jackson considered this proposal for a moment. He seriously doubted he’d have the guts to do anything to Isaac, so that would probably mean that not much happened tonight, but maybe that would be a good thing. He might want to save going past the next metaphorical ‘base’ for when it wasn’t bedtime on a school night.

“Okay,” he agreed.

“Cool,” said Isaac. He lay back down next to Jackson and relaxed there. “Ball’s in your court, Whittemore.”

This somehow made Jackson calmer and more excited at the same time. At first, he was paralyzed, not sure what he even wanted to do, let alone how to go about it. But he didn’t have to do anything major. Just something small; a first step toward whatever might happen at a later date. This could be a good opportunity to get from making out to… serious stuff, without doing it all in one night or something.

Feeling kind of like he was fourteen years old, Jackson hesitantly placed his hand flat on Isaac’s stomach. The muscles beneath the skin there twitched. Isaac was unexpectedly toned. Jackson wasn’t sure why he found that unexpected, actually; it wasn’t like Isaac wasn’t athletic, and being a werewolf sort of kept everything looking in good shape. But Isaac didn’t wear tight enough clothing to make it immediately obvious. Jackson found that he kind of (really) liked being able to feel Isaac’s muscles. He let his hand wander over them as he slid his palm up to Isaac’s chest, his collarbone, his shoulder.

Isaac remained passive, watching Jackson quietly. It was somewhat unnerving, but not enough to make Jackson stop. Half of Jackson’s attention was focused on the strangeness of finding Isaac’s body attractive. Logically, it shouldn’t be strange; this wasn’t the first time Jackson had found Isaac physically attractive. He just hadn’t really stopped to think about the fact that being attracted
to Isaac meant that he was attracted to a guy before. It didn’t… bother Jackson, exactly. It just kind of caught him off guard. He was attracted to Isaac, but he had never really stopped to consider Isaac’s guyness until now. Now that he was spending a fair amount of time analyzing it.

“You think too much,” Isaac murmured, like he was being careful not to break some kind of spell.

Maybe that was true, but Jackson couldn’t help it. Some things required thinking about. Some things couldn’t be undone.

Jackson ignored Isaac and gently pulled at his shoulder so Isaac would turn onto his side, facing Jackson. Jackson shifted closer so he could get his arm around Isaac and run his hand over the hard planes of Isaac’s back, his shoulderblades. When he got to the back of Isaac’s neck, Jackson slipped his fingers into Isaac’s short hair and tugged on it a little, causing Isaac’s eyes to slide shut. Jackson smirked before kissing Isaac.

When the kiss broke, Jackson finally felt comfortable. Mostly.

“A guy could get used to that,” said Isaac, voice still hushed.

Per their agreement, Jackson kissing Isaac meant that Isaac could kiss Jackson, which he wasted no time in doing. Soon Jackson found himself flat on his back with Isaac leaning over him so he could kiss Jackson senseless (or at least, that appeared to be his goal). Isaac’s hands were a lot less hesitant than Jackson’s had been— they seemed to slide over every inch of Jackson’s skin from the hem of his pajama pants up. It made Jackson kind of wish that they’d go lower, but that would require Jackson doing that first, and he didn’t think he was ready to try that yet.

As he let himself bask in Isaac’s attention, Jackson mentally agreed: A guy could definitely get used to this.

Chapter End Notes

Dramas and squees! Thanks so much for all of the lovely comments and the kudos and just for reading and enjoying. We appreciate every one of you!

Savenna Cloverunner
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: KNOCKOUT (Dynamite Boy)

I will not apologize for being me.
I cannot rationalize my true feelings.
There is no saving grace.
I have no other face.
Why can't you understand?

“What are you doing Friday night?”

Isaac didn’t even remember answering the phone. He was still half asleep and tangled up with Jackson. They’d stayed up pretty late the night before, and Jackson was going to have to get up for school soon. Isaac didn’t want to wake him (unless it was for more makeouts).
“Hannah?” Isaac asked blearily, “What--”

“If you answer with anything that isn’t, ‘Spending it at dinner with you, love’ you’re wrong. Pol wants to treat you to dinner. Well, she wants me to take you and Jackson out. Her treat. You’re really not allowed to say no.”

“If I say yes, will that make this conversation stop?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes.” And with that, he hung up. Isaac nestled back against Jackson and tried to steal a few more minutes of sleep. Until his phone buzzed again.

“It’s too early,” Isaac groaned.

“You’re the one picking up your phone,” Hannah said, matter-of-factly. “Anyway, I was going to say, we should go out after we eat. And you’re more than welcome to bring friends if you like. Especially if they have sexy red hair and fantastic blue eyes. But I don’t suppose you know anyone like that.”

Isaac snorted. “Yeah, I’m sure Jackson’s going to let that happen.”

“I’m only saying, if you happen to run into anyone that fits that description, you should invite them along.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

“Isaac, please. You don’t get to tell me how sweet and thoughtful he is and let me see how gorgeous and adorable he is and then refuse to let me get to know him. It just isn’t fair!”

“I’m hanging up. I’ll text you later.”

“Wolf--”

Isaac ended the call and switched his phone to silent. Isaac rolled back over to find Jackson staring at him flatly.

“Good morning.” Isaac smiled, hoping to distract Jackson from what he had probably just overheard.

“Why’ve you been talking about my brother with Hannah?”

Isaac’s relief that Jackson wasn’t calling her ‘that hunter’ anymore was short lived.

“I wouldn’t say I’ve been talking about him with her...”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed at the obvious lie.

“Okay,” Isaac admitted, “so she may have had a few questions about him and I may have talked about how protective you guys are of each other and showed her the text he sent me and--”

“Text?” Jackson asked.

“Yeah, the one from that night you decided to go all Requiem for a Dream on us,” Isaac said casually.
“Call it that again and I’ll kick you out of this bed for good.” Jackson’s threat made Isaac feel kind of bad for bringing up the tranqs. “What did he text you?”

“Basically that, if I was going to be living with you, I needed to look out for you, too, and not just myself. At least I think that was the idea. His exact words were ‘stop being a twat’.”

Jackson snorted. “That does sound like Zach. So you showed Hannah that text and that made her think he’s sweet?”

Isaac shrugged and changed the subject by starting to kiss down Jackson’s conveniently bare chest. Deciding to start sleeping without his own shirt on last night had definitely been the best idea Isaac had had in a while.

“Is this how we’re going to end every argument now?” Jackson was trying his best to sound annoyed, but his breath hitched around the word ‘end,’ when Isaac planted a kiss near his ribs.

“Depends. Are we having an argument?” Isaac asked innocently, tugging at the waistband of Jackson’s pajama pants. They were already slung low, below Jackson’s hipbones, which seriously tested the small amount of self-control Isaac had.

“I’m pretty sure we are, and I’m also pretty sure that I haven’t tried to take your pants off yet. So knock it off.”

Jackson was clearly even more determined now to act like Isaac wasn’t getting to him, but pulse and scent didn’t lie.

Isaac gently bit down on the flesh just to the side of Jackson’s hipbone. “That was last night’s arrangement.”

“It’s a good arrangement,” said Jackson. His pulse skipped when he said it, though. It was also starting to speed up with excitement.

It was difficult to resist the temptation to call Jackson out for trying to pretend he wasn’t interested, but Isaac didn’t want to risk pissing Jackson off (or worse, scaring him off) and ruining the fun. So, even though it pained him, Isaac left Jackson’s pants alone and settled for continuing to worry at the same spot on Jackson’s hip with his teeth and lips. Just because Jackson’s werewolf healing meant a hickey wouldn’t stay, that didn’t mean Isaac couldn’t have fun giving him one.

“Technically the agreement covers biting, too,” Jackson added.

Isaac looked up, meeting Jackson’s eyes without lifting his head, and bit down again. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

When Jackson did not, in fact, tell Isaac to stop (or say anything at all), Isaac smirked in victory. He kissed the faint bruise that was already starting to fade from Jackson’s hip and sat up, stretching his hands above his head. A quick glance at the clock on his phone showed that they still had plenty of time before Jackson had to go to school.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Isaac asked, trying to ignore the way Jackson’s heartbeat was still racing. “There might still be some bacon left.”

“Bacon sounds good.” Jackson’s voice was slightly strained, which made Isaac smirk.

“Good. Go take your shower, but I’m not waiting for you, so hurry up.” Isaac moved to get out of bed.
“You realize we didn’t actually resolve anything, right?” Jackson said flatly.

Isaac shrugged. “We’re having bacon for breakfast.”

“You know what I mean. Zach isn’t coming with us to dinner,” Jackson insisted.

Isaac couldn’t help but point out the double standard. “Why can you go, but Zach can’t?”

“Because he--”

“Zach’s an adult. He can take care of himself.”

“I know that, but--”

“So there’s no point in you trying to protect him from nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. She’s a--”

“Worst case scenario, they hang out and realize that they have nothing in common and never talk to each other again.”

“That’s the best case scenario,” said Jackson. “Worst case scenario, Zach gets killed!”

“I think you’re being a little overdramatic,” said Isaac.

“And you’re being a complete--”

“It’s not like--”

Jackson growled and covered Isaac’s mouth with his hand.

“It’s exactly like. Just shut up for a second and let me fucking talk.”

Isaac hoped Jackson appreciated the amount of restraint that it took not to lick Jackson’s hand. Somehow he doubted it, though. He sighed through his nose and waited for Jackson to continue.

“Okay. Say we invite Zach to come with us Friday,” said Jackson. “What would happen? We’d all talk about a lot of things that would then have to be explained to Zach, including but not limited to the fact that she comes from a family of hunters. Not just any hunters; hunter freaking royalty. Then we’ll move onto the wonderful topic of what the fuck you and I are doing spending time with them. Do you see where I’m going with this? It’s a terrible. Fucking. Idea.”

Jackson waited, like he was expecting Isaac to respond. Isaac blinked and looked meaningfully down at Jackson’s hand, which would have to be removed before Isaac could say anything. After another few seconds, Jackson (reluctantly, Isaac thought) pulled his hand back.

“I get it,” said Isaac. “I really do, but you have to realize that trying to keep them apart is only going to make them more interested, right?”

Jackson fell back onto his bed with a heavy sigh. “I know. Zach’s already asked about her. What the fuck am I supposed to tell him?”

“It’s up to you, man, but I don’t think Zach would like you making decisions for him.”

Jackson groaned in a way that Isaac chose to interpret as ‘Thank you, Isaac, for being so smart and saying the things that I needed to hear instead of the things I wanted to hear.’
“You’re welcome. Now I’m pretty sure you have to get ready for stupid school.” Isaac started pushing Jackson’s shoulder, trying to roll him out of bed, which naturally Jackson resented. He caught Isaac’s arm, pulling Isaac down on top of him, which naturally led to both of them trying to pin the other to the bed.

Isaac couldn’t say he really fought too hard to break free when Jackson was on top of him, though. In fact, Isaac would have been very content to stay there all day, letting Jackson have his way with him.

“You know, you having school is seriously starting to get in the way of my fun,” said Isaac.

“Or having you around is seriously starting to get in the way of my school,” Jackson countered, leaning down to kiss Isaac before climbing off of him and out of bed.

Just before leaving the room, Jackson paused and looked back at Isaac. “I’ll tell him about Friday and let him make his own decision, okay? Now go make that bacon.”

“Well, hullo, Jack. Hearing from you twice in one week! To what do I owe the honor?”

Jackson had called Zach as soon as he had finished school for the day. He was still a little annoyed about the fact that Isaac had somehow gotten him to agree to this idiotic plan (Jackson blamed the bacon and kissing), but he had ultimately decided that if he didn’t just rip the bandaid off, he would chicken out. But to be fair, Jackson was basically abetting a criminal act, under duress. Chickening out would hardly be a bad thing.

“Hannah invited us to dinner Friday,” said Jackson. No point in dancing around the issue.

“Hannah…?” Zach asked, a little too innocently.

“You know who. Isaac and I are having dinner with her Friday night and she invited you.”

“Hang on,” said Zach, “did she honestly invite me, or are you just trying to make me feel special?”

“Why would you think I’d do that?”

“Because you make horrible decisions all the time and you know I can’t tell when you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying,” said Jackson, though he was starting to really wish that he hadn’t said anything at all.

“Good. Lying’s a sin, Jack, and very unbecoming a werewolf.” It was clear that Zach was trying to hide a massive amount of excitement, but he failed miserably. “What time and where?”

Jackson regretted this decision already.

“Zach, I really have to tell you something.”

Jackson, Zach, and Isaac were waiting outside the restaurant Hannah had chosen. They had gotten there early, and, after torturing himself over the issue during the entire trip over, Jackson had finally decided that he needed to tell Zach ahead of time that Hannah was a hunter. The only problem was that he couldn’t get a fucking word in edgewise.
“Are you sure I look okay?” Zach nervously smoothed his hair with his hand for what must have been the thousandth time that night.

“Yes,” Jackson said impatiently for what also must have been the thousandth time. “Zach, listen to me--”

“Should I have worn a tie?” Zach asked, playing self-consciously with the collar of his shirt. Jackson had never seen Zach dressed up before, and it was very weird. Granted, Zach was still wearing jeans and sneakers with his button-down shirt, but they were nice jeans and nice sneakers.


Zach’s expression was a combination of pleased and skeptical. “Really?”

Jackson wanted to shake Zach. “Zach, I swear to God--”

“All right, Puss, don’t get your tail in a knot.”

Zach’s use of Hannah’s nickname for Jackson sent Isaac into a fit of laughter. Jackson glared at both of them, and he might have walked away then and washed his hands of the whole evening if Hannah hadn’t chosen that moment to finally make an appearance.

“What’d we miss?” She was smiling, but her voice was a bit tight. And that Northern asshole was with her. What the fuck was he doing there? Jackson was pretty damned sure there hadn’t been any mention of him on the phone.


Isaac caught Hannah by the elbow and dipped his head close to her ear.

“Hannah, what the fuck?” Isaac whispered in a much calmer way than Jackson would have been able to. It was obvious that Isaac was just as alarmed by this turn of events as Jackson was, though.

“I’m so sorry,” Hannah whispered back. “Aunt Wendy made me bring him. Some bollocks about him feeling left out. I texted you from the taxi. Didn’t you see my messages?”

Isaac pulled out his phone, and Jackson could tell by watching his face that clearly she had texted. Not like it would’ve changed anything, of course.

Jackson’s one (very small) consolation was that everyone seemed to have come to a silent agreement that they needed to keep Tobias away from Zach. Hannah sat between them while Jackson and Isaac took the seats across from Zach and Hannah, respectively.

Regardless, it was probably the most stressful meal Jackson had ever been forced to sit through. And he’d endured a painfully memorable Thanksgiving where his vocally homophobic uncle had been seated next to Danny. After the fourth comment about “homos” and “fags” (Jackson’s uncle didn’t seem to realize that Danny was gay), Jackson had stood up and cursed the bastard out until his dad had to physically restrain him and his mom sent him to his room. Jackson was furious at them for stopping him, but later learned that after he was gone, his mom had made his uncle apologize to Danny and told him that if he said one more hateful word in her house, he wouldn’t be allowed back. She had also saved second helpings of dessert for both Jackson and Danny.

Jackson had a brief moment of wondering what that asshole might say about his and Isaac’s
Tobias was bristly and cold, and as obviously wary as Jackson himself felt while watching Zach and Hannah talking animatedly together, with Isaac not-so-subtly encouraging their flirting. Jackson was really wishing that he’d had time to warn Zach about their hunter affiliations, but so far the conversation had stayed pretty light.

It didn’t seem likely that it would stay that way forever, though. The way Tobias was currently eyeing Zach had Jackson feeling like they were definitely being hunted. Jackson’s senses were warning him that there was a threat very close, and Zach and Isaac were oblivious to it.

Jackson did have to admit, however, that Zach and Hannah seemed to be getting along pretty well. It even looked like Hannah was genuinely interested when Zach went off on a tangent about how dandelions reproduce by cloning. Nobody was interested in dandelion biology. She must have really liked him. Jackson just didn’t know whether that would turn out to be a good thing, in the end.

“So what’s it like bein’ a monster?” Tobias asked suddenly, cutting Zach off mid-sentence.

“Toby!” Hannah spun around in her chair to face him.

“That goes for the lot of yous, by the way,” Tobias addressed the three of them.

“Sorry, mate, you’ll have to be more specific.” Zach feigned confusion. “Can’t say I know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, not a real monster in your case.” He gave Zach a disdainful look. “Clearly just a ‘uman with a wolf fixation. Which, ‘onestly, might be worse.”

Hannah’s expression went dangerously blank. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, Toby, and I think it’s time we left.”

She stood up, pulling Tobias to his feet. He might have had half a foot of height on her, but Hannah still had enough muscle to drag him towards the exit like a misbehaving child.

At least they’d pretty much been done with dinner. Jackson looked at Zach, waiting for him to put the pieces together; knowledge and an obvious hatred of werewolves? That was really only likely to mean one thing: Hunter.

Isaac sighed and stood up. “You guys make sure she doesn’t kill him in public. I’ll get the check. Don’t hide the body without me.”

He said it as if that was the fun part. Jackson wasn’t interested in corpse disposal; he wanted to help Hannah murder the little shit who thought he could insult Jackson’s brother and get away with it.

Jackson and Zach couldn’t have been more than a minute behind them, but by the time they got outside, Hannah and Tobias were well on their way to having a shouting match in the street.

Thankfully, being Friday night in London, that wasn’t particularly uncommon, so nobody was paying them much attention.

“Why’re you defendin’ them, eh? They’re bloody animals!”

“I’d say they’re as human as you and me,” Hannah spat, clearly livid but still cautious enough to
try to keep her voice—relatively—low while talking about supernatural matters, “but comparing them to you would be an insult to them.”

Toby clearly didn’t have the same compulsion. “I’m not the monster ‘ere!”

“Really? Because you’re sure doing a good impression of one,” Hannah said coldly. “Go home, Toby.”

“And leave you alone so you can—”

“Oi! Be careful what you say next,” Hannah warned, a dangerous look in her eye.

“‘ow d’you think it’s goin’ to sound to the family when I tell ‘em you want to shag a wannabe wolf? Bet they’ll love that.”

Behind Jackson, the door to the restaurant slammed open as Isaac came out.

“Fuck, you guys,” he said to Jackson and Zach, “I could hear this shit inside. You want to do something about it?”

“Sure,” Jackson scoffed. “How about the werewolves jump into the middle of that. You first.”

Isaac looked back at the bickering hunters and paled. “Good point.”

Zach, however, didn’t seem to have the same reservations. He strode over to Hannah’s side and looked up at Tobias calmly.

“I think it’s time you went home, mate,” said Zach.

Tobias’s eyes snapped to Zach. “I am not your mate, you—”

“Toby, stop,” said Hannah, edging her way between Tobias and Zach. She turned to Zach and said quietly, “I’m really sorry about him, Zach. I’ll get him out of here.”

Zach waved her off. “It’s fine, really. Honestly, I’m just curious,” Zach said as he turned to Tobias. “What is it exactly that offends you so much about me? Only, there are a lot of things about me that people seem to find offensive, so I like to know where I stand. So is it that I’m not human enough, or not man enough?”

Tobias didn’t even have the decency to look slightly abashed at Zach’s words. He just glared down at him, radiating hostility and dislike.

“See, I’m not a ‘wannabe wolf.’ I’m not a ‘wannabe’ anything.” Zach’s tone was strong, proud. “I am exactly who I want to be.”

“Yeah? And what’s that, eh?”

“The best of both worlds,” Zach said simply.

Jackson blanched. Was Zach trying to get himself killed? Jackson wasn’t keen to find out how hunters felt about half-wolves the hard way.

“So what you’re sayin’ is, you’re not a ‘uman or a wolf?” Jackson could pinpoint the exact moment that Tobias figured out what Zach meant by the look of disgust on his face. “Christ, I shoulda known.”
“You act as if it’s an insult. I’m rather proud of it, actually.”

“So either you’re literally a son of a bitch, or your mum fucked a dog.” Tobias sneered.

“The fuck did you just say to my brother?” Jackson’s anger was rising. He struggled to find his anchor as quickly as possible, knowing he’d risk his eyes glowing their telltale blue if he didn’t keep himself under control.

“Leave it, Jack,” said Zach, “I can handle this.”

“I said your brother,” Tobias stressed the word, as if to mock their pack bond, “is a mongrel.”

Jackson felt Isaac’s arms wrap around him from behind, holding him back. Part of him was glad, knowing that wolfin out and tearing Tobias to shreds would be an incredibly bad thing, but that didn’t stop Jackson from struggling to break free.

“And you’re making an ass of yourself,” said Zach, smiling, “but I won’t blame your mother for that.”

Tobias’s expression turned dark. Without warning, he shoved Zach’s shoulder, harder than he needed to against a human, judging by the way Zach staggered back. But though Zach flinched in pain, he fixed Tobias with a fierce glare to rival any werewolf’s glowing eyes, and growled low in his throat: a warning to the hunter that even though Zach might have a small, human body, there was wolf blood in his veins, and he’d been raised to be able to look after himself.

But Tobias only laughed derisively. “I should call the pound, eh? They’ve lost a stray.”

Jackson was about five seconds away from breaking Isaac’s hold on him when Hannah’s fist connected audibly with Tobias’ face, catching him by surprise and landing him flat on his back on the pavement.

Everything went silent as all four of them stared at Hannah in varying stages of disbelief and shock.

“Don’t touch my friends, Toby,” said Hannah, voice calm as she rubbed at her knuckles. “Actually, don’t touch my enemies, either. You’ve no right to fight on my behalf, and you should know better.”

When she leaned down and held out her hand to help Toby up, his vacant, wide-eyed surprise shifted into a narrow-eyed glare, and he slapped her hand away. Zach growled again, but Hannah merely held up her hands in a placating gesture and took a few steps back (still managing to stay between Zach and Tobias, Jackson noticed).

When Tobias had scrambled back to his feet, he had a bloody lip and a pink mark near his cheekbone that would start to bruise in minutes.

“You’ve gone completely bloody mental,” he said to Hannah, holding his jaw gingerly. Then he gave them all one last glare of deep loathing and stumbled off toward the nearest Tube stop.

“Good riddance,” Hannah muttered, watching Tobias go before turning back to the three stunned wolves apologetically. “Sorry about that, puppies. Anyone fancy a drink?”

Chapter End Notes
We apologize for the short(er than usual) chapter, but it was the logical end point. But next week's will be significantly longer, and soon we will have a special treat along with our usual chapter, in the form of a short, related piece. So stay tuned!

Once again, thank you all so much for reading, commenting, and leaving kudos. We appreciate every single one of you, and it always makes our day to hear from you!

Savenna Cloverunner
Live Before You Die

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: LIVE BEFORE YOU DIE (Social Distortion)

Leave your troubles and your worries far behind.
Stop contemplating. Start celebrating!
Yeah, you gotta live before you die.

Jackson had a headache.

Not just because of the loud music and overwhelming scents of the club; really it was the whole evening summed up in one throbbing ache behind his eyes.

Going to clubs and loud pubs had gotten easier for Jackson since Isaac had helped him with the whispering trick, but being there with two humans meant they had to shout to be heard, and it was taking its toll on Jackson’s ability to tune the rest out. Plus he was still keyed up from the
altercation at the restaurant. Tobias’s hostility had been irritating, but Jackson would’ve been able
to shrug it off eventually if the guy hadn’t fucking attacked Zach.

Hannah had insisted on taking them out for an apology drink to make up for it, not to mention the
fact that Isaac had had to pay for dinner. (He justified it by saying that since the Bristows were
paying him, technically Pol had paid for dinner, but Hannah didn’t see it that way.) She had
covered their entry to the club and their first two rounds of drinks, even though Isaac, Jackson, and
Zach had all insisted that it was unnecessary. After all, Hannah wasn’t responsible for what a
fucking asshole Tobias had been.

Just thinking about the things that chavvy prick had said to his brother earlier made Jackson’s
blood start to boil again. He focused on the firm pressure of Isaac’s hand gripping his knee beneath
the table to keep himself (relatively) calm.

Jackson was relieved that Isaac had kept the fact that things were different between them now,
well, between them. It wasn’t that Jackson wanted to hide it, or that he was embarrassed; he just
wanted to keep it between him and Isaac for just a bit longer, until he could wrap his head around
it. Plus, it wasn’t like there had exactly been a good moment this evening to bring it up. Between
Tobias showing up unexpectedly and Hannah punching Tobias unexpectedly, there had been kind
of a lot going on.

Besides, Jackson still didn’t even really know what exactly the “it” they were keeping to
themselves was.

“I’m so sorry,” Hannah was saying again when Jackson tuned back in to the conversation. Jackson
had lost count of how many times Hannah had apologized, and that was just since they’d gotten to
the club. It was actually starting to get kind of annoying, but Jackson decided it might be kind of
rude of him to come out and say that, so he contented himself with quietly sipping his drink and
staying out of the conversation as much as possible.

Which wasn’t that difficult to do, since Isaac and Hannah were carrying most of it. Zach had been
practically mute since the confrontation earlier. (Jackson suspected that this was probably because
Zach was embarrassed about all of the incredibly personal information he had revealed in a very
public way.)

“Seriously, stop,” Isaac shouted at her with an easy grin. “We don’t blame you. Stop killing my
buzz.”

“You can’t even get drunk,” Zach finally spoke up.

“I meant my figurative buzz. I’m trying to get high on life over here.”

“I don’t even know why I’m wasting good beer on these two,” Hannah said to Zach with an
overdramatic sigh.

“Especially since they’re minors.” Zach smirked.

“And even worse, Seppos.”

Zach laughed into his glass. “Oh, you’re right. That’s much worse.”

“The fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Isaac asked, confused but not offended, clearly unfamiliar
with Cockney rhyming slang. Jackson only knew about it because several kids in his class at
school had used it behind his back (obviously not knowing that he’d be able to hear them) when
he’d first started.
“We’ll tell you when you’re older, sweetie.” Hannah patted Isaac’s arm condescendingly.

Isaac frowned, knowing he was being made fun of, but still not quite sure how.

“It’s just a nickname for Americans,” Jackson whispered.

“That makes literally no sense,” Isaac whispered back.

Hannah cleared her throat loudly. “Something you boys want to share with the rest of the class?”

“Jackson was just telling me how attractive he finds me and how if there weren’t people around, he would totally rip my clothes off here and now,” Isaac announced without missing a beat.

Jackson choked on the sip of beer he was in the process of taking.

“I was just telling him how I’m not that kind of wolf.” Isaac did his best impression of a scandalized person. It wasn’t very convincing. (Probably because Isaac had never been scandalized in his life.)

“Of course you’re not.” Zach rolled his eyes. “Are you sure you don’t have that backwards?”

Isaac tilted his head and looked up, pretending to think about it. “Nope. Pretty sure that’s what happened. Right, Jackson?”

But Jackson was still coughing and couldn’t deny it, so he just fixed Isaac with a glare. Isaac winked at him.

Isaac was lucky the other two clearly didn’t believe him.

“Anyway,” Zach awkwardly segued, turning back to Hannah, “thanks again for the drinks. You really didn’t need to.”

“It’s the least I could do. Honestly, I couldn’t believe Toby would act like that. I mean, he’s generally a bit sour and hostile most of the time, but I haven’t seen him attack someone outside of training.”

“Training probably doesn’t involve actual werewolves,” Jackson muttered lowly enough that only Isaac could hear him. Isaac made a small sound of agreement and smoothed his palm over Jackson’s knee to soothe him.

“I feel like I ought to be the one apologizing,” said Zach. “I’m sorry for escalating the situation. I shouldn’t’ve gotten involved.”

“It’s fine,” said Hannah. “Toby was spoiling for a fight all evening. It was bound to happen.”

“Still, I egged him on,” Zach insisted. “It was childish.”

“It was.” Hannah smiled teasingly. “But you handled yourself well. Get harassed for being a wolf-boy often, do you?”

“Not exactly.” Zach laughed. “No, actually, there are so many other things I get harassed for, that was a rather refreshing change.”

His tone was light, but Jackson knew how much Zach had been through to get to where he was now. How many small-minded, insecure people who had given him shit his whole life for being who he was. Jackson hadn’t always been the nicest, most inclusive person, but he couldn’t
understand why anyone would put that much energy into being cruel to someone like Zach, and for such a ridiculous reason. It wasn’t like Zach was bothering anyone. Zach was just… Zach. Unfortunately, that seemed to be too much for some people to deal with.

“Well, Toby’s a prick,” Hannah said after taking a long drink. “And so’s anybody else who tries to make themself feel big by making somebody else feel small.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Isaac tipped his glass to Hannah before draining the last of it.

“You off to find a patron, then?” Zach teased, nodding at Isaac’s empty glass.

Jackson’s irritation spiked again, even though they had stopped talking about Tobias. Isaac’s grip on his knee tightened just a bit, even though there was no way Isaac could have heard Jackson’s pulse speed up over the din of the music and shouted conversations.

“Not tonight,” Isaac said casually. “Jackson actually owes me a few. Figured I’d just cash in on those.”

Jackson couldn’t remember promising to buy Isaac any drinks, but it wasn’t like that had ever stopped Isaac from making Jackson buy him drinks before.

“Only if you stop making up stories about me,” said Jackson.

Isaac turned back to Hannah and Zach. “That’s right,” he said, snapping his fingers together as if he’d just remembered. “It was me that offered to rip off Jackson’s clothes here and now.”

Jackson downed the last of his drink and stood up, grabbing their empties. He needed to get out of there before Isaac could say something even more incriminating.

“I think it’s my turn to buy you a round anyway,” Zach said to Hannah, standing up too and following Jackson to the bar.

After they finally caught the attention of the bartender and placed their orders, it only took Zach about ten seconds to ask Jackson the question he’d been dreading all night.

“So when were we going to talk about the fact that Isaac’s friend is obviously a hunter?” Zach thought about it for a second. “Huntress?”

Jackson sighed deeply. He was not remotely surprised that Zach had figured it out. Honestly, he would’ve been surprised if Zach hadn’t by now.

“Ideally, never.”

“So the reason you made such a big deal about her supposedly ‘moving’…?”

“Yep.”

“So she’s not moving away?” There was a small but alarming note of hope in Zach’s tone.

“If only.”

Zach smiled, then a thought occurred to him. “...Does she know I don’t grow fangs and get all hairy?”

“There are worse things she could know about you,” said Jackson. “The snoring, for starters. She already knows you go on about science facts when you’re nervous.”
“You’re dodging the question,” Zach said impatiently. “Do you think she knows I don’t transform?”

“I don’t know what she knows about you,” said Jackson. “But you weren’t exactly subtle with all that stuff you said earlier. At least you’ve had your tattoos covered up.”

Unnatural skin markings—like tattoos and scars—were the most obvious signs to anyone who knew about werewolves that someone wasn’t a werewolf, or at least that they hadn’t always been one (like Dominic). Piercings were another giveaway, but it was entirely possible that Hannah hadn’t made that connection. Jackson couldn’t decide if it would be worse for Zach if Hannah thought he was a werewolf or if she didn’t.

Zach frowned and started self-consciously adjusting his collar again.

Jackson debated saying anything. On the one hand, Jackson didn’t want to encourage Zach’s crush on Hannah, but on the other, he also couldn’t stand to see his brother so worried, especially about the way he looked.

“Honestly, I don’t think it matters,” Jackson said finally. “She’s still here, isn’t she?”

Zach glanced up at him. “Well, well! Since when did you turn into such an optimist, Jack?”

“Since you turned into such an obnoxious romantic. Girls make everything sappy and complicated.”

“And boys don’t?” Zach gave Jackson a knowing look, which Jackson pointedly ignored (though he couldn’t entirely suppress the way his face flushed).

Jackson handed over a few coins, grabbed the drinks the bartender had put down on the bar, and turned to go back to the table, but Zach’s hand on his arm made him pause.

“Jack...” Zach started, sounding uncharacteristically serious. “You and Isaac hanging out with hunters... Tell me I don’t need to be worried about you.”

“You don’t need to be worried,” Jackson replied automatically, even though he wasn’t sure if he believed himself. At least Zach couldn’t hear his heartbeat.

“I’d better not,” said Zach, grabbing his own drinks, “because I really want this girl to like me, and if you’re in trouble, then so am I.”

Zach had no idea how right he was. Jackson debated mentioning that Hannah’s last name was Bristow as one last-ditch effort to dissuade Zach from getting any more involved than he already was. But deep down, Jackson knew it wouldn’t change anything.

He just had to hope that he’d been telling the truth that neither of them really had anything to worry about.

When they got back to the table with the drinks, Isaac let his hand linger on Jackson’s for just a little too long when he took his drink with a whispered “Thanks.” As soon as Jackson sat down next to him, Isaac’s hand was back on Jackson’s knee, but this time, Jackson didn’t think it was meant as support. In any case, it was more than a little distracting.

“So you know how I said I like sleeping without a shirt on?” Isaac suddenly whispered, his mouth hidden from Zach and Hannah—who were having their own conversation again already—by his glass. “And how that turned out super well? I actually like sleeping without other stuff on, too.
Well, without any stuff on.”

Jackson refused to even acknowledge that he had heard Isaac, but the tone of Isaac’s voice and the way that his finger was tracing a lazy spiral on Jackson’s knee was making it difficult for Jackson to notice anything else.

But the whispering continued. “So do I really have to wait for you to take my pants off before I can take yours off?”

Isaac’s fingers traced up a little higher, but Jackson still pretended like he was listening avidly to whatever Hannah was saying. (He had absolutely no idea what she was saying.)

“Okay, how about just partway off? There’s a ton of stuff I could--”

Jackson couldn’t take it anymore. Things were about to get incredibly embarrassing incredibly fast if Jackson didn’t put a stop to this.

“Isaac,” Jackson whispered through clenched teeth.

“ Actually, really I just need to unzip--”

“Isaac,” Jackson tried again as Isaac’s wandering fingers moved up Jackson’s inner thigh.

“I guess there are a couple of things I could do with them still on…”

Before Isaac could show him right then and there what he meant, Jackson finally came to his senses and pushed Isaac’s hand back down to a less… publicly inappropriate place. Jackson might not have been entirely opposed to whatever “things” Isaac might come up with to do to him, but sitting with their friends in a club was not the time.

Isaac wasn’t going to be discouraged, though. “Seriously, I could show you in the bathroom right now.”

Then Jackson made the mistake of looking at Isaac, and saw how completely serious he was. Isaac’s eyes were dark and hungry, and Jackson would’ve sworn, even with all the other heady scents of the club, that he could smell Isaac--his cheap body wash, the fact that he had clearly used Jackson’s shampoo without asking, the particular Isaac-y muskiness that was unique to him--and for a second it didn’t matter that there were so many people around or that the bathroom in a club was just about the most disgusting place Jackson could imagine to do “things,” Jackson wanted Isaac, too.

“Isn’t that right, Jack?” Zach asked, snapping Jackson’s attention back to the conversation that Jackson had become entirely unaware was continuing.

“What?”

“You’d never do karaoke,” Zach repeated. “You--”

Just then, the crowd on the dance floor started cheering and stomping as the DJ put on some particularly popular song that Jackson had never heard before, and the four of them lapsed into friendly silence for a bit. The whole time, Jackson was almost painfully aware of Isaac beside him. Isaac didn’t try moving his hand from Jackson’s knee again, and somehow, Jackson got the feeling that it was because if Isaac moved his hand again, he wouldn’t stop. And Jackson wasn’t entirely sure he would stop Isaac.
Jackson decided that maybe keeping an eye on Zach might help distract him from Isaac’s proximity, but it turned out that watching Zach was like watching a very subtle trainwreck in slow motion. Hannah wasn’t even talking anymore, just bobbing her head along to the music and smiling at the crowd, and Zach was still transfixed. It was like Jackson could physically feel Zach falling for Hannah, second by second. And it was torture.

Because Zach and Hannah couldn’t be a thing. Despite what Jackson had said earlier about not having to worry about hanging out with hunters, he knew that Zach and Hannah together was a horrible idea. It was dangerous. Hell, it was dangerous enough for Jackson and Isaac to (kind of, maybe) be (sort of, temporarily) a thing, and Isaac was only working with hunters. Tobias would no doubt be the first in a very long line of Bristows who would not approve of one of their kids getting involved with a wolf--even one who couldn’t transform. And honestly, Jackson couldn’t blame them.

It was a disaster waiting to happen. Hell, it was a disaster already happening. And there was nothing Jackson could do to stop it.

“I love this song,” Hannah said to no one in particular, despite the fact that she was obviously hoping Zach would get the hint.

“Me, too,” said Isaac after an expectant pause, during which Zach said nothing. “Wanna dance?”

Hannah looked him up and down, then shrugged. “Yeah, go on, then.” She downed the last third of her pint like it was water and stood up.

Jackson watched Isaac lead Hannah onto the dancefloor, then looked over at Zach. He was still staring longingly at Hannah.

“You’ve got it bad,” said Jackson. He leaned in close to minimize the need for shouting.

“Can’t help it,” said Zach. “I can’t resist a girl with a great right hook.” He heaved a melodramatic sigh. “I should’ve asked her to dance.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Afraid, I s’pose,” said Zach.

“Afraid?” said Jackson, stifling a laugh. It was clear that Zach wasn’t talking about the fact that Hannah was a hunter, in which case Jackson couldn’t see why there was anything about her to be afraid of.

“Only a fool wouldn’t be afraid of a girl who looks like that,” said Zach. “Even discounting the fact that she could probably kill me with her little finger.”

Jackson was reminded of Lydia and nodded his agreement. “Good point.”

Zach smiled, still watching Hannah, who was dancing with Isaac but keeping him in line. “She’s just… special.”

“Yeah,” said Jackson. He could see the appeal of Hannah now. Not just her looks or her body (which were both objectively above average), but her attitude, her sense of humor. Jackson had always been attracted to confident people. So once again, he refrained (for the moment) from pointing out to Zach all of the reasons why he and Hannah would still be a bad idea. It wouldn’t help the situation.
“He is, too,” said Zach, after a pause. “Special. In his own way.”

“Huh?”

Zach gestured toward Hannah and Isaac. “That unnecessarily tall boy with no respect for personal boundaries. Don’t think I haven’t noticed all the touching.”

Jackson’s face felt hot again, and he was grateful for the low light in the club.

“He’s over the moon for you, Jack,” said Zach, somewhat sadly. “Don’t waste it.”

Jackson didn’t know how to respond to that, and their conversation lapsed into silence for a few minutes as they both watched Isaac and Hannah dancing together.

“Uh-oh,” said Zach, noticing it before Jackson did. “This’ll be fun.”

A guy, probably about Zach’s age, was moving in behind Isaac. Tall, tight T-shirt, skinny jeans, footballer haircut. Jackson hated him the second he saw him. He would’ve hated him even if he hadn’t been inches away from Isaac, invading a space that was supposed to be Jackson’s. Trying to steal something that didn’t belong to him.

Jackson was across the room and at Isaac’s side before he’d realized he was moving. He snarled at the taller man, who quickly took a step back. Isaac grabbed Jackson’s wrist before he could go after the guy, and forced Jackson to look at Isaac instead.

“Jesus, Jackson, are you trying to blow our cover?” Isaac whispered urgently, which made it a little easier for Jackson to focus.

“I was trying to keep that douchebag from--” Jackson cut himself off and frowned. What had he been trying to do, exactly? Isaac could take care of himself. If he didn’t want that guy near him, he could’ve blown him off.

“I appreciate you trying to defend my honor,” said Isaac, “but now would be a good time to find your anchor, okay? You’re lucky the lights in here can explain your eyes.”

Jackson cursed and shut his eyes tightly. It was bad enough to nearly wolf out in a room full of humans without one of them being a hunter. He could only pray Hannah hadn’t seen his eyes. He didn’t want to have to explain why they glowed blue.

Several deep breaths and a moment of concentration helped Jackson force the wolf back down. Cautiously, he looked up at Isaac.

“Better?”

Isaac nodded, grinning. “My hero.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. Isaac always had to ruin everything! Now that Jackson had completely overreacted and embarrassed himself, he moved to go back to the table, but Isaac still had ahold of his wrist.

“Not a chance,” said Isaac. “I’ve finally got you here. You’re not leaving till I get at least one dance.”

“What about--” Jackson looked around for Hannah, only to find that she was dragging Zach onto the dancefloor by his unbruised arm. Zach had a unique combination of delight and terror on his
face that worried Jackson. He wasn’t sure which would be worse: if she led Zach on and broke his heart, or if she was actually interested—not just being nice—and the fact that she was a hunter meant it couldn’t become anything more.

“Stop thinking,” said Isaac.

You think too much, Isaac had said the other night, when Jackson had been trying to get used to the fact that neither of them was wearing a shirt. Apparently Isaac was very much against Jackson thinking.

Isaac pulled Jackson close and helped him fall into step. As they danced, Jackson felt himself begin to relax, letting every sound except Isaac’s voice become one cohesive background noise that he was only aware enough of to stay on beat with the music. Isaac kept his hands in contact with Jackson no matter how they moved—on his arm, his neck, his chest, his hip, even in his hair. Jackson braced his own hands on Isaac every now and then. Like there was an irresistible charge between them that kept pulling them together. It kept Jackson grounded.

And yet somehow… not. Jackson couldn’t shake the feeling of déjà vu that they’d been here before, done this before...

“See, you’re good at this,” Isaac whispered near Jackson’s ear. Jackson shivered. “Why wouldn’t you do it before?”

Hadn’t they? Something about this felt so familiar...

But Isaac had asked Jackson a question. Jackson leaned a little closer to Isaac and finally explained, “It’s foreplay.”

“Huh?”

“Dancing. It’s foreplay.” Jackson shrugged. “People say they do it for fun, but mostly they just do it because they’re hoping to get off.”

Isaac cocked his head to the side. “So…”

“So I don’t usually dance with people I don’t want to fuck,” said Jackson. Then he added, a little self-consciously, “Or who I think aren’t really interested in fucking me.”

Isaac’s eyes widened slightly as he considered this. “Which means… you think that every time I dance with someone, it’s because I want to sleep with them.”

“Well, not everyone,” said Jackson. “Not Hannah.”

The words sounded a lot harsher to Jackson once he’d actually said them. He’d basically just accused Isaac of being a huge slut. And to be fair, Isaac had made no secret of how much he liked to ‘have fun’ with people. But this made it sound like Jackson had been judging Isaac. He hadn’t. He’d just thought…

Isaac didn’t seem offended, though. In fact, he looked relieved, like this explained a lot.

“So when I asked you to dance, you figured I thought you were just like everyone else.”

Jackson shrugged again, hoping he looked like he didn’t care. Like not being special to Isaac didn’t matter to Jackson: the boy who wanted to be special in all things.
“You are so fucking clueless, Whittemore,” said Isaac, grinning. He grasped the front of Jackson’s shirt and pulled him in for a long kiss. When it broke, he pressed his forehead to Jackson’s and said, “You could never be just like everyone else, Jackson. Not to me.”

Jackson’s heart was pounding, its beat louder in his ears than the music. He pulled back to look at Isaac, completely unable to find something to say. Jackson didn’t even really know how he felt, let alone how to express it. Thankfully, Isaac saved him from having to respond.

“That being said,” said Isaac with a wicked smile, “I very, very much want to sleep with you. Well, not just sleep. We already do that all the time. I mean sex. I would really like to have sex with you.”

“Yeah, you said that before,” Jackson said dryly, thinking about Isaac’s confession from a week ago: We can fuck, if you want. I want to. Bad. I’ve wanted to for a long time.

For a long time…

Like a shot, it hit Jackson: his dream. The one that had kind of inadvertently turned into a fantasy. Jackson had been dancing with Isaac and Lydia… Only it hadn’t really been Lydia, had it? Jackson had only wanted it to be, for the sake of his fantasy. But in the dream, the girl had had long blond hair. It was one of the few things Jackson remembered about the dream, along with Isaac’s mischievous blue eyes and his lascivious smirk, and an overwhelming sense of wanting…

“Jackson!” Isaac whispered intently, like he’d been trying to get Jackson’s attention for a while.

Jackson shook his head, trying to clear it. “Have we--” Jackson started, before cutting himself off.

Isaac quirked his head to the side, looking more concerned by the second. “Have we what?”

“Have we danced before?” Jackson asked, well aware of how crazy he probably sounded.

To Jackson’s embarrassment, Isaac gave a relieved laugh. “That’s why you suddenly spaced out like that? Jesus, you freaked me out.”

Jackson was grateful again that the lighting in the club would mask his flushed skin. “Nevermind, that was stupid.”

“No,” Isaac insisted, squeezing Jackson’s arm reassuringly and ducking down to meet his eye again. “No, I just hadn’t thought of it that way, I guess.”

Now Jackson was really confused. “What?”

Isaac sighed and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “We danced before. Kind of. I guess it wasn’t exactly you, though.”

...Oh. Jackson’s stomach sank. He didn’t need Isaac to spell it out. The dance had been real, and it had happened when Jackson was being controlled by Matt.

“At the rave,” said Jackson. His voice sounded a bit hollow to his own ears. “There was a girl, too, right?”

“Erica,” said Isaac. The tone of his voice made it pretty clear that Isaac didn’t want to talk about her. That meant she was probably dead. One of Derek’s other betas, maybe? In any case, Jackson wasn’t going to ask.
“You were trying to tranq me,” said Jackson, as that memory surfaced.

“Look, I know it’s kind of fucked up,” said Isaac, starting to rush and stammer through words, “but I-- We-- You were just... You were just so fucking hot, and you smelled so good, and you had this look in your eyes like... like you didn’t just want her. You wanted me. I don’t think anyone had ever wanted me like you did then. Seriously, I almost forgot what I was supposed to be doing.”

How was Jackson supposed to respond to that? Was Jackson supposed to be flattered that Isaac had thought Jackson was sexy when Jackson hadn’t been in control of his own actions?

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t me.” Jackson was surprised at how bitter the words tasted as he said them. Why would it have been him? In what alternate reality would Jackson have danced with Isaac back in Beacon Hills without being the Kanima?

“Pretty sure it was.” Something about the way Isaac said that made it clear to Jackson that Isaac hadn’t been sure before, but now he was.

“How do you know?”

“Because you looked at me like that again tonight.” Isaac looked away, his hand moving up to the back of his neck again. “So, it had to be you in there somewhere.”

Jackson just stared at Isaac, completely at a loss.

When Isaac looked back, there was a sly glint in his eye. “Which means, if you really think dancing is foreplay, then we’ve been building up to this for...” Isaac paused, like he was doing a complicated mental calculation. “For like a year. And you totally wanna fuck me.”

Before Jackson could even consider denying it, he was struck by the overwhelming truth of Isaac’s words. Just hearing them sparked that familiar sensation of intense want that Jackson had felt in that dream. In that memory. That want that Isaac had seen on Jackson’s face a few minutes ago, without Jackson even realizing he’d been feeling it.

Still, he wasn’t going to give Isaac the satisfaction of admitting that.

“Maybe.”

“Definitely,” said Isaac.

“Maybe,” said Jackson, but they both knew it was a yes. So it would probably be a good idea to clarify that Jackson didn’t mean he wanted to right now. Jackson cleared his throat. “Just, uh... Not yet. Okay?”

“Not yet,” Isaac agreed, which gave Jackson a bigger rush of relief than he’d expected. “I’m cool with a little more foreplay.”

“Okay,” said Jackson, not quite comprehending the fact that he’d basically just acknowledged that he wanted to have sex with Isaac, and that he’d implicitly agreed that it was going to happen at some point in the near future.

“I like foreplay,” said Isaac, letting his hands trail dangerously low down Jackson’s back, sliding his shirt up just enough to hook his thumb in the top of Jackson’s jeans. “It’s fun. You’re fun.”

“And you’re asking for trouble.” Jackson tried his best to sound like he wasn’t being affected, but he didn’t pull away.
“Seriously, Whittemore, I wasn’t kidding about the things I want to do to you in the bathroom right now.” Isaac relented—very slightly—by hooking his fingers in one of Jackson’s side belt loops instead. “Just say the word.”

“I know that’s supposed to sound dirty in a good way, but it just sounds unsanitary.”

Isaac shrugged. “I’d make you forget about it in thirty seconds, tops.”

Much to his chagrin, Jackson had very little doubt that Isaac was right. Of course, Jackson was determined to protest anyway. “Still sounds gross.”

“You should let me take you home, then.” Isaac tugged Jackson closer by his belt loop. “Your bathroom is a lot more sanitary. Also you have a bed. And a couch. And at least a couple floors.”

Jackson suppressed several vivid mental images and raised an eyebrow at Isaac. “Thought we just agreed not to have sex yet.”

“Who said anything about sex?” Isaac grinned mischievously.

Isaac really, really wasn’t kidding about the things he wanted to do to Jackson, or where he was willing to do them. Some of the bathrooms at the clubs in Paris were way worse, and that hadn’t stopped Isaac before.

But he respected that Jackson didn’t have the same lack of inhibitions that he did. And even though he didn’t honestly expect Jackson to take him up on the offer, it was still fun to make it. Surprisingly, Jackson didn’t really seem to mind, anyway, which was the best part. Sure, Isaac couldn’t hear Jackson’s heartbeat or smell his emotions, but there were other ways to tell when someone was interested in fooling around with you, and from the look in Jackson’s eyes, he was seriously interested.

Isaac pulled Jackson back into step, closer now, faster. Jackson was right, dancing could be foreplay, and Isaac wanted to show Jackson exactly how much fun foreplay could be.

They were both breathing hard by the time the DJ brought the tempo of the set back down. Isaac would’ve been happy to slow dance for a while, but that seemed to be where Jackson was going to draw the line.

After whispering something about needing some air, he grabbed Isaac’s hand and pulled him towards the patio. Isaac smirked and wondered if Jackson realized how possessive he was being—and if Jackson even cared—and let himself be led outside.

Until Jackson stopped short in the doorway. Isaac looked over his shoulder to see what had made him stop like that. Oh! Hannah and Zach were standing incredibly close together, looking like they were about to kiss.

Now way was Isaac going to interrupt this. It was too perfect.

Isaac tried to pull Jackson back inside before they were seen, but Jackson resisted. Isaac didn’t know if some sound or motion gave them away, but a moment later, Zach glanced over in their direction and took an awkward step back from Hannah.

Jackson didn’t seem to share Isaac’s attitude about the perfect-ness of Hannah and Zach. In fact, from the tension in his muscles and the hard line of his mouth, he felt the opposite way. Isaac half-expected Jackson to go over and interrupt, but he didn’t. Instead, he mumbled something about
going to get another drink, and stalked back inside before Isaac could react.

Wanting to give Hannah and Zach some privacy, but also unwilling to miss a second of this adorableness, Isaac retreated to a less obvious vantage point. Zach relaxed visibly when he thought both Jackson and Isaac were gone. He and Hannah didn’t go back to almost-kissing, but they still stood very close together. The kind of close you stay when the person in front of you is the most important thing you can imagine in that moment. Isaac usually experienced that moment in a way that was a lot less innocent and sweet, but it was still an important moment.

Zach gave Hannah a shy smile when she reached to brush his hair out of his eyes. Unlike Isaac, she didn’t get her hand smacked away. (That’s for pack and for pretty girls, Zach had said. Hannah most definitely qualified as the second category.) Isaac couldn’t help but smile as well, watching them. The guy was absolutely smitten. He was adorably awkward, especially for someone several years older than Isaac, but to be fair, dating was probably a little more complicated for Zach than it was for most people.

There was no kiss, though. Not that Isaac saw, at any rate. Zach’s awkwardness won out, and Isaac heard him suggest they go back inside. Isaac fled to find Jackson before they realized he’d been observing (okay, fine, spying on) them. Jackson was lurking near the bar, holding a drink in each hand.

“Is one of those for me, or are you having a stressful night?” Isaac whispered as he got within a few feet of Jackson.

Jackson rolled his eyes and handed Isaac a cider. Isaac tapped it against Jackson’s glass before taking a sip. Then he stepped in closer and stole another kiss from Jackson. Jackson was tense at first, but it took him all of five seconds to melt into the kiss. Isaac decided that it was now his mission to kiss the stress out of Jackson whenever possible.

Hannah and Zach found them a few minutes later. They each got another drink, and all four of them sat down together again. Jackson was subdued while Isaac talked to Hannah and Zach, who were clearly straying over the line between tipsy and drunk.

“This is th’ prollem drinkin’ wiv werew--” Even drunk, Zach stopped himself (since they were in public). “Wi’ you lot. You don’ get prop’rly pissed!”

“Yeah, and it’s bloody awful,” said Jackson. Spending the evening surrounded by Brits was making his speech patterns shift again. Isaac hid a smile in his cider.

“Hadn’t thought much about that,” said Hannah. She was clearly drunk, but a lot less slurry than Zach. She just dropped all her pronouns and spoke in much shorter sentences. “Makes sense, though. Healing factor. Organs process the toxins faster.”

“See? ‘N they whinge ‘bout healin’.” Zach snorted. “When we were kids ‘n I got myself banged up, Sarah’d wear plasters t’ match me. Doctor Who pattern. She never needed ‘em.”

Zach’s head was practically lolling on Hannah’s shoulder. She had an arm around his waist and her cheek pressed to the top of his head. It was the most painfully cute thing Isaac had ever seen in his life.

Hannah looked to Jackson. “Sarah?”

“Older sister,” Jackson explained tersely.

Isaac tried to think back to the other night when they’d been out with Zach. Had it come up that
Zach had an older sister? Maybe. Probably. Isaac kept forgetting that Jackson had all these other people in his life. Zach, Sarah, Josie… Jackson’s pack. Hell, Isaac didn’t even know how many people were in Jackson’s pack, come to think of it.

And Jackson needed his pack. It was just…

Things were suddenly so good between them--him and Jackson--that Isaac found himself wondering… What if he stayed? What if he…

But it didn’t really do much good to think about that. Isaac had until the new moon, and that would be good enough. Then he would go back to France--or maybe somewhere else--and Jackson would stay in London, and their lives would go on. That’s what people did.

It was pretty soon after that when Jackson decided to call it a night, which was probably for the best. Hannah was definitely slowing down, and if she hadn’t been hanging on Zach when they stood up, she might not have made it to her feet. Isaac had to remember that she was a fairly petite girl who had been drinking enough to keep up with three wolves (more or less) all night. Isaac idly wondered if Zach’s werewolf heritage would give him any kind of alcohol tolerance, but considering the way he and Hannah were having trouble heading straight for the door, Isaac figured probably not much.

The cool air outside helped wake them all up a bit; it had somehow gotten to be half-two (Damn it Jackson!) without Isaac noticing. Not that it was particularly late by Isaac’s standard of a good night out, but he wasn’t usually weighed down by two drunk people and one somewhat cranky werewolf.

“Want me to take you back to yours?” Jackson asked Zach.

Zach shook his head vehemently, which made him and Hannah stagger from temporary loss of balance.

“To mine, then?”

Zach nodded emphatically. Jackson heaved a deep, resigned sigh.

“Right, come on.” Jackson looked Hannah over for a moment. Isaac could tell that it was just as obvious to Jackson as it was to Isaac that Hannah was in no condition to get herself home.

“You can come, too, if you like,” said Jackson. Isaac was so genuinely surprised by the offer that for a moment he thought he must have misheard it.

Hannah gave Jackson a smile that was even broader than it would’ve been if she were sober. “Knew you liked me, Puss!”

“There’s a difference between liking you and not wanting to be responsible for a hunter getting run over by a car after going out with w-- with us,” Jackson said irritably.

But Hannah was still smiling. “You like me.” She nodded, like that realization solved something, and then sighed. “Would that I could. Best get home. Family’re goin’ t’be quite cross.”

‘Cross’? Talk about understatements. They were going to be livid. Isaac couldn’t let Hannah go home alone to face that, even if she hadn’t been drunk.

She leaned up to give Zach, who she was still hanging on, a quick peck on the cheek, before letting go to give Jackson a hug. Which was to say, she practically fell into him and Jackson had to keep
her from landing on the ground.

“I should take her home,” Isaac said as he gently pried her away from Jackson, who looked equal parts surprised and confused.

“You are too sweet, Wolf,” pronounced Hannah, somehow managing to sound regal, even drunk. “But I’m quite alright. Promise. ‘m just sleepy now.”

“It’s fine,” said Isaac. “I was going that way anyway.”

“Liar,” Hannah said, but she was still leaning heavily on Isaac and her eyelids were fluttering shut.

Isaac turned to Jackson. “Help me flag down a cab?”

It didn’t take long to get a cab, and Isaac gave Jackson a long kiss and a quick “See you tomorrow” before he got in. Then Jackson helped him get Hannah into the cab next to him (Isaac was enough of a gentleman to know that you never let a drunk girl get in a taxi alone.) and Isaac gave the driver the address for Bristow Manor.

Hannah insisted on taking the middle seat so she could cuddle up (lean her weight) against Isaac. She closed her eyes, and there were a few silent minutes where Isaac thought she might have dozed off.

Then she unexpectedly said, in a sleepy, almost sad voice, “Should’ve kissed him, shouldn’t I?”

Isaac laughed and put his arm around her shoulders. “Probably.”

“He’s shy,” she said, like it was a very charming trait.

“I know the feeling,” said Isaac, thinking about how long it had taken him to get Jackson to be as comfortable with him as he was.

“I like him,” she pronounced.

“I know,” said Isaac. “You’re not very subtle.”

Hannah scoffed. She was quiet for another minute or two before she said, “I punched Toby.”

“I saw,” said Isaac, laughing again.

“Goin’ t’be in a heap of trouble.”

“Yeah,” said Isaac. He sighed and looked out the window. “Pretty sure you’re not the only one.”

Chapter End Notes

Hooray, a long chapter! Hope you guys enjoyed it :D

Once again, thank you all so much for reading, commenting, and leaving kudos. We appreciate every single one of you, and it always makes our day to hear from you!

Also, shameless self-promotion for Lenna’s other fic, a
href=”https://archiveofourown.org/works/1186243”>Divided Loyalties, which finally
updated again! Check it out if you're interested in Stiles/Jackson.

Savenna Cloverunner
I Only Want a Place I Can Stay

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: I ONLY WANT A PLACE I CAN STAY (Superdrag)

‘Cause I believe in
the act of loving a thing
and knowing it’s leavin’.
And if you’re human at all,
your heart is deceivin’,
even now.

More than a few lights were on at Bristow Manor when Isaac and Hannah finally walked up the imposing driveway. Isaac didn’t think that was a good sign.

They’d had the taxi drop them off a few streets away; no need to draw extra attention to themselves if they could avoid it. But attention was probably inevitable by this point. Either way, the walk and
the chilly air seemed to help Hannah sober up a bit more, although Isaac suspected it was the looming threat of punishment that really brought her back.

The closer they got to the house, the slower Hannah’s steps got. Not that Isaac could blame her. She had to be imagining the welcome that awaited her inside.

Isaac stopped at the bottom of the steps for a brief goodbye. Hannah barely paused for a quick hug and an even quicker “Thanks for tonight” before trudging up the steps.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob.

“Do you want me to come in, or…?” Isaac asked after the silence had stretched on for a few long seconds.

“Honestly, I think it might just make things worse.” Hannah sighed. “Toby’s bound to have made a fuss about it all. No need for both of us to be in trouble.”

Isaac realized too late, however, that he was already in trouble when the door suddenly swung open to reveal Wendy standing in the doorway.

“Glad you finally decided to come home, Hannah.”

Isaac bristled at the way Wendy’s lip raised in a cruel smirk when she said Hannah’s name. There was a familiar promise there, and Isaac went cold all over as he realized that it was the same look his father used to get when he’d tell Isaac to get the chains.

“We were just talking about you” said Wendy. “Both of you.”

Wendy stepped back and held the door open expectantly. Hannah marched past her without a second glance.

Isaac had just started wondering if running was an option when Wendy fixed him in place with another cold stare. “Please come in.”

Isaac tried his best to ignore the growing fear in the back of his mind that he was about to be locked up in the Bristow’s dungeon basement, and started up the steps.

Wendy only had one more cold word for Isaac after he walked through the front door: “Upstairs.”

She pointed her finger up for emphasis. Isaac understood immediately. They didn’t want Isaac to be a part of their family meeting, but they also wanted him safely in the house in case they needed to question him about what had happened that night. Isaac was only too happy to flee up to the guest room, his wolf instincts making him very aware of how hostile the atmosphere downstairs was.

But just because he wasn’t involved in the conversation didn’t mean Isaac wouldn’t listen in. What was the point of having super hearing if you didn’t use it when a crisis was going down? Isaac lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, focusing his hearing intently on the conversation downstairs.

“This isn’t a family meeting, it’s a bloody tribunal,” Hannah was saying.

“Hannah.” Isaac recognized James’s voice. “We need to talk about your behavior this evening.”

“How about we talk about what a right prick Toby was tonight? Honestly, Dad--”

“You punched him in the face, Hannah--”
“Damned right I did!” Hannah spoke over her dad, but he kept going.

“--and when did you begin staying out until three o’clock in the morning?”

“Apparently when Aunt Wendy decided that I need a chaperone to go out with my friends.”

Someone muttered something that Isaac couldn’t quite catch.

“Gran told me to treat them to dinner,” said Hannah.

“Isaac and Jackson, yes,” said James, “but that was not permission to spend time with another member of a wolfpack.”

“‘alfbreed freak.” Tobias’s voice cut in, angry. Isaac found himself bristling again at the sound of it as much as his words.

“You will speak when you are asked to speak, Tobias,” said Pol. “And when you do speak, it will be with a civil tongue.” Isaac couldn’t help but smile to himself. At least Pol would be on Hannah’s side down there.

“He’s not a freak, he’s…” Isaac could hear the hesitation in Hannah’s voice as she trailed off, probably unsure how much information to give her family to work with. “He’s from the Holborn pack, but he’s not technically a werewolf.”

“We are quite aware of the half-wolf’s affiliations, Hannah.” Wendy’s voice was a dry hiss, the way Isaac imagined that a snake would sound if it could talk.

The silence that fell in the room intensified the sick feeling that was building in Isaac’s gut.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hannah asked.

For a few moments, no one said anything. Finally, Pol spoke up in her typical brisk manner.

“Well, tell her, then.”

Isaac caught what sounded like papers being slapped down on a desk, and then more silence.

“What is all this?”

Isaac really wished Hannah would be more descriptive, especially when nobody seemed interested in volunteering any information about whatever she was reading or looking at.

It was Pol again who spoke again. “That, my dear, is our legacy. Information on every werewolf in London, as well as several affiliated packs across England. This is merely the Holborn file.”

Isaac heard the papers being ruffled through on the desk. “But this must be nearly fifty pages. All for one pack?” Hannah asked, sounding as stunned as Isaac felt hearing her say that. “Josephine McAllester, A.K.A. Josie, D.O.B. October the sixteenth, nineteen-eighty-four, alpha status… Pack residence Bedford Row… Territory boundaries, pack history, past and present pack members… Nine adults, three juveniles… Look at this. Justin and Colin-- Jesus Christ, they’re barely older than Maya! Why do we need to keep information on five-year-olds?”

“Because pups have teeth and claws, too, and they’ll grow quick enough,” Wendy said ominously.

“That doesn’t mean they’ll hurt someone!”
“Doesn’t mean they won’t.”

“I thought we protect people.” Hannah’s voice was acid. “Not play Big Brother.”

“Oh, don’t you get it, ‘annah?” George’s voice was dripping with condescension. “This is ‘ow we protect people. It’s time you grew up.”

Wendy tried a different tactic. “We’re trying to protect you, too, Hannah.” Her voice grew sickeningly sweet. Even if Isaac hadn’t known that Wendy was clearly just trying to trick everyone, he wouldn’t have trusted her tone.

“From what? The only threat tonight was Toby. He started everything! Attacking Zach---”

“Tobias’s actions are being dealt with accordingly.” Wendy again.

Isaac had a sneaking suspicion that “dealt with accordingly,” meant “rewarded”.

“But Zoey Thompson is William Thompson’s daughter,” Wendy continued. “A former alpha. Regardless of whether she can transform, you shouldn’t even be in the same room with her, let alone spending an evening together.”

Zoey… Who the hell was Zoey? Ohhh. The use of Zach’s former identity threw Isaac off, but Hannah didn’t miss a beat.

“Zach Thompson is William Thompson’s son, and I doubt that having a group meal with him in a public place puts me in grave danger.”

“And what about after dinner?” The tone of Wendy’s voice suddenly became even more manipulative. It was less obviously hostile and all the more dangerous for it; the snake tightening her coils. “Are you telling us that you haven’t spent the past several hours with her unsupervised?”

Tobias muttered something that Isaac couldn’t catch but sent Hannah’s voice up an octave.

“That’s a fucking lie!” Hannah spat.

“We’ve already heard Tobias’s account of the evening. We’d like to hear yours, Hannah,” James interjected. “Without the cursing, if you don’t mind.”

“I’m surprised you don’t already know, considering the effort you’ve put into your stalking of the London wolves.”

“Hannah, none of that information is used for anything beyond safeguarding London. Yes, there is information in our files on werewolves who will never hurt anyone. However, the information we have collected has also prevented the loss of lives and controlled the growth of England’s werewolf population.”

Isaac was extremely frustrated that he was too far away to listen to James’s heartbeat to tell if that was the truth or not. He wanted to believe James, but he didn’t really think he could.

Hannah didn’t seem to buy it, either. “And you think that gives you the right to do this?” Hannah must have thrown the file down because Isaac heard papers scatter.

“The methods of this family are not in question here,” said Wendy. “Your judgement, however, is.”

“So I keep Toby from hurting a werewolf and possibly causing open war on the streets of London
and my judgement’s the one being called into question? I’d hate to see how you all would react if Zach could transform.”

“Mutt,” growled Tobias, as if the entire idea was disgusting to him.

“Tobias, you will keep your mouth shut or you will go to your room.” Pol again. Isaac was appreciating having that old woman on their side more and more by the minute.

But James seemed determined to stay on topic. “Hannah, he might not be able to transform, but Wendy is right: Zachary Thompson is no less a danger to you than the rest of his pack is. He grew up in a den of wolves. His father is a wolf. His sister is a wolf. He has wolf blood in his veins. He is a wolf where it counts. He might not be able to get his teeth in you, but that does not mean that one of his pack won’t.”

Hannah didn’t seem to have a comeback for that one, or if she did, it was too quiet for Isaac to catch. But, as much as it bothered him, Isaac had to agree that James might have a point. What if someone from Jackson’s pack didn’t like Hannah’s and Zach’s relationship—or whatever it might be—even more than the Bristows and decided to do something about it?

“It was one night. Nothing happened,” Hannah finally said, but a lot of the fire from before had gone out of her argument.

“Which is why we’re talking to you now,” said James. “So nothing happens in the future.”

And then Pol stepped in again. “Hannah, dear. You are compassionate and unprejudiced. It does you credit. But there is a difference between trusting Isaac, who has proven himself to us and one of our trusted allies, and spending time alone with members of a well-established London pack.”

Isaac frowned. He had thought Pol was on their side, but it looked like maybe she just didn’t like Tobias. If Pol was against Hannah spending any more time with werewolves than she had to, then there was definitely no hope for her and Zach.

“When you endanger yourself, you endanger the entire family,” Pol continued.

“I wasn’t in danger,” Hannah insisted. “And I wouldn’t be if I saw him again.”

“Hannah…” James sounded reluctant. “Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that you are in no danger now. You’ve no idea how quickly that can change. You as much as said it yourself: all it would take is one rogue element to start a war between us and an entire pack of werewolves.”

There was a murmur of agreement from what sounded like the whole room, and all Isaac could think of was the sound of nails being driven into the coffin that was Hannah and Zach’s potential relationship.

“You’re young,” James continued. “You don’t remember what that can be like.”

Pol sighed. “You also mustn’t let your judgment be compromised. We are hunters. We have a duty to keep people safe. Our family must be united in this cause. It requires making difficult, but necessary decisions.”

“One last thing, and then you should get to bed,” said James. “I want you to consider this carefully: What would happen if I needed to kill a member of his pack? What if it were his father, or his sister? If we allow you to become attached to this boy, you would never forgive me.”

After that, it wasn’t long until the meeting broke up. Hannah was grounded, her phone confiscated,
and she was assigned extra chores for two weeks while Tobias got off with nothing more than a sharp word (which was incredibly unfair, in Isaac’s opinion).

Isaac was still lying there when Hannah stormed in looking mutinous and flopped down beside--and partly on top of--him on the narrow bed.

“Budge up,” she said, shifting, trying to get comfortable.

Isaac scooted over until his shoulder was pressed against the wall. It was still pretty snug, but at least Hannah was actually on the bed this way. It helped that her shoulders weren’t nearly as broad as Jackson’s. Isaac and Jackson had definitely had a more… interesting time fitting on the bed together, that was for sure.

“They’re keeping tabs on every werewolf in the city.” Hannah interrupted Isaac’s very pleasant train of thought with a more serious one.

“I heard,” he said with a sigh.

“There’re files, dozens of them, that I didn’t even know existed. They knew about Jackson before you brought him over, and they still pretended like they had no idea who he was... Why? Why bother? Why keep all that a secret?”

That was a really good point: if the Bristows had already had Jackson on file as part of the Holborn pack, why pretend like they had no idea who he was? And beyond that, why let him help at all? Isaac couldn’t shake the feeling that he and Hannah were missing something. Something important.

“They took my phone,” said Hannah, staring up at the ceiling.

“I know.”

“You heard everything, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Hannah made a disgusted noise. “Ridiculous. Toby practically tries to start a bloody war and he gets a pat on the head and a biscuit. I stay out half the night once, with people I know can be trusted, and I’m essentially under house arrest. Tobias must have made it sound like Zach and I were groping each other in the restaurant’s toilet. All I did was flirt a bit!”

“Let’s not tell them about the dirty dancing,” Isaac joked, but it did nothing to lighten Hannah’s mood.

“They’re lucky I didn’t let the fool get himself torn to shreds by you three.”

“Sounds like that would’ve been just the excuse your family needed.” Isaac frowned.

“Don’t remind me.” Hannah covered her eyes with her arm. “I don’t want to think about that anymore. I want to think about our pretty boys and forget for a moment that I want something I can’t have.”

Isaac tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

“You really like him, huh?”

“I do like him,” said Hannah. “But what I really want is the chance to find out how much I like him. Is that so ridiculous?”
“Sounds like your family thinks it is.” Isaac sighed and shifted onto his side, facing Hannah. There was more space for both of them that way. Hannah sighed, too, and dropped her arm.

Hannah was right; they needed to talk about something happy for a while.

“He’s very pretty,” said Isaac.

Hannah nodded at the ceiling.

“But he’s more than that,” she said. “He’s sweet. Funny. You can tell there’s so much going on in his head. Makes me want to take him out of it.”

“I know what you mean,” said Isaac.

“Is Jackson like that? Busy head?”

“You could say that.”

“Is that why he’s such a prick?”

Isaac smiled. “He’s not always a prick.”

“Just when anyone but you is around?” Hannah teased.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“You like him.”

“I do.”

“Do you think he likes you?”

Isaac thought for a moment before responding.

“It’s hard to tell with him. I’m not sure he really likes anyone.”

“Does he always attack people who try to dance with people he doesn’t really like?” Hannah said knowingly.

Isaac shrugged, an awkward action while lying on his side, but he made it work. “Maybe he’s just territorial.”

Hannah giggled. “He did look a bit like an angry dog.”

“I think he was just keyed up from all that stuff earlier with Tobias.” At least, Isaac hoped that was all it was.

Being possessive when you were spending time with someone was one thing, like Jackson taking Isaac’s hand and dragging him outside? Adorable. But being actively jealous… Now that was something else entirely.

Isaac was just relieved Jackson had realized immediately what a stupid thing he’d done, chasing off that other guy on the dancefloor. Isaac probably would’ve blown the guy off anyway since Isaac was there with his friends already. But Jackson didn’t get a say in who Isaac spent time with, and Isaac liked spending time with a lot of different people. Life was more interesting that way.
Or at least… That was how Isaac usually felt. Since the night Jackson had first kissed him, Isaac had found himself becoming a little… fixated on Jackson. Isaac wasn’t getting nearly the amount of physical attention he was used to getting, but so far, it hadn’t mattered much. At least for now, he was happy to focus on Jackson and see where that went. Especially after what they’d talked about at the club.

Thinking of Jackson chasing off that guy made Isaac wonder, though…

“You didn’t… see anything weird tonight, did you?” Isaac asked in what he hoped was a casual manner.

Hannah bit her bottom lip and hesitated before speaking. “His eyes are blue.”

Isaac blanched. He had really been hoping Hannah hadn’t seen that. There was no point denying it, however. “Yeah. Do you know what it means?”

“That a wolf has killed an innocent person, and…” Hannah trailed off, clearly reluctant to go on.

“And?” Isaac asked, despite already knowing the answer.

“And we’re supposed to kill them on sight.”

“Argents have a similar rule. Had,” Isaac corrected himself. “It’s not as simple as ‘blue eyes equal murderer,’ though, since there are a lot of reasons to kill someone. A lot of elements out there that can leave you with no choice.” And being mind-controlled by a severely unhinged homicidal teenage boy and a sadistic, self-serving old man was a big one.

“How did it happen? For Jackson, I mean.”

“It’s not really my place to tell,” said Isaac, hoping Hannah wouldn’t push.

“Fair enough.” Hannah nodded. “I guess there’s a lot I don’t know about werewolves… About a lot of things,” she amended.

“I don’t have to tell you not to tell your family, right?”

“You think I’m daft? Besides, they’ve got more than enough information as it is,” she said bitterly.

Isaac definitely agreed with that. He’d thought Chris was bad, back before he’d started working with the werewolves of Beacon Hills to stop the real monsters out there, but even the Argents had never collected information like that on their targets. As far as Isaac knew, anyway. If they had, they probably would’ve done things differently. Gerard and Kate had been all about the scorched earth policy while Chris had waited for proof that a werewolf had killed or turned someone before taking them down. The idea of sitting around, watching and waiting for a werewolf to make a mistake, or look like they were about to… It was wrong.

Isaac wondered what his file would say, because it would be naive to think that the Bristows wouldn’t have one on him. They’d probably known all along that he was staying with Jackson.

“Shoulda hit him harder,” Hannah mumbled, sounding sleepy again. Her eyes had shut at some point.

Isaac laughed, thinking about Tobias sprawled on the pavement earlier. “I don’t know, you got him pretty good.”
“Mm,” Hannah intoned, “jaw was already swelling. Bet it’s purple tomorrow.”

“If we’re lucky, he won’t be able to talk for a while. That would make everything way better.”

Hannah made another sleepy sound of agreement. Isaac should send her to bed, he thought. He should go home himself. But he knew that the second he went downstairs, the Bristows were going to want to question him, and Isaac wasn’t ready for that yet. Maybe he could just shut his eyes for a few minutes. A few minutes, then he’d be ready to face the music.

Isaac figured the rest of the Bristows had probably forgotten that he was there. That was the only excuse for how he and Hannah had managed to sleep for several hours lying next to each other in bed (on top of the duvet and fully clothed, but still a pretty suspicious position for Hannah to be found in after getting in trouble for spending time alone with werewolves).

They were incredibly lucky that it was Nina who finally noticed them.

As far as Isaac could tell, Nina was the only one of the adults who hadn’t already taken a firm stance on the whole working-with-werewolves issue. She spent her time taking care of the kids, and as long as they weren’t in danger, she seemed happy.

“Hannah, dear.”

Isaac woke up before Hannah did, not that he’d really been sleeping all that soundly to begin with. Nina had knelt down beside the bed and was brushing Hannah’s hair back from her forehead.

“You ought to go to bed, dear,” Nina said gently. “Your own,” she added, dryly.

Hannah mumbled something incoherent about pancakes, but didn’t open her eyes. Even when Nina was helping her sit up, Hannah still seemed more asleep than awake. Isaac didn’t blame her; it had been a long night.

Nina managed to get Hannah to her feet, however, and after a nudge down the hall and towards her bedroom, seemed content that autopilot would get Hannah to where she needed to go. Then she turned back to Isaac. He’d barely managed to sit up and rub the sleep out of his eyes; he was not prepared to be chewed out. He would have at least liked a cup of coffee first.

“Probably best for you to be gettin’ on your way, too,” Nina said, not unkindly. “I suspect the family will be wantin’ to talk to you first, though, so best not to mention this little slumber party, I’d say, hmm?”

Isaac smiled gratefully at Nina, fully aware of how bad it could have been for both him and Hannah if anyone else had found them like that. Luckily, Nina seemed more concerned about looking after Hannah--and maybe even to some extent Isaac--than in participating in the family drama.

Nina patted him on the shoulder before disappearing out the door.

As Isaac swung his feet off the bed, he realized he hadn’t even taken off his shoes before falling asleep beside Hannah. He swore under his breath when he suddenly realized that he hadn’t let Jackson know he was staying over.
He quickly pulled out his phone and typed a quick message about how he wasn’t dead or being held hostage, he had just accidentally fallen asleep, and hoped that Jackson was asleep and hadn’t noticed, or at least hadn’t been worried. That was the last thing they needed, another stupid argument over miscommunication.

Especially since Isaac was about to keep a pretty big secret from Jackson. Because it wasn’t like there was anything Jackson would be able to do about the Bristows having all that information on Jackson and his pack and every other werewolf in London, and knowing that the Bristows knew where he lived was just going to freak him out. Jackson would probably feel obligated to tell his alpha, which would make her wonder how he found that out, which would require Jackson to have to tell her what kind of work Isaac did, which would be bad for everyone.

No, it would be better for Isaac to keep that to himself, at least for a while.

Nina had been right that the family would want to talk to Isaac before he left. James was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs.

“Isaac, would you mind joining us for a moment?”

Knowing he didn’t have a choice, Isaac nodded and fell into step behind James. Isaac felt a little like he was going to see the principal as they headed towards Pol’s office. At least only Pol and Wendy were there when James led him inside and shut the door behind him. Everyone else had probably gone to bed, or maybe this just wasn’t a public discussion. Either way, knowing that two out of three hunters in the room more or less liked him made him feel much better about his odds of getting out of there in one piece.

“Unfortunately, you’ve put us in a bit of a difficult situation, Isaac.”

Isaac thought that was a nice way for James to start the conversation. “Difficult” definitely described the situation.

“I know,” Isaac said, then after a moment, “Would it help to say that I didn’t mean to?”

Pol laughed, not unkindly. “Intentions matter little compared to actions.”

Isaac couldn’t really disagree with her there. “So what now?”

“Now, you remember who you work for,” Wendy snapped. “We didn’t bring you to London to fraternize with the locals.”

The way she said that word made Isaac wonder what else Tobias had been telling his family, or what else they’d seen while evidently spying on him.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I just felt I ought to remind you that you’re here to do a job.”

“I’ve been doing my job,” said Isaac, trying not to sound too defensive, but it was very difficult. “I found the pattern, I figured out that it travels underground, I caught the thing’s scent!”

“And you’re still no closer to figuring out what it is or how to stop it!”

“...I-- I will. There’s still time,” Isaac insisted.

“And we have every confidence in you,” James interjected. “But we cannot ignore the fact that you
have facilitated a very dangerous friendship between my daughter and various members of the Holborn pack.”

“James, you can trust them,” said Isaac. But he was already pretty sure that he was fighting a losing battle.

“There’s more happening than you realize, Isaac,” said James. “You becoming too involved with the Holborn pack could be problematic for all of us. You only have Jackson’s word that his pack are trustworthy, and only him for protection if they take issue with you. You’re our responsibility while you live in London. Argent entrusted us with your safety.”

“I’m not a kid,” said Isaac, though he couldn’t deny that he was feeling a twinge of guilt at the mention of Chris. Isaac had a sneaking suspicion that Chris wouldn’t approve of the situation, either. At the end of the day, even though Isaac didn’t care much about what the Bristows thought, he did sometimes care what Chris thought. And unfortunately, whatever Isaac did in London reflected on Chris.

Wendy scoffed. “Then you should stop behaving like one. Children have the luxury of ignorance. Adults do not.”

Isaac’s eyes flitted to the desk where documents were spilling out of a thick folder. Isaac would have bet money that it was the Holborn file. “So does that mean you’re going to stop pretending like you’re not keeping tabs on me, then?”

James responded before Wendy could. “You may spend time with other werewolves and live where you choose. However, there is a chance that your connection to this family could put not only yourself at risk, but us as well. You’ve put my daughter in a dangerous situation, Isaac. I don’t take that lightly. No parent would. Certainly you understand that, at the very least.”

Isaac looked down. How could he explain to them that Hannah wasn’t in any danger? Not from Jackson, and certainly not from Zach. Still, the Bristows probably hadn’t cornered the market on the inability to see the potential of a friendship between the hunters and werewolves. No doubt Josie would be just as worried about the situation, too, if she knew.

“Peace is fragile,” James continued. “Even seemingly innocuous interactions can threaten it. You need to understand this if you are to stay in London.”

Knowing he had been defeated, Isaac nodded his understanding.

“Have we made this clear, Isaac?” said James.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I assume I don’t need to remind you of the Code used by most hunters in North America?”

Isaac swallowed nervously. “‘We hunt those who hunt us.’”

“Indeed,” said James. “You’ve let a wolf catch my daughter’s scent, Isaac. Make sure he doesn’t hunt her.”

It was almost noon when Isaac came back to the flat. Zach had stayed for a few hours of sleep--pressed up against Jackson in the bed because Zach got extra wolflike when he was drunk--until he’d sobered up enough to go home around half-ten. Jackson had been sound asleep since then until Isaac closed the window (which, to his credit, he tried to do quietly, but Jackson was attuned
to people being in his space). It was very pleasant lying on his stomach with the duvet pulled up so high it was nearly over his head.

“What did they say?” Jackson asked, not bothering to open his eyes. He listened as Isaac kicked off his shoes and started taking off layers of clothing.

“I’m gonna need a ‘who’ and a ‘what’ to answer that,” said Isaac. His voice was muffled, presumably by the process of removing his shirt.

“The hunters,” said Jackson. “About Hannah decking that Northern pillock.”

Isaac was laughing, presumably at Jackson being “extra Britshy” after the night out.

“They said a lot. Hannah got grounded, and I got a little talk about how I need to be more careful who I trust. They don’t seem to like your pack much.”

From the sound of it, Isaac had opted to disrobe completely except for his boxers. This wasn’t a new thing anymore, but it reminded Jackson of all the “foreplay” from last night, and the fact that Isaac had all but gotten Jackson to confess that he wanted to have sex with him. Jackson would just have to trust Isaac to honor his agreement not to rush him.

Jackson snorted. “They’re hunters. We’re werewolves. We’re lucky if they just ‘don’t like’ us.”

Isaac crawled under the duvet, prompting Jackson to make a sound of objection as he let in some cold air.

“Hannah likes us.”

“Hannah’s young,” said Jackson. “Her family could change her. We’ve seen that before, right?”

Isaac didn’t answer. Jackson felt a pang of guilt once he realized why. He had gotten very close to breaking the unspoken rule that they didn’t talk about Allison.

After an awkward pause, Jackson said, “Sleep. Or at least let me sleep.”

Isaac shifted close to Jackson, causing his chilled skin to come in contact with Jackson’s, disturbing his comfort.

“Cold!” Jackson protested.

“So warm me up,” said Isaac. Unlike the rest of him, Isaac’s lips were warm where they pressed against the nape of Jackson’s neck, suggestive and tender at the same time.

“Sleep,” Jackson insisted, but it was half-hearted. It hadn’t even been a week since Jackson had kissed Isaac that first time, but it seemed like Isaac didn’t have to worry about rushing Jackson; Jackson kept finding himself encouraging Isaac to speed up.

He could feel Isaac settling in close to him on his side, and Jackson knew that if he opened his eyes he would find Isaac’s face directly in front of his.

“My pillow smells like Zach,” said Isaac, “and all the cider he drank.”

“You’re the one who insisted we invite him,” Jackson pointed out.

“And we all had a good time, right?”
Jackson would’ve rolled his eyes if he’d had the will to open them. “If that’s your idea of a ‘good time,’ I’m not sure I want to know what you’d think a really good time is.”

“Oh, you definitely want to know.”

“Do I?”

Fingers brushed through Jackson’s hair, then trailed over the back of his neck, down between his bare shoulder blades. Jackson shivered. This sleeping-without-shirts-on-now thing was a double-edged sword.

“I’m trying to sleep,” he murmured.

“And I’m trying to get you to look at me,” countered Isaac.

“Why?”

“Because you have pretty eyes,” said Isaac. “And you’re the only person I’ve met who’s still sexy when they’re cranky and sleep-deprived.”

Jackson felt his cheeks flush. He never knew what to do when Isaac said things like that. Should he thank Isaac for the compliment? Tell him how sexy he was, too? Because he was. Jackson had come to appreciate just how attractive Isaac was—not just in general, though it was clear from Isaac’s conquests that his appeal was close to universal, but to Jackson specifically. Of course, there was no way he would ever say that outloud. He didn’t have the nerve. Plus, Isaac was well aware of how sexy he was anyway.

“For a guy as cocky and obsessed with what people think as you are, you’re pretty terrible at taking compliments,” Isaac teased.

“Only from you,” Jackson said honestly. With great effort, he forced his eyes to open, blinking at the sunbeams streaming in through the window, which bathed Isaac’s face in a warm light. Isaac gave Jackson one of his charmingly crooked smiles.

“G’mornin’, sleepyhead.”

“It’s not morning until I’ve had at least six hours of sleep.”

“Actually, technically it’s afternoon.”

“No,” Jackson objected firmly. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Yeah, I got a couple hours,” said Isaac. “But between the anti-werewolf vibe in that house right now and the fact that you weren’t there, I wouldn’t call it a good night’s sleep.”

Again, Jackson didn’t know what to say. Out of all the things Isaac did to try to throw Jackson off, sincerity was the most effective.

“They gonna let you go back?” Jackson’s eyes slid closed again of their own will.

“Eventually. Might stay away for a while, though.”

“Mmn,” Jackson agreed. Words were becoming difficult.

Isaac snuggled closer to him (which was only just barely possible) and heaved a contented sigh.
“You’re warm.”

“I was warm, until you got here.”

“You like me being here,” said Isaac. Jackson thought he could detect a note of uncertainty in Isaac’s generally overconfident tone, however.

Jackson couldn’t say it outright. It just wasn’t in him. But he tilted his head enough that he could press his lips to Isaac’s for a moment before he lay it heavily back down on the pillow. This seemed to reassure Isaac, at least enough that he threw his arm over Jackson and tugged the duvet back up.

Isaac was asleep within seconds.

“Yeah,” Jackson found himself murmuring, “I do.”

There were some things that could only be admitted to people who couldn’t hear them.

Chapter End Notes

So much drama but also so much cute! And we have a VERY IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT: We have started posting a short multi-part side story for this fic about Hannah and Zach! It's not in any way essential for you to read it in order to keep up with the fic, but if you are interested in Zach/Hannah (Zanna), we think you'll really enjoy it. It's called The Strength of the Wolf: Star-Crossed, and Part I has been posted here. Let us know what you think!
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: MOON (Sia)

I am the moon:
I long to be apart,
I isolate my heart.
You’ve drawn me into your world.
Now I, too, spin limbless.

It was the heartbeat, loud and fast, that woke Isaac up: Jackson’s heartbeat, pounding so hard that Isaac was worried it might burst out of the poor guy’s chest. The scent of fear was overwhelming; so heavy and sour and strong it might as well have been Isaac’s own. Instinct was screaming at him to break out his claws and bare his fangs. But there were no enemies to face. Just a terrified werewolf having a nightmare.
This was different than the other one, though, when Isaac had taken Jackson out to the couch with him. Before, Jackson had been thrashing and flinching, sweating and shaking. Tonight he was utterly, unnervingly still, almost like he was paralyzed, except for his eyes, darting around behind his rapidly fluttering eyelids.

Somehow, this seemed so much worse than the other one.

This one reminded Isaac of when he and Erica had held Jackson still, forcing his mouth open so Derek could test the Kanima poison on Jackson, of how okay Isaac had been with the whole situation because he had felt justified in his own cruelty. At the time, that had seemed like no more than what Jackson had deserved, and Isaac had needed Jackson to call off the cops. Jackson had been the only person who had known what Isaac’s dad had been doing to him—maybe not the exact details, maybe not how bad it had really been, but enough to make the cops think Isaac could have killed his dad—and it was his testimony that had forced Isaac to stay in hiding.

This new, worse nightmare also reminded Isaac of when Jackson had been “dead,” or evolving, or whatever had been going on after Gerard had forced Jackson to sink his own claws into himself. It reminded Isaac that Jackson had been reborn that night and had become a person who, despite appearances and assurances to the contrary, cared about more than just himself. The person lying beside Isaac, trapped in bad memories he didn’t deserve.

“Jackson,” Isaac whispered tentatively. There were very few things that scared Isaac anymore, but seeing Jackson this way came damned close.

“Jackson,” Isaac repeated, more insistently this time.

He put his hand carefully on Jackson’s arm—preparing to pin Jackson to the bed if he were to suddenly turn violent like before—and was completely caught off guard by the fact that he could actually feel pain thrumming beneath Jackson’s skin. But it couldn’t be real; Jackson wasn’t actually hurt. It was just the phantom pain of memory, which meant there was nothing for Isaac to take away. What a fun way to learn something new about werewolf abilities...

Isaac carefully started running his fingers through Jackson’s hair and put his lips close to Jackson’s ear, murmuring gently—Jackson’s name, that it was just a dream, that he was safe, that Isaac was right there—trying to draw Jackson out of it without risking a violent reaction.

Slowly, Jackson’s eyes fluttered open and his quiet, shallow breathing became desperate gasps for air. He struggled to sit up, and not only did Jackson not push Isaac away when he helped him sit up against the headboard, he clung to Isaac desperately, like he would have been pulled back into the nightmare if Isaac let go.

So Isaac pulled Jackson closer, wrapping himself around Jackson protectively. He kept talking quietly to Jackson until the words didn’t make sense to his own ears anymore and were just vague, reassuring sounds.

“Isaac—” Jackson finally said. His breath was hot against Isaac’s chest.

“It was just a dream,” Isaac murmured, still petting Jackson’s hair. He found himself making shushing sounds, like a parent comforting a child or something. An instinct triggered by seeing Jackson that way.

Jackson shook his head vehemently, then lifted it and looked up at Isaac, his eyes pleading with Isaac to understand something. “It-- It’s all my fault.”
Isaac held Jackson tighter, at a loss. He knew nothing he could say would make Jackson feel better, but he still felt like he should try. “Jackson--”

“If I hadn’t been so fucking weak--”

“Jackson, stop,” said Isaac. He shifted his hand from Jackson’s hair to his arm, gripping it gently. “It wasn’t real.”

“No,” Jackson insisted. “It happened.”

“Yeah,” Isaac admitted reluctantly. “But not tonight.”

“Like that fucking matters,” Jackson growled, the sudden ferocity behind his words taking Isaac aback.

“Jackson, it wasn’t--”

“No!” Jackson’s grip on Isaac tightened. “Don’t tell me it wasn’t my fault. Don’t you fucking dare. It was real and I did it.”

There wasn’t any point in denying it. Even if Jackson’s dreams weren’t technically real, they were still based on real events—real things Jackson had done as the Kanima.

“It was real,” Isaac conceded. “And you did it. But it wasn’t your fault.”

Jackson made an angry, disgusted sound and tried to pull away, but Isaac didn’t let him, transferring his grip on Jackson to the back of his neck so he could make Jackson look him in the eyes.

“It’s the truth,” Isaac said firmly. “Matt used you. Gerard used you. You couldn’t control it. You didn’t even know.”

“Bullshit,” Jackson spat, but the biting anger was draining out of him. Isaac could tell how badly Jackson wanted to believe him.

“Hey,” said Isaac, his hands shifting to cup Jackson’s face, holding Jackson’s reassuring not-glowing eyes with his own. “I remember a lot more of it than you do, and I know that wasn’t you.”

Jackson pressed his forehead to Isaac’s and squeezed his eyes closed tightly. “It’s never going to stop, is it?”

Isaac wanted to tell Jackson that it would, that someday the nightmares would be gone for good and Jackson wouldn’t even remember what had happened at all.

But Isaac knew better. He knew how memories lingered and that no matter how faded or far away they became, any seemingly insignificant detail or little reminder could bring it all right back.

“No,” Isaac said softly. “But it gets easier.”

“When?” Jackson asked, sounding desperate and exhausted. “It’s getting worse. I remember more.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” said Isaac.

Jackson scoffed. “How could that possibly be good?”

“What’s that thing people say about fear of the unknown? It’s the strongest fear or something?”
“Something like that,” said Jackson with a weak laugh.

“Do you… want me to tell you?” Isaac asked hesitantly.

Jackson froze, still as a statue, but Isaac continued. “I don’t think it was actually as bad as you think it was. I mean,” he amended quickly, “it was bad, but maybe not knowing everything makes it seem worse to you.”

Jackson considered the idea for a long time. Finally, he gave Isaac the slowest, smallest nod.

Isaac shifted them until he was lying on his back with Jackson’s head resting on his chest. He ran his hands gently across Jackson’s back, up his arms, through his hair, keeping the pressure light, just enough to hopefully keep Jackson present.

Isaac tried to be thorough with his explanation without going into too many of the gory details. He didn’t think Jackson needed to know about Stiles watching the mechanic get crushed by his Jeep, and he glossed over how they’d all trashed Scott’s house since that hadn’t really been because of Jackson anyway, but he tried to tell Jackson the truth to the best of his ability. He also tried to highlight the kind of positive stuff like how Jackson had refused to kill the pregnant woman, and how Scott and Lydia had never given up on Jackson. (Isaac decided not to mention that he himself had only agreed to help because of Scott.)

Jackson stayed quiet throughout Isaac’s entire monologue, not reacting at all to anything Isaac said. If Isaac hadn’t known better, he might’ve thought Jackson had fallen back asleep.

“I didn’t remember the pregnant girl,” Jackson said finally.

“See? It’s not all bad.”

Jackson wasn’t reassured. “There’s still a lot of blood on my hands.”

“I still say it doesn’t count if you weren’t in control.”

“Easy for you to say,” Jackson said bitterly. “You’re not the one with the glowing permanent reminder.”

“Yeah, well, if intention mattered, I bet our eyes would be swapped. I’ve wanted to kill a lot of people. Tried, even. Turns out I just have no follow-through.”

“Lucky me, I guess,” Jackson drawled. “I’m better at killing me than you are.”

Isaac flushed, a little ashamed. “It was pretty fucked up… the way we went after you. I mean, even before we knew for sure you were the Kanima.”

“You were trying to stop me from killing more people.”

“Maybe Derek was,” said Isaac. “I didn’t really care. Still don’t. You could’ve killed half the town and it wouldn’t’ve made any difference to me.”

Jackson flinched, and Isaac softened his tone. “All I’m saying is, I tried to kill you, and I don’t even have the excuse of having been manipulated into it.” Isaac kissed the top of Jackson’s head and whispered “M sorry” into Jackson’s hair.

Jackson’s grip on Isaac tightened almost imperceptibly, but he made no other response.

“And thanks,” Isaac added after a moment.
Jackson shifted so that he could look up at Isaac, adorably confused. “For what?”

“It’s kinda funny, but…” Isaac hesitated, a little self-conscious now that Jackson was looking at him. “I’m probably still alive because of you.”

“How?”

“I almost went with Boyd and Erica,” said Isaac. “That night they tried to leave Beacon Hills. If I had, the alpha pack probably would’ve caught me, too.”

Jackson stared at Isaac for what seemed like minutes, and Isaac began to regret saying anything about that.

“Why’d you stay?” Jackson finally asked.

Isaac shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal. “Scott needed help saving you.”

Something seemed to close behind Jackson’s eyes; almost like a door that Isaac hadn’t realized was open. “You mean stopping me.”

“No,” said Isaac, worried now that he had just set the conversation back by about ten minutes. “Stopping Gerard from using you, stopping Al– Stopping the hunters and the Hales from killing you.”

“I kind of died anyway,” said Jackson.

“Yeah, and I got stabbed about twenty times with Chinese ring daggers. We’re both still here, right?”

Jackson snorted. “So really, you’re still alive because of McCall.”

“I’m alive because of a lot of things. Actually, probably despite a lot of things.” Isaac shrugged again, more relieved than anything that their lives in Beacon Hills were done. “But it doesn’t really matter now, you know? Because I’m alive.”

Jackson considered Isaac for a long time. Then he sighed out a small laugh. “That’s some outlook.”

“Being a pessimist was too much work.”

“That sounds more like you.” Jackson sat up and stretched his neck. Something made a very satisfying pop and he sighed in relief before climbing out of bed. He grabbed the empty water glass from the bedside table and headed for the kitchen.

It was surreal how calm Jackson was now, especially considering how he had been after his other nightmare. Jackson had shaken for hours; even after he’d fallen back asleep, Jackson had kept flinching and making pained noises. In retrospect, Isaac was more than a little relieved that his brilliant plan to make Jackson feel better by detailing the horrific events of his time as a homicidal lizard had not backfired disastrously.

The first thing Isaac did when Jackson came back in was apologize. “I shouldn’t have brought up the Kanima thing yesterday.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jackson said, handing Isaac the glass of water, which he accepted gratefully. “I get these nightmares all the time. At least once a week, if I’m lucky, so I was overdue.”

“Shit, that often?” Isaac took a long drink before putting the glass back in its place on the table.
“Have you thought about maybe talking to someone about it?”

“You mean, like a therapist?” Jackson snorted, crawling back into bed beside Isaac and curling up against him. “Yeah, that would go over super well. Hi, Doc, this week I want to talk about the time that I got turned into a homicidal puppet and killed a bunch of people.”

Isaac laughed (even though it was a little morbid) and pulled Jackson closer. “I meant more like your alpha or Zach, but hey, if you wanna go that route, knock yourself out.”

Jackson was quiet long enough that Isaac felt the need to follow up.

“Do they know anything about your life before?”

“Josie knows. Some. I… She…” Jackson trailed off.

The way Jackson started running his fingers across Isaac’s arm seemed unconscious. It was too light to be called a scratch, almost like Jackson was flexing his hand and Isaac’s arm just happened to be there.

“It was just so much easier,” Jackson continued. “Starting over where nobody knew anything about me… about it.”

“Are you going to tell them?” Isaac couldn’t help but ask.

“Josie wants me to,” said Jackson. “But she said it could wait until I was ready.”

“And?”

“And I’m not ready.”

With that, Jackson rolled over, pressing his back to Isaac in a way that made it clear that he was finished talking, but wanted to stay close.

“Fair enough,” said Isaac. He kissed Jackson’s bare shoulder, then reluctantly pulled away from his warmth and got out of bed.

“Where’re you going?” Jackson’s voice had a hint of disappointed uncertainty in it.

“Grabbing your laptop,” said Isaac. “No way I’m letting you go straight back to sleep after that conversation. Besides, there are like eight seasons of QI we need to catch up on.”

Jackson made a few half-hearted sounds of protest, but he was clearly already starting to feel better when Isaac queued up the show and laid back down close to him. Jackson would benefit from what Isaac had learned long ago: Losing a few hours of sleep getting over a nightmare was better than risking another one.

“Oi! Keep your bloody shirt on!” Zach shouted after Jackson knocked on his door a second time.

“Well hurry up,” Jackson shouted back. “Some of us have class before noon.”

There were some sounds of protestation from behind a nearby door at the noise they were making, but Jackson ignored them. He hoped it was that asshole who was always keeping Zach up by having unnecessarily loud, unsatisfying-sounding sex.

Jackson also reminded himself that he’d left home early in order to stop by Zach’s flat on his way
to school to ask Zach a favor, which meant Jackson probably should try to be patient.

Monday morning had come way too soon for Jackson, who, after spending the weekend lounging around his flat with Isaac (watching a lot of *QI* and doing almost no homework), did not want to face the world yet. Or, more specifically, face the fact that the full moon was tomorrow.

How the fuck had it already been a month since the last one?

When Zach finally opened the door, he looked exhausted and a little out of it--like he’d only been asleep for a few hours--but also extremely... happy. For a moment, Jackson thought that it was because Zach was glad to see Jackson. Then he stepped inside Zach’s room and caught a familiar scent.

*Hannah.*

It was unmistakable. Hannah must have been here--very recently, judging by the scent in the air and all over Zach himself. An involuntary pang of anxiety gripped Jackson’s chest. A hunter had been alone with his brother, in his room, and it didn’t smell like she had just been there to talk.

Apparently Jackson’s expression gave away his thoughts.

“You can smell her on me, can’t you?” said Zach, pulse speeding up a bit. “Please, Jack, I’m too tired for a lecture--”

“I’m not going to lecture you,” Jackson said quickly. He *did* want to say something to Zach about Hannah, but he didn’t have time, and he didn’t want to upset Zach right before asking him for help. “I came to ask a favor, actually.”

“Yeah?” Zach flopped back down on his bed and gave a great yawn. “Fire away.”

“Could you come over to mine tomorrow night?”

“Tomorrow night?” Zach furrowed his brows like he was looking at a calendar in his head. “That’s the full moon. You won’t be home.”

“I know,” said Jackson. “But Isaac will.”

“Don’t want to bring him to the den?” Zach teased. He already knew the answer: the full moon was *not* the time to introduce Isaac to the rest of the pack.

“I just thought maybe you could keep an eye on him. He says he doesn’t usually have a problem, but I think Josie would kill me if I left a werewolf alone in our territory on a full moon.”

“And you think she’d feel better if you sent your frail, powerless brother to look after him?”

“I’d be more worried about him than you if he does lose control,” Jackson said with a very slight smile.

“Too right you would!” Zach stuck his studded tongue out at Jackson, then yawned again and pulled his duvet up around himself.

“So you’ll do it?”

“I suppose I can survive one night alone with that ridiculous letch,” Zach said sleepily. “As long as he minds where he puts his hands. Now get yourself off to school, Jack. I’ve got three hours until class and I intend to spend at least two of them unconscious.”
The lead-up to the full moon was worse than usual for Jackson.

It wasn’t uncommon for Jackson to have trouble sleeping the night before, but that night, Jackson wasn’t sleeping at all. He kept tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable, which would’ve been frustrating on its own, but the fact that Jackson’s restlessness was also keeping Isaac awake made it worse. Like, now Jackson wasn’t only inconveniencing himself with his problems anymore. First he’d kept Isaac up half the night because of his stupid nightmare, and now this.

“What can I help?” Isaac asked, after Jackson flipped his pillow over for the dozenth time and punched it in frustration.

How exactly Isaac planned on helping, Jackson had no idea.

“I’m fine,” Jackson snapped. “I don’t need a fucking babysitter.”

“That’s not—”

“If me moving around so much is bothering you, there’s a whole other half of the bed you can be using.”

Jackson turned away from Isaac then, worried that if he opened his mouth again, he might just start screaming.

That didn’t stop him from hoping that Isaac would realize that Jackson didn’t actually want Isaac to sleep on the other side of the bed.

After a few uncertain seconds, Jackson felt Isaac shift away and settle with a few inches between them.

Unfuckingbelievable.

Jackson bit his tongue. The logical part of his brain knew it wasn’t Isaac’s fault that full moons were awful for him, but that didn’t stop the part of Jackson’s brain that needed someone to blame for how antsy he was feeling; how stressed and nervous and just generally uncomfortable he was.

And he couldn’t blame Zach—who Jackson really, really wanted to blame for dating a hunter, or whatever the hell he was doing—despite all the stress he was causing Jackson, since it was Isaac’s fault Zach had met Hannah in the first place. Or maybe it was Jackson’s fault for letting Isaac talk him into inviting Zach to dinner....

Jackson resisted the urge to punch his pillow again. He had too much anxious energy pent up under his skin, itching to get out. Like the wolf was waking up early, and it wanted to play. With another wolf. One specific other wolf. Who had promised not to make a move on Jackson until Jackson made a move first. Who now, after weeks of being in Jackson’s space all the fucking time, was actually giving him room. Brilliant.

It wasn’t any better when Jackson was getting ready for school the next morning. He turned the water in his shower up so hot that if he hadn’t had werewolf healing, he probably would’ve had burns when he got out. But at least it helped with the itch under his skin, at least for a little while.

Isaac managed to stumble out of bed to “fix” Jackson’s hair just as he was about to leave, but that
and a quick kiss were all Jackson got before Isaac went back to the bedroom and burrowed under the covers again. This reminded Jackson that Isaac was tired because Jackson had kept him awake, which made Jackson feel even shittier.

Jackson couldn’t focus in class. The energy prickling beneath his skin was getting worse. But he really didn’t want to go home early. He almost always missed a bit of school around the full moon, but that was usually the day after, when he’d spent most of the night trying to keep himself human.

By lunchtime, though, it was unbearable. Jackson couldn’t sit still, he couldn’t concentrate, and he had to apologize to two separate professors for not paying attention properly. He managed to convince one of them that he was feeling ill, and was allowed to go home with the warning that he needed to be more mindful of how much school time he missed. There went any possibility of skiving off tomorrow, then…

Jackson barely registered the trip back across town. By the time he got home, Jackson felt trapped in his own skin. He had his jacket off and tie loosened before he even got to the front door of his flat, and his fingers wouldn’t obey him when he fumbled with his keys to unlock it.

He hadn’t realized how desperately he’d been wanting to see Isaac until he found him there, sitting on the couch, regarding Jackson with confusion.

“How’s--”

Isaac was off the couch in an instant, recognizing instinctively that Jackson was close to losing control over his wolf. His eyes weren’t glowing yet, but it was clearly a near thing. Judging by how agitated Jackson was, it was practically a miracle that he had even made it home in that condition. What the hell had happened

Isaac quickly pushed the door shut behind Jackson, threw the lock, and turned around--

--and was instantly shoved against the door and pinned, his neck attacked by soft lips and hard teeth. Isaac’s knees went weak with sudden, giddy, entirely unexpected pleasure. Only the hard body pressed against him kept him from sliding to the floor. He eagerly twined his fingers with the ones holding his hands against the door near his head.

Somewhere in the part of his brain that wasn’t overloading from how fucking amazing it was that Jackson was moving forward with their agreement about Isaac not being allowed to do anything until Jackson did it first, Isaac recognized that this wasn’t like Jackson at all. Jackson had gotten a little gutsier about this stuff lately, but not throw-Isaac-against-a-wall gutsy.

It hadn’t been hard to figure out that it was the full moon tonight that had put Jackson on edge (and kept him there) since the night before. Isaac had tried to give him space, worried about making Jackson’s wolf feel threatened if Isaac tried something that made Jackson too nervous, but evidently, that wasn’t the problem. In fact, it looked like space was exactly the opposite of what Jackson’s wolf wanted from Isaac right now.

Jackson’s wolf. Isaac cursed inwardly. As much as Isaac didn’t want to kill the mood, he felt like he should make sure this was what Jackson-the-person actually wanted and not just the ball of frustration and animal instinct that had arrived on the doorstep.

“Mm, Jackson?” Isaac struggled to get the words out as Jackson’s teeth slid along the shell of his ear. “Everything okay?”

A low growl, rumbling against his ear, was the only response he got, along with a particularly
fierce nip to his earlobe.

*Okay, don’t get distracted, don’t get distracted,* Isaac told himself as he worked one of his hands free. He grabbed Jackson by the short hair at the back of his head and tugged so he could get a look at Jackson’s eyes. Still not glowing, which was a good sign, but there was definitely a vacant quality to them.

“Jackson? You in there?” Isaac ducked his head to try to catch Jackson’s gaze. “Look, this is really hot and I’m not complaining, but--”

Another growl, and suddenly Jackson’s lips were crushed against his, with his tongue in Isaac’s mouth. Isaac was so pleasantly surprised by this unexpected turn of events that he failed to notice his hand being re-pinned against the wall. The intention was loud and clear.

“Isaac,” Jackson said finally when they both had to come up for air. “ Shut up.”

Well, at least Isaac knew Jackson could *talk* now. And he was saying very Jackson-like things.

Isaac would’ve laughed at Jackson’s impatience (which was kind of adorable in a way that only Jackson could manage) if he weren’t being thoroughly kissed again. He reveled in the sensation of Jackson grinding against him, and encouraged Jackson with a shameless moan as the playful kisses and bites became sharper. Isaac thrust his hips into Jackson’s and was rewarded by being slammed even more forcefully back into the wall. He couldn’t stop the huff of laughter from escaping his lips that time.

Jackson didn’t seem to think it was funny, though. There was another growl, this one more ominous than before, and Isaac cried out in pain as Jackson sank his sharp wolf teeth into Isaac’s shoulder.

“Fuck!” Isaac swore reflexively as his skin slowly began knitting itself back together.

Jackson pulled back to give Isaac a stern look, eyes glowing brilliant blue now, lips red with Isaac’s blood. Yeah, maybe Isaac should’ve listened to the part of his brain that had been trying to warn him about Jackson’s behavior being un-Jacksonlike.

That being the case, Isaac decided it would probably be wise to interact with the wolf and not just Jackson, then. With that in mind, Isaac consciously made himself relax against the wall, surrendering, letting Jackson be the alpha. Maybe if he didn’t fight back, Jackson would calm down. Isaac had found that people who were a bit rough usually just wanted to be in control. Usually when Isaac found himself in situations where the roughness started approaching pain, he’d stop pushing and things could stay fun.

“Sorry,” Isaac whispered against Jackson’s lips for good measure, but Jackson didn’t let up. He released his hold on Isaac just for a moment, but only so he could flip him over, and Isaac swore again as his chin hit the wall, creating a temporary bruise and scraping off a few layers of skin. As hot as it was that this position let Jackson grind against his ass, Isaac was enjoying the roughness less and less.

Isaac’s breathing was becoming shallower. Pressed between Jackson and the wall, his cheek scraping against it, Isaac was starting to feel trapped, and that was definite ‘red flag’ territory. Old associations were creeping in, and Isaac’s plan of being submissive wasn’t making Jackson back down.

“Ja-- Jacks--” Isaac tried to push himself away from the wall, but he couldn’t get the leverage he
needed for his arms. Jackson was clearly intent on getting as close to Isaac as he possibly could. His forehead was pressed against the back of Isaac’s neck in a way that was almost sweet; it almost made Isaac reluctant to keep struggling. But he wasn’t used to being physically overpowered, and it was getting harder and harder to control his fight-or-flight response. Isaac had been spoiled by sleeping with so many humans; he’d forgotten what it was like to be with someone who was genuinely stronger than he was.

Maybe Jackson had forgotten that, too, though. Maybe he didn’t know his own strength. Jackson just wanted Isaac, and it wasn’t exactly like Isaac hadn’t encouraged him. He’d done the exact opposite. Jackson wasn’t trying to injure Isaac or anything. This wasn’t Jackson’s fault. It was Isaac’s fault. Of course it was Isaac’s fault. It was always Isaac’s fault…

“Whoa, hey,” said Jackson, suddenly pulling back and pressing Isaac’s shoulder to get him to turn away from the wall and face him. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Isaac lied weakly, sagging against the wall in relief and trying to smile like it wasn’t a big deal. It shouldn’t be a big deal. He cursed himself for how hard his heart was pounding. Jackson must have heard it, or smelled Isaac’s anxiety (or both). God, it was so stupid for Isaac to overreact like this. “I’m just not… I’m not really into pain.”

Jackson looked stricken. “Shit. Shit, Isaac, I didn’t mean… I wasn’t... Fuck.”

“Not your fault,” said Isaac. “I like rough. I do. Scrapes and bruises, totally fine.” He reached to wipe some of the blood off Jackson’s lip with his thumb. “It’s just a tricky line. Especially this close to the full moon.”

“It is my fault,” said Jackson, rubbing his mouth with the back of his hand, and Isaac somehow knew that Jackson wasn’t just talking about what had happened in the last five minutes. But Isaac didn’t want to talk about it, so he let it pass.

“How’re you feeling?” he said instead. He put his hand on Jackson’s arm, intent on keeping contact with him. The last thing Isaac wanted was for this to ruin the progress they’d been making, all over some stupid misunderstanding.

Jackson huffed out a humorless laugh. “Seriously? You’re asking me that?” He looked vaguely ill, with an unfocused quality to his eyes (which had thankfully reverted to their normal shade of baby blue). He made a small sound of frustrated confusion. “I hurt you and I didn’t care. I would’ve done worse if you hadn’t stopped--”

He was so lost and pitiful that Isaac couldn’t think of what else to do but pull him into a rough hug. Jackson’s face fell into the crook of Isaac’s neck. His fingernails (not claws) dug into Isaac’s back through his shirt, clinging to him.

“It’s okay. You’re okay.” Isaac ran his palm over Jackson’s back a few times before pulling away enough that he could see his face again. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m just… stressed out… and pissed off at nothing, and I know it’s nothing, but I can’t stop being pissed off. And fuck, I want you so bad right now I can’t even think.” Jackson paused to take several deep breaths. He gripped Isaac’s shirt and made another frustrated, anxious sound. “I hurt you and I didn’t care. I would’ve done worse if you hadn’t stopped--”

“Jackson.” Isaac cupped Jackson’s face with both hands and forced Jackson to look at him. “You stopped yourself.”
Jackson closed his eyes and bit his lip, looking like he wanted nothing so much as for that to be true. God, it had definitely been a rough few days for Jackson’s sense of guilt, hadn’t it? Isaac hadn’t exactly been qualified to talk Jackson through the emotional trauma of being the Kanima, and here he was trying to make him not blame himself for hurting someone else again.

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s just instinct.” Isaac pressed his forehead to Jackson’s. “Focus on me.”

Jackson took another deep, shuddering breath. As he let it out, a tiny fraction of the tension in his shoulders lifted.

“Good. Just remember, you’re in control.” After another deep breath. Jackson opened his eyes, meeting Isaac’s gaze, and gave him a shaky smile. “My hero.”

“Don’t make me bite you again,” said Jackson.

“As long as you use human teeth, I’m game.” Isaac smirked. And because he was completely shameless, he continued: “Gotta say, that started out pretty sexy. Wanna try again?”

“I… “Jackson looked torn, and Isaac could see the now familiar fear beginning to surface again. “You don’t… We don’t have to if you don’t want.”

“I do want,” Isaac insisted, because he very much did want. “You know I do.”

“Like this, though? After all that?” Jackson wiped self-consciously at the remaining blood around his own mouth, underlining his point. He pulled away from Isaac and headed for the kitchen sink.

Isaac followed him, frowning. “Is it just the moon, or is something else going on?”

“I dunno.” Isaac leaned his hip against the counter and shrugged. “But you can tell me if there is.” When Jackson didn’t say anything, Isaac decided to just bite the bullet. “If you don’t want to have sex with me, that’s okay. I’m not one of those guys who gets all pissed off when someone changes their mind about wanting to sleep with him, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Jackson sighed deeply, frustration still plain, and turned off the water. “That’s not… This shit is just... more complicated. Since I turned,” he said, still staring into the sink, hand on the faucet.

“Really? I’ve only done it as a werewolf. Is it different?”

“Everything’s different as a werewolf,” said Jackson, voice tinged with bitterness. Isaac wondered if there was a story there, but decided that now wasn’t the time to ask.

“So be different with me,” said Isaac, shrugging. “Different can be fun.”

Jackson looked up into Isaac’s eyes. “What if I hurt you again? I could--”

Isaac cut him off the same way Jackson had done to him earlier: with a kiss, this one gentle and slow and lingering. A moment later, Jackson’s still damp hands were tangled in Isaac’s shirt, trying to pull him closer, but Isaac pulled back just a bit to keep it almost painfully sweet and soft. It wasn’t how Isaac normally did things, but he knew what would happen if he matched Jackson’s energy now. Isaac stroked his fingers through Jackson’s hair, scraping blunt fingernails over his scalp. Jackson sighed contentedly through his nose. Isaac didn’t stop until he felt Jackson’s hands unknot from his shirt and drift down to settle on his hips, the tension easing out of him.
“I can keep you under control,” Isaac breathed against Jackson’s ear, and smiled when it sent a shiver through Jackson.

He kissed Jackson again and took a slow step back towards the bedroom. Jackson watched him for a few steps, fighting a last moment of indecision, before following him in. Once there, Jackson seemed much surer of himself. Isaac had decided to linger near the bed (rather than just stripping and splaying himself out on it) to see what Jackson would do, and it was only a few moments before Jackson was back in Isaac’s space, the fingers of one hand gripping Isaac’s hair, kissing him desperately.

Isaac was all too willing to let Jackson back him up against the edge of the bed. He fell to a sitting position on it and let Jackson stand between his knees so that Isaac was looking up (for once) into hungry, lust-dark eyes. Isaac wanted to say something, wanted to tell Jackson how fucking gorgeous he was or how badly Isaac wanted him, but he didn’t want to embarrass him or scare him off, or provoke the unpredictable wolf in him, for that matter.

For the same reason, Isaac kept his movements slow when he reached for the hem of Jackson’s T-shirt. Jackson watched Isaac’s hand in an almost detached way as Isaac slid the fabric up, revealing the smooth skin of Jackson’s stomach and the lower parts of his ribs—which was as high as Isaac got before remembering their arrangement of not doing anything to Jackson that Jackson didn’t do to Isaac first.

“Little help?” he said with a smile.

His words snapped Jackson out of it enough that Jackson nodded and pulled his T-shirt the rest of the way off. Isaac let his eyes rake appreciatively over the newly-revealed skin. True, he had gotten used to the sight (and feel) of a shirtless Jackson lately, but bare-chested spooning wasn’t the same as deliberately undressing someone with the intent of taking off a lot more than just his shirt.

The muscles in Jackson’s stomach jumped under Isaac’s fingertips when they made contact. Isaac murmured a quick apology and laid his palm flat over Jackson’s ribs. It was only then that he realized how hard Jackson’s heart was pounding; he’d been too preoccupied to listen properly for the sound of it before. An elevated pulse was pretty much expected in these kinds of situations (if you were doing things right), but now that Isaac was paying attention he noticed that a faint hint of anxiety was still souring Jackson’s scent. Isaac looked up again to find Jackson’s expression decidedly less confident.

“C’mer,” said Isaac. He took Jackson by the wrist and pulled him down onto the bed with him, shifting so that they could both lie down on their sides, facing each other. Isaac smoothed out some strands of Jackson’s hair that were out of place and tried to catch his eyes. There wasn’t fear there, exactly, but there was something…

Shit. How the hell could Isaac have been so oblivious? Isaac thought about how those first kisses had seemed to paralyze Jackson, how Jackson used to seem uncomfortable with Isaac touching him too much. Maybe it wasn’t just irritation or indifference that had made Jackson behave that way. Maybe he honestly just hadn’t known how to react.

Isaac had never really stopped to consider what they’d been doing lately--and what they were (Isaac hoped) about to do—from Jackson’s perspective. Compared with Isaac, Jackson didn’t actually have a ton of experience. He’d had a reputation back in Beacon Hills, but it had all been with girls, and mostly Lydia. During his single-minded lusting after Jackson, Isaac had neglected to remind himself of his own past experiences with first-time-with-a-guy partners.
Isaac slid his knuckles over Jackson’s bare arm slowly, back and forth, in what he hoped was a safe, soothing contact.

“Okay,” he said as he tried to think how to phrase what he was thinking in a way that wouldn’t be completely awkward. “I’m just gonna go ahead and ask the obvious question: Is this weird because I’m a guy?”

“No,” Jackson said quickly, eyes darting away from Isaac’s, but then he amended: “Okay, a little, I guess. Not weird, just… new.”

“Well, people always say it’s good to do new things, right?” said Isaac, smiling to try to lighten the mood.

Jackson didn’t return the smile, though. His pulse was still racing.

“Okay,” said Isaac, deciding to try a different tack. “Remember when I said sex for me is like how you said getting drunk was for you?”

Jackson nodded, regarding Isaac warily.

“It’s the most like that when someone else is in control,” said Isaac. “No thinking. Just feeling.”

Jackson considered this, but said nothing.

“Let me keep you under control,” said Isaac. “You won’t hurt me. I won’t hurt you.”

Jackson stayed silent.

“Hey,” said Isaac, keeping his voice soft, “Do you trust me?”

“Sometimes,” said Jackson, and Isaac nearly laughed.

Instead, he rolled his eyes. “Thanks for being honest.”

The corner of Jackson’s mouth twitched up, though he was clearly still nervous.

“I’ll show you what to do,” Isaac said earnestly. “And if you don’t want to do something, tell me and we won’t.”

Jackson’s pulse began to slow perceptibly as Isaac ran his palm smoothly up and down his back.

“Worst case scenario, you can flip me over and have your way with me, right?” Isaac lifted Jackson’s chin, caught his eyes, and gave him what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

Finally, Jackson nodded his agreement. The scent of anxiety faded, replaced by the lust reflected in his wide-pupiled eyes.

“There we go,” said Isaac. Isaac tangled his fingers in Jackson’s short, fluffy locks, gripping his hair with a slight tug. Jackson inhaled sharply, eyes sliding shut. “Now, what were you saying about how bad you want me?”

“I can’t even think,” was all Jackson seemed able to say.

“Good,” said Isaac. “Don’t think.”

The combination of hunger and surrender in Jackson’s next kiss made Isaac certain: it had already
been worth the wait.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slightly late post! Both of us have been really busy lately and might continue to be for a little while, but hopefully we'll still be able to post once a week. In case you haven't seen it, we've started posting a short multi-part side story for this fic about Hannah and Zach! No new chapter this week, but there will be another one within a few weeks. It's not in any way essential for you to read it in order to keep up with the fic, but if you are interested in Zach/Hannah (Zanna), we think you'll really enjoy it. It's called The Strength of the Wolf: Star-Crossed, and Part I has been posted here. We've already had some wonderful responses, so thank you for that! And thanks to all of you for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate every one!

Savenna Cloverunner
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: CRASH INTO ME (Dave Matthews Band)

Touch your lips just so I know;
in your eyes, love, it glows so.
I'm bare-boned and crazy for you
when you come crash
into me, baby,
and I come into you
in a boy's dream.

They didn’t have much time afterward before sunset, but Isaac savored it for as long as he could. He and Jackson were both a little sticky and sweaty (despite the flat being as cold as usual) and just generally kind of gross, but Isaac had experienced a lot worse. Besides, it was worth it to have Jackson lying peacefully in his arms, moon-related energy temporarily abated, pulse and breath
Isaac found that he was completely relaxed, too--more so than he’d been in a very long time. And not just because he’d finally had sex for the first time in weeks, but because he’d had sex with Jackson. And it had been fantastic. Isaac had tried to strike a balance between passionate and playful, mixing in enough roughness to sate Jackson’s wolf without scaring him or risking Isaac’s safety. The result had been unpredictable and fun and very, very hot.

It had been kind of strange, having sex with someone he knew that well. There was still a lot Isaac didn’t know about Jackson, of course, but he hadn’t been this connected to a partner since Erica. It wasn’t something as sappy or serious as love; Isaac was sure of that. But there was a familiarity and a specific dynamic that made it easier, more comfortable, and yet somehow more exciting at the same time. Getting to know someone on a completely different level; learning things about them almost no one else knew. Finding new pieces of the puzzle.

This Jackson wasn’t the Jackson Isaac had grown up with, and Isaac wasn’t the same person now, either. Like Jackson had said, it was just… new.

And Isaac liked new.

“That was good,” Isaac murmured near Jackson’s ear after a few minutes of lying there quietly with him. ‘Good’ didn’t quite cover it, but it was a start.

“Yeah,” said Jackson, tone tinged slightly with embarrassment.

“Didn’t expect to like it?”

Jackson shrugged noncommittally, which made Isaac chuckle. Jackson had definitely liked it, and they both knew it.

“Glad I let you be on top?” Isaac teased.

This prompted an affronted sound from Jackson, and Isaac suddenly found that he’d been flipped onto his back, with Jackson straddling him, pinning his wrists to the bed.

“Let me?” said Jackson, eyebrow arched, expression challenging.

“Point taken,” said Isaac, grinning up at Jackson.

“You’re lucky I have to go,” said Jackson with a playful warning. He let Isaac’s wrists go.

Isaac shook his head and dragged Jackson down for a deep kiss.

“Unlucky. Very unlucky. I’m being cockblocked by the friggin’ moon.”

Isaac’s own regret that they didn’t have time for more was mirrored in Jackson’s eyes. Still, Jackson dragged himself out of bed and headed for the shower. Isaac decided to be proactive and stripped the sheets (only struggling with one or two of the buttons on the duvet cover, which Isaac still didn’t quite understand). He got them into the washing machine before Jackson was done showering--because he was Jackson, so the moon would be halfway up before he got out of there unless Isaac made him...

Isaac knocked on the bathroom door before opening it a crack to speak through; running water was a challenge for werewolf hearing.
“I get that you shouldn’t go over there smelling like an omega, but if you keep this up, you’re not gonna make it there at all. If your alpha gets pissy with me because you’re jacking off in there or something, I’m blaming you.”

“Jealous I get to touch myself in the warm, soapy water and you don’t?”

Jackson was quickly becoming far too good at teasing, Isaac decided. He found himself unconsciously biting his own lip as he imagined all the fun things they could do if Jackson didn’t have to leave. It had been a long time since Isaac had had shower sex...

“Well I am now,” Isaac groaned. “Seriously, though. Moon’s coming up.”

“I know, I know,” Jackson said dismissively. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Don’t make me come in there after you,” Isaac said, only half joking, then closed the bathroom door again.

True to his word, Jackson shut off the water pretty soon after that. Isaac couldn’t resist stealing another kiss from Jackson before heading into the bathroom for his own shower. Unable to help picturing Jackson being in there before him, Isaac resolved that shower sex was definitely on the list of things to do with Jackson in the near future.

About halfway through his shower, Isaac thought he heard voices coming from outside the door, but with the water running it was hard to tell. Then it got quiet again and Isaac wondered if it might have been coming from outside the flat or if someone had been at the front door.

Isaac got his answer when he came out of the bathroom and caught Zach’s scent. He resisted the very strong urge to annoy Zach by greeting him in just a towel, and instead threw on some clothes before going into the living room. He found Zach sitting on the couch surfing Jackson’s Netflix queue. With a crossbow lying on the cushion next to him.

“Let me guess,” said Zach without looking away from the TV screen. “Jack forgot to tell you he asked me to keep an eye on you?”

Isaac rolled his eyes. If Isaac knew Jackson, Jackson hadn’t ‘forgotten’ to tell him Zach was coming over. Jackson had probably known that if he’d told Isaac about it, Isaac would’ve objected. Now Isaac had no choice but to accept it.

He looked around reflexively, but he could already tell that Jackson wasn’t in the flat anymore. He must’ve left when Zach had arrived. That would explain the conversation Isaac had thought he’d heard while he’d been in the shower. The fact that Jackson hadn’t even bothered to say goodbye made Isaac frown. Jackson had been running late, but he still could’ve shouted something through the door.

Despite his disappointment about Jackson, though, Isaac was still happy to see Zach.

“I always wanted a hot babysitter,” said Isaac.

Zach turned to him and picked up the crossbow, arching one eyebrow as if to say, ‘Are we going to have a problem?’

Isaac smirked. At least this full moon wouldn’t be boring.

“We were beginning to worry about you,” said Josie with a smile when she greeted Jackson at the
“Sorry,” said Jackson. He automatically ducked his head to his alpha as a sign of contrition.

“It’s all right,” she said, and ruffled his hair affectionately. For obvious reasons, Jackson felt most wolfish on full moons, so the approval and contact were particularly satisfying.

“So where’s your inferior half tonight?” Josie asked as she led the way down to the basement.

Jackson ignored Josie’s insinuation about Isaac’s relationship to him. “At my flat. With, uh… with Zach.”

That made Josie pause. She turned to regard Jackson intently. “How’s Isaac’s control?”

“Perfect,” Jackson said honestly, not entirely able to keep a note of jealousy out of his tone. “And Zach has tranqs and chains and everything, just in case.”

She seemed to consider that for a long moment before letting it pass and continuing down the stairs.

“I would’ve invited him to spend the full moon here,” said Josie, “but I wasn’t sure either of you would want that.”

“Who cares what they want?” said Rodger, who was already waiting for them in the basement. “I want to meet this Isaac I’ve heard so little about.”

“You guys haven’t… mentioned him to anyone else, have you?” Jackson asked self-consciously.

“Please, Jack,” Josie scoffed. “Of course we haven’t.”

“Because everyone already knows,” said Rodger. He and Josie shared a smirk, and Jackson wondered if there were any deep, dark holes nearby that he could hide in. It was embarrassing enough that he’d been caught lying about Isaac, but to know that he might as well not have bothered since the whole pack knew anyway made it a thousand times worse. Still, he knew Josie had let him (and Isaac) off a lot easier than other alphas would’ve, so he’d just have to deal with it and be grateful.

Jackson sat down on the couch while Rodger sat in a chair facing him like last time, but for once it all felt unnecessary. Jackson was still full of energy, sure, but even despite his embarrassment, he didn’t feel like the wolf was going to leap out from beneath his skin. It had finally gotten to play with Isaac’s wolf, in a way, and now it seemed content to leave Jackson alone for the most part.

“How’s your wild wolf tonight?” said Rodger.

Jackson thought about the question for a moment before answering.

“Tame.”

Rodger chuckled. “Only dogs are tame, Jack. Wolves only trick you into believing they can be.”

“Then he’s tricky tonight,” Jackson countered.

“You have a hold on him, then?” said Rodger.

“I think so,” said Jackson. He considered how he felt, taking a few deep breaths as he eased himself back into the couch. Rodger watched him warily, but made no move to stop him.
Actually, Jackson had felt surprisingly normal since leaving his flat. He did feel a little bad about not saying goodbye to Isaac, but he’d already been running late, and once Zach had shown up…

Well, Jackson wasn’t sure he was ready for Zach to know just exactly how far things had gone with Isaac, and there was no way Isaac would’ve let Jackson leave without doing something.

Now that he was thinking about how easy maintaining control seemed now, Jackson felt an unexpected spike of aggression flare up within him, and he could tell by Rodger’s reaction that his eyes had glowed. But Jackson took a few deep, calming breaths, and his eyes dimmed again before Rodger could even stand up to help.

“I got it,” Jackson insisted.

He closed his eyes and relaxed his muscles as much as he could, breathing steadily and reciting the mantra in his head. He knew the words so well by now, he hardly noticed when his thoughts began to wander.

What Jackson did notice was how the anger that he associated with being a werewolf, which had basically consumed him ever since he’d been stupid enough to ask for the Bite—anger that the full moons magnified by a thousand—didn’t seem that important anymore. Like a grudge that he’d held so long, he didn’t even remember how it had started. It was still there, but just… quiet.

Everything had been so loud in Jackson’s life for the past year, he almost didn’t remember what quiet was like. The quiet made Jackson feel lighter, less tense.

With his eyes closed, Jackson could almost forget that he was sitting on a couch in a basement being babysat in case he lost control of himself. Jackson could’ve been sitting on his own couch at home, Isaac cooking in the kitchen or getting ready to watch an episode of one of those quiz shows he was obsessed with. Like it was any other night.

Unlike on the last full moon, when Isaac popped into his head now Jackson didn’t feel angry or irritated. In fact, he felt quite the opposite. Thinking about Isaac—Isaac’s low voice whispering in his ear, Isaac’s warm hands on his skin, Isaac’s crooked, suggestive smile—had stressed Jackson out so much earlier, but now his wolf was calm. Pleased, even.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that they’d had sex. Obviously that was going to mean that things would be different between them now, even if Jackson didn’t really want to think about how they would be different, or what it meant, or the fact that he was already looking forward to next time…

Honestly, the fact that they’d been able to have sex at all was the most surprising part of the situation to Jackson, considering that his previous attempts after he’d arrived in London had mostly been disasters. Not to mention how out of control Jackson had been when he had shown up at the flat earlier that day. Only someone as crazy and sex-obsessed as Isaac would’ve rolled those dice, Jackson thought with a small smile.

I can keep you under control, Isaac had said earlier. And he’d done it. He had made it seem so easy, like he could communicate with and handle the wolf inside Jackson and not just the nervous, self-conscious human part of Jackson: the Jackson who had never slept with a guy before and had worried that it would be weird or that he’d be bad at it or that it would all just go horribly wrong and Isaac would be disappointed. But it hadn’t been weird or awkward. It had been, well, good. Isaac had made it work. Isaac had kept Jackson calm. Isaac had--.

Realization struck Jackson like a bolt of lightning.
Isaac had become Jackson’s anchor. He had kept Jackson grounded right before the full moon. Stealthily, unintentionally, unknowingly, Isaac had insinuated himself into Jackson’s subconscious. He had met Jackson’s wolf and dominated it.

“You all right, Jack?”

“Huh?” said Jackson. Rodger had been snapping his fingers in front of Jackson’s face to get his attention. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You’re doing really well,” said Josie. “Do you think you’d be all right if I let you go upstairs?”

Excitement and pride surged in Jackson at the suggestion, even as his mind was still reeling from his epiphany. The invitation to go upstairs meant that Josie was pleased with Jackson’s level of control, that she could finally trust him around the rest of the pack. Jackson nodded eagerly, which made both Josie and Rodger laugh.

“Come on, then.” Josie motioned Jackson toward the stairs and followed him up. Jackson heard her tell Rodger to stay close to Jackson, but it didn’t bother him. He understood that Josie needed to take precautions for the safety of the pack, and somehow he knew that Rodger wouldn’t have to intervene. He’d be okay now that he had a strong anchor. No matter what it meant that it was Isaac, it would help him get through the night, and that had been his goal on every full moon: just get through the night. He’d deal with the rest later.

For the first time, Jackson got to spend the night of the full moon in the parlor with some of his packmates. Eva, Ada, and Will were in a separate room with the twins. Helen was in her and Will’s room as a special precaution since she was human, and Dominic was up in the loft on his own. But Sarah smiled when they entered the parlor, and Bronagh (in wolf form, as usual) perked her ears up and emitted a happy whine.

Sarah got up and hugged Jackson. She kissed him on the cheek before stepping back and assessing him with a proud smile. “Congratulations, darling.”

“Surprised to see you here,” said Jackson. “Don’t you have a show tonight?”

“We’re still in rehearsals at the moment,” said Sarah. “I said I wasn’t feeling well. Jeremy—the director—wasn’t pleased, of course, since we open this week, but God knows my understudy can use the practice. Her blocking is shamefully shoddy. It’ll do her a world of good to work on it without me there pointing out her mistakes, I’m sure. Jeremy gets cross with me when I do it, but it’s impossible to just stand there and watch her blundering about like she’s in her first year of drama school.”

Jackson had to stifle a laugh. Sarah was every bit the successful actress: fantastically posh, from her flawless upper-class London accent down to every fashion accessory. Like Zach, she had an undeniable magnetism, but in a very different way. She was elegantly beautiful where her brother was ethereally pretty, poised where he had attitude, unfailingly confident where he was sometimes self-conscious, and she was certainly much more social. She was also taller than him, which was a point of endless annoyance for Zach. She had her mother’s figure and striking features (Helen had been a fashion model before motherhood) and Will’s hypnotic hazel eyes. She was a force to be reckoned with.

“And we’re all very honored to have the esteemed Dame Sarah Thompson with us tonight,” said Rodger.

“You tease, Rodger, but I do hope to see you at the ceremony when I graciously accept my
“Knighthood. Some things are simply inevitable.”

Sarah was twenty-three and spoke like she was three times that.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, love,” said Rodger. He flopped down on the couch that Sarah had just vacated and beckoned her to come back. She did so happily, leaving space on her other side for Jackson. Josie took a nearby chair and Bronagh settled at Rodger’s feet.

Jackson sat down next to Sarah, but kept a small distance between them because he hadn’t spent nearly as much time with her as some of the other pack members. However, she tsked and admonished Jackson with a “Don’t be silly, darling” before pulling him close against her side, a slender arm draped around his shoulders.

“And how is my charmingly bookish brother?” she said to Jackson. “I think you may see more of him these days than I do.”

Jackson winced internally. Zach had indeed been spending a lot of time with Jackson lately. He had also happened to be spending it with Isaac and/or Hannah.

“Zach’s all right,” said Jackson. “Studies a lot, so he likes to have a drink with me sometimes.”

Sarah arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow at him. “Am I to believe that our dear Zachary buys alcohol for a minor, or are we still pretending that we don’t all know about the identification card stating your age as nineteen?”

Both Rodger and Josie laughed at that, which made Jackson flush. He hadn’t exactly been stealthy about the fact that he went to pubs and clubs, but he tried not to talk about it when the ‘adults’ in his pack were around.

“Shall we hand the little miscreant over to the police, then, Josie?” Rodger teased.

Josie made a show of pretending to think the matter over, tapping her finger against her lips.

“I think I’ll let it pass,” she said. “Seeing as keeping a wolf in prison on a full moon is a nasty business.”

Though it was a joke, Jackson shuddered at the thought. He had never considered what would happen if a werewolf were locked up with unsuspecting humans on a full moon…

“Hush, you’ll frighten him,” said Sarah, smoothing Jackson’s hair down. “How is my other little brother, then?”

Jackson always felt a small surge of pride whenever one of his ‘siblings’ reaffirmed their connection. After longing for lost family members for most of his life, these bonds were important to Jackson. More so than he liked to let on.

“Not bad,” said Jackson. “I think my marks are better this term, but who knows.”

“You make it sound like our schools are very complicated,” said Josie.

“They are!” said Jackson, to which the other three laughed. Even Bronagh-the-wolf made an amused sound.

“I don’t suppose you’ll reveal the identity of the wolf whose scent you’ve got hanging about you?” Sarah said slyly.
Jackson blushed furiously, even as he saw Josie shoot Sarah a sharp look. Apparently the pack had come to some kind of agreement that they weren’t going to pry into Jackson’s personal life. It was very much like Sarah to ignore that kind of order. Jackson was kicking himself internally for not doing enough to wash Isaac’s scent off himself consistently. Maybe that was how the pack had figured it out.

“Scold me if you like, Josie,” said Sarah. “I’m only showing an interest in our brother’s well-being.”

“Let it alone, Sarah,” Rodger said gently.

“It’s okay,” said Jackson. There was no point denying it to Sarah, really. If Josie and Rodger already knew and the rest of the pack suspected, Jackson would only make things more complicated by being mysterious about it. “He’s, uh, a friend from the States. Josie said he could stay in Holborn for a couple weeks.”

“And where is this friend right now? It’s the full moon, after all,” said Sarah. Her fingers had slid into the hair at the back of Jackson’s head, long nails scratching pleasantly against his scalp; she was trying to show him with an affectionate gesture that she wasn’t being judgmental or trying to make Jackson uncomfortable.

“At mine,” said Jackson, then hesitated before adding, “with Zach.” He winced internally, worried Sarah would be upset with Jackson for leaving her brother alone with a werewolf on a full moon.

But Sarah just laughed: a low, musical sound. “Well, I pity your friend if he steps a toe out of line, then. We all know how well Zach’s been trained.”

There was a sound of assent from Josie and a chuckle from Rodger at that, and Jackson wondered just what exactly Zach’s ‘training’ had entailed. Now that he thought about it, though, it would make sense that someone who was growing up in a house full of werewolves would have to be taught what to do if one of them lost control.

“In any case, he’s a lucky wolf,” said Sarah, and gave Jackson’s shoulder a squeeze.

And that was the end of that part of the conversation. The four of them chatted for a while. Ada came upstairs soon thereafter, saying that Will and Eva had the twins under control. Jackson listened while the others talked, their nearness and their voices soothing both his wolf and human sides. He didn’t realize he’d dozed off until Sarah was extricating herself from the couch, careful not to jostle Jackson more than was necessary. He was dimly aware of Rodger helping to shift him so that Jackson’s head was on Rodger’s lap. Jackson fell back asleep to Rodger, Josie, and Ada talking in hushed tones and Rodger’s hand resting comfortably on his shoulder.

“Are those for me?” said Isaac, eyeing the heavy chains Zach was hauling out of Jackson’s closet.

They had spent half an hour arguing over what to order for takeaway, but Zach had won out in the end. Now they were waiting for their Chinese food to be delivered.

“Not if you’re a good boy,” Zach said cheerfully. “Can you be a good boy, Isaac?”

“There are sooo many ways I could respond to that…”

“But you won’t,” warned Zach.

“I won’t,” Isaac agreed. “I’ll be good.”
“But if you’re not,” said Zach as he reached into a smaller bag he had brought with him, “I’ve got these.”

Zach pulled out half a dozen syringes filled with a liquid that was most likely wolfsbane, judging by the color and smell. He also still had the crossbow, which was clearly mostly for effect, and Isaac was starting to suspect who he’d gotten it from.

“If you so much as grow a few extra whiskers, you’ll be drugged and chained up,” Zach said, tone firm, “and not in the fun way.”

Isaac bit back a suggestive comment and nodded his understanding. It wouldn’t do him any good to piss Zach off, especially this early in the night.

“You don’t have to worry,” said Isaac as Zach dragged the supplies back over to the couch and sat down again. Isaac joined him. “I’m good at this. Really good. And I feel better than usual tonight.”

“Why? Because you’ve finally taken pity on poor Jack and shagged the living daylights out of him?” said Zach, deadpan.

If Isaac had been anyone else, he might’ve blushed. “Hey, I’ve been trying for weeks. He’s the one who finally gave in to my many, many charms.”

Zach rolled his gorgeous eyes.

“How’d you know?” said Isaac.

“Firstly,” said Zach, “you don’t have to be a werewolf to smell sex in a flat with all its windows shut. Secondly, Jack is never that calm on the day of a full moon. He’s rarely calm at all, come to that. Amazing what diffusing months of sexual frustration will do for a person’s demeanor.”

“Speaking from experience?” said Isaac, because that opening was too perfect to be ignored.

Zach’s blushing was made even more adorable by the fact that Zach was clearly annoyed by the fact that he was blushing. He ignored Isaac’s comment.

“So where’d you get the crossbow?” Isaac continued, though he knew the answer now.

“Borrowed it from a mutual acquaintance.”

“I didn’t realize you and Tobias were that close,” Isaac teased.

“Oh yes, we’re practically best mates now,” Zach said sarcastically. In retrospect, Isaac kind of regretted bringing Tobias up.

“Seriously, though,” said Isaac. “I’m glad that’s working. You and Hannah.”

“Yeah she’s… Well, she’s quite something.” Zach flushed again and looked away.

“Wow, you really like her,” said Isaac, grinning.

“So what if I do?”

“Nothing, it’s just cute is all.”

“Cute.” Zach snorted. “I’m glad someone is enjoying this.”
“You’re not enjoying getting attention from a gorgeous girl?”

“I’m enjoying the attention,” said Zach, but he was frowning now. “But do you enjoy wanting things you can’t have?”

“No, I guess not,” said Isaac. “But what does that have to do with Hannah? She likes you, right?”

Instead of answering, Zach made a frustrated sound and said, “Why did she have to be a hunter?”

“It’s part of what makes her so great,” said Isaac. He still couldn’t understand why this was such a big deal. As far as Isaac was concerned, Hannah’s family was seriously overreacting. Besides, why should either of them care what their families thought anyway? They were adults.

“I know,” Zach said miserably. “But of all the people in London… *Bristow’s daughter*. It’s like some cruel twist of fate.”

So Zach not only knew that Hannah was a hunter now, but that she was part of James’s family. Isaac wondered whether Hannah had told him, or if he had just figured it out on his own. He was a pretty observant guy, after all.

“If you’d known who she was from the beginning, would you have left her alone?”

Zach shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. Since I first saw her in the cafe, I… I can’t explain it.”

“*Le coup de foudre*,” said Isaac, grinning. He hadn’t seen someone this smitten in a long time, and it seemed silly to Isaac that Zach would fight it.


“Do you think that’s what it is?” Isaac didn’t believe in love at first sight, but then, he didn’t really believe in love--at least not in the way most people seemed to--so it was all kind of amusing.

“Maybe,” said Zach. But unlike Isaac, Zach was deadly serious. “It would be kind of a relief if it was.”

“Why?”

“Because it would be easier.”

“Easier than what?” Isaac was completely lost now.

Zach sighed deeply. “A mate bond.”

“A mate bond,” Isaac repeated dumbly. He’d never heard of that before, and it sounded kind of ridiculous, but he didn’t dare laugh considering the graveness of Zach’s expression. “What’s that?”

“It’s something some werewolves can feel for another person,” said Zach. “In my case, it would be my wolf blood showing itself in essentially the worst possible way.”

“What’s so horrible about it?”

“Most werewolves--‘real’ werewolves,” Zach amended, “the ones who can transform--think that trying to control the wolf is the hardest part of having abilities. Hunters probably think that, too. But the transformation is just a physical manifestation of animal survival instinct: fear, rage, aggression. Those feelings can be conquered with practice. But…”
Zach broke off, determinedly looking anywhere but at Isaac now. He paused for a few seconds before he continued.

“There’s no mantra to control love,” said Zach. “There’s no way to overcome pack loyalty or a parent’s protectiveness of their pups. Those instincts run deeper. Humans have bred aggression out of some dogs, but the rest is still there. And it’s like that for us.”

“Why’s that a bad thing, though?” said Isaac.

“There are a million songs and poems and stories about how love is a double-edged sword, right?” said Zach. “Incredible when you have it, excruciating when you don’t. So a mate bond can be wonderful. If it’s returned. If it’s not, well. Dulling that metaphorical love-sword or whatever you’d like to call it is hard, to say the least. Everyone knows that. Dulling a ‘sword’ from a mate bond is harder. Much harder.”

“So what you’re saying is…”

“If that’s what I’m feeling?” Zach finally met Isaac’s eyes again, and there was fear in them when he did. “I’m fucked.”

Isaac frowned, trying to process. He still didn’t really see why Zach was so worried. Hannah liked him, right? There was no reason for him to worry this early on that it wasn’t going to work out. Besides, Hannah was obviously crazy about Zach.

“What if she feels the same way?”

“Well, she can’t feel the same way,” said Zach. “It is literally not possible. She doesn’t have wolf blood. If she falls in love with me—which is a big ‘if,’ mind—that could be enough. Like my mum and dad. But I think I might scare her off if she finds out that something in my DNA is trying to convince me that she’s my bloody soulmate.”

“What happens to you if…?”

“If she doesn’t fall in love with me and agree to stay with me for the rest of my life?” Zach shook his head. “You’d be better off asking Josie about that.”

“Why Josie?”

Zach sighed deeply. “Unrequited mate bond. That’s why she left her old pack. The way I’ve been told, she was eighteen, and he was in love with someone else. I think I was about ten when she found my dad—he was Alpha then—and asked if she could stay. He let the pack vote on it, and my dad, Rodge, and Bronagh explained mate bonds to the rest of us. Sarah and I were too young to vote, but we were allowed to attend the pack meeting.”

There was a pause wherein Zach sighed again and rubbed at his face, looking weary, sad, and still a little scared.

“She didn’t smile for over a year,” said Zach. “That’s not an exaggeration. Her mouth arced, but it never reached her eyes. Her voice sounded… hollow. She’s so different now, it doesn’t quite feel real when I remember it. And I was young, so maybe it hit me harder, but... seeing how sad she was, it sort of made me think that an unrequited mate bond would be one of the worst things that could happen to a person.”

Isaac said nothing. If all of that was true, then he could see why Zach would be scared. Isaac couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to be tied to someone like that, but it didn’t sound very
appealing, whether they felt it too or not.

“It made her stronger. I’m certain it’s why she’s Alpha now. But it cost her a lot.” Zach sniffed once and wiped at the corner of his eye hastily. His heart was racing and Isaac could actually smell a faint hint of fear now. But then Zach’s tone shifted back to normal and he smiled. “So. Let’s hope for boring old love-at-first-sight, yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Isaac, eager to lighten the mood. “I mean, it’s probably way too soon to be jumping to conclusions, right?”

“Right,” said Zach. “Absolutely.”

“So have you slept together yet?”

Isaac could tell instantly from Zach’s reaction that they had. He smirked wickedly.

“You sly half-wolf.”

“Now hang on,” said Zach, “it was only sleeping.”

“Uh-huh.” Isaac wasn’t convinced.

“And some kissing,” Zach added after a moment, flushing again. “A lot of kissing.”

Isaac’s smirk grew into a grin. “I guess everybody’s had a busy weekend.”

Zach pointedly ignored the comment in favor of stretching out on the couch, resting his legs on Isaac’s lap.

“I thought you didn’t like me touching you,” said Isaac, then added, “When you’re sober, anyway.”

“You’re not touching me,” said Zach. “I’m touching you.”

Isaac snorted. “Semantics.”

Zach shrugged. “I know you better now. And you smell like Jack. It helps.”

“You’re not a werewolf,” said Isaac. “How do you know what I smell like?”

“Humans still have noses, idiot,” said Zach. “I thought I made that point with the whole sex-smell thing. Christ, what do they teach you about Biology in America? Do you even remember being human?”

Isaac smiled to himself, and Zach rolled his eyes. “You’re thinking about how you smell like Jack right now, aren’t you? You two are sickeningly adorable. Honestly, I’m glad the takeaway’s not here yet, because I’ve paid good money for it and I’d hate to see it end up in the toilet before I’ve had the chance to digest.”

“It’s not like we’re dating,” said Isaac. He and Jackson were a lot of things, but he would not describe their situation as adorable.

“You don’t need to date,” said Zach. “You’ve skipped dating and moved in together.”

“That’s not what this is.”
“Really? You sleep in his bed, you eat meals together, you spend most of your spare time with him, and now you’re shagging him. What exactly would you call it?”

Isaac searched his mind for a moment, but found that it came up blank. He hadn’t realized that the question was so complicated.

It looked like Zach might be about to say something, but then the doorbell rang.

“Food’s here,” Isaac said quickly, springing to his feet despite Zach’s protests as he lost his footrest.

Isaac could only hope that dinner would prove distracting enough that Zach would drop the conversation.

Jackson felt a lot better than he ever had after a full moon. Even though it was barely light out, he felt awake and happy to be on his way home. He’d brought his school things with him to the den and he was ready to go, but he had a bit of extra time, so he figured he might as well swing by his flat before school and check that Isaac and Zach hadn’t killed each other.

Apparently Jackson had had no reason to worry. He opened the door to find the two of them curled up on the couch together head-to-foot, covered in the duvet and surrounded by empty and half-empty takeaway containers. Zach was snoring loudly, mouth open. Isaac had his face hidden beneath the duvet.

And suddenly it didn’t seem to matter that Zach was there. Jackson felt an impulse and he followed it: he set his stuff on the table, knelt next to the couch, and pulled the duvet away from Isaac’s face. Isaac made a sound of protest as the light reached his eyes, but his attitude changed when Jackson kissed him.

The kiss was long and distracting enough that Jackson didn’t notice that Zach had stopped snoring until--

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Zach sleepily from the other side of the couch.

Jackson flipped him off--two-finger Brit style--without even breaking the kiss.

From the sound and feel of it (Jackson was still preoccupied by Isaac’s mouth), Zach had escaped from Isaac’s legs and stumbled off the couch.

“I think I’ll leave while everyone’s clothing is still on,” said Zach, gathering up his stuff.

“I have to get to class anyway.” Jackson kissed Isaac once more and then stood up.

“Hey! Less stopping, more kissing!” demanded Isaac.

“I have to get to school,” Jackson insisted.

“You’re seriously going to tease me like that and then just leave?” Of course Isaac would act like Jackson didn’t want to stay and keep going just as much as Isaac did.

“You did it to me for weeks.”

“It’s not the same!”

“I’m late,” said Jackson, holding the door open for Zach, who gave Isaac a vague goodbye wave.
before ducking out. “See you tonight.”

“You are not late!” Isaac shouted just as the door shut behind Jackson.

It was extremely satisfying to get the last word for once.

Chapter End Notes

Awww, so much cute in this chapter! A nice change, huh? If you're disappointed about the smut, you must remember that this fic is rated Mature, not Explicit, so there's certain content we're not going to show. In case you haven't seen it, we've started posting a short multi-part side story for this fic about Hannah and Zach! Still no new chapter, but there will be another one within a few weeks (as it becomes concurrent with the main storyline). It's not in any way essential for you to read it in order to keep up with this fic, but if you are interested in Zach/Hannah (Zanna), we think you'll really enjoy it. It's called *The Strength of the Wolf: Star-Crossed*, and Part I has been posted [here](#). We've had some wonderful responses, so thank you for that! And thanks to all of you for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate every one!
Why Can't You Behave?

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: WHY CAN'T YOU BEHAVE (Kiss Me Kate)

After all the things you told me
and the promises that you gave,
oh, why can’t you behave?

That day, Jackson had an entirely different reason to be distracted at school. He couldn’t stop thinking about Isaac. Or rather, he couldn’t stop thinking about having sex with Isaac, and how he really wanted to do it again. As soon as possible. It was like discovering sex all over again; it had been easy to ignore when it wasn’t something he could have, but now that it was an option, it was all Jackson wanted, and he wanted it bad.

Usually the day after the full moon, Jackson was exhausted from trying to keep his wolf in check and still too on edge to feel comfortable being around so many weak, defenseless humans. The fact
that this time he was just dealing with regular old hormones was almost a relief. Or, it would have been if it hadn’t been so distracting. Not that there weren’t still some residual post-full-moon side effects--misjudging his own strength, being overly irritable and antisocial toward humans--but Jackson got through the day without any major issues, so he called it a victory.

But his instincts dialed up again when, before he had even made it to the front gate of the school, Jackson recognized what was now a very familiar (and very welcome) scent. Jackson fixed his face in a scowl even as his pulse sped up in excitement when he saw that Isaac was waiting for him at the gate.

“What the hell, man?” Jackson hissed under his breath as he headed towards Isaac. “What happened to not being out alone in our territory?”

“Oops.” Isaac shrugged. “Guess I forgot. But it’s fine now that you’re here, right? Thought you might get lonely on your long walk home.”

Jackson shot Isaac a half-hearted glare as he walked past Isaac without even slowing down. Isaac caught up after a few seconds and fell into step beside him.

“How was school?” Isaac asked, using that tone of voice he seemed to think sounded innocent but really just made him seem like he wanted something.

“Fine,” said Jackson shortly. But Jackson wasn’t really pissed off, he realized pretty quickly; he was worried Isaac was going to try something when they were within sight of his schoolmates.

Actually, if he were really honest with himself, Jackson wasn’t worried, either. He was turned on. Just seeing Isaac after thinking about him like that all day, after wanting him all day… It was all Jackson could do to keep himself from pinning Isaac to the nearby fence and--

Jackson quickly cut off that train of thought and determinedly searched for something else, anything else, to focus on before Isaac could catch the scent of his arousal. But when Jackson glanced at Isaac out of the corner of his eye, Isaac was smirking, which did not make Jackson hopeful that he’d succeeded. Unfortunately, smirking was kind of Isaac’s default face setting. And of course now Jackson was thinking about Isaac’s mouth, which really wasn’t helping his resolve not to pin Isaac to a fence--well, now the nearest surface was a wall, but the point still stood--and say fuck all to whether someone saw.

“Your hair’s a mess today,” said Isaac. “Want me to fix it for you?”

No. Nope. No way. Jackson had no intention of letting Isaac ‘fix’ anything for him while they were in public, especially when they were still so close to his school. Jackson wasn’t particularly bothered by the idea of PDA--it or at least, it certainly hadn’t bothered him back in Beacon Hills--but so far, he’d been doing a good job of flying under the radar with his London classmates. The last thing he needed was for the thing that caught their attention to be seeing him be too friendly with someone (especially a guy, sad to say).

“Hands off, Lahey,” Jackson muttered, looking straight ahead again and digging his own hands deeper into his pockets. When had it gotten so cold again? The weather had been turning around lately. It was practically spring, after all. Soon they probably wouldn’t need the extra blanket at all. Fuck, even thinking about the weather made Jackson think about Isaac.

But despite Isaac doing as Jackson had told him and keeping his hands out of Jackson’s space, Jackson couldn’t help but feel like Isaac was just biding his time, waiting to try something. Or was Jackson just on edge because the part of him that had craved Isaac all day wanted Isaac to try
Jackson cursed internally because he could feel himself blushing again, and it was so stupid and embarrassing and he hated that Isaac could throw him off balance so easily.

He found himself unconsciously walking faster, speeding up his steps, trying to get home as quickly as he could without running. Isaac matched him step for step. Even after Jackson had noticed what he was doing, he didn’t try to slow down. He didn’t think he could even if he wanted to. Any control Jackson thought he had fell to pieces with Isaac close to him. And Jackson wasn’t really sure that he cared.

It wasn’t like Isaac was planning to make a scene. He just needed Jackson to know who got the last word. Always. Jackson’s smug exit that morning would not stand. Besides, the fact that Jackson was walking about three times as fast as usual was basically like putting a fox in front of a beagle; how was Isaac supposed to resist chasing him?

So when they turned down a particular side street that Jackson always took on the way home that Isaac knew would be deserted because it always was, Isaac made his move.

The variety of expressions that flashed across Jackson’s face ranged from surprised to pissed off to (despite Jackson trying to hide it) excited when Isaac used Jackson’s speed as momentum to tackle him against the brick wall. Jackson glowered up at Isaac, but it was obvious that Jackson wasn’t angry. The way his eyes kept flickering to Isaac’s lips and the slight friction Isaac could feel as Jackson tried not to roll his hips forward into Isaac’s would have given him away, even if Isaac couldn’t smell how turned on he was. How turned on he’d been. There was no way Isaac could miss the musky mix of arousal and frustration that had been lingering around Jackson when Isaac had picked him up from school. Jackson wanted him bad. And that was good. Very good.

Isaac’s smirk grew as he ducked his head so that he could put his mouth against Jackson’s ear. “Let me help you with that,” he whispered, and slowly started to loosen Jackson’s tie. “Looks pretty uncomfortable.”

Jackson didn’t seem capable of words. Isaac took that as a good sign. When he was done with the tie, Isaac pulled away just enough to find the top buttons on Jackson’s Oxford shirt and undo them, too. He was still pinning Jackson to the wall with his body, but he kept himself still, even as Jackson’s restraint weakened and he started pushing back more insistently against Isaac with his hips. Jackson’s hands rested passively by his sides, though, like he didn’t know what to do with them. Isaac had a few ideas, but they should probably wait until they got home for those.

“Better,” Isaac whispered when he’d made Jackson’s neck more accessible. He dipped his head again and started nuzzling Jackson’s jawline, working his way down Jackson’s neck. Isaac didn’t kiss him, though. Not yet. He wanted to drag this out for as long as Jackson would let him.

Isaac made quick work of untucking Jackson’s shirt. He had to actively remind himself that Jackson would not be happy if Isaac took Jackson’s shirt off in a London alley, even while his fingers itched to unbutton the shirt entirely. To keep them in line, Isaac slid one of his hands into Jackson’s hair and knotted the other in Jackson’s shirt near his hip.

Jackson made a little wolf-whine sound when he tried to kiss Isaac and Isaac held him back by his hair. He was so damned cute when he was desperate!

“You kind of hate me right now, huh?” Isaac teased.
There was an affirmative noise from Jackson, but he didn’t seem to have the wherewithal to open his eyes.

“Would you like me again if I kissed you?”

Jackson didn’t answer.

“Guess there’s only one way to find out,” Isaac murmured before finally kissing Jackson. Jackson returned the kiss hungrily, emitting more little sounds of frustration when Isaac continued to hold him in place by his hair. Jackson finally lifted his arms, hands clutching at Isaac’s shirt to keep him close while they kissed.

It was with great reluctance that Isaac broke the kiss, because he had already checked ‘have sex in a skeezy alley’ off his bucket list and was pretty sure it wasn’t one of Jackson’s goals, and judging by the way Jackson was grinding against him, if they didn’t stop now, they wouldn’t stop at all.

Jackson finally opened his eyes. He fixed Isaac with a glare that was undermined by how dazed he looked, and said, “Still hate you.”

Isaac laughed. “How ‘bout we get home so I can try to change your mind?”

They barely made it through the door of Jackson’s flat before Isaac and Jackson were kissing hungrily and pulling at each other’s’ clothes in the fun kind of desperation. Isaac finally got to unbutton Jackson’s shirt, and somehow managed to take it off while leaving Jackson’s tie in place. The whole process was made more difficult, however, by the fact that Jackson seemed unwilling to leave any space between their bodies.

“Not that I’m complaining.” Isaac managed between kisses, “but you’re acting pretty hard-up for a guy who just got laid less than twenty-four hours ago.”

“Been a while.” Jackson was now preoccupied with the zipper on Isaac’s jeans, which appeared to be stuck. Isaac was just about to tell him to go ahead and break them (after all, it wasn’t like he couldn’t afford a new pair) when the zipper gave way.


Jackson shrugged noncommittally and demanded, through a series of gestures, that Isaac help him take off Isaac’s T-shirt.

“All right, how many since you moved here?”

“Three,” Jackson said after a pause. “Kind of.”

Isaac gaped at him. Three? There was no way a guy who looked like Jackson (and was that good in bed) had only slept with three people in nine months.

“What does ‘kind of’ mean?” Isaac asked as he started working on the fly of Jackson’s jeans.

“Not… all the way,” said Jackson awkwardly.

“So oral and stuff?” said Isaac. This was getting even more unbelievable.

Jackson gave a sort of affirmative shrug and looked away.

“Come on, tell me.” Isaac nipped at Jackson’s earlobe.
“There was basically just one,” said Jackson. “This wolf from another pack, before I met Josie. But her alpha didn’t like me.”

Isaac assessed Jackson for a moment, eyes scanning him from adorably messy hair to flawless feet. (He may or may not have lingered a bit on certain parts in between, considering that Jackson was now only wearing his school tie and boxer briefs.) Then he shook his head.

“I call bullshit,” said Isaac.

“You know I’m not lying!”

“One? You’re… You’re you! You could have anyone, whenever you want.”

“Why don’t you think about what I did to you yesterday for five fucking seconds and then tell me how that would’ve gone down with a human?” Jackson said coldly.

...Oh. Well, now Isaac felt like a huge asshole. Unpleasant images of Jackson losing control while trying to have sex with frail human girls came unbidden to Isaac’s mind.

“Sorry,” he said awkwardly, and did a kind of wolfy nuzzle apology thing to Jackson’s shoulder that must’ve come from instinct. But he still couldn’t let the issue go. It was too ridiculous to think that Jackson had lasted that long without sex. “What about other werewolves? There were plenty in Par--”

“I’m in a pack,” said Jackson, like the answer should’ve been obvious. “I’m not supposed to hang out with other werewolves.”

“And there’s nobody in your pack you’d…?”

Jackson made a grossed-out face. “Even if I wanted to, which I don’t, I’m underaged.”

Isaac snorted. “Never stopped me.”

“Like anything can,” Jackson drawled.

Isaac shrugged. “What can I say, I’m a go-getter. Or a go-get’im. Either way.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is, horny.”

“Look who’s talking,” Isaac glanced down meaningfully toward one of the spots his eyes had lingered on earlier, and Jackson rolled his eyes.

Isaac took the opportunity to grab Jackson’s tie and pull him in for another kiss before Jackson could get too irritated with him again.

“Well, London’s loss is my gain,” said Isaac. “And since I’m such a nice guy, I’m willing to help you make up for all that lost time.”

Jackson snorted. “How selfless of you.”

“I know, right?” Isaac grinned and tugged at Jackson’s tie again, leading him toward the bedroom.

“I think I’ve figured out what your problem is,” Isaac mused. He was tracing patterns on Jackson’s bare chest, laughing every time Jackson jerked away because he was ticklish, despite the fact that Jackson swatted his hand and glared at him every time it happened.
“Only one?” Jackson tried to catch Isaac’s hand to make him stop the tracing, but either Isaac was too quick, or Jackson was too tired, or both. Jackson ignored his rumbling stomach. They had been in the bedroom the entire evening and it was well past dinnertime.

“You care about what people think,” Isaac said simply.

Jackson rolled his eyes. “You think you’re the first person to tell me I care too much about what people think?”

“I didn’t say you care too much,” said Isaac. “You shouldn’t care at all.”

Jackson craned his neck so he could look up at Isaac. “You’re serious.”

“Yeah,” said Isaac. “My life has been sooo much better since I stopped giving a flying fuck what anybody else thinks about me.”

“Easy for you to say,” said Jackson.

“Why’s that?”

“I... nevermind.” Jackson lay his head back down on Isaac’s shoulder.

“You were going to say that nothing I do matters,” said Isaac.

Jackson didn’t respond. Isaac was exactly right. Jackson’s grades, his pack, his family... it all mattered to him. A lot. For better or worse, Isaac didn’t have any of that hanging over his head.

“You don’t have to feel bad about it,” said Isaac with a shrug. “You’re right. And I like it that way. It’s fun. It’s easier.”

Easier. Jackson frowned, thinking of all the ways his life would be easier if he didn’t care what anyone thought. If he didn’t care, maybe he would’ve kissed Isaac outside school earlier. Maybe he would’ve brought Isaac to meet his pack. Maybe he’d even have the guts to tell someone back home--even if it was just Danny--about Isaac. There were so many things Jackson might do in relation to Isaac if he didn’t care what people thought.

But he did.

That depressing thought was suddenly undermined by Isaac’s stomach rumbling very loudly, causing both of them to laugh.

“Burned all my calories,” said Isaac. “Dinner break?”

Jackson lifted his head and peered at the clock on the nightstand. “Midnight snack.”

“Awesome,” said Isaac as his gaze followed Jackson’s. He turned back to Jackson and grinned. “You are seriously fun to fuck, Whittemore.”

School the next day turned out to be basically just an intermission between two marathon sex sessions. Isaac agreed to obey Josie’s command not to leave Jackson’s flat alone, but he jumped Jackson the moment he walked through the door. Jackson was exhausted (having gotten virtually no sleep the previous night) and he really needed to catch up on his homework, but he still couldn’t
resist.

Honestly, Jackson would have been perfectly content to let life continue to be one long marathon sex session broken up by school, meals, and the occasional nap, but then Zach texted on Friday morning to remind Jackson that Sarah’s show was opening that night and ask where and when he wanted to meet up before the show.

Since Jackson had joined the Holborn pack, he’d gone to every one of Sarah’s opening night performances with Zach, who in turn had gone to every single opening night performance since Sarah had started acting. This particular show was special for two reasons: one, this was Sarah’s biggest role to date on a professional stage, and two, this would be the first show Zach was bringing a date to.

Zach had casually mentioned in his text that he had invited Hannah to the show, and while Jackson wasn’t exactly thrilled about that, it did make him feel better about deciding to invite Isaac. Jackson would’ve felt bad about leaving him alone at the flat, especially now that he knew how much Isaac was enjoying Shakespeare—Sarah was playing Catherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Jackson couldn’t wait to hear Isaac’s thoughts on this one—despite Jackson being hesitant to let Isaac meet yet another member of his pack.

Zach, Josie, Sarah… If Jackson wasn’t careful, Rodger was going to find some excuse to meet Isaac, too, and then Isaac might as well meet everyone, and Jackson definitely wasn’t ready for that. Bringing Isaac back to the den would feel too much like bringing Isaac home to meet his parents; way too serious for whatever it was they were doing.

Isaac was in the kitchen when Jackson got home from school on Friday afternoon.

“Welcome back,” Isaac called over the sound of studio audience laughter that was emanating from the TV.

“Hey,” Jackson responded, dropping his backpack on the couch and sitting down heavily next to it. Maybe he could fit in a quick nap before the show that night. Just an hour or two, to make up for part of last night. He should really be using the time to catch up on homework, but it was Friday. He could afford to put it off just a little longer, couldn’t he?

Jackson had barely leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes when Isaac straddled his lap and started “fixing” his hair. The fact that the position didn’t automatically make Jackson want to have sex again was a testament to how tired he was.

“Long day?” Isaac asked.

The feeling of Isaac running his fingers through Jackson’s hair, as well as the pleasant weight of Isaac on top of him, were definitely not helping Jackson stay awake, so the sound Jackson made in response was somewhere between a hum of agreement and a moan.

“Is that so?”

Jackson didn’t even need to open his eyes to tell Isaac was smirking at him. Jackson was saved from having to muster the energy to talk, however, when Isaac slid his hands down so that they were cupping Jackson’s face, then leaned in to kiss him.

It was weird. Well, it was nice, which was weird.

Usually when Isaac kissed him, it was more insistent, more demanding, not to mention the way that Isaac usually built up to a kiss by starting with Jackson’s neck or his ear. This was just a kiss,
with no sign that something more intense was about to follow.

And when the kiss was over, Isaac climbed off Jackson’s lap and moved Jackson’s bag to the floor. Then he pulled Jackson’s legs up, maneuvering him so that Jackson was lying down on the couch properly. Eyes still closed, Jackson heard Isaac’s footsteps head into the bedroom.

Jackson didn’t realize what Isaac was doing until Isaac had draped the blanket over him and switched off the TV. In his head, he thought ‘Thanks,’ but he was asleep before he could get the word out.

The smell of bacon cooking was what woke Jackson up. He shot up to a sitting position, convinced that it was breakfast time and that he’d slept through the night and missed Sarah’s show.

“Fuck, what time is it?”

“Just after five,” said Isaac over the sizzling in the pan.

Thank God; more than enough time to eat, dress up, and get to the theater. Jackson yawned and got to his feet, stretching. He caught Isaac eyeing him when the stretch revealed some skin near Jackson’s hip. It was probably a good thing that they couldn’t stay in together tonight, judging by the expression on Isaac’s face; Jackson wasn’t sure he could handle another sex marathon without a real night of sleep. “Bacon for dinner?”

“Bacon mac ‘n cheese,” said Isaac, gesturing to the pot of boiling pasta when Jackson got close enough to see the stove. “Should be ready in about fifteen.”

“Awesome,” said Jackson. The smell of the food made him suddenly famished. He’d been burning more calories than usual over the past couple of days. “So, uh, Zach and I are going to a play tonight. Want to come?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, Sarah’s in it,” said Jackson. “Opening night.”

“Zach’s sister?”

Jackson didn’t miss the way Isaac’s face lit up at that.

Great. “Look, don’t make a big deal about it. Do you want to come or not?”

“I’m just shocked you’d let me meet more of your pack.”

“Whatever,” Jackson said irritably. He was already kind of regretting inviting Isaac. He was more than a little worried that Isaac would act like a dick around Sarah like he had with Josie. It was already going to be bad enough being around Zach and Hannah together. “If you do, you’ll have to hurry up and get ready. I told Zach I’d meet him at the theater at seven.”

After the food was done, they ate quickly, and then Isaac took a shower while Jackson got dressed. Jackson argued with Isaac about whether or not Isaac should dress up for the theater, and in the end they compromised on Isaac wearing the vest from the suit he’d borrowed over a T-shirt. It should’ve looked tacky, but it looked good. Everything looked good on Isaac. Of course, Jackson still had to act disapproving on principle.
Like during *Much Ado About Nothing*, Isaac seemed captivated by the show, which helped to keep his misbehaving to a minimum. He had already pressed himself against Jackson, complaining again about the tiny seats, and when the lights went down, Jackson wasn’t surprised by Isaac taking his hand (even if it did make him roll his eyes). But Isaac seemed content with that.

Jackson tried to focus on the show, but he kept catching flickers of motion out of the corner of his eye: Zach shifting to put his arm around Hannah’s shoulders, Hannah’s thumb skimming Zach’s knee, not to mention the fact that Hannah *smelled* like Zach.

Watching Sarah up on stage (brilliant and flawless, as usual), Jackson kept hoping the show would run long, or that she’d be called away immediately after the show for some big emergency theater thing and she wouldn’t be able to meet them outside afterward like she always did. Because at least if she didn’t come out tonight, she wouldn’t meet Hannah, who Sarah would obviously be curious about and who smelled like Zach and hunter—although if Sarah would be able to recognize the scent of gunpowder and wolfsbane was anyone’s guess; Jackson sure hadn’t—and Jackson could pretend for just a little while longer that the situation wasn’t spiraling completely out of control.

Because no matter how Hannah felt about werewolves or how much she liked Zach and Isaac, she was still a freaking *hunter* at the end of the day. And Zach was a werewolf, despite claims of *technicalities*. Sooner or later it was going to end, and it would probably end badly.

Even while they were waiting for Sarah outside the backstage door, Jackson kept hoping that maybe she had forgotten all about them and that the reason she was taking so long was because she had already left. He kept hoping for that right up until the moment she walked out.

Zach had brought irises for her, like he always did. It was probably too much to hope for that Sarah wouldn’t notice that Zach had also gotten a rose for Hannah, who was holding it like it was made entirely of gold.

“Do my eyes deceive me,” Sarah said dramatically, “or have both my brothers brought *dates*?”

“Yes,” Zach admitted with just a hint of embarrassment in his tone at the exact same moment when Jackson firmly said, “No.”

“Sarah, this is Hannah,” said Zach. His tone of voice had a strange mix of affection and pride in it when he added, “My girlfriend.”

Oh, for the love of--

“I’m Isaac,” Isaac interjected before anyone else could say anything. “Jackson’s unwanted houseguest.”

“Unwanted, eh?” Sarah raised an eyebrow, first assessing Isaac, then Jackson. “I’d say not, judging by your scents.”

Her eyes danced mischievously, and Jackson was ready to crawl into a hole and die if it meant not having to deal with this.

Sarah turned back to Zach and Hannah. “I take it that this charming young lady is the reason we haven’t seen as much of you at the den lately?”
The conversation continued on like that. Jackson endured a full five minutes of excited chatting among the group before Sarah offered to take Hannah backstage for a tour. Hannah eagerly accepted, though Zach didn’t seem keen on the idea once it became clear that Sarah had meant that only Hannah would go with her.

“Why don’t we all go?” Zach asked in what was clearly a last ditch effort at keeping his sister and his girlfriend from being alone together.

“Don’t be silly, darling.” Sarah waved him off. “You’ve seen it all before. Besides, it would only bore the rest of you. We’ll be back in a flash.”

Before Zach could protest further, Sarah had whisked Hannah off toward a backstage door.

“This is the worst possible outcome,” Zach said melodramatically after the girls had vanished inside.

“No shit,” Jackson muttered.

“Didn’t catch that, Jack,” said Zach. “Something you’d like to share?”

“I said, ‘No shit.’”

“Mind explaining your meaning?” said Zach, though it was clearly from his expression and the tone of his voice that he suspected what Jackson was getting at.

Jackson decided to just bite the bullet. What was the point in sugar-coating it?

“I mean,” said Jackson, “that you shouldn’t’ve brought her here.”

“I don’t see the harm in bringing a date to the theater,” said Zach.

“You know what I mean,” Jackson said shortly. “You shouldn’t’ve brought her to a theater where Sarah’s performing.”

“I like Hannah,” said Zach. “When a person becomes romantically involved with someone, it is not uncustumary for them to introduce this person to their family.”

“I like Hannah,” said Zach. “When a person becomes romantically involved with someone, it is not uncustumary for them to introduce this person to their family.”


“Come on, Jackson, you’re overreacting,” said Isaac, finally intervening. He had been preoccupied with checking out the orchestra pit (which meant he had probably been listening to the entire conversation and had been hoping he could just ignore it).

Jackson rounded on Isaac. “Don’t talk about things you have no fucking clue about.”

Isaac looked taken aback, but it made him shut his mouth.

“Who gives you the right to tell me what to do?” said Zach. “You’re not my alpha, you’re not my mum--”

“And they’d never forgive me if they found out I did nothing to stop you doing this,” said Jackson.

“Says the wolf who hasn’t told his alpha that the omega who lives with him is working with hunters,” countered Zach. “Should I let that bit of of information slip next time I’m home?”

Jackson blanched. “Zach, I’m just trying--”
“To protect me. I know,” said Zach. “And I’m moved by your concern. But last I checked, I’m the adult here. I may not have fangs and glowing eyes, but I know a hell of a lot more about being a wolf than you do, Jack.”

“Guys, can we just--” Isaac started, but both Jackson and Zach cut him off simultaneously with an emphatic, “No.”

Isaac frowned and turned away.

“Please, Zach,” said Jackson, trying to calm his own voice. “On her own she might be harmless, but she’s got a whole family looking for excuses to kill us. Remember what happened with her cousin?”

“I’m not like to forget, Jack, but Hannah and I can handle ourselves.”

Jackson could tell he wasn’t going to get anywhere with Zach, not like this, not trying to convince him that something that was making him happy now was going to make him miserable the second anyone else found out about it.

That wasn’t going to stop him from trying, though. Jackson had just opened his mouth to ask Zach what his plan was when Isaac elbowed him in the ribs. Jackson turned to glare at Isaac just as the stage door opened and a giggling Sarah and Hannah stepped out.

“Thanks again for the tour,” Hannah was saying. “And for that bit of advice.” Something about that made the girls start laughing again, but none of the boys asked what, knowing they wouldn’t get an answer.

“You are most welcome, darling,” Sarah said when her giggling subsided. “I’m almost sad that I’ve already agreed to have drinks with the cast,” she said as she turned to Zach, “but you will be bringing her round again, won’t you, dear?”

“Absolutely.”

Jackson didn’t miss the brief glare Zach shot him when he said it.

“Wonderful!” Sarah gave each of them a brief hug, lingering with Zach to whisper, “I really like her,” in his ear before pulling away, and then headed back inside alone. (Jackson got to be privy to that exchange whether he wanted to or not, thanks to his supernatural hearing.)

Zach’s cheeks were flushed, but he seemed pleased. Jackson felt the exact opposite. Sarah liking Hannah did not help the situation. It was bad enough that Isaac approved of Zach and Hannah together, but if Zach’s sister actively encouraged it, Jackson’s objections were going to be even less effective.

“Zach--” Jackson started, but Zach turned away from him.

“See you, Isaac,” Zach said, and took Hannah’s hand in his. She gave Jackson a kind of apologetic look before leaving with him. Probably to go back to Zach’s flat, to make him even more attached to her.

“Thanks for backing me up,” Jackson said sarcastically to Isaac.

“What was I supposed to say?” Isaac heaved a frustrated sigh. “I still think you’re worrying too much.”
“Then you’re an even bigger dumbfuck than he is,” Jackson snapped.

He didn’t even ask Isaac if he was ready to go. He just left, with Isaac on his heels, clearly wanting to say something but containing it.

Neither of them spoke the entire way back to the flat, but the moment the door had closed behind them, Isaac had Jackson up against a wall and was kissing his neck and fumbling with the buttons of his shirt.

“Been wanting to do this all night,” Isaac murmured before nipping at Jackson’s earlobe. Jackson wasn’t so sure about that explanation, though. He didn’t doubt that Isaac had been wanting to do this; Isaac always wanted to do this. But seducing Jackson to distract him from an argument was a very ‘Isaac’ tactic.

Still, the tactic was going to work. Because even though he was still furious and worried and scared and frustrated, Jackson gave in. Based on the way Zach was acting about Hannah, those emotions were going to be Jackson’s baseline for the foreseeable future. That being the case, Jackson’s time with Isaac was better spent fucking than fighting.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry we had to take last week off! It's been kind of crazy around here with both our school and work and other life things, and we just couldn't find the time to do the chapter properly and get it posted on time. Hope you liked this one, though! Things are beginning to accelerate for sure. Thank you all so much for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate all of you!

Savenna Cloverunner

P.S. In case you haven't seen it, we've started posting a short multi-part side story for this fic about Hannah and Zach! It's not in any way essential for you to read it in order to keep up with this fic, but if you are interested in Zach/Hannah (Zanna), we think you'll really enjoy it. It's called The Strength of the Wolf: Star-Crossed, and Part I has been posted here.
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: MOUTH (Bush)

You gave me this;
made me give.
You have soul machine,
broken free.
All your mental armor drags me down.
We can’t breathe when you come around.
All your mental armor drags me down.
Nothing hurts like your mouth.

“All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t be encouraging him!”

“Why does it even matter what I think?” Isaac was genuinely confused. How had this argument even started? How had they gone from talking about what to make for breakfast to shouting at each other about Zach and Hannah’s relationship?

“It matters because you’re working with the hunters. If you say they’re safe, of course he’s going to believe you!”

“So what? Hannah’s not a threat to him!”

Jackson made a loud, frustrated sound and spun away from Isaac. “I can’t believe how fucking naive you all are!”

Isaac watched Jackson pace around the apartment like a caged animal, silently fuming. Isaac knew that anything he said that wasn’t ‘Yes, Jackson, you’re right, I can’t believe I couldn’t see it before’ wouldn’t be taken well, so he stayed quiet.

For as long as he could. But there was only so much angry pacing he could endure in silence.

“You know,” Isaac finally said, unable to help himself, “Zach’s an adult. He can make his own choices. Even if you think they’re mistakes.”

“They are mistakes,” said Jackson. “He’s putting himself in danger. He’s putting the whole pack in danger! Not like you’d know anything about that,” he added under his breath.

Maybe luckily for both of them, that was the moment Isaac’s phone started buzzing in his pocket.
After a quick glance at caller I.D., he answered.

“Hey, Hannah,” said Isaac, still not sure whether or not he should be glaring at Jackson for that last comment.

“Wolf!” Hannah’s voice was jarringly cheerful and excited in contrast with all the arguing. “I think I know what the monster could be. How fast can you get to the library?”

“I’m actually a little busy at the moment.”

Jackson, who could obviously hear her, just rolled his eyes and headed for the kitchen. “Go. Sounds like she needs you,” he said to Isaac over his shoulder.

“We’re kind of in the middle of something here,” Isaac said to Jackson, following him into the kitchen with the phone pressed to his chest (although how much that actually did to muffle sound reaching the receiver, Isaac had never known).

“Whatever,” said Jackson, tone resigned, “we can talk later. This is your job, right? Go do your job.”

Isaac hated how bitter Jackson sounded saying that word: job. But Jackson did have a point; stopping that monster was the reason Isaac had come to London in the first place. And if Hannah really had a lead on what it could be…

Still, that didn’t stop Isaac from feeling guilty about walking out during an argument.

“Okay…” said Isaac, still hesitant. “If you’re sure.”

But he didn’t want Jackson to be sure. He wanted Jackson to tell him to stay so they could resolve this. Honestly, it shouldn’t be that hard to resolve an argument about nothing. Hannah and Zach were dating now, it was their lives, their choice; Jackson didn’t get a say in it. Jackson was just too stubborn and paranoid to accept that. But since Jackson’s stubbornness meant he wouldn’t listen to Isaac, maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea for Isaac to just go before their discussion devolved back into shouting. And at least if Isaac left, he wouldn’t be around the sour scent of Jackson’s anger, which was getting to him more than usual.

When Jackson didn’t say anything, Isaac put the phone back to his ear. “Okay. I’m on my way.”

“Excellent!” Hannah said a little too loudly. Isaac could hear the sound of someone shushing her right as she hung up.

Isaac hung up too, and with a last glance at Jackson—who was standing with his back to Isaac, looking in the fridge—went to the bedroom. It took Isaac maybe five minutes to get ready, and when he came out again, Jackson was still standing there with the fridge door open.

“Hopefully this won’t take long,” said Isaac, heading for the door. “I’ll call you when I know more.”

Jackson just waved vaguely without even turning around. Unsure what else to do or say, Isaac left.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Hannah whispered smugly.
She had staked out a large corner desk and literally covered it with various books, papers, and her laptop. Isaac suspected that Hannah’s determination to solve this case had more than a little to do with the fact that she was now dating a werewolf (one that her family had expressly forbidden her from having anything to do with and had no idea she was going behind their backs to see) and was feeling the need to prove that she was still a good hunter.

It made Isaac incredibly reluctant to tell her that she was, in fact, wrong.

“Uh... well...”

“Come on, Wolf, spit it out.”

“It’s not a troll.”

“Oh, come on,” said Hannah, “it’s unbelievably obvious.” She waved the book she was holding in Isaac’s face. “In every fairy tale ever, trolls can’t stand sunlight. It makes perfect sense that it would tunnel underground and only hunt during the new moon since that’s when it’s darkest.”

“Trolls live in mountains and caves, and sometimes under bridges if you believe that stuff. If they even exist.”

“They’re in the bestiary,” Hannah insisted, gesturing to a page in the massive book—the Bristow bestiary—on the desk in front of her.

“Just because something’s in hunter records doesn’t mean it’s real,” said Isaac. “But even if it is, my point still stands: why would a big monster that lives in the mountains be following ley lines through a London graveyard?”

“Hunting.” Hannah shrugged, looking down at the bestiary again. “Does it matter?”

Isaac rolled his eyes at the book and slid Hannah’s laptop closer to himself.

“Oi! Paws off my things!”

“You guys need to join the twenty-first century,” said Isaac as he pulled a keyring from his pocket. It contained six items: 1) the key to his old house in Beacon Hills; keys to the Argent house in France, including 2) the main lock on the front door, 3) the second lock on the front door, 4) the weapons closet, and 5) the “wine” (weapons) cellar; and 6) a metal thumb drive.

Isaac slid the drive into a USB port and opened the Argent bestiary on Hannah’s laptop. He did a quick search and brought up the entry on trolls.

“According to this, they’re scavengers,” said Isaac. “They’re slow and lumbering, not to mention pretty stupid. Oh, and it also says ‘Existence not confirmed.’”

“Let me see,” said Hannah. She tried to pull the laptop back toward her, but Isaac kept it angled away.

“Sorry, I can’t let you see that. Family secrets.”

Hannah raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re not an Argent.”

“Don’t tell that to the French border patrol,” Isaac said with a smirk. “Anyway, this doesn’t fit the profile of the thing from the graveyard at all. Whatever we fought was fast and strong and is definitely a fan of live meat.”
“Plus it was intelligent, at least to a degree,” Hannah admitted, chewing absently on her lower lip. It wasn’t lost on Isaac that she had pulled the Bristow bestiary away from him a bit.

Isaac nodded, thinking about how the monster had been able to separate them that night in the graveyard, tricking them by using sound and who knew what else.

“Impenetrable skin, headless, and who could forget the giant mouth in the center of its stomach?” Isaac sighed and wearily ran his hand through his hair before gesturing again at the screen (which he still kept out of Hannah’s view). “There’s nothing that matches that description in our bestiary. Not even close.”

“Well it has to be something.” Hannah melodramatically let her head fall back. Isaac would have laughed at the way she was glaring so intently at the ceiling if he hadn’t felt so much like doing the same. It was incredibly frustrating being so close and yet so far away from solving the mystery.

They might have figured out the pattern, but without knowing what the monster was, they didn’t have much of a chance of finding a way to stop it.

They needed to solve this, and soon. Lives depended on it.

Jackson watched his phone buzzing on the table, screen lit up with Isaac’s ridiculous picture and the stupid heart next to his name that Jackson kept forgetting to change. He knew what Isaac was probably calling about. That didn’t change the fact that Jackson didn’t want to talk to him.

With the way things had been between them that morning when Isaac had left for the library, Jackson hadn’t even thought about the fact that he had let Isaac walk through their territory alone until a couple of hours later, despite the fact that he had made such a big deal about it to Isaac over the past few days.

It took Jackson until the last ring to make up his mind not to let Isaac’s call go to voicemail.

“Before you say anything,” Isaac started immediately, “I just want you to know that I really did forget about Josie’s rule until right now.”

“Uh-huh.” Jackson didn’t care if Isaac really had forgotten or if, once again, not being alone in Holborn territory was just another rule for him to flout. The outcome was the same.

There was a long pause on the line just before he heard Isaac take a deep breath and let it out.

“Well, I’m done at the library. I was thinking, maybe you could come meet me and we could go get some dinner?”

“I already ate,” said Jackson.

There was another, even longer pause. “Okay. Well, do you maybe wanna come meet me and I could grab something on the way back?”

“You know,” Jackson said, more forcefully than he meant to, “I’m actually pretty busy. I can’t just come meet you whenever you want. Why don’t you ask Zach?”

“Jackson--”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Jacks--”
It might have been petty, but hanging up on Isaac felt incredibly satisfying.

For a few minutes.

Then Jackson started feeling guilty. He wasn’t actually busy; his homework was stacked on the table around him, but he had already finished everything he was going to get done that day, including the stuff that was due Monday. So the only reason not to go get Isaac was because he didn’t want to. Which was pretty messed up to do to someone who was—sort of—trying to abide by someone else’s rules (when he remembered about them). But Jackson wasn’t about to call Isaac back and tell him that Jackson could come get him after all. If Isaac really needed Jackson, he would call back.

But ten minutes later, Jackson still hadn’t heard anything, and the longer his phone stayed quiet, the easier it became to convince himself that Isaac had called Zach, or had decided to say ‘fuck it’ to Josie’s rule and walk back to the flat alone anyway. Which Jackson would have to tell him not to do again, again, but wouldn’t actually be that big of a deal.

Twenty minutes. Still nothing. Isaac had probably gone to get something to eat. Not to mention that if he was waiting somewhere for Zach, it would take him longer to get home anyway.

At thirty minutes, Jackson’s phone buzzed again, this time just once, signaling a text. From Zach.

Zach: You had better actually be busy.

Jackson cringed and put the phone down.

There was a familiar knock on the door about fifteen minutes later, causing the knot in Jackson stomach to jump into his throat.

“Not too busy to open the door, are you?” Isaac said from outside. He sounded resigned, tired. Hannah’s hunch must not have led them anywhere. At least he didn’t sound angry. Jackson didn’t have the energy for another fight.

Jackson wasn’t even aware of moving to the door, but suddenly it was open and he was staring up at Isaac, who looked pretty much like he’d sounded through the door: tired and discouraged and resigned. Jackson couldn’t think of anything to say, so he just took a step back to make room for Isaac to pass.

“Thanks. It’s fucking freezing out there,” Isaac said as he finished stomping some mud off his boots and stepped inside. He clearly hadn’t dressed warmly enough for the weather when he had run out earlier. He didn’t even have his stupid scarf, Jackson noticed.

“Yeah, the weather here can be pretty unpredictable,” Jackson said lamely after way too long a pause. Isaac shrugged and sat down heavily on the couch, letting his head fall back.

“About earlier…” Jackson started when it was clear that Isaac wasn’t going to say anything. But he trailed off.

“It’s fine,” said Isaac, and it actually sounded like he might mean that. “Zach was running errands anyway, so Hannah and I got dinner and then Zach walked me back.” His voice took on a bit of an edge when he added, “Hannah didn’t come into your territory with us. In case you were wondering.”

Jackson had been wondering, actually. He flushed, embarrassed, but not enough to keep from feeling justified in his concern. The last thing they needed right now was for a Bristow to be seen
wandering around Holborn territory. Jackson was a little disappointed that Zach hadn’t come in to say hi, though. Jackson guessed he was probably still pissed about what Jackson had said at the theater about Hannah being dangerous. He hated fighting with Zach. Why was it that everyone was pissed off at Jackson just because he wanted to keep them safe?

“So… Did you find anything?” Jackson asked, more to change the subject and interrupt the silence than out of any actual curiosity. He hoped that he didn’t seem as uncomfortable as he felt (he was still hovering by the door, so that wasn’t likely), but Isaac seemed pretty preoccupied with trying to warm up his hands.

“Nope,” Isaac said shortly, flexing his fingers. “I’m starting to wonder if this thing actually exists or if it’s just Old Man Jenkins in a rubber mask.”

“Yeah.” Jackson laughed despite himself. “Maybe he’s trying to scare people away from graveyards for the insurance.”

Isaac laughed, too. “And he would have gotten away with it too if it wasn’t for us meddling werewolves.”

And then the silence was back, and Jackson couldn’t think of anything else to say to fill it. Isaac was eyeing him curiously.

“You planning on standing there all night?”

And for some reason, it was that comment, delivered with an arched eyebrow and a dry tone, that snapped Jackson out of whatever it was that had kept him locked in place and fumbling for words.

“No.” he said, walking to the kitchen.

“I thought you already ate,” Isaac said as he watched Jackson put two pieces of bread into the toaster.

Jackson determinedly stared at the toaster as he pressed the button down, rather than look at Isaac. Isaac was right; Jackson had fudged the truth earlier when he’d said that he’d already eaten and therefore didn’t need to have dinner with Isaac. He had eaten lunch.

“I did eat,” he said shortly. “I’m eating again.”

“Right,” said Isaac. He was clearly unconvinced, but made no further comment. Instead, he got up from the couch and went over to Jackson.

Jackson made a sound of protest and jerked away on instinct when Isaac’s hand brushed against Jackson’s cheek on its way to ‘fix’ Jackson’s hair.

“Your hands are fucking freezing,” Jackson complained.

Isaac offered Jackson his hands and a sly smirk. “Well, you could always warm them up for me.”

It was clearly a come-on, but Jackson wasn’t about to give in quite that easily. So he took Isaac by the wrists and moved his hands over the toaster, which was radiating heat.

“There.”

Isaac made a big show of rubbing his hands together over the toaster like he was in front of a campfire. Jackson had to stifle an involuntary smile behind his hand.
“Might need a bigger toaster,” said Isaac. “The rest of me’s pretty cold, too.”

Jackson couldn’t help but think that, in a way, all of this had started because Isaac had been cold. If Jackson had just bought another blanket, back in the beginning, would they be here now? Would Jackson still be finding himself desperately trying to stay irritated when all he really wanted to do was take Isaac to his bed and methodically warm up every inch of his skin?

The knowing smirk Isaac was giving him made it clear that Jackson’s pulse had spiked from the thought.

“Yeah?” said Isaac, cocking his head to the side.

There was so much in the one-word question. Jackson couldn’t answer it out loud. So instead he brushed past Isaac and headed for the bedroom.

The bedroom door closed behind Isaac just as the click of the toast popping up sounded distantly from the kitchen.

It wasn’t that Jackson was hiding from Isaac when he left to go to the den the next morning before Isaac woke up; Jackson just wanted to have as much of the day as possible to work on the rest of his homework somewhere that he could focus. The den itself might be busy, but maybe Zach would happen to be there and magically not be pissed off at Jackson anymore and they could go study together at the cafe like they used to.

Even if that didn’t happen, though (and it almost definitely wouldn’t), Sunday morning brunch with the pack was always good. Especially if Rodger was cooking. And if Jackson wasn’t around, Isaac wouldn’t feel obligated to cook, so really, Jackson was being considerate.

Which was also why Jackson waited to text Isaac until Isaac texted him first: Jackson hadn’t wanted to accidentally wake Isaac up.

Isaac <3: ?

Jackson got the text just as he was putting his plate in the dishwasher. He assumed the solitary question mark was shorthand for ‘Where are you?’ and responded as briefly as he could:

Me: At the den
Isaac <3: Everything ok?
Me: Doing homework

When Isaac didn’t respond for a few minutes, Jackson added a grudging,

Me: Call if you need something

During the time it took Isaac to respond, Jackson couldn’t help wondering what Isaac was thinking—if he was annoyed about Jackson leaving without waking him up and effectively trapping him in the flat, if he was actually worried that something might be wrong with the pack (which would explain why Jackson was at the den), whether he believed Jackson’s excuse--and worrying that maybe not at least leaving a note or something was kind of a dick move.

Isaac <3: Got food and research. Im good
Well, there was no point overthinking the situation. Zach hadn’t shown up yet—if he was even going to at all—and Jackson still had homework he needed to do, so he took his school stuff to the sitting room and settled in to get some work done.

Or at least, he tried to. But his focus kept getting undermined by intruding thoughts of Isaac. Jackson kept going back and forth in his head about whether he could stay away all day so he didn’t have to risk another argument with Isaac, and wanting to go home and spend all day in bed with him. Things were good between them when they were having sex. If only they could just do that all the time…

Jackson gave up on his homework when he realized that he’d been reading the same page three times without comprehending any of it. When Helen passed through the sitting room, Jackson asked her if there was anything he could do to help out around the den, and she happily put him to work doing some of the chores Rodger had apparently been neglecting.

The sound of a key turning in the lock of the flat’s front door had Jackson immediately half-nervous, half-relieved; if it was Zach, maybe they could talk about Friday and Zach wouldn’t be as pissed off at Jackson anymore and Jackson wouldn’t have to feel so horrible (even though he hadn’t done anything wrong).

But the sound of laughter and little shoes stomping at top speed into the flat signaled the return of Justin and Colin, who had been out with Bronagh and Sarah between Sarah’s two Sunday performances. This had given Eva, Ada, and Dominic a rare chance for a Sunday morning lie-in while their pups were away.

“Did you boys enjoy the play?” Helen asked the twins.

“It was so long,” complained Justin.

“Bronagh said it was in English but we couldn’t understand it!” said Colin.

Everyone laughed, and Bronagh said, “We made it to the intermission, then we needed to have an ice cream and a walk through the park. Didn’t we, pups?”

“Mine was chocolate!” Justin said proudly, like it was an accomplishment.

“Strawberry is better!” Colin insisted, which led to them arguing and chasing each other upstairs to get their parents to decide the matter.

“It was a lovely performance,” Bronagh said to Sarah. “The part I saw, anyway. Promise I’ll come back to see it properly.”

“I did wonder if five was a bit young for Shakespeare,” Sarah admitted, “but it never hurts to start them off early.”

“Indoctrinate them when they’re young, eh, Sarah?” said Rodger as he joined them in the sitting room.

The pack fell into a pleasant conversation about the theater, which Jackson happily listened to from the sofa until a reference to opening night inevitably led to--

“Hannah. Isn’t it a lovely name? You should see her, Mum,” Sarah said to Helen. “She’s absolutely stunning. And charming and amusing, and she clearly adores Zachary. Honestly, I can’t think why he hasn’t brought her round yet. He seems quite serious about her.”
“You know your brother, dear,” said Helen. “He’s always been shy about girls.”

“Not to mention that our family can be a bit… intimidating,” Rodger pointed out.

“Yes,” said Sarah, “I haven’t forgotten the time that poor boy came to pick me up for a party when I was sixteen, and you, Dad, and Dominic all interrogated him about his intentions. By the time I had gotten ready to go, he was sweating bullets and positively reeking of fear!”

“I’ll admit to testing the lad a bit,” said Rodger, “but, if you remember, it was Zach who really put the fear of God into him. Only just fourteen and a full head shorter than your beau, but he delivered the fiercest ‘If you touch my sister…’ I’ve ever heard.”

Helen smiled proudly. “If I recall, the boy took Zachary’s words to heart.”

“I assume that you’re referring to the fact that he never came within a meter of me after that night?” Sarah said dryly.

Both Rodger and Bronagh burst into laughter. Under different circumstances, Jackson would’ve laughed, too, but between his stress about Sarah talking about Hannah too much and his guilt about fighting with Zach, it was difficult to feel anything else.

“Have you given this girl the same warning, then?” Helen asked Sarah.

“I’ve got a bit more tact than an overprotective teenager,” Sarah said, with a note of fondness in her voice for the memory of a younger Zach. “I’ve met her, we’ve talked, and I approve of her. I am, however, fully prepared to despise her if she should ever cause our little brother pain,” she added.

“Naturally,” said Bronagh. “Wasn’t there a bully at his school once, and you--?”

“I flashed my eyes at him and gave a good growl,” said Sarah. “Dad was furious. He grounded me for a month. But the little coward was too frightened to tell a soul, and he let Zachary alone after that.”

The conversation continued on in that vein, with reminiscences about Sarah and Zach when they were teenagers and speculations about what hellions Justin and Colin would grow into. Rodger broke away from the group, however, and went over to Jackson. He didn’t say a word in front of the others, but he stared at Jackson meaningfully until Jackson got up and followed him down to the basement. Jackson’s heart sank. This meant Rodger wanted to talk to him without it being too obvious to the others that it was a serious discussion; it was difficult to overhear people in the basement unless you were really concentrating, and it was impolite to try to eavesdrop.

“Tell me what’s going on, Jack,” Rodger said as soon as they had reached the bottom of the stairs.

“With what?”

“With Zach,” Rodger said seriously. It was always a bad sign when Rodger was overly serious.

“Who’s the girl?”

Jackson shifted awkwardly and looked away. “Does it matter?”

“Normally it wouldn’t, and I’d be pleased for Zach and let him tell me in his own time,” said Rodger, “but seeing as how you failed to mention her, despite the fact that you’ve seen more of Zach lately than the rest of us put together, gives me good cause for concern.”

“It’s nothing.”
“Lie to me again, pup, and I will take this straight to Josie,” Rodger said in a tone that was sterner than Jackson had ever heard from him. It caused Jackson to cringe.

“He’ll hate me if I tell you,” he said, in a last-ditch effort to get Rodger to drop the issue, but he knew full well that there was no way it would work.

“Fine,” said Rodger. “Get your things.”

“What? Why?”

“We’re going to Zach’s. Right now.”

The look on Zach’s face when he opened his door made Jackson’s stomach drop. Zach’s eyes met Rodger’s first, and Jackson could see a combination of fear and resignation there--because Zach was smart enough to guess why Rodger would pay him an unannounced visit--but when his eyes flitted to Jackson, they were cold and tinged with betrayal.

Rodger didn’t even wait for Zach to invite him in; he just shouldered his way into the room. Jackson considered fleeing the whole awkward mess, but Rodger grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him inside, too. Zach, probably sensing that there was no way to get out of this, reluctantly shut the door behind them.

Jackson hovered by the door while Zach went to sit on the edge of his bed. Rodger took Zach’s desk chair. He faced Zach, and didn’t bother with any pleasantries before starting his interrogation.

“Tell me everything.”

“About what?” said Zach, in some kind of futile effort not to give in right away, maybe on principle. Zach was an abysmal liar, even around people who didn’t have built-in lie detectors.

“The girl,” said Rodger. “The one Sarah won’t stop going on about. The girl whose scent is all over you and your room and your things and smells alarmingly like steel and silver and gunpowder and bloody wolfsbane.” Rodger wasn’t raising his voice, but he still sounded increasingly angry as he spoke. “Tell. Me. Everything.”

Zach chewed nervously at his lower lip and looked away. His heart was pounding hard, as fast as a rabbit’s. Jackson expected him to dodge the question, to tell half-truths, to find any way of admitting all of it to Rodger. But he didn’t. He just squared his shoulders, locked eyes with Rodger, and said, “She’s Hannah Bristow.”

Judging by his stunned silence, Rodger hadn’t been expecting something quite that bad. It was clear that Rodger had been guessing ‘hunter’ after what he had said about Hannah’s scent in the room, but maybe he had been hoping there was some explanation that didn’t involve that particularly dreaded last name.

Jackson winced and pressed his body back into the corner near the door as a heavy tension filled the room. Someone was going to snap. It was only a matter of who, and when.

It turned out to be Rodger, and after about thirty seconds.

“Holy mother of--” Rodger actually got to his feet, like he was so alarmed or angry (or both) that
he couldn’t stay sitting. He made a gesture of entreaty toward the sky like he was praying for patience.

“Rodge—” Zach started, but Rodger talked over him.

“Jack is obviously a bad influence. Sleeping with a werewolf associated with hunters is bad enough, but you and Bristow’s daughter? A likely future leader of one of the oldest hunter families in Britain? Are you trying to get yourself skinned?”

“I’m not technically a werewolf,” protested Zach. “They wouldn’t—”

“The hell they wouldn’t!” Rodger said fiercely. “Christ, you pups are naive.”

“I can’t transform,” Zach insisted. “I might as well be human!”

“Human,” he says.” Rodger snorted. “You’ve let growing up during twenty years of peace between us and the hunters make you complacent. D’you know how we keep that peace? By not killing people, not turning people, and not doing reckless shit like this.”

“I haven’t done anything to her!”

“D’you think they care?” said Rodger. “D’you think passing for human will save you? Dominic was human once, Zach. I’d tell you to talk to him, but he hasn’t said a word about his life before he came to us since the day Will gave him the Bite, and I doubt he ever will again.”

This stopped Zach short. Both he and Jackson had known Dominic used to be human—the scars told that story—but no one had ever even hinted at Dominic’s past, at least not to Jackson.

“What happened to Dominic?” Zach asked hesitantly.

Rodger sighed deeply and rubbed at his face. “To be honest, I was hoping no one would ever be enough of an idiot that I’d have to tell this story.”

Zach bristled, but said nothing. Jackson kept quiet, too. Based on Rodger’s attitude, Jackson wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to know how Dominic had become a werewolf, but he was also curious.

Rodger looked to each of them in turn and said seriously, “You will not let on that you know this to anyone. We don’t talk about it because we don’t want to hurt Nic, and I expect you to respect that. Understand?”

Both Zach and Jackson nodded, and Rodger sat back down on the chair.

“Right,” he said. “No questions until I’m done.”

He took a deep breath, let it out, and began: “Everyone older than you and Sarah knows the story. Will made Dominic tell the pack everything before he’d even think about giving him the Bite. There can’t be any secrets when a pack considers letting in someone new, especially if they’re going to be bitten.”

Jackson felt a twinge of guilt when he reflected on the painful process of half-explaining why his eyes were blue to Josie and felt a rush of gratitude toward her for giving him permission to not answer questions about it. Apparently that probably wouldn’t have been the case if Will had been alpha at the time. Would Jackson have been willing to tell everyone the story behind his eyes if it meant having a pack, or would he have been unable to do it, even if it meant being alone?
“He wasn’t much older than Jack is now when he came to us,” Rodger continued. “He’d grown up just outside of Norwich in a pack that mostly kept to themselves. He wasn’t born into it, but his dad had left his mum when he’d gotten her pregnant, and she took up with a wolf not long after Nic was born. The pack took Nic and his mum in like they were family, and Nic was raised as a wolf, same as you, Zach, even though he didn’t have the blood.”

Jackson didn’t miss the small frown Zach made at that comment.

“Sometimes on the full moon some of Nic’s pack would go out into the countryside near their house to run out their energy. They could let themselves get a bit wolfy without any humans seeing and no harm was done. So one night Nic was out running with his half-sister, a wolf that his mum had with her new mate. The girl was only just sixteen, and her control wasn’t perfect, but Nic had a way with her and could keep her in line most of the time. He was her anchor.”

_He was her anchor._ Jackson’s stomach turned cold, because he could already guess where the story was probably headed. Things rarely ended well when a person was a wolf’s anchor. Jackson determinedly put that thought out of his mind as soon as it had occurred to him.

“Whether they’d been tracked or it was just bad luck, Nic never found out, but they ran across a couple of hunters. The hunters caught sight of Nic’s sister’s glowing eyes before Nic could rein her in, and in a flash there was a gun and a crossbow pointed at the two teenagers. As you might imagine, the girl didn’t take this well, especially under a full moon. She made a move to attack one of the hunters, and when Nic tried to stop her she accidentally got her claws in him. That’s why he’s got those scars.”

Rodger paused and took a few breaths. He was acting like he was remembering something painful that had happened to himself, not to someone else.

“A few crossbow bolts took her down to the ground. A bullet to the head put her there for good. The hunters said that scratching Nic counted as harming a human, even if it was just an accident and he was in her pack, so they were justified in killing her under their so-called Code. They shot a sixteen-year-old girl dead right in front of her brother, didn’t even bother bringing her in to discuss it with the rest of the hunters.”

Anger flashed in Rodger’s eyes, and Jackson couldn’t blame him. The story was starting to make him feel nauseous. Jackson had seen a lot of fucked-up shit in the past couple of years, but murdering teenagers in cold blood was still pretty high on the list.

“The hunters let Nic go, but the way they acted made Nic sure they’d only done it so he’d lead them back to his pack. He also thought it was his fault that his sister was dead. So he ran. He came to London, and started looking for other wolf packs. See, Nic was human, but he was still a wolf in his heart. He couldn’t live without a pack.” He looked at Zach seriously. “You understand that, don’t you, Zach?”

Zach nodded, frowning more deeply. It looked to Jackson like the very idea of living without a pack terrified Zach.

“Eventually Nic found Will and begged him for the Bite. He said that he knew it could kill him, but he didn’t care. Being dead was worse than living like a ‘normal’ human. Will made Nic wait until he was eighteen before he’d bite him. He said it was because it wasn’t right to bite a child, and that Nic needed time to think about whether he really wanted this. But I reckon he was hoping that Nic’s pack would come for him, or that Nic would change his mind and go home. It’s a terrible thing when someone is separated from their pack.”
That went without saying, even to Jackson, who had only been without a pack for several months. He couldn’t imagine what it would’ve been like to grow up in one for his whole life and then be forced to leave it.

“Those six months were some of the darkest I can remember. I’d never met anyone so desperate, or scared, or angry, and I haven’t since. Nic hardly spoke and didn’t eat half as much as he should’ve done. He couldn’t bear to be alone, but he also couldn’t bear to be touched. He slept in my bed with me—I was scarcely old enough to have my own bed at the time—but I had to keep my distance, especially when he had nightmares, which was more often than not. It felt like a bloody miracle the first time he slept through the night and gave me a hug when he woke up.”

Rodger’s eyes had a faraway look in them, like he could see the memory in front of him.

“In the end, it was only Will saying that he wouldn’t give Nic the Bite until he was strong that got him healthy again. Nic was bitten on his eighteenth birthday, and he was a wolf the next day. Healthier and stronger than we’d ever seen him, but with scars to remind him of his sister for the rest of his life.”

Rodger took another deep breath and sighed it out. He finally looked up and fixed his eyes on Jackson and Zach in turn.

“Nic knows better than any of us what hunters are capable of,” said Rodger. “They’re not all like that, I know, but some are. And it only takes one.”

Zach looked away from Rodger, self-conscious and saddened. Jackson empathized.

“Hey,” Rodger said to Zach, gently pulling Zach’s face back toward him with a hand under his jaw. “I know what love feels like when it’s new, pup. Like the world is full of possibilities, and nothing can touch you.” He brushed Zach’s fringe out of his face in a surprisingly tender gesture. Jackson could see the beginnings of tears shining in Zach’s impossible eyes, and he started to feel like he was intruding on something private.

“But we can’t lose you, pretty boy,” said Rodger, smiling sadly. “Not even to the prettiest girl in the world.”

Zach sniffled as Rodger kissed the top of his head, like a parent would a child. Then he made the much more wolflike gesture of nuzzling his face against Zach’s hair. Zach accepted the affection and comfort passively, maybe too upset to actively return it.

“Right, well,” Rodger said as he stood up. “I’ve said my piece. I hope you’ve taken it to heart.” He crossed to the door and gave Jackson a significant look as he added, “The pair of you.”

The gentle threat in Rodger’s words wasn’t lost on Jackson, and there was no way Zach had missed it, either: if either of them let their interactions with the Bristows (and Isaac by extension) endanger themselves or the pack in any way, Rodger would tell Josie. Hell, he would probably tell Josie anyway. All they could do was wait and see.

Rodger gave Zach one last glance, then patted Jackson on the shoulder, and left.

There was a long, excruciatingly awkward silence (punctuated by sniffles that Zach couldn’t quite contain) while Jackson stood awkwardly near the doorway, grateful that Zach couldn’t hear how Jackson’s heart was pounding or smell his anxiety.

“I get it if you hate me,” said Jackson. “But Sarah was talking about her at the den and I couldn’t lie to Rodge, even if I’d wanted to.”
“I don’t hate you, Jack,” Zach said in a voice that was thick with the tears he had held back. “You’re my brother.”

Somehow that made Jackson feel even worse. It seemed like everyone was giving him special treatment and he didn’t deserve it: Josie letting Jackson keep secrets, Zach forgiving him… Hell, even his parents for helping him get away from Beacon Hills and letting a high school student live halfway around the world alone. Even if they didn’t know that he wasn’t actually alone anymore.

But Jackson really didn’t want to think about Isaac anymore. He didn’t want to think about Zach and Hannah either, but with Zach sniffing back tears a few steps away, it was kind of difficult. Jackson thought about offering support somehow, but he didn’t really know how to go about it. Still, Jackson felt like he was supposed to do something; just leaving after the way he and Rodger had shown up seemed rude (at best).

Why did this shit have to be so complicated? Jackson wasn’t exactly a romantic, but if two people liked each other as much as Hannah and Zach seemed to, they should be able to be together. But the normal rules didn’t apply to supernatural creatures and the people who hunted them. Rodger’s story just reaffirmed everything Jackson had been saying; it was too dangerous.

It wasn’t like Jackson had wanted to be right about this. Jackson wanted Zach to be happy, he really did. But he wanted Zach to be safe more. He also wanted Zach to not be angry with him anymore. Actually, Jackson wanted to stop fighting with everyone: Zach, Hannah, Rodger, Isaac… especially Isaac, who Jackson now had to go home and confront after ignoring him for most of the day, and the very idea of dealing with that right now exhausted Jackson to his core.

“How…” Jackson rubbed at his face wearily, swallowing his pride with difficulty. “Can I stay here tonight?”

There was a long pause during which Jackson was sure that Zach was going to tell him to fuck off.

“But you can,” said Zach. He gave Jackson a weak smile and gestured for him to come farther into the room. “My den is your den.”

Chapter End Notes

SO MUCH DRAMAZ D: Why can’t everybody just get along? Thank you all so much for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate all of you!

Savenna Cloverunner

P.S. In case you haven’t seen it, we’ve started posting a short multi-part side story for this fic about Hannah and Zach! It’s not in any way essential for you to read it in order to keep up with this fic, but if you are interested in Zach/Hannah (Zanna), we think you’ll really enjoy it. It’s called The Strength of the Wolf: Star-Crossed, and Part I has been posted here.
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; 
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: PUZZLE PIECES (Justin Young)

Lying here and I can’t fall asleep;  
I’m just listening to you breathe.  
I miss the way it was before.

It was strange, sleeping on a pillow that smelled like Zach and Hannah rather than Isaac. Jackson woke up disoriented and lonely in a way he hadn’t in a while. Lonely wasn’t exactly new territory for Jackson, but he hadn’t realized how tired of it he’d gotten until he hadn’t had to deal with it anymore. He’d thought that having a pack meant he’d never have to worry about loneliness again. Apparently he’d been wrong.

The sun wasn’t even up yet, but Zach was already sitting at his desk, typing on his computer, probably still trying to finish the paper he’d been working on when Jackson and Rodger had shown
up the night before. Zach had kept working on it after Jackson had decided to stay over, and he’d seemed to have finished it before basically stumbling into the small bed with Jackson, pressing up close against him, and falling asleep almost instantly. But Jackson knew that Zach could be a perfectionist, and he wouldn’t have been surprised at all if he was working on a whole new draft of the paper.

“You know they don’t give anything higher than an A1, right? I’m sure it’s already great,” Jackson said through a yawn as he sat up.

“Good morning to you too, Jack,” Zach said without looking up from his screen. “Sleep alright?”

Jackson shrugged. He hadn’t, really. Between feeling guilty about telling Rodger about Hannah (or at least, making it obvious to Rodger that there was something to be worried about), feeling guilty about his brisk text telling Isaac that he wasn’t going to be back that night, and still being a little angry about the whole situation in the first place, Jackson’s dreams had had plenty to work with. And as nice as it had been having Zach sleep next to him (even though he snored), Zach wasn’t… Well, he wasn’t Isaac.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to share why you’re hiding at mine?” Zach was still typing while he talked.

“I’m not hiding.”

Zach finally turned around in his chair and raised an eyebrow at Jackson. “Are you expecting me to believe that you stayed over last night for my benefit?”

Jackson shifted awkwardly and looked away.

“Honestly, Jack, this isn’t a crisis,” said Zach. “Just because you and your boyfriend had a little spat—”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Jackson said firmly.

“He might be if you’d get out of your own way and ask him to be.”

Zach made it sound so easy, so logical, but to Jackson it could not have been more difficult or complicated. He hardly knew where to begin trying to explain that to Zach.

“Even if I wanted that, which I don’t,” said Jackson, “that’s not what Isaac does.”

“People change,” said Zach. And Jackson had to admit he was right; whoever Jackson and Isaac had been back in Beacon Hills didn’t even exist any more. It had only been a year, but they’d both come a long way from being the popular lacrosse captain and the introverted nobody. Hell, they had practically switched places when it came to social confidence and fashion sense.

“He did,” said Jackson. “And he likes the way he is now.”

“You like the way he is now, too,” Zach countered.

Jackson snorted. “Yeah, it’s awesome sleeping with someone who’s only doing it because it’s convenient and they’re leaving soon.” The words came out almost against Jackson’s will, and with a lot more bitterness than he’d intended.

“Your life would be so much easier if you could actually believe that, wouldn’t it?” said Zach. “But you don’t. Not really.”
“So you know exactly how I feel, huh?” said Jackson, bristling. He really didn’t need this from Zach right now.

“I know that you’re being a stubborn brat who’s too proud to admit how lucky he is and appreciate it.” There was an unexpected note of bitterness in Zach’s tone now, too.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you’ve no idea,” said Zach, suddenly angry. “No fucking idea how difficult it is for me. I try to make it look easy, but it’s not. It’s complicated and awkward and painful and bloody lonely sometimes. But not with Hannah. A girl like her understanding who I am and not just accepting it, but liking it? That’s a bloody miracle.”

“Zach—”

“You haven’t got a clue,” Zach continued, talking over Jackson, “what you and Rodge are asking me to do. What you’re telling me to give up. You two barge in here saying how reckless and selfish I’m being about Hannah, meanwhile you’ve essentially got special permission from our alpha to fuck an omega who works with her dad.”

Jackson was speechless. He’d never seen Zach even close to this angry before, and it felt like it had come out of nowhere.

“It’s an insult,” said Zach. “Can’t you see that? I’ve got the courage to make a go of it with Hannah and I’m essentially told that I could start a war by trying to be happy. You’re too scared to admit that you feel something for Isaac and everyone looks the other way while he sleeps in your bed every night and shags you six ways from Sunday. It’s so easy for you, Jack, and you refuse to see it. If you want to be blind to that, I can’t stop you, but I’d appreciate if you weren’t blind to what’s going on with me.”

Jackson was speechless. He’d never seen Zach even close to this angry before, and it felt like it had come out of nowhere.

“Look, I… I know you and Rodge are right. Hannah and me, it’s dangerous. Not just for me and for the pack, but her as well. If her family found out…” He made a sound that was part frustration, part despair. “I keep thinking that maybe if I were stronger, I could fight it. But I can’t.”

The anguish on Zach’s face, the emotion that was rolling off him, quelled thoughts that Zach was being a little melodramatic about his romantic situation. All of Jackson’s senses were now telling him that Zach was in real, physical pain.

On instinct, Jackson took Zach’s wrist in his hand to take some of the pain away, but it didn’t work; Jackson could still sense Zach’s pain, but he couldn’t draw it out.
Zach emitted a strained half-laugh. “I appreciate the effort, Jack, but it’s no use.”

“What’s happening to you?” Jackson was genuinely alarmed now. This wasn’t just heartache or internal conflict. Zach was hurting.

“It’ll sound ridiculous to you,” said Zach. “Hell, it sounds ridiculous to me. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”

“Tell me,” Jackson insisted, then added, “Please.”

Zach sighed deeply. “Well, since you’ve asked so politely…”

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Ten days.

The thought hit Isaac like a bulldozer the second he woke up at--he checked the clock on his phone--five-thirteen Monday morning. He had ten days left to figure out how to stop the graveyard monster. Ten days and no leads and a pit in his stomach when he realized that Jackson really hadn’t come home last night.

Sure, Jackson had texted the night before and told Isaac that he was staying at Zach’s, but Jackson hadn’t said why, he hadn’t come back to pick anything up… The fact that, on top of all that, Jackson had left the previous morning before Isaac had woken up made the message pretty clear: Jackson didn’t feel like spending his spare time with Isaac anymore.

Which was fine. Isaac didn’t need the distraction anyway, hunting on a deadline. If Jackson was over Isaac, that was fine. That’s what Isaac had said when they had started having sex on a regular basis, right? That it was Jackson’s call.

*Ball’s in your court, Whittemore.*

Not like Isaac had been subtle about what he wanted, but he had let Jackson dictate how far things went, how fast, and although the ‘Isaac-won’t-do-anything-to-Jackson-that-Jackson-doesn’t-do-to-Isaac-first’ rule hadn’t actually lasted long, it had helped Jackson get more comfortable. Which was why Isaac was a little confused now. They’d been having fun together, hadn’t they? Isaac was still having fun. When had Jackson stopped?

But really, it was fine if Jackson didn’t want to sleep with Isaac anymore. Isaac was more worried about the fact that Jackson would rather not sleep at home than just tell Isaac that. What did Jackson think Isaac was going to do? Sure, Isaac didn’t like the idea of going back to being just friends with Jackson, but if that was what Jackson wanted, Isaac would respect that. In any case, he definitely didn’t want to make Jackson feel like he couldn’t be comfortable in his own apartment.

Besides, Isaac really did have work to do. He was going to figure out what the monster was and then he and the Bristows would stop it from killing anyone else and Isaac would go back to France and everything would be fine. In ten days. Until then…

Until then Isaac would back off, he decided with a frustrated sigh. If any moves were going to be made, they would have to be made by Jackson. That would be the only way Isaac would know that he wasn’t making Jackson feel obligated to keep having sex with him.

It was a shame, though, because even though there was sometimes awkwardness now when they weren’t sleeping together, when they were kissing and flirting and fucking, things were good. No, things were fucking amazing between them. But only then. If only Jackson didn’t have school and Isaac didn’t have hunting, they could ride out the next ten days pretty damned pleasantly.
Isaac rolled over and pressed his face into Jackson’s pillow. At some point during the night, he’d gone from being on his side of the bed to Jackson’s. Probably force of habit. Of course, Jackson was usually there, radiating body heat.

...No, Jackson wasn’t usually there; he was always there. Isaac had never slept in Jackson’s bed without Jackson before. He hadn’t thought about it at the time, but Isaac had probably only been able to fall asleep there last night because he had been sure on some level that Jackson would be back by the time he woke up.

Isaac needed to sleep more. He needed at least another four hours of sleep (double what he figured he’d already gotten that night), a break in the monster case, and a good lay and everything would be fine. That wasn’t too much to ask for, right? And if the lay wasn’t Jackson, well, he’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

Okay, backing off. Step one: Isaac pulled the blankets around him, grabbed his pillow, and headed for the couch. He wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep in the bed without Jackson anyway.

As far as Isaac could tell, it wasn’t the sound of Jackson getting home that woke him up again; it was the awareness of someone else being in the room with him. Even without opening his eyes, Isaac could tell Jackson was looking at him, watching him sleep or (more likely) wondering why he was sleeping on the couch.

“Something’s wrong with the bed,” Isaac managed through sleep-heavy lips. “ Couldn’t sleep.”

After a few seconds of silence, Isaac wondered if he had been wrong, if the feeling had just been wishful thinking, and opened his eyes just in time to see Jackson disappear into the bedroom.

And suddenly the couch didn’t seem so comfortable anymore, and Isaac started to wonder if ten days was going to be too long. He hated the awkwardness. Maybe the Bristows would let him stay with them instead? It was a long shot, and Isaac didn’t really like the idea much (it would probably be just as awkward there, though a different kind of awkward), but at least he wouldn’t be in Jackson’s way.

Isaac thought about saying something else, remarking on the time or asking Jackson what he’d been up to, maybe. But then he heard the bathroom door shut and it made it easier to stay quiet.

“Do you need anything before I leave for school?”

Isaac blinked up at Jackson. He was wearing his uniform now, his bag slung over his shoulder. Isaac must have dozed off for a few minutes. He pulled himself up into a sitting position and rubbed his eyes, then checked the time on his phone. Jackson would have to hurry, but he wasn’t quite late yet. There was probably a little time for… But no, Isaac had already decided that he needed to let Jackson make the next move, which didn’t seem very likely at this point.

“I’m fine, or, I will be after few more hours of sleep.” Isaac let his head fall back against the arm of the couch. “All this time to myself has been great for my research but bad for my sleep pattern.”

“Any idea what it is yet?” Jackson asked. The question sounded forced, reminding Isaac that Jackson had always been unhappy and reluctant about Isaac’s involvement with hunters. This thing between Zach and Hannah just hadn’t helped the situation.
“Oh yeah,” Isaac yawned. “I’ve totally got this. By this time next week, that thing will be as good as caught.”

Did sarcasm count as lying if you sounded totally serious and actually really needed what you were saying to be the truth? Was it even still sarcasm?

Either way, Jackson didn’t say anything, just frowned a little more deeply and headed for the door.

Isaac’s last thought before falling back asleep was that Jackson’s hair had looked good.

A **mate bond**. If Zach hadn’t been so serious and obviously upset when he’d told Jackson about it, Jackson wouldn’t have believed him. How could that be a real thing? Jackson could accept the existence of monsters with supernatural powers--especially since he **was** one--but this felt like it had more to do with fate (or God, or whatever people put their faith in) than with magic. And Jackson didn’t believe in any of those things.

Still, a lot of things Jackson hadn’t believed in had turned out to be true. Zach had said that Rodger and Bronagh had a mate bond, and that Will was bonded to Helen. Why hadn’t someone mentioned any of that to Jackson before? Had the pack kept it from him deliberately, or was it just something that proper werewolves understood and took for granted?

In any case, Jackson couldn’t deny the pain Zach was feeling. Apparently even the idea of not being with Hannah hurt Zach, so of course his packmates telling him to break up with her would make him feel pretty damned shitty. No wonder Zach had snapped at Jackson; he was in an impossible situation. Jackson would’ve given almost anything to help fix it for Zach, but it was too late now. All Jackson could do now was regret having ever let Zach cross paths with Isaac.

Isaac. Yet another thing for Jackson to worry about. Jackson hadn’t forgotten Rodger’s warning from the previous night: if something to do with Isaac or Hannah put Jackson, Zach, or the pack in danger, Rodger would almost definitely tell Josie. How could he not? Jackson would, if he were in Rodger’s place. Jackson hated keeping things from Josie, and even though she had been forgiving about Jackson letting an omega stay at his flat without telling her, he doubted that she could afford to be as lenient if she found out the omega was also a hunter. God, even if he managed to keep it a secret for the next ten days, until Isaac left, what if Josie found out about it later? Would she punish Jackson retroactively? What if--

“Mr. Whittemore!”

A firm voice startled Jackson from his thoughts, which had apparently kept him from paying attention to class for the past ten minutes. Cautiously, he looked up from his desk at his Physics teacher.

“Yes, sir?”

“I asked you a question.”

Jackson flushed in embarrassment. He hadn’t heard the question; how was he supposed to answer it?

“I… I’m sorry, sir. What was the question?”

“I don’t see a reason why I ought to waste my time repeating it,” the teacher said sternly. A group of boys sitting nearby sniggered and Jackson’s blush intensified. The teacher flashed a menacing look at them and singled one out: “Mr. Miller, please inform Mr. Whittemore of my question.”
Miller gave Jackson a haughty smile and said, “What is the difference between centripetal and centrifugal force?”

Jackson’s heart sank. He had no idea what the difference was. He remembered the terms from his homework, but his brain was so full of other problems that he hadn’t been able to absorb the information properly. He found himself running his fingers through his hair nervously as he desperately tried to remember something useful, but all that did was remind him that Isaac hadn’t ‘fixed’ his hair that morning, because Isaac hadn’t offered and Jackson hadn’t wanted to ask. He didn’t want to rely on Isaac anymore.

The humiliation from that class followed Jackson through the rest of his miserable Monday. On the walk back to his flat he kept going back and forth between desperately wanting to jump Isaac as soon as he got home so they could fuck until Jackson forgot about how shitty his day had been, and worrying that things would be excruciatingly awkward between them and Jackson’s shitty day would get even worse.

It turned out that it was awkward. Isaac smiled at Jackson when he came home, and asked him if he wanted to order takeaway. Jackson said that sounded good, but the conversation trailed off before they actually decided on something specific.

It felt to Jackson like Isaac had something he wanted to say to him, but he hadn’t yet worked up the nerve to say it. And the silence Isaac was offering instead was becoming physically painful to Jackson. He either needed to start a conversation or leave the flat again right now.

He decided on the first option. Even though the first topic that sprung to mind was not a pleasant one.

“Rodger made me go with him to talk to Zach last night,” said Jackson, like it was some kind of confession. “Sarah was talking about Hannah at the den and he asked me about her. I couldn’t lie.”

Logically, Jackson didn’t need to tell Isaac any of this. It didn’t really concern Isaac, and if he found out eventually through Hannah (if Zach even told Hannah), Isaac probably wouldn’t blame Jackson. But Jackson felt so guilty, even though he had no reason to; he hadn’t gotten Zach into this mess—in fact, he had tried very hard to keep him out of it—but he was still mixed up in it, and his brother was hurting, and Jackson couldn’t do anything to help.

When Isaac didn’t say anything, Jackson rushed on. “You can’t go out without me or Zach anymore, okay? It’s not safe. If Rodger finds out, he might tell Josie you’re a hunter, and I can’t protect you.”

Jackson turned away from Isaac, cheeks flushed with self-consciousness about what he’d just said. He was sure Isaac would give him some smart-mouthed response about how Jackson actually cared, and Jackson didn’t think he could handle that right now.

He could hear Isaac getting up from the couch and walking toward him, but Jackson didn’t look up, even when Isaac stopped to stand directly in front of him, close enough that Jackson could feel his body heat.

“I don’t need protecting,” Isaac said seriously (for once). “But I won’t go out without one of you guys anymore. Promise.”

Jackson flinched at the word ‘promise,’ and Isaac seemed to have realized the misstep as soon as he said it, because he quickly added, in a lighter tone, “Besides, I can think of a ton of stuff I’d rather do in here than anything out there.”
The suggestion in Isaac’s voice finally made Jackson look at him, the now-familiar-but-never-boring feeling of want forming in the pit of his stomach. He hated that Isaac could spark that in him without even trying. He hated how much he had come to rely on Isaac to help him escape, and he knew it was going to come back to bite him in the ass when Isaac left and Jackson had no outlet for his stress and no anchor.

But he also couldn’t help but think about what Zach had said— that Jackson complaining about Isaac was an insult to Zach. If things were going to be fucked up no matter what, why fight it?

Jackson honestly didn’t know who kissed who first. One moment he was staring up into Isaac’s lust-darkened eyes, and the next his hands were gripping the front of Isaac’s shirt while Isaac’s fingers were tangled in his hair, and they were play-fighting for dominance with lips and teeth and tongues.

The fuzzier Jackson’s head got, the lighter his heart became, and soon he was smiling. This was easy. This was fun. He should get as much of this as he possibly could while he still had the chance. He could deal with whatever happened after that later.

So his plan to back off hadn’t even made it to step two, but Isaac couldn’t really say he was sorry for that. Isaac laughed against Jackson’s lips, relieved to still have this, even if it was only for a little while longer. The tension between them dissolved, and it was like everything was back to normal (whatever that meant for the two of them). It felt that way from the moment they fell into bed together, kissing and fumbling to strip off each other’s clothes, to the moment Jackson got out of bed in the morning and didn’t say anything to Isaac while he got ready for school.

It continued pretty much like that for the rest of the week: Jackson came home every evening, and after several incredibly awkward hours where Jackson would do homework and Isaac would watch something to take his mind off the fact that, despite spending every day researching until his brain was numb, he still had no leads on the monster. Then he’d make dinner or order takeaway and they would put on *Breaking Bad* to keep from having to deal with the fact that they didn’t talk anymore.

Like, at all.

Isaac would’ve worried that Jackson had gone mute if Jackson wasn’t so vocal when they were having sex. Sex was the one thing that still worked between them. And the more stressed out Isaac got about the case, the more he needed to distract himself with Jackson, to focus on putting all of his energy towards something constructive, like seeing how loud Isaac could get Jackson to shout his name.

Maybe if Isaac could make Jackson forget about the world for a while, he could forget, too. After all, that was how it had worked in Paris.

When he’d first gotten to Paris, Isaac had been lost; without a home, a country, a family… Sure, he’d had Chris, but it had taken a while for them both to settle into the idea of him being ‘Uncle Chris’ to Isaac.

Isaac had started by living day-to-day, sometimes moment-to-moment, mostly because it had been less painful than being conscious of the past. Those first two weeks of sexual exploration had been less romance and more desperate escapism for Isaac. He had hooked up with every pretty person he’d found and had focused less on what he’d felt and more on what he hadn’t.

The first boy he’d hooked up with had made Isaac not feel so sad, so lonely; it was an addicting reprieve. The next night it had been a pretty girl who’d distracted him from his grief, from his guilt,
and on it had gone.

He had never felt angry, though. Isaac didn’t have it in him to be angry, didn’t have the energy for it. Besides, who would he direct it at? The nogitsune, for everything it had done? Stiles, for not being able to stop the nogitsune from possessing and using Stiles’ body? Kira’s mother, for not calling off the oni? Allison... Allison, for being so recklessly brave and selfless, for giving her life to save one that wasn’t worth as much?

Isaac wasn’t suicidal or anything, but he knew what he was worth compared with other people, and he objectively wasn’t worth as much as Allison had been. If Isaac had been killed by the oni, a few people would’ve been sad for a while, but nobody had really needed him. He had accepted that, and he was okay with it. But people had needed Allison: Scott and Lydia and Chris... Chris most of all.

Chris had needed Allison, not Isaac. Isaac could only be grateful that Chris had taken pity on him during those first days of grief; that Chris had understood how impossible it would’ve been for Isaac to stay in Beacon Hills after that. Isaac still wasn’t sure he could ever go back. What was there for him to go back to there anyway?

Nothing but the bone-deep sorrow that filled the space in him that he wished was anger. Anger, Isaac could deal with, but this…

Chris had said he could compartmentalize his feelings, and most of the time Chris had been able to. But living in close quarters with him, Isaac had started to pick up on the flickers of grief that seeped through the cracks in Chris’s carefully constructed emotional wall. Isaac knew from experience what building that kind of wall does to a person. He’d tried, but never fully succeeded, in building one for himself. And Isaac had never lost a kid…

There had been more than a few moments in France when Isaac had known on instinct to leave Chris alone for a while. Moments when a certain name was almost said, or worse, half-said and cut off. Moments when it was clear that Chris couldn’t replace a daughter with a son (hell, he couldn’t replace a daughter with another daughter, but the point still stood). Moments when, in the middle of teaching Isaac how to use a crossbow or a knife, Chris would have to stop and Isaac would know he should go out and come back later. (They had come to a silent agreement that neither of them would touch the Chinese ring daggers.)

More quickly than he would have thought possible, Isaac had become used to his new life away from Beacon Hills. He had started to really enjoy the training, the sex, the adventure of it all. He had finally found things he was good at. He had carved out a place for himself in the here-and-now and left the there-and-then firmly behind him. The future--the where-and-when--also didn’t concern him. He’d deal with ‘when’ when it became ‘now’ and in the meantime, immersed himself in solving puzzles: namely, hunting-related cases, and pretty people.

It had been Isaac’s interest in solving the puzzle that was Jackson that had made him want to fuck Jackson in the first place. Well, that and the fact that Jackson was undeniably gorgeous and funny and even pretty nice once in a while. Why wouldn’t someone want to fuck Jackson?

But now Isaac was fucking Jackson on a regular basis, and he didn’t feel like he was getting remotely close to ‘solving’ him. For a while, especially after Jackson had kissed him, Isaac had felt like he’d been making some progress. But now it was like Jackson wasn’t even really there, or at least acknowledging Isaac in some way, except when they were having sex.

Well, if sex was his only opportunity to figure Jackson out, and progress was slow, then Isaac would just have to try harder. He’d make the most of the time they had left, give Jackson as much
attention as possible, and hopefully Isaac would learn more about Jackson in the process. He didn’t want to leave London with this particular case unsolved.

It kept getting worse. The awkwardness. The fact that now neither one of them said anything to each other that they wouldn’t say to a stranger in an elevator. Jackson was beginning to dread the period of time between when he got home and when he and Isaac inevitably ended up naked in Jackson’s bed together. A small part of him still hoped that one day he’d come home and Isaac would be his unbearably obnoxious, snarky self again instead of the polite stranger he had become lately. Jackson knew that person was still in there, because he got to see him during sex.

And the sex was good. In fact, it was really good. But pretty much every moment they weren’t in the middle of it, or in foreplay or afterglow, Jackson was starting to feel anxious about it. And he was torn. It wasn’t like he wanted Isaac to be his boyfriend or some shit like that, and they both knew the score: Isaac was leaving soon. Jackson was (mostly) prepared to deal with that. But he hadn’t thought that having sex with Isaac would mean that they wouldn’t hang out as much, that they wouldn’t really talk as much (or at all) anymore.

Was Jackson doing something wrong? Had he offended Isaac somehow, maybe by not coming home the other night or something? Or was this just how Isaac was after he’d finally gotten what he wanted from somebody? Maybe Isaac was getting bored with Jackson. It wouldn’t be all that surprising, after all. As far as Jackson knew, Isaac’s sex life had mostly consisted of one-night stands until now. Maybe Isaac wanted to fool around with other people again.

But then, why not just do that? Why keep having sex with Jackson instead of going out to clubs again? Jackson didn’t have a claim on Isaac, and though Jackson would feel kind of shitty about it, at least if Isaac said he wanted to ‘have fun’ with other people, Jackson would know what was going on.

...Except that Isaac had been forbidden to go out without Jackson or Zach. Which meant he couldn’t go to a club without Jackson. Which meant he couldn’t go home with someone else. Which meant that maybe the explanation for Isaac’s distantness was the worst possibility: that Isaac was only fucking Jackson because Jackson was convenient. Because he was there. Because Isaac lived with him, and he knew Jackson wouldn’t say no.

And it was true; as much as he was kind of starting to hate himself for it afterwards, Jackson never said no. It felt too good, and not just physically. It felt good to have that connection, felt good to be wanted, to have someone’s complete attention for a little while. Isaac’s attention. Which had been so focused on Jackson lately that Isaac barely allowed Jackson to reciprocate now. Was that also a sign that Isaac was getting bored? Was Isaac having to do more to Jackson because nothing Jackson did to him was interesting enough? Now that was a depressing thought.

When had Isaac’s attention, his approval, started to matter so much to Jackson?

Jackson had been fine on his own, hadn’t he? He’d had his flat, and his pack, and he would’ve worked out his control issues eventually. Isaac had basically arrived uninvited and screwed everything up. Jackson’s life would’ve been so much easier if Isaac hadn’t bothered looking for him in the first place.

Easier, yes. But not as good. Not as bad, either, but still. Would Jackson trade it, if he could?

Two days. Isaac had two fucking days left to figure out what the monster was and how to stop it and everything was not going to be fine.
Isaac had been so sure that he would be able to figure it out. But even with Hannah helping him research and the hunters following up on Isaac’s discovery that the monster travelled by burrowing tunnels, they had yet to come up with anything that would be useful when the monster started killing people again in two days.

Oh, and if that wasn’t bad enough, it could actually be just one day if the monster decided to make an appearance the day before the new moon like it sometimes had in the past.

Isaac felt more like a fraud than ever. It wasn’t like he’d solved the mystery of the Darach or the Kanima or the cases in Paris on his own; he’d always had other people working on the problem, too. Had he been kidding himself thinking he knew enough to do this without help? Sure, the Bristows were ‘help,’ but there was a lot of pressure on Isaac to bring his A-game after Chris had talked him up as a ‘werewolf consultant.’ Maybe Isaac should have asked Chris to be involved in this case, or hell, he could’ve called Scott and Stiles. Any one of them was a better detective than Isaac. But they also each had their own problems to solve. This one was Isaac’s. If he didn’t learn how to work without that support now, when would he?

Jackson was still at school, meaning that Isaac couldn’t use him to distract himself the way he had been lately, especially the last few days. And watching quiz shows wouldn’t be distracting enough. He needed something that he could concentrate on.

What he would really like to do was go for a walk, but he couldn’t leave the flat without Jackson or Zach.

Isaac needed to get his mind off everything for a while, just a little bit, then he would be able to focus on the monster problem. Luckily, a quick search of the flat turned up the last book he’d bought at the used book store around the corner: *Othello*. Isaac hadn’t had time to read it yet with everything else going on and he knew that just trying to keep up with the prose would keep his mind pretty occupied.

At least, until he reached Act One, Scene 3.

*Holy shit.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for all the angsty introspection! Wouldn't everything be so much easier if these boys just *talked* to each other? As always, thank you all so much for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate all of you!

*ALSO, if you read* The Strength of the Wolf: Star Crossed, *which is a short side series about Hannah and Zach, we're planning on posting a chapter of it within the next day or so. If you haven't read part 1 already, you can find it* here: *Savenna Cloverunner*
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back; 
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: KILL ALL YOUR FRIENDS (My Chemical Romance)

You’ll never take me alive.
You’ll never take me alive.
Do what it takes to survive
‘cause I’m still here.

“This is a bad idea,” Isaac muttered to himself for what must have been the thousandth time that night.

Beside him, Hannah sighed for what must have been the thousandth time that night. “Stop it, Wolf, your idea is great.”

“Look, I’ve had a lot of bad ideas in my life. I’m kind of an expert when it comes to bad ideas, so
trust me when I say, this is a very bad idea.”

“You’ve managed to convince several senior hunters otherwise,” Hannah said wryly.

“That’s because I’m a good liar, not a good tactician.”

“Isaac.” Hannah trapped his hand between hers and the gravestone it had been resting on. Well, not resting really; he’d been tapping out a nervous beat with his fingers without even noticing. Hannah squeezed his hand reassuringly, and only continued talking when Isaac looked her in the eye. “It’s a good plan.”

But despite her reassurances, Isaac wasn’t convinced. Even a few hours ago when they had been buying the pigs, the plan had still seemed pretty reasonable. But now that they were crouched behind tombstones in the middle of the night, actually waiting for the monster to show up, Isaac couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going to go terribly wrong.

And if anyone got hurt tonight, it would be Isaac’s fault.

“I’m not qualified for this!” Isaac insisted again. “I pulled a little girl from a mud puddle and convinced a couple of wolves they didn’t all want the same piece of shitty land! Who the fuck in their right mind would trust me to come up with the plan?”

“My dad, that’s who,” Hannah said sternly. “Listen, Wolf. If you don’t believe in this, no one will. So get your shit together and believe in yourself. Alright?”

Isaac tried, but he couldn’t keep the small smirk from his lips. “That was the scariest pep talk anyone has ever given me.”

“Oh, bugger off.” Hannah shoved his shoulder affectionately with hers.

Isaac put his ear against the tombstone again and turned his attention back to listening for the monster’s approach.

After a few minutes, Hannah blew out a quiet breath and turned around so that her back was pressed against the tombstone. Isaac watched her double-check (or triple-check, or quadruple-check) her crossbow and recount the bolts in the built-in quiver.

“So how exactly did you figure out what it was?” Hannah asked, eyes scanning the graveyard behind Isaac. “You’ve been a little vague on that.”

Isaac had probably been vague on a lot of things since he had discovered the name of the creature in the last place he’d expected.

“‘And of the Cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders,’” Isaac quoted.

“Was that something from the bestiary?” Hannah asked.

“Nope. Othello,” he said with a small laugh.

Searching the bestiary for the term ‘Anthropophagi’ had turned up much more useful information. It even had its own entry. However, nobody had thought to include ‘headless’ in the description (probably because nobody would have believed it without seeing the monster firsthand), which explained why searching for it in the bestiary hadn’t worked before. What was in the description was a point of origin, which a quick Google search had shown to be a small island in the
Caribbean.

So the creature was used to warmer temperatures, possibly hibernating underground between the new moons to conserve energy. But what was it doing so far from home?

Another half hour or so of research had turned up a relatively recent news article about a blight of some kind killing most of the flora on the island, causing disastrous repercussions for the local wildlife and forcing most of the people who had lived there to relocate.

So that was why; no food left on the island. But how the fuck had it ended up in England?

Well, that was a different problem. Isaac had only needed to figure out how to stop it.

A headless human-eater from the tropics that had crossbow-resistant skin and no obvious weaknesses. How was Isaac supposed to come up for a plan for fighting that in a day? Everything had to have a weakness, though, right? Isaac stared down at a drawing of an anthropophage, wracking his brain.

The answer had struck him instantly and palpably. How could he have been so oblivious? The monster’s weakness was obvious.

“Its mouth,” Isaac had announced when he had laid out his plan for the hunters. “All we should have to do is tranq its food and we’ll be able to catch it.”

“Are you suggesting we poison some poor victim and let your beastie eat them?” George had asked, apparently shocked. Isaac had been slightly insulted that the hunter had thought Isaac would casually suggest poisoning a human as part of his plan. It shouldn’t have been very surprising coming from George, though. In George’s eyes, Isaac probably had more in common with anthropophagi than humans.

“Wouldn’t that be the opposite of saving people from the Anthropophage?” Isaac had retorted, biting back a more hostile response. “No. Aside from people, before the blight, the island had a big wild boar population. I figure maybe pig might’ve been their next choice when the other white meat wasn’t available.”

“And that might be enough to bait this one,” James had finished for him, nodding. “It’s as good a suggestion as any, and better than what we’ve come up with so far. And I think I know just the concoction to keep the pigs active for long enough to get the monster’s attention.”

“We’re also going to need earplugs. And goggles,” Isaac had said, thinking about how the Anthropophage had tricked them with sound, then proceeded to pelt them with dirt to escape. And they still didn’t know what other tricks the monster might have up its sleeve--neither the bestiary nor the Internet had given Isaac much to work with--but it would have to be enough.

“Are we doing the right thing?” Isaac asked Hannah, taking a quick break to rub his ear before pressing it back to the tombstone. “I mean, shouldn’t we be worried that that your family wants to catch the monster to study it? I guess it makes sense since there’s not much in the bestiaries about it, but still.”

Isaac was still listening for the Anthropophage to show up, but he couldn’t help wonder what was going to happen when it did. All of his other hunts had focused on killing something bad and/or rescuing someone good. Capture was a whole new level of complicated, and Hannah’s family was being kind of weird and secretive about it.

“They’re just trying to be responsible.” But Hannah didn’t sound convinced by her own words. “If
we learn more about it, we can protect people better next time something like this shows up.”

Isaac sighed. “And I get that. But where are they going to keep it? How?”

“I don’t know,” said Hannah. “I guess we’ll deal with that once we have it.”

“Speaking of things we’ve been putting off, you decided what you’re going to do yet?” Isaac asked.

Hannah had told him that Wendy had confronted her last week about the way she had been sneaking out to see Zach. Not to mention the not-so-subtle threat that if Hannah continued to fraternize with werewolves, her family might have to take drastic measures. Between that and Rodger confronting Zach, it didn’t sound like Zach and Hannah had been able to spend much time together lately. For the first time, Isaac was considering the idea that maybe Jackson hadn’t been overreacting to the potential danger of Hannah’s and Zach’s relationship.

Hannah’s face hardened. “Let’s just get through tonight first.”

Isaac found himself agreeing with her. They didn’t need to invite distraction, not tonight. That was why any thoughts of Jackson—and how distant he’d become and how Isaac hadn’t seen him since he had left to stay with the hunters until after the new moon so that Isaac would have more freedom of motion to work on putting this plan together—had to be pushed to the back of his mind until after the hunt. Jackson probably hadn’t even noticed Isaac was gone, anyway, or at least hadn’t cared. After all, Jackson had school, so Isaac being around and having to come and go would have just been inconvenient for Jackson.

Nope, stop it. Isaac shook his head to clear it. No more thoughts of Jackson, not until this was over.

“Isaac, we’ve got a problem.”

“Oh, good,” Isaac drawled. “Because everything was going so well before. I was getting kinda bored, actually.”

“Guess who decided to crash our party?”

“Don’t tell me,” said Isaac. But he was pretty sure he already knew.

“This is a bad idea,” Jackson growled, following Zach as he weaved between gravestones, trying to stay low and out of sight.

“Well, I didn’t hear you suggesting a better one,” Zach snapped.

Jackson bit back a comment about how staying home had been a better idea. What good were they going to do Isaac and Hannah if some hunter shot them for being where they shouldn’t be?

Still, Jackson did have to admit (though only to himself) that, as dumb and dangerous as this plan was, it felt a lot better than doing nothing, which was what they’d been doing for the past two days.

When Jackson had gotten back to his building after school on Monday, a familiar scent had been lingering in the foyer. As soon as he had identified it, he’d practically launched himself up the stairs to his flat, where he had found Zach sitting on the floor outside his door.

“What’s wrong?” Jackson had said, heart pounding. Because why else would Zach have been at Jackson’s flat unannounced unless something bad had happened?
Zach had gotten up and shaken his head. “It’s okay. I’m okay. It’s just that, er…”

“Tell me.”

“Isaac’s gone to the Bristows’. I escorted him out of Holborn territory a few hours ago.”

Jackson hadn’t said anything, just opened his front door and let Zach in.

“He tried to call you,” Zach had said.

There had indeed been a missed call from Isaac when Jackson had checked his phone. And a text.

Isaac <3: At the bristows for a couple days. Don’t have too much fun without me

Jackson had decided not to send a response.

Through an unspoken agreement, Zach had basically moved in with Jackson starting that afternoon. They both still went to school, but Zach had been there when Jackson had woken up and when he had come home. They’d watched TV and ate meals together and both slept in Jackson’s bed, but mostly all they had done was worry. Isaac and Hannah were going on a hunt, and there was nothing they could do to help.

On the day of the new moon, Zach had been so antsy that he hadn’t been able to sit down.

“I can’t handle this any longer. I need to help her somehow.”

“She can take care of herself,” Jackson had said, but privately he had been thinking the same thing: he needed to help Isaac somehow. Even though Isaac, too, could take care of himself.

So Jackson had relented, and they had swapped what little information they each knew about the research Isaac and Hannah had been doing about the graveyard monster. Jackson knew which graveyards Isaac had pinpointed as potential sites the monster might target, so after that it would be simple enough to check each of them out and try to catch some sign of hunter activity. Luckily, Jackson had caught the scent of gunmetal as soon as they had gotten to the second graveyard on their list.

Which was how they had ended up here, sneaking through graves, trying not to get spotted, at least not until they’d made sure that Isaac and Hannah were okay. As soon as they were sure, Jackson was going to get Zach out of there as fast as possible, whether he wanted to go or not. A hunting ground was no place for werewolves, and especially not half-wolves who didn’t have healing abilities.

God, this was a really, really bad idea. How the hell had Jackson let Zach talk him into this? Not only would it just be horrible in general if Jackson and/or Zach got hurt by hunters, it could also potentially start a major conflict between Holborn and the Bristows. Their saving grace right now was the fact that Zach was almost better at being a werewolf than Jackson was, at least in terms of staying in the shadows, being aware of his surroundings, and moving without making noise. Jackson had known that Zach had grown up being trained like the rest of the pack, but he had never actually seen Zach in action.

They stopped for a moment behind a particularly large tombstone so Jackson could listen, and it was only a minute before he heard soft footfalls on grass and the low murmur of voices. Jackson put his finger to his lips to indicate to Zach to stay extra quiet while Jackson very slowly and carefully leaned out from behind the tombstone to see who was nearby.
There were two black-clad figures: one unnecessarily tall one and one unusually short one. Jackson let out a breath he had been holding when Isaac’s and Hannah’s faces became visible. He felt an unexpectedly strong rush of relief at seeing Isaac, at knowing that he was safe. Had it really only been two days since Isaac had left?

Jackson considered whispering to Isaac to let him know that they were there--thus decreasing the possibility of Jackson and Zach surprising Isaac and Hannah and getting shot--but Isaac and Hannah were already striding toward the tombstone.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Isaac whispered.

Well, that answered the question of whether Isaac would be pissed at Jackson about this…

Jackson slowly got to his feet, and Zach followed. Hannah looked cross, but she still ran up to Zach, threw her arms around him, and kissed him soundly. Jackson could practically feel the tension in Zach’s muscles ease.

Then Hannah broke the kiss and fixed both Jackson and Zach with a fierce glare.

“Are you two bloody mental?” she hissed.

“Probably,” said Zach. He took Hannah’s hand in his, and she held on to it even as she berated them.

“You need to leave,” she said. “Now. If my family find you here--”

“I know, I know,” Zach said placatingly. “We’ll go. I just needed to know you were okay.”

“Those puppy eyes won’t work on me, Mowgli,” said Hannah, but the corner of her mouth turned up.

“Why the fuck would you bring him here?” Isaac asked Jackson. Isaac’s hostility made Jackson bristle.

“I didn’t bring him here,” Jackson protested. “He would’ve gone alone if I hadn’t come!”

“Go home,” said Isaac. His voice sounded… different. Not like the Isaac Jackson knew. It was unsettling. Isaac gestured to Zach with his chin. “Take him with you.”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed at Isaac’s tone. “You’re putting yourself in danger. We’re just making sure you’re okay.”

“I’m a hunter, Jackson,” said Isaac. “It’s my job to be in danger.”

The words caught Jackson off guard. *I’m a hunter.* Jackson had been aware that hunting was Isaac’s job, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever heard Isaac just explicitly state it like that. It felt like some kind of betrayal, even though it wasn’t new information. It was like Isaac had been straddling a line in the sand, and he had finally chosen a side.

“Fine,” Jackson snapped. “Forget we even came. Have fun hunting.”

Suddenly, Hannah’s hand went to her ear and she turned away from them. Zach frowned.

“Hannah, what--”

“The Anthropophage is here.” She spun back around. “They’ve closed the perimeter.”
“What does that mean?” Jackson asked.

“The mountain ash barrier around the perimeter of the graveyard.” Isaac sighed heavily. “To keep the monster from tunneling away. It means--”

Fear sunk cold in Jackson’s stomach. He finished Isaac’s sentence for him:

“I’m trapped, too.”

“Why is nothing happening? Shouldn’t it be asleep by now?”

“I don’t know, it’s your dad’s drug.” Isaac risked a quick glance around the side of the mausoleum they were hiding behind, not because he was worried about being seen by the Anthropophage, but because watching that thing devour the pigs was disgusting. He didn’t want to see any more of that than he absolutely had to.

Hannah was right, though: the creature had already eaten four gigantic hogs practically whole and it wasn’t even slowing down. Isaac wracked his brain for answers. Maybe they’d miscalculated the monster’s weight and hadn’t used enough of the tranquilizer, maybe it had a natural immunity. Whatever the reason, the monster was still awake, and they were running out of pigs for it to eat. Sooner or later, the monster was going to try to leave, and if the drugs didn’t work, what was to say the mountain ash would?

At least they’d managed to convince Jackson and Zach to find somewhere to hide while Isaac and Hannah got into position to help deal with the monster. After all, the last thing any of them needed was George or Wendy or any of the less werewolf-friendly hunters spotting the two interlopers. Hopefully Jackson and Zach could manage to stay out of the way until this whole thing was finished and the barrier was taken down.

Hannah’s hand went to her earpiece. “They want to move in on the creature, try to subdue it manually,” Hannah whispered to him.

“Right, because that worked so well when we tried it last month.” Isaac rolled his eyes.

“Well, unless you’ve got a better suggestion, and now, my family are going to attack.”

“What they’re going to do is get someone killed.” Isaac needed more time. There had to be a better way than a full-frontal attack. He just had to think of one.

“Too late,” Hannah muttered as the unmistakable sound of crossbows launching filled the air, followed immediately by a loud, pissed-off shriek. Even with the special earbuds they were wearing that only activated when noise was above a certain decibel, the sound was almost unbearable. Isaac hoped Jackson and Zach were okay.

“Damn it! We’ve got to stop it before it decides to go underground,” Isaac growled and launched himself away from the mausoleum they’d been hiding behind and towards the battle. He rounded the corner and was hit immediately by a wall of dirt. He threw his arm up to protect his eyes and backed up until he was out of the worst of it.

“Guess it decided to go underground,” said Hannah, unnecessarily. At least she’d had the forethought to put on her goggles, Isaac noticed. He scrubbed the dirt out of his eyes as best he could and followed suit. He pulled his scarf up until it covered his nose and mouth and dove back into the fray.
They’d been hiding barely ten yards away and Isaac was still too late. By the time he got to the epicenter of the dirt storm, the monster had already vanished underground. All that research, all that planning, and nothing to show for it. Isaac was so angry he could feel his eyes burning gold. He didn’t even care that there were hunters around. Let them see. Right now, Isaac had more important things to worry about.

He dropped to his knees and pressed his ear to the ground so forcefully it hurt his head, trying to focus past the confused shouts of the hunters, listening and feeling for any vibrations coming from underground that they could use to track the Anthropophage. There was something, but it was faint, and moving away fast. Isaac couldn’t pin it down. There were too many people moving around above ground, trains running through the nearby Tube, too much everything.

Isaac sat up, frustrated, and slammed his fist against the ground with a shout. The few hunters that had approached him took several quick steps back. At least they hadn’t trained their weapons on him. Yet, Isaac thought, maybe uncharitably, but he didn’t doubt that George and Wendy were going to spin this somehow, make it Isaac’s fault that the creature had escaped. It wasn’t like they would be wrong. Isaac should’ve come up with a better plan. The Anthropophage was gone, they would have to wait another month for a shot at catching it, and this time, Isaac didn’t think the Bristows were going to invite him to stick around. Isaac’s first big hunt without Chris, and he had failed.

There was one pair of boots that hadn’t backed away at his outburst. Hannah was circling him, looking out, crossbow at the ready. Protecting him, Isaac realized. From the Anthropophage, or from her family? he wondered, with a sinking feeling that maybe he shouldn’t have let his eyes glow.

Just as Isaac opened his mouth to tell her there was no need for that, the vibrations beneath his hand suddenly became more intense.

“Below!” Isaac shouted, lunging for Hannah and throwing them both to the ground a few feet away as an eruption of dirt covered them.

So maybe the monster wasn’t as gone as Isaac had thought.

Somehow, Hannah managed to grab a hold of him by his jacket and started tugging him up. After digging themselves out of the dirt, they used each other as support to quickly put some distance between themselves and the monster. Not that where they were standing would help much with something that could be beneath their feet almost before they knew it.

But why? Why was the Anthropophage still here? Unless... unless the mountain ash worked. It was at that moment that Isaac realized exactly how little he’d expected it to have an effect on the monster. But now that they knew that it could contain the monster, even from tunneling away, the beginning of a back-up plan started to take hold in Isaac’s mind.

“How?” Isaac said slowly, tugging his scarf down from his face. “I think I know how to stop this thing.”

“You sure this time?” Hannah teased. She was remarkably amused for someone under attack, Isaac thought. She was going to make a badass hunter someday.

“As sure as I can be. But I’m not sure you’re going to like it.”

“Try me,” she dared.
“Is there any more mountain ash?”

“Of course,” Hannah said, unclipping a compartment from her belt and shaking it for effect.

“Good. I’m going to need you to round up as much of that as you can, as fast as possible,” said Isaac. “We’re going to have to get a little up close and personal with Mr. Mouth next time he comes above ground.”

“About time you came up with a fun plan, Wolf.” Hannah’s heart was racing, but by the grin on her face, he could tell she was excited. That made one of them at least.

“Tell your family to pull back on my signal. I don’t want anyone getting caught in the crossfire.”

“Oh, you’re going to have to be a bit more specific than that,” Hannah drawled. “What kind of signal?”

“Light,” he murmured, still not sure where exactly he was going with this either. “It’s sensitive to light, that’s why it only comes out to hunt on the darkest night each month.”

Isaac ran a hand through his hair, listening to sounds of what was now undeniably a full-fledged battle raging on around them. Isaac had no idea how they were going to explain this if cops showed up. They were probably already on their way.

Hannah rummaged around in her pack for a moment and produced a flashlight. “Think this would be enough?”

Isaac shook his head. “It’s gotta be something big, something flashy, something...” he trailed off as he caught sight of one of the Bristow vans parked nearby. Isaac scrambled to his feet and made a break for the car, with Hannah close on his heels.

A quick search of the unlocked vehicle turned up a tire iron, a set of jumper cables, more than a few candy bar wrappers, and (as luck would have it) two road flares.

Triumphant, Isaac snatched up the flares and spun around, jumping out of the van and practically crashing into Hannah, who had been looking over his shoulder as he’d been rummaging.

He held them up for her to see. “First flare, your family needs to get as far away from that thing as possible in case it starts tunneling again. Second flare, that’s your cue.”

“And if it does decide to go underground?”

“Then I will be, too. I guess.” Isaac was not looking forward executing to this plan at all, but at least now he had one.

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Stay out of the way. Those had been Isaac’s exact words before Hannah had managed to convince Zach with a gentler approach (and another kiss) that Jackson and Zach needed to stay out of sight until the battle was over. Jackson regretted ever worrying about Isaac. Isaac had just made it pretty damned clear that he was not happy to see Jackson and didn’t appreciate Jackson’s concern. At least Hannah had acknowledged that Zach had been worried and hadn’t tried to make him feel like shit for coming.

Jackson’s first instinct had been to take Zach to the edge of the mountain ash circle and get him to leave. If he could at least get Zach out of harm’s way, Jackson would feel slightly better about the situation. And then Jackson could meet up with Zach as soon as the circle was broken and they
could (hopefully) get home without the hunters seeing them.

When they got to the edge of the circle, Zach crossed his arms and shook his head.

“You want me to leave.”

“I want you to go somewhere safe,” said Jackson.

“And let you dodge hunters and a mysterious corpse-eating monster on your own?”

“It’s easier to hide one person than two.”

“You mean it’s easier not to get killed if you have wolf abilities,” said Zach.

“That, too,” Jackson admitted. “Come on, just go. You can wait nearby if you want, and I’ll meet up with you when they break the circle.”

Zach stared at Jackson defiantly and said nothing.

“Please, Zach.” Jackson put his hand on Zach’s shoulder and said earnestly, “For me?”

The guilt trip worked. Zach made a resigned sound and rolled his eyes. “Fine. But if you get yourself killed--”

“I won’t,” Jackson insisted.

Zach nodded and headed toward the circle of mountain ash. But when he tried to step over the line, his foot appeared to have been pushed back.

“Whoa,” said Zach, eyes wide. Tentatively, he reached his hand out in front of him. It was stopped mid-air by an invisible force.

Well, fuck.

“Tell me you’re fucking with me, Zach,” said Jackson. Maybe it was just a joke. Zach could be messing with Jackson, right?

Now Zach was hitting the barrier with his hand like it was a pane of glass. And he was grinning.

“This is so cool!” he said gleefully, and Jackson had to shush him.

“It’s cool that you’re trapped in a magic circle with a bunch of hunters and a monster?”

“I’d never thought to test if mountain ash worked on me,” said Zach, giddy. “Apparently I’ve got just enough magic in me to count as a supernatural creature. This is fascinating! Do you think I have time to take some notes?”

“No, you definitely do not have time to take notes,” Jackson hissed. “We need to get out of sight!”

Jackson got hold of Zach’s wrist and tugged him away from the edge of the circle, back toward where they had last seen Isaac and Hannah. Maybe if they got up somewhere high with a view of the action, they could anticipate if any hunters were getting near them. With that in mind, Jackson helped Zach climb up on top of a tall old family mausoleum that was on top of a small hill on the outskirts of the graveyard.

For a while, everything was eerily quiet. When Jackson tuned out the frantic beating of Zach’s
heart he could hear nocturnal animals scurrying through grass and trees, the wind blowing between buildings, and the distant sound of London traffic. But beyond a very faint footfall now and then, he couldn’t even hear the hunters, and certainly not a monster.

All of a sudden, everything was very much not quiet anymore. There was shouting in the distance, and the sounds of crossbows firing, boots stomping through grass, and a strange rumbling sound that Jackson identified belatedly as something tunneling underground. That went on for a few minutes, and then things went relatively quiet again. What the hell was doing on?

Then a single shout rang out, a voice Jackson would know anywhere. Isaac. Jackson’s blood ran cold, heart jumping to his throat. What had happened? Had it been a shout of alarm? Victory? Pain?

Almost immediately, the noise started up again, and a few minutes later, Jackson finally spotted a large, sickly pale creature darting between gravestones in the distance. Over a dozen figures—hunters—were circling it, corralling it, but they weren’t firing on it. Why weren’t they firing? What were they waiting for?

“Why aren’t they attacking it?” Zach asked Jackson, heart racing again.

“Fuck if I know,” said Jackson. His own pulse was nearly as fast as Zach’s now. He couldn’t tell if Isaac or Hannah were with the group of hunters. It was difficult to make out details from that distance, especially with so little light. It must have been even more difficult for Zach to manage.

“Where’s Hannah?” said Zach. “I thought I saw her, but then she disappeared. I can’t tell them apart from here. Do you think she’s okay?”

“I don’t know,” Jackson said shortly. He wasn’t going to lie—say something like ‘I’m sure she’s fine.’—just to make his brother feel better.

When Jackson finally singled out Isaac from the group, he wished he hadn’t. Because Isaac had broken off from the wide circle of hunters, and appeared to be sneaking up along the monster’s side, just out of view of its non-existent peripheral vision.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Jackson muttered.

“I can’t see,” said Zach. “It’s too dark. Is Hannah with Isaac? We need to do something. I know she can take care of herself but they’ve never fought this kind of monster before and something could’ve gone wrong and—”

“We can’t help them,” Jackson said firmly, gripping Zach’s shoulder to keep him from getting up. “That’s probably every single Bristow hunter who can carry a weapon, and we know at least one or two of them are itching for an excuse to ‘accidentally’ kill one of us.”

The scent of anxiety and fear coming off of Zach was potent. Jackson was reminded of their conversation about Zach’s mate bond with Hannah, and he suddenly felt like kind of an asshole for being frustrated with Zach about his need to make sure Hannah was okay. There was clearly something happening on an instinctual level that was overriding Zach’s sense of self-preservation.

Jackson looked back toward the fight, where Isaac was now much too close to the monster. It didn’t appear to have noticed him yet, but how much longer could that last? What exactly was Isaac planning on doing?

Suddenly, Isaac lunged toward the monster and a bright light erupted in his hand, causing the monster to make an ungodly sound that hurt Jackson’s ears as it stumbled, apparently disoriented
by the light. The hunters who had been in a circle around the monster began to retreat, and anger flared in Jackson at the thought that they were abandoning Isaac to fight on his own.

Jackson could only watch helplessly as Isaac jumped to the side of the thrashing monster and used a tombstone as leverage to launch himself at it, landing over its back--where its head should have been--and scrabbling to keep hold of it. Another shriek from the monster led Jackson to guess that Isaac was using his claws to keep himself steady. Then Isaac reached down and seemed to be using some kind of tool to pry the monster’s mouth open. Jackson couldn’t make out what it was, but he didn’t like the idea of Isaac’s hand being so close to the monster’s teeth.

There was another sudden eruption of light, this time from inside the monster’s mouth. Smoke was pouring from it, beginning to obscure Jackson’s already poor view of the scene. He thought he saw Isaac jump off of the monster, but couldn’t be sure. Then he caught another, smaller form weaving through the tombstones, just before Zach saw it, too.

“Hannah!” Zach shouted, and made another attempt to get up before Jackson yanked him back down. He practically had to pin Zach, who was struggling in Jackson’s grasp and repeating urgently that he needed to help Hannah.

Zach made pitiful sounds of worry and protest while the two of them watched Hannah run toward the monster, getting dangerously close, to the point where Jackson was worried about her safety, too. Then she threw a small package into the monster’s mouth.

A few more ear-splitting shrieks from the monster, and then everything went eerily quiet again. The smoke was still obscuring their view, and Zach’s heart was racing with panic. But his pulse skipped when Hannah came stumbling out of the smoke, coughing and sputtering as she reoriented herself. Zach emitted a relieved sort of whimper and relaxed in Jackson’s hold.

“Where’s Isaac?” said Zach, echoing Jackson’s thoughts.

“I don’t know,” said Jackson. “I lost track of him after he put that thing in its mouth.”

“Should we go down there?” said Zach, clearly still worried despite the fact that seeing Hannah alive and well had calmed him down quite a bit. “Maybe Hannah knows where he went.”

Jackson desperately wanted to assent, to go down to where the fight had happened and look for Isaac. But it was way too dangerous.

“I told you, this place is crawling with hunters,” said Jackson, shaking his head. “We can’t risk them seeing us.”

So they stayed on top of the mausoleum, waiting and worrying. Jackson strained his supernatural hearing as best he could, but all of the hunters were moving and talking at the same time, barking orders and directing each other. Jackson thought he heard Hannah’s voice very briefly, but he couldn’t make out what she was saying. Besides, it was difficult to hear much over the frantic beating of Zach’s heart and Jackson’s own blood rushing past his eardrums.

After another several agonizing minutes, the sounds of the hunters began to move farther off, and Jackson decided that he and Zach could probably risk moving back toward where he had last seen Hannah; she, too, had disappeared again in the commotion. At least the smoke had mostly dispersed now.

“Okay,” said Jackson. “Let’s go over there. Quietly.”

Zach rolled his eyes. “I’m quieter than you when I walk, pup. Josie’ll have to train you properly
when this is all over.”

They hopped down and made their way slowly through the tombstones toward the spot where the hunters had been. Jackson held Zach back every time he heard a strange sound so he could stop and listen for a moment before moving on. A little over halfway there, Jackson’s hearing caught two voices. Two wonderfully familiar voices.

“--can’t believe them! Packaging it up and hauling it into a van without explaining what they intend to do with it. I’m not a child! I’ve just as much right as the rest of the family to know what they’re up to.”

“Yeah, my kind of hunting--” Isaac grunted, like he was in pain. “--usually includes more monster-killing.”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if Tobias knew more about the situation than I do,” Hannah said bitterly. “He’s set himself up to be Wendy’s new protégé when she takes over for Pol.

The two of them finally came into view. Hannah was struggling under the weight of Isaac’s much larger form as he limped along. It looked like he had injured his leg or something.

“Hannah!” Zach rushed up to her, and Jackson found that he was keeping pace with Zach before he had even decided to move.

Isaac hissed in pain as Jackson took his weight from Hannah, who pulled Zach into a crushing hug. Jackson resisted his own urge to hug Isaac, and instead helped him down to the ground so he could assess Isaac’s injuries.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Jackson demanded as he pushed Isaac’s shirt up and inspected his abdomen. There was dark bruising over his ribs, but it was visibly clearing up already.

“Got stuck under the Anthropophage when it fell over. Think a couple of ribs broke, but they’re mostly healed. Need to set my leg, though.”

Shit. Isaac needed someone to realign a broken leg. Jackson had no idea how to do that. “I don’t--”

“I’ll do it,” said Hannah. She broke away from Zach, knelt at Isaac’s feet, and examined his shin. Isaac winced as she gingerly pressed on different segments of his bones. “I take it you’ve been through this before?”

Isaac nodded. “You don’t have to get it perfect. Things sort of… move back into place on their own if you get them close enough.”

“Convenient,” said Hannah, clearly impressed. “All right, lie still.”

There was a very unpleasant series of grinding sounds, and it was only when he felt a pressure near his shoulder that Jackson realized Isaac was gripping Jackson’s upper arm while Hannah fixed his leg. Just because werewolves healed a lot faster didn’t mean their injuries weren’t as painful as they were for humans.

Jackson covered Isaac’s hand with his and began drawing some of the pain out. When Isaac noticed, he shook his head and tried to pull his hand away.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m used to--”

“You don’t usually have other wolves when you hunt, though,” said Jackson, cutting off Isaac’s
protest and gripping Isaac’s hand tighter. “I’m here, so I might as well.”

Isaac relented and laid his head on Jackson’s shoulder while Hannah finished up. His pained, shallow breaths became slower and more even. The healing had begun working properly now that the bone was set.

“Thanks,” Isaac said to Hannah. She nodded and stood back up, and suddenly her anger and frustration returned.

“Secrets upon secrets upon secrets! That’s all the Bristow name is.” Hannah pressed the heels of her hands against her forehead and took a deep, shuddering breath before continuing. “First-rate family I come from.”

Zach frowned and tugged gently at Hannah’s wrists until her hands weren’t hiding her face anymore. He got his arms above hers and framed her face with his own hands so she had to look at him.

“Hey,” he said gently. “I don’t know your family, but I know you. You are honest, and kind, and good. And if someone like you came from them, they can’t be all bad, can they?”

The sweetness of it all was almost too much for Jackson to bear. Hannah gave Zach a watery smile, and he wiped away the beginnings of tears from her cheekbones before she pulled him into a tight hug.

It made the way Isaac was leaning on Jackson for support while he healed feel more intimate. For a moment, Jackson considered pulling away to keep things from getting awkward. Besides, he was still a little upset about how cold Isaac had been to him earlier, and how stressful it had been to have to watch Isaac do really, really stupid, life-endangering things without being able to help.

But another, stronger part of him kept Jackson from letting go: the part that was overwhelmingly relieved but still worried at the same time. The part that felt soothed by even this small, platonic contact with Isaac. The part that hurt whenever he remembered that Isaac would be leaving soon.

“Sorry I yelled at you,” Isaac murmured near Jackson’s ear. Hannah and Zach were too absorbed in each other to pay attention to them anymore. Isaac punctuated his apology by nuzzling his face into the crook of Jackson’s neck. It made something in Jackson ache in a way that was good and bad at the same time.

“Sorry we crashed your hunt,” Jackson said grudgingly, because he wasn’t really sorry he’d done it. There had been no alternative. Not with the way Zach had been feeling. Not with the way Jackson had been feeling.

“Liar,” Isaac said against Jackson’s neck. Jackson couldn’t help but smile.

They stayed like that for maybe a minute longer while Jackson listened to Isaac’s bones and muscles repair themselves. Then Isaac got up and pulled Jackson to his feet with him.

“We should get out of here. Wanna do the honors, Hannah?” He gestured toward the mountain ash barrier nearby, which wasn’t necessary anymore.

Hannah nodded and reluctantly let go of Zach, moving toward the barrier. But then Isaac caught her by the wrist.

“Hey, Hannah?” he said, staring at something behind Jackson, beyond the mountain ash.
“Yeah?”

“So the Grim looks like a big black dog, right?”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Wolf, you know I was having you on, yeah? There’s no such thing as a Black Shuck!”

“Okay,” said Isaac, sounding unconvinced. “Then what’s that?”

They all turned to look where Isaac was pointedly staring, and there was in fact a large black dog standing behind them.

No, not a dog, Jackson realized with a sinking feeling.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and heard the word echo from Zach.

It wasn’t a dog. It was a wolf.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slightly late update! There's been some busy pre-Thanksgiving stuff going on here, and this was a very complicated chapter. We're hoping to be able to update this week, but it's possible that Thanksgiving may force us to be late again, or skip a week. We'll just have to wait and see how our workloads end up in the next few days.

ALSO, if you read The Strength of the Wolf: Star Crossed, which is a short side series about Hannah and Zach, we've just posted Part II! You can find the fic here.

As always, thank you all so much for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate all of you!

Savenna Cloverunner
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THIRTY: ANOTHER PERFECT DAY (American Hi-Fi)

So I might try to leave it all behind.
I know tomorrow’s not so bright now.
I’ll say goodbye ‘cause nothing good can last.

“--irresponsible, selfish, reckless--”

Josie’s rant had dissolved into a series of admonishing words, each of which made Jackson cringe. He had never seen Josie even close to this angry before. Hell, he’d hardly seen Derek this angry before, and Derek had spent years perfecting the art of being angry. The beta wolf in Jackson was cowering, whining inside him, overwhelmed with guilt. Zach didn’t look like he was faring much better.
Even Isaac and Hannah had seemed to recognize the seriousness of the situation back in the graveyard when Bronagh-the-wolf had fixed the Holborn betas with a level stare and waited for them, standing still as a statue. Hannah had wordlessly broken the circle of mountain ash, and Jackson and Zach had walked through it. There had been no goodbyes to or from Isaac and Hannah. Jackson and Zach had known what they had to do: follow Bronagh home to face the music.

“You lied to me, Jack,” said Josie, pointing her finger in his face. “You kept important information from me. You told me an omega was staying with you, weeks after he arrived, and I made an exception because I could tell he was important to you. But you deliberately didn’t tell me he was a bloody hunter!”

Josie’s eyes flashed red, and it was all Jackson could do not to recoil. Even Rodger’s and Bronagh’s eyes briefly pulsed gold in response. They were standing near the foot of the basement stairs while Jackson and Zach sat together on the couch with Josie looming over them. As soon as Jackson and Zach had arrived with Bronagh, probably smelling of graveyard dirt and hunters, Josie had practically roared the word “Out!” and five minutes later, the rest of the pack had left the flat. Josie couldn’t have this conversation (for lack of a better way of putting it) in public, but also didn’t want to have it within hearing distance of the rest of the pack.

“And you--” Josie rounded on Rodger, who took a step back on instinct. “You knew about this.”

Her tone dared him to contradict her, and he actually started, “I--”

“Maybe you didn’t know about the hunt, but you knew about the omega working for the Bristows, didn’t you? You knew about Zach and the girl.”

“I warned them to stay away,” Rodger protested. “I told them it--”

“You should’ve told me,” Josie snarled. “When your little brothers put themselves and the pack in danger, you don’t coddle them. You tell your alpha!”

That finally cowed Rodger. He shut his mouth and sat down on the steps, making himself smaller and less assertive.

“I…I’m sorry, Jo--” Rodger cut himself off, averting his eyes. “I’m sorry, Alpha.”

The formality of the title made everything feel so much more serious. Jackson had taken for granted how kind and accepting Josie was, how informal she had made Holborn pack’s structure. He had forgotten what other wolf packs could be like.

Josie stalked back over to the couch, fierce gaze now focused on Zach, who was actually trembling.

“A Bristow,” she spat, like it was a curse. “Hannah bloody Bristow! You’re supposed to be intelligent, Zach!”

“I-I didn’t know when I met her,” said Zach in a small, scared voice.

“It can’t have taken you long to sort it out, though, can it? I assume you met this girl through Jack’s omega--And we’ll get back to that later, Jack--so it can’t have been too difficult. And you continued seeing her anyway!”

“I tried, Josie, I really did. But it wasn’t-- I couldn’t--” Zach sniffled and fixed Josie with a miserable, pleading look. “It’s a mate bond.”
The words made Josie flinch and take a step back, as if she had been burned. Bronagh’s hands flew to her mouth, and Rodger made a small sound of alarm. There was a long moment of tense silence before Josie recovered.

“No,” she said firmly. “That can’t be true.”

“You know I’m not lying,” said Zach.

“If you think that’s what you’re feeling, it won’t sound like a lie,” said Josie. “That doesn’t mean that you’re not mistaken.”

“But I’m not.”

“She’s human!”

“Mum’s human,” Zach countered. When Josie didn’t immediately respond, Zach pressed on: “I know what I’m feeling, Josie. It hurts.”

Josie shook her head, but Zach became bold enough to take her hand. Her eyes widened at the contact. Jackson knew that she must be feeling what he had felt when he had touched Zach, back when Zach had told him about the mate bond: a pain that couldn’t be taken away.

The color drained from Josie’s face. Jackson couldn’t understand why they were all reacting so intensely. He could get why Josie would be angry, but her stricken expression seemed extreme.

“Be that as it may,” said Josie, voice less heated now. “You could have been killed. The pair of you.”

Jackson flinched involuntarily when his alpha’s eyes flitted back to him.

“This is a very serious matter,” Josie finally said, releasing Zach’s hand so she could step away to include Rodger and Bronagh as she spoke. “Too serious for me to decide without consulting some of the others. For now, the three of you are grounded. Rodge, you’re confined to the den. Zach, Jackson, you don’t leave your flats except to go to and from school or come here. As should be clear to you by now, I have scouts who keep an eye on hunter activity, and they are fully capable of keeping an eye on two wayward pups as well.” She nodded her head toward Bronagh for emphasis. “If either of you disobeys, I will ground you to the den as well, and escort you to and from school myself. Have I made myself plain?

Rodger, Zach, and Jackson all murmured variations on “Yes, Alpha” or “Yes, Josie.” Josie gave all of them one last, fierce glare before marching toward the stairs. But she paused near Rodger and Bronagh, then turned around and came back to the couch.

Jackson braced himself for further scolding, but Josie didn’t say anything. Instead, she sat down on the coffee table in front of the couch so that she was at Jackson’s and Zach’s level. Then, much to Jackson’s surprise, she pulled them toward her in a fierce group hug. She cradled their heads in her hands and nuzzled her face into their hair in turn: a sign of affection and forgiveness, even though Jackson knew it didn’t mean there would be no punishment later.

When Josie pulled back a bit to look at them, her eyes were shining with unshed tears.

“You scared me half to death, pups,” she said softly. “I understand why you felt you needed to go. I do. But what you did was wrong. You can’t always act on how you feel.” She looked at Zach in particular, and tenderly brushed his fringe out of his eyes. “No matter how strong or irresistible the feelings are.”
“It hurt so much, Josie,” Zach said pitifully. “Just the idea that something could happen to her. It hurts whenever she’s not with me and I--”

“I know, darling,” said Josie, shushing him gently. And it was like a shadow had passed over her face when she added, “You know that I know.”

Zach frowned guiltily and nodded, wiping at his damp eyes. Jackson didn’t understand what had passed between the two of them, but he knew better than to ask.

Josie stood up again and beckoned them to follow her out of the basement. “You’re both to stay here tonight. We’ll get a bit of food in you, then you’ll be off to bed. We’ll discuss all of this further tomorrow.”

Rodger stood and moved back from the stairs to make way for Josie. He still looked submissive and wary, but perked up a little when Josie stopped to ruffle his hair and nuzzle his cheek. Apparently even betas who were older than their alphas still needed comfort and reassurance from them.

Bronagh reheated leftovers from the pack’s dinner--curry and rice--and Jackson and Zach ate in silence. On Josie’s orders, Rodger texted the rest of the pack that they were allowed to come home now. Not wanting to face any of his packmates right now, Jackson fled to Zach’s old room with Zach, Bronagh, and Rodger on his heels.

Apparently Bronagh had been waiting for the right moment to unleash her own anger about Jackson’s and Zach’s behavior on Rodger, because as soon as Zach had closed his bedroom door behind Jackson and himself, Bronagh could be heard not-quite-shouting in a mixture of night-incomprehensible Northern Irish English and fragments of what Jackson assumed was Gaelic.

If Jackson had thought he couldn’t have felt guiltier after Josie’s rant, he had been wrong. On top of everything, he had asked Rodger to keep a dangerous secret for him, and now Rodger was paying for trying to help him.

Even with Zach next to him, sleep did not come easily to Jackson that night.

After Jackson had left with Zach under very ominous circumstances, Isaac had been left to figure out what he was going to do that night. If Jackson was already in trouble with his pack, Isaac doubted that sneaking alone through Holborn territory so he could get back to Jackson’s flat would make it much worse. Besides, now that the monster had been caught, Isaac figured he’d be better off not going back to the Bristows’ manor. As much as he trusted Hannah, James, and Pol, he didn’t much like the idea of being in a house full of hunters who were high on a recent monster capture, especially since they didn’t need Isaac’s help anymore.

Which was why Isaac had been sleeping on Jackson’s couch Thursday morning when Jackson had run home to change for school that day. Although ‘sleeping’ was probably an overstatement; Isaac had spent the night falling in and out of dreams that the Anthropophage was eating him alive, starting with his fingers and working its way up. Strangely enough, this was only mildly disturbing compared with some of the stuff that had actually happened to Isaac before, in dreams and real life. Still, it wasn’t exactly relaxing.

Jackson hadn’t stuck around very long, but he did ask how Isaac was feeling, if his leg was okay (though they both knew that of course it was fine), and then mentioned that he was glad Isaac wasn’t at the Bristows’. So, still kind of awkward, but an improvement over how things had been between them lately. Whether Jackson actually cared about Isaac’s injury or he was just being
polite, Isaac would happily take the attention.

When Jackson got home from school, he barely made it inside the door before he dropped his backpack with a weary grunt and then collapsed onto the couch on top of Isaac’s legs. Isaac couldn’t really blame Jackson for being tired; Isaac had hardly left the couch all day and he was still exhausted. It wasn’t uncommon for Isaac to experience a kind of ‘crash’ after a successful hunt, where he spent a couple of days afterward taking it easy, but this time seemed worse than usual. Maybe it was just because the hunt had taken so much research and preparation to pull off. In any case, Isaac was very relieved that it was over, and figured he more than deserved a little downtime before he headed out of town.

“Long day?” Isaac asked. He pulled his legs out from under Jackson and gently laid them back on Jackson’s lap.

Jackson shrugged and reached for the TV remote.

“Breaking Bad?” he asked, already setting up Netflix. Isaac grinned and responded with a shrug of his own, which Jackson didn’t even acknowledge. It might have been stupid, but Isaac’s pulse sped up just a little bit when Jackson set down the remote and let his hands rest on Isaac’s leg as the episode started.

It was an insignificant little touch, but Isaac couldn’t but help take it as a sign that there was still a chance that things might get better between them. They were talking again (sort of) without fighting, so that was a start. It seemed like they were pretending like the last few days hadn’t happened, but if that was the only way to keep Jackson from being mad at him, Isaac was fine with that. He wasn’t exactly keen on talking about how he’d probably gotten Jackson in trouble with his alpha, anyway.

Besides, they didn’t need to talk in order to sit on a couch together, just like they wouldn’t need to talk to sleep in the same bed (assuming Jackson still wanted to do that). It was important to Isaac that he leave on good terms with Jackson, and with the way everything was going, Isaac would probably have to leave sooner rather than later. Back before everything with the hunters, with Hannah and Zach, before falling out with Jackson and causing problems between him and his pack, Isaac had almost thought that he might be able to stick around in London for a while. Maybe not another month, but a week or two at least. Now…

Now Isaac was just going to have to wait and see how things would work out. It was pointless worrying about what had already happened or what might happen tomorrow, or the next day, or next week. He still had tonight, and worrying would interfere with him being able to appreciate it.

So he settled in to watch the show with Jackson and enjoy how things weren’t agonizingly awkward between them right now. But he kept finding his attention being drawn back to Jackson and the subtle way his fingers would twitch against Isaac’s leg whenever something surprising or stressful happened on the screen. Eventually, Isaac’s attention was monopolized by his awareness of Jackson’s every move. Which was why he was surprised when the show paused itself to make sure they were still watching.

Neither of them made a move for the remote to start the show back up, and Isaac figured Jackson was probably ready to stop and have dinner or work on his homework. But Jackson didn’t try to get up, and they ended up sitting there together for a minute or two.

“Fuck, this show is stressful,” Jackson said finally.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Isaac smirked.
“You didn’t tell me how messed up some of it is,” said Jackson. “Seriously, how the fuck could Walt do that to his wife? She was just trying to help and now she’s scared of him. Why is she even still trying to protect him?”

Isaac blinked. Jackson was taking this a lot more seriously than he would’ve expected.

Despite what he had said when he was first trying to convince Jackson to watch *Breaking Bad*, sometimes Isaac wasn’t really sure he liked the show that much. After all, there was a ridiculous amount of death and abuse and a whole lot of other things that probably should have been triggers for any of his numerous traumatic memories. Isaac wasn’t sure if it meant he was unhealthily numb to violence, but when he was watching stuff like this, Isaac usually found it pretty easy to turn that part of his brain off. Seeing things in a movie or a TV show that had also happened to him made him feel a little less alone sometimes, like the things that had happened to him could happen to anyone. It gave him a chance to take a step back and look at what had happened to him objectively.

“It’s tough,” Isaac said carefully, thinking about each word before he spoke. “She started out loving him, right? It’s hard to just let that go. Especially with the way he’s manipulating her. He’s using the fact that she loves him to keep getting away with it.”

“But she knows she’s being used,” Jackson insisted. “She could just leave.”

“She’s scared.” Isaac shrugged. “Emotional abuse builds up slowly over time, so slowly you don’t realize when it starts. And then it just kind of eats away at you. You get so used to it that leaving can be scarier than staying.”

Jackson opened his mouth to say something, but no sound came out. After a long moment, his mouth snapped shut and an embarrassed flush spread quickly across his cheeks. Suddenly, Jackson didn’t look angry about the show anymore. He looked like he wanted to run away.

Isaac thought about trying to change the subject, of hitting play on the next episode, of doing anything that would keep him from talking about himself anymore. That was not something Isaac did. Not ever.

There had been one extremely brief conversation with Chris when they’d first arrived in Paris and Isaac had said something about his dad and then felt bad, and Chris had awkwardly asked if Isaac wanted to talk about it, which he hadn’t, and that had been that. The past was the past. No amount of therapy or ‘talking it out’ would change what had happened to Isaac. Rather than wasting his time rehashing the worst moments of his life, Isaac chose to ignore them. Preferably by distracting himself with a pretty person.

But Isaac wanted to talk to Jackson. Jackson was the first person Isaac had really felt comfortable with (apart from the awkwardness and fighting recently) in a very long time, and for once Isaac didn’t want to ignore what he’d been through, because that meant keeping a part of himself closed off. He didn’t want to have to do that around Jackson. It might be nice to have someone actually know Isaac. Maybe Jackson would want to know him. Isaac definitely wanted to know Jackson, after all.

“We used to be a happy family. Weird, right?” The words were out of Isaac’s mouth almost before he knew it, and then he found that he couldn’t stop. “Maybe that’s why it took me so long to notice how bad it’d gotten. When my mom died, at least there were still three of us. Dad got kind of distant and started drinking, but it was still okay most of the time. When he did get pissed, Camden took the worst of it. My brother,” he added for clarification. “After Cam left it got a little worse, but if I stayed out of Dad’s way it was mostly fine. Then Cam got killed, and my dad pretty much drank all the time. I guess he drank so he could be pissed-off instead of sad.”
Isaac shrugged, not totally sure if what he was saying was the truth or just something that made all the messed up things that had happened make just a little more sense.

“He didn’t even fight it. It was like once he got to the point where he was angry all the time, he felt better.” That was Isaac’s theory, anyway. It had been one of the reasons why he had accepted his dad being like that. “The first time he threw a glass, he apologized after. The second time, he apologized again but said it was my fault, that I made him do it. I don’t even remember what I’d done. Maybe I got home late from school, maybe I failed a test or didn’t take out the trash or something...”

Isaac shook his head. “Doesn’t matter now. I swore I would never do it again, but something would always set him off... The third time, the fourth, it got a little worse, and every time it happened he said I was bringing it on myself and I swore it would never happen again. But no matter what I did, something always set him off. I think a part of me figured out pretty fast that there was nothing I could do to stop it, but I still felt like maybe if I was a better kid, he wouldn’t be so angry all the time.” Isaac let out a long breath.

“Eventually he stopped apologizing and started locking me in the freezer.”

He could feel Jackson’s eyes on him, but Isaac didn’t look up from the loose thread he was picking at in his jeans. He had never laid all of it out in one go like this; he usually made people (cops or therapists) pry the details out of him, or he talked about it blatantly but left out the emotional stuff. Saying ‘My dad locked me in a freezer’ sarcastically was easy. Saying it honestly while letting himself actually remember what it had felt like was a lot different. Still, he couldn’t stop talking.

“By then I’d already learned to stay out of his way if I could, to not talk back, to just shut up and stop crying and take my punishment because I deserved it. If I didn’t fight it, it wouldn’t be as bad. He was my dad, and dads only want what’s best for their kids, right? He only threw dishes because he loved me. He only hit me because I needed to be disciplined. He only locked me in the freezer for my own good. He wanted me to be better.”

Isaac didn’t notice that his hands were clenched in his jeans until Jackson pried them loose. And then Jackson kept holding them, thumbs gently rubbing the backs of Isaac’s hands. Isaac reciprocated a quick, grateful squeeze. The contact felt strangely... intimate, which was kind of ridiculous considering the stuff he and Jackson had done together. But it was an acknowledgement from Jackson of Isaac’s pain, and he’d never really gotten that from anyone before, or at least not anyone whose opinion he actually cared about. It was a relief to be able to tell this stuff to someone he thought might genuinely give a shit about Isaac and wasn’t just asking him about it because it was their job or they felt sorry for him.

“I didn’t know how to make him stop. So I just kept letting it happen. I should’ve told someone, I guess, but I was so scared...” He shrugged helplessly. “And I was so sure I deserved it. That sounds so stupid now.”

Isaac could feel the telltale stinging sensation behind his eyes starting to build, his throat tightening. He wasn’t going to cry in front of Jackson. He couldn’t. So he just stopped talking.

It was the way Isaac said it, something about the tone of his voice, that made it suddenly clear to Jackson that Isaac still loved his father. That abusive asshole who had locked Isaac up and treated him like crap for years. If that had happened to Jackson, he was pretty damned sure he wouldn’t be able to be so forgiving.

In fact, assuming he had the power, he probably would’ve done to his own abusive parent exactly
what he had done to Isaac’s father.

The thought made Jackson feel suddenly ill. What the Kanima had done to Isaac’s father, he tried to correct himself, but it didn’t really help. Besides, if he were honest with himself, Jackson felt a lot less guilty about killing Isaac’s dad than he did about turning a blind eye to what Isaac’s dad had been doing to him. Out of all the horrible things Jackson had done in his life, that was the worst one that couldn’t be blamed on someone else controlling him.

_I should’ve told someone, I guess, but I was so scared…_

No, Isaac shouldn’t have told someone. Jackson should’ve told someone. Maybe he hadn’t known exactly how bad it was at the time, but he had still known that Isaac’s dad was hurting him. He’d heard the yelling. He’d seen the bruises that couldn’t be completely explained away by lacrosse practice. And he had decided that it wasn’t his problem. Maybe he had figured that if it was really that bad, someone else would notice and do something about it. Or maybe he just hadn’t given enough of a shit to give it much thought.

Isaac was so different now, it was hard to imagine that he and that scared, awkward kid were the same person. It was almost impossible to see the boy who had grown up next door to Jackson when he looked at Isaac. Even right now, with Isaac talking about all of it, the two different versions of him seemed worlds apart. So much had changed in just over a year. Hell, so much had changed in just over a month…

But what was Jackson supposed to say about any of this? That he was sorry? He was sorry, but what good would it do to say that now? Wouldn’t it just dredge up even more shit? Isaac already looked like he was on the verge of tears, and Jackson definitely wouldn’t know what to do if the guy started crying.

Before Jackson could say anything, though, Isaac cleared his throat.

“Oh, don’t make me be the only killjoy,” Isaac said, apparently trying (and failing) to lighten the mood. “Your turn to spill some depressing big deep dark secret shit.”

Jackson stared at him. Was Isaac serious? Did he really want Jackson to follow up that gut-wrenching saga of extended childhood trauma with one of his own? Well, if that was what Isaac wanted, he was going to be disappointed. As much as Jackson had felt that he had suffered as a kid, it hadn’t been anything like what Isaac had been through. What could Jackson say? That even though his family had loved him and given him everything he had ever wanted (and then some), Jackson had never felt like he completely belonged with them? That when he was a kid he had felt like he could never be good enough because his birth parents had rejected him? That even though he’d found out when he was a little older that they were dead, and they hadn’t chosen to give him up, that feeling had never gone away? The feeling like nothing he did would ever be enough. And even if he could be good enough, he would never have the chance to prove to them that he was someone to be proud of.

How the fuck was Jackson supposed to say that to someone who had lost his entire family—a family that he still loved, despite at least one of them not deserving it—without sounding completely ungrateful and selfish? Jackson’s problems were nothing compared with Isaac’s. And as ungrateful and selfish as it was, Jackson kind of hated that Isaac had just dropped all of that at his feet. What was Isaac trying to do, anyway? Jackson had just asked a question about a TV show—not even really expecting an answer—and now he had just been ambushed with detailed information about the darkest parts of Isaac’s life.

Isaac was _leaving_. What right did he have to dump all that personal shit on Jackson when they
probably wouldn’t see each other for a very long time (if ever) after another couple of days?

Jackson let go of Isaac’s hands and stood up abruptly, dumping Isaac’s legs off his lap. “I didn’t ask you to tell me all that.

Isaac paled, the smile sliding off his face. “I-- I know. I didn’t mean--”

“It’s getting late and I still have homework,” Jackson said quickly, like that was any kind of explanation. It was the truth, but it was still a bullshit response.

“...Okay,” Isaac said quietly.

Jackson sat down heavily at his desk and mechanically opened up his books and fished around in his backpack for one of his notebooks and some pens. He wasn’t even paying attention to what subject he was working on. It wasn’t like he’d be able to concentrate anyway. Not with Isaac sitting on the couch practically radiating hurt and confusion and embarrassment. All of that just made Jackson angrier, because the wolf in him was instinctively driven to comfort the other beta-omega--and Jackson outright refused to do that right now.

He stared down at the books and papers on the table. He didn’t want to do his homework. He wanted to go a half hour back in time and not ask that stupid question. He wanted to watch Breaking Bad or one of those quiz shows with Isaac and forget that the entire ‘conversation’ (Isaac spilling his guts) had never happened. He wanted Isaac to make him forget that things were awkward between them now and that Isaac would be leaving soon. When it came down to it, Jackson had really just wanted things to be okay between them for one more night.

But that didn’t seem likely now.

It was over. It was all over; the Anthropophage had been stopped, Isaac had met with James earlier that day to collect his final payment for his help, which meant that Isaac had no reason to stay in London anymore… Well, aside from one.

Isaac couldn’t keep himself from glancing at the bedroom, where Jackson had disappeared almost an hour ago. After the disaster that had been Isaac opening up to Jackson last night, Isaac had been trying his best to stay out of Jackson’s way. They’d had a very awkward morning during which Jackson had walked Isaac out of Holborn territory so Isaac could meet up with James, and then Isaac had stayed out well past dinner before asking Zach to walk him back. By the time he’d gotten home, Jackson was already getting ready for bed, so Isaac had set up camp on the couch until Jackson settled in.

It was late. Isaac should go to bed. He had considered sleeping on the couch last night so it wouldn’t be awkward lying in bed with Jackson, but not sleeping in the bed could be interpreted as some kind of official admission of the awkwardness, which could’ve made thing even more awkward. And Jackson hadn’t objected to Isaac being there. True, he hadn’t really acknowledged Isaac being there, but still. And even though it had been awkward, Isaac had still wanted to be close to Jackson. He wouldn’t have many more opportunities to do so at this point.

But it had still been awkward, and it would probably be awkward tonight, too. Isaac sat heavily on the couch, thinking about what his life had been like before London and trying to come to terms with the fact that nothing could be the same after.

What was Isaac going to do if he went back to Paris? Do more ‘werewolf consulting’ for hunters on his own? Chris was gone, but even though Isaac hadn’t really kept in touch with any of his
Baudin contacts, he figured he’d still be welcomed back. And even if he hadn’t really been friends with any of the French werewolves, they’d probably still go out to clubs with him. He could have fun with them, at any rate. Start getting laid on a regular basis again. So life would continue. Isaac’s life, the way it had been before. Nothing had to be that different.

But it would be different, and it bothered Isaac that he couldn’t figure out why he was so certain that he couldn’t pick up where he had left off.

Before London, it had been easy to leave everything behind and stop worrying about, well, everything. Isaac had been able to tell himself that nothing but here and now mattered, and it had worked. It had worked really well most of the time. For months. And then…

And then Jackson had happened. Jackson, who could never just live in the moment, who could sometimes ignore the past but never let it go. Jackson made Isaac connect, made him care about what he was doing beyond acting and reacting. And it was exhausting trying to live like that again. It had been hard to keep in mind how Jackson might feel about something Isaac said or did; it took energy to consider consequences for Jackson’s sake.

Sometimes it felt like everything he did had the potential to upset Jackson in some way, even talking about Isaac’s fucked up family. Especially that, apparently. And it was all just so awkward now and it seemed less and less like it would change.

Isaac couldn’t do it anymore. The precarious place he had carved out for himself in Jackson’s apartment, in his life… It had started to really matter to him at some point, without Isaac being aware of it. He had never intended for the arrangement to be anything but temporary. And it had been an awesome bonus that Jackson had ended up wanting to sleep with Isaac, but that seemed to have backfired in the end.

Isaac hadn’t been really afraid in a long time, but the thought of how much all of this mattered to him scared him. Jackson forced him to think about the where-and-when, about the fact that Isaac’s time in London was finite. Time had never been on Isaac’s side. It slowed down in the painful parts of his life and rushed by during the brief moments of calm and happiness and pleasure. It wouldn’t be any different with Jackson.

Maybe Isaac just had to accept the fact that his time with Jackson was up. He had gotten a lot more of it than he’d expected to--a lot more calm, happiness, pleasure--after all. Maybe trying to get more would be foolish. Greedy.

Slowly, Isaac dragged himself off the couch. His legs felt like jelly when he stood up and his head felt stuffy and far away. He would have thought he had a cold if that wasn’t impossible.

Taking a step towards the bedroom helped, taking another helped more, until Isaac almost felt normal again crawling into bed beside Jackson. Isaac caught himself before he could slide across the empty expanse of Jackson’s bed and curl up against Jackson like he wanted to. Even though it would have been so much easier than staying on his own side. Touching Jackson had become the default now; not doing it took conscious effort.

“You awake?” Isaac whispered in the darkness. A soft snore was the only response he got from the werewolf sleeping beside him. “Good. Then you won’t mind this.”

But Isaac didn’t make a move toward Jackson this time. Jackson had rolled away in his sleep and kicked a foot out from under the blankets. It wasn’t quite as cold as it had been when Isaac first showed up two months ago.
So much had happened since then, since that first day when Isaac had decided almost on a whim to track Jackson down. He still wasn’t completely sure why he had done it. Some nostalgic part of him that missed Beacon Hills, maybe? Isaac wasn’t exactly a nostalgic person, though. Maybe he had just thought it might be fun to see what Jackson was up to, even mess with him a bit. But it didn’t really matter now. Isaac was glad he’d done it. He just wasn’t glad about all the pain and awkwardness that decision had caused. Straining Jackson’s relationship with his pack, possibly messing up his life completely, not to mention Zach’s and Hannah’s situation.

Maybe it was selfish, but all of that felt worth it to Isaac. He was becoming more and more sure, though, that Jackson didn’t feel the same way. How could he? Maybe Jackson had had fun with Isaac, but Isaac had caused Jackson a lot more trouble than Jackson had ever caused Isaac. Jackson would probably be relieved when Isaac was gone.

Isaac resisted the urge to pull Jackson closer to him, to bury his face in the soft hair at the back of his neck where it was getting a little too long, to breathe in his scent, to not let go. The urge was so strong that it almost hurt Isaac to fight it.

Maybe there was a way to make it work somehow. It wasn’t like Isaac had to leave the country entirely just because he wasn’t staying at Jackson’s place anymore. Jackson’s alpha had made it pretty clear that she wasn’t thrilled with Isaac staying in her territory, but that was only one neighborhood in one city in the UK. Chris probably had contacts in other British hunter clans. Maybe Isaac could go up north somewhere for a while to do some hunting. That way he could at least come back and see Hannah and Zach, and maybe Jackson wouldn’t be as awkward if Isaac wasn’t staying with him, and they could be friends, or at least on good terms.

But the way things had been between them lately, Isaac wasn’t sure Jackson would be interested in that. He seemed pretty ready for Isaac to move on. Isaac shouldn’t have been surprised that Jackson was tired of him after two months, but it still stung. Isaac didn’t usually take it personally if someone wasn’t interested in fooling around with him anymore. Hell, his lifestyle in Paris had basically depended on people not being interested for long periods of time. But with Jackson, it bothered him. It shouldn’t have mattered, but it did.

Isaac took a deep breath and pushed all of that down as best he could. He didn’t want to think about it anymore, but if he didn’t say what he wanted to say now, he might never, and he couldn’t do it when Jackson was awake. Isaac would get the words out, and then he’d be done. It would all be done, and they could both move on with their lives.

“Look, I…” Isaac swallowed. “I know things got bad. Really bad, sometimes. And I know you didn’t ask to get involved in my shitty, screwed-up life, and I fucked things up with you and your pack, and I made you miss all that school and not do your homework, but I… Maybe it makes me a dick, but I’m not sorry. For any of it.” He blew out a soft breath. “I guess… I guess maybe, even though it got shitty in the end, I hope you’re not sorry, either.”

He rolled onto his side, facing away from Jackson so he wouldn’t be as tempted to touch him, to kiss him, to go back on his decision to leave tomorrow. Because he knew he had to leave. And he had to leave Britain entirely, or things would be too complicated.

He just didn’t want to.

Which was why Isaac was packed before Jackson got home from running errands the next morning.

Since it was Saturday and Jackson didn’t have school, Isaac had made up some excuse about them needing stuff from the store--stuff that Jackson was going to need anyway since he couldn’t be
bothered to cook for himself most days--just to get Jackson out of the flat for a bit.

It was better this way, Isaac had told himself as he cleaned out his shelf of Jackson’s closet. It was better for everyone. No more bad influence for Hannah, no more bad advice for Zach. No more distracting house guest screwing up Jackson’s relationship with his pack, his family.

No, it really would be much better for everyone this way.

As fun as the past few weeks had been with Jackson, that was all it had been. Fun. Isaac ignored the way his heart pounded as he repeated that thought over and over and over, trying to make himself believe that it was the truth. Because admitting that it had been something more wasn’t something Isaac could do. What did ‘something more’ even mean, anyway? That was just something people said when their fun got too complicated, too messy.

Without Isaac around, Jackson could fix what had happened with his pack. It had been Isaac’s fault that Jackson had lied to his alpha and flouted pack rules. Jackson’s life would go back to normal and he would move on, Isaac had thought, swallowing the sudden lump in his throat.

Isaac would be fine, like he always was. He would go back to France, he’d decided, keep working with the Baudins or other French hunters. Or if they didn’t need him, he could go to Mexico, where Chris was still looking for his werebitch sister. Hell, with the money the Bristows paid him, he could go anywhere he wanted, pick a country with a lot of pretty people and just have fun there for a while.

It just suddenly didn’t sound all that fun if Jackson wasn’t there. A world full of attractive potential lovers, and the one Isaac still wanted the most was the one he couldn’t have. How fucking typical.

What was the point in thinking about that, though? If Isaac couldn’t have Jackson anymore, he couldn’t. No amount of pining was going to change that.

By the time the key turned in the lock, Isaac was sitting on the couch rereading the same page of Much Ado About Nothing over and over, unable to focus on the words. He’d mostly been thinking about what he was going to say, what reason he was going to give Jackson for leaving so abruptly. Isaac had practiced it so many times, he almost believed it himself, which was the only way he was going to be able to get away with lying so openly to someone with werewolf senses.

“Hey, so--” Jackson stopped mid-sentence, maybe at the sight of the packed duffle at Isaac’s feet.

Isaac’s fingers felt numb as he set the book down on the couch beside him and stood up to face Jackson.

“Hey.” Isaac smiled a bit to try to lighten the mood.

Jackson continued to stare at him blankly.

“So, I got a call from Chris while you were gone,” Isaac continued.

He couldn’t get enough air. He kept his smile firmly fixed and his heart rate steady as he bobbed his shoulders mechanically in a shrug, trying to act normal, not wanting Jackson to see how much this was killing him.

“Said he needs my help. So I’ve gotta go.”

The lie rolled off his tongue easily. It was better this way, it was better this way.
“I just wanted to say goodbye.”

Isaac was lying. Boldly. Casually. Like it was nothing. The lie had escaped Isaac so easily that Jackson had almost missed it. Had he always been this good at lying? Had he lied before and Jackson hadn’t caught it?

But why did Isaac even think he had to make up some stupid excuse anyway? Jackson had known from the start that Isaac would be leaving. He just hadn’t expected it to be like this. So abrupt, so... cold.

And what was worse, what made this whole bad situation that much more terrible, was that Jackson had actually thought that maybe there was a chance he could still fix things with Isaac.

Jackson just hadn’t accounted for the possibility that Isaac might not want to fix things.

On his walk back to the flat, Jackson had decided to tell Isaac he could ask to join the Holborn pack if he wanted to stay. When Josie (with Will there as her advisor) had lain down her judgments on Jackson and Zach the day after the hunt, she had given Jackson an ultimatum: Isaac had three days to decide whether he would ask to join the Holborn pack. If Isaac wanted to stay, he would have to cut ties with all hunters in the UK and agree not to assist with any hunting in the British Isles. Then the pack would vote on whether to admit him as a member. If he didn’t want to stay, he would be barred from Holborn territory until further notice, and Jackson would not be allowed to see him without Josie’s express permission.

Jackson had figured that the worst thing that would happen if he suggested to Isaac that he could join the pack was that Isaac would say no. It was a long shot, considering that Isaac had been pretty clear that he didn’t want a pack, but he would probably still appreciate the offer. And then, whatever Isaac decided, they would talk like they used to and Isaac would kiss him like he used to and even if Isaac didn’t stay maybe things could be okay for one more night.

You could never be just like everyone else, Jackson. Not to me.

Wasn’t that what Isaac had said that night in the club? Had that been a lie too? Just some pretty words Isaac said to everyone he wanted to sleep with?

Jackson had tried so hard to be perfect, or at least the best he could possibly be. It looked like the best he could be wasn’t good enough for Isaac. Isaac Lahey, of all fucking people. The guy who had been a loser, a nobody, until Derek Hale had rescued him (if you could call it that) from an abusive home and made him into this cavalier bad boy who saw people as just fun distractions.

Apparently Jackson wasn’t enough fun anymore.

Why? he wanted to ask Isaac. More important than why Isaac was leaving was why he’d forced himself into Jackson’s life in the first place: Why did you come here? Why did you do this to me? Jackson had been happy before Isaac. It hadn’t been perfect, but it would’ve gotten better in time. Jackson’s pack would’ve helped him. He hadn’t needed Isaac to show up and change everything. He hadn’t asked Isaac to crawl in bed with him, to flirt with him, to comfort him, to fuck him, for God’s sake. He hadn’t meant for Isaac to become his anchor, the ubiquitous presence who was there when Jackson went to sleep and when he woke up.

Jackson might have laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation if he hadn’t felt so numb.

Isaac’s voice sounded like it was coming from a long way off, like there was already a distance between them that Jackson couldn’t cross: “Thanks for letting me stay and everything.”
Summing up whatever they'd been the last few weeks, their entire relationship in a single meaningless word. *Everything.* Was that really all Isaac was going to say? Jackson couldn't have felt any lower, any more worthless, any more *pathetic* that he'd become so attached to someone who could write him off so easily.

Jackson was only dimly aware of Isaac easing past him. He kept waiting for a touch, a kiss, the familiar sensation of Isaac’s fingers ‘fixing’ his hair--something to shy away from, to get angry about. But Isaac kept his distance.

Jackson’s ears registered the sound of the front door opening, then closing again. Of a presence disappearing, pulse and breath and scent and warmth. Just gone, with the coldest, emptiest goodbye Jackson could’ve imagined:

*Thanks for letting me stay and everything.*

“I don’t need you,” Jackson murmured to his empty flat.

Jackson was almost as good at lying to himself as Isaac was at lying to Jackson.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to make you all wait an extra week and then drown you in feelings T_T We promise it'll be okay, though! The fic isn't quite over yet! Hang in there :)

In case you didn't see this last time, we've posted Part II of *The Strength of the Wolf: Star Crossed:* a short side series about Hannah and Zach. You can find the fic [here](#).

Thank you all again so much for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate all of you!

Savenna Cloverunner
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: GOODBYE (Secondhand Serenade)

It’s a shame that it had to be this way.
It’s not enough to say I’m sorry.
It’s not enough to say I’m sorry.

He couldn’t breathe.

This was a mistake. Isaac knew it was a mistake. But he couldn’t go back. He couldn’t.

Even though every instinct he had was screaming at him to go back. To apologize for leaving, to beg Jackson to let him stay, to beg Jackson to come with him, anything, it didn’t matter as long as they were together.

But he couldn’t and it felt like it was literally killing him.
Isaac tried to slow his breathing, but all he could manage was short, painful gasps. His heart was pounding so hard he thought he might faint, and any semblance of calmness he’d been able to fake before he’d left had abandoned him. Every step away from Jackson felt like walking through quicksand with weights tied to his ankles. Soon Isaac was going to be swallowed up and there would be nothing left.

There must have been some tiny part of his brain that wasn’t being completely consumed by what was happening, though, because he was still able to wonder if a werewolf could have a heart attack. Like, maybe his family’s predisposition for heart problems had somehow managed to overcome his ability to heal. Stress could cause a healthy seventeen-year-old werewolf to have a heart attack, right?

That had to be it, he had to be having a heart attack, because there were only two alternatives that Isaac could think of, and both of them were definitely worse.

The first alternative was that he had somehow fallen in love with Jackson Fucking Whittemore, which was ridiculous and impossible because Isaac didn’t fall in love. He wasn’t even sure that he believed in love, or at least the romantic kind. The second alternative was even more ridiculous and impossible, though: that Isaac could’ve somehow stumbled into whatever the hell a ‘mate bond’ was, and that he was likely now doomed forever, and the thought of that terrified Isaac.

Zach’s explanation of a mate bond, specifically an unrequited one, kept ringing in Isaac’s ears: 

*She didn’t smile for over a year. Seeing how sad she was, it sort of made me think that an unrequited mate bond would be one of the worst things that could happen to a person.*

But even if Isaac did have this bond, and by some miracle Jackson wanted him like that--which Jackson had made pretty damn clear that he didn’t--Isaac wasn’t sure he wanted that. He wasn’t sure if he could be with one person forever and no one else. He loved getting to explore people and the puzzles that came with them. Not to mention the fact that Isaac had become dependent on a certain level of attention, one that wasn’t fair to expect from one person. Based on how much Isaac had fucked up Jackson’s homework and school attendance, plus kept him from spending as much time with his pack, Isaac had already asked for too much attention from him. How could that be sustainable?

So basically, if that incredibly ridiculous, impossible alternative was in fact to blame for what was happening to him, Isaac was completely screwed. Just like Zach had said, with fear in his eyes: *If that’s what I’m feeling? I’m fucked.*

Isaac’s head was spinning and there was an overwhelming pressure in his skull, pressing behind his eyes, filling his throat and ears. He managed to look around and realized he had no idea where he was. Nothing looked familiar. All he could hear was the sound of his own frantic pulse threatening to make him pass out.

He was lost, and all he wanted--all he needed, like he needed oxygen--was for Jackson to come find him.

The first thing Jackson did after the door quietly clicked shut behind Isaac was put away the groceries. He went through the motions mechanically, not really sure what he was putting where. In the end, almost everything was shoved into the fridge since Jackson couldn’t seem to remember where anything was supposed to go.

It didn’t matter anyway. Isaac was the one who usually put away the groceries; they were his places. Without him, Jackson would probably go back to almost exclusively using his fridge to
store takeaway leftovers.

Jackson went to the bedroom next. He almost wasn’t sure why until he was pulling open the closet, almost like he needed to see for himself what he already knew he would find: Isaac’s shelf was empty. Like Isaac had never been there at all.

*Good*, Jackson tried to think. He should’ve felt vindicated, or smug, or something… Isaac had proved Jackson right by leaving, hadn’t he? He had proved that he didn’t care, that Jackson wasn’t special to him, just like Jackson had thought. So why was it that all Jackson could feel was a bleak numbness?

Jackson went back into the living room and sat down on the couch. He noticed belatedly that something was digging uncomfortably into his leg. Jackson glanced down. It was the corner of an old, dog-eared copy of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Just seeing the title reminded Jackson of how Isaac had convinced him to ditch school after his nightmare and go to the play. Isaac had called it a personal health day, and Jackson couldn’t disagree that he’d needed it.

And even though he tried to deny it, Jackson needed a lot of things that Isaac had given him, knowingly or not. ‘Fixing’ Jackson’s hair, comforting him after nightmares, helping him through the full moon, even just putting away the fucking groceries… Jackson *needed* Isaac.

All too slowly, Jackson felt himself sliding out of his numbness, through confusion and realization, into panic. Jackson swore, glancing at the clock on his phone as he sprinted out the door. He’d wasted half an hour. Thirty precious minutes he could have used to follow Isaac. Because Jackson *had* to go after him. It wasn’t a choice. It wasn’t even a conscious thought. It was a *fact*. Isaac wasn’t in Jackson’s flat and he was supposed to be there, and there was a wrongness to that, and Jackson had to make it right, before Isaac was gone and it was wrong for good.

“Rodge,” Jackson said on the phone, unable to keep his voice from betraying how frantic he was. “Rodge, he left. He left and I didn’t stop him and I don’t know where he is and--”

“Woah, slow down, Jackie Boy,” said Rodger, clearly alarmed. “What’s happened?”

“Isaac,” was the only word Jackson could get out. His chest was tight, panic threatening to consume him.

“Where are you?” said Rodger.

“Den,” Jackson managed just as he turned the corner and ran down the street, hoping Rodger would understand that he meant ‘outside the den’. He didn’t want to have to go in, not as worked up as he was. Jackson was scared that his packmates would ask questions he couldn’t answer.

The call dropped, and Jackson could hear heavy footsteps stomping down the stairs inside, then the door opened to reveal Rodger, watching Jackson run up with intense concern.

“Where’s he going?” Rodger asked immediately, moving to Jackson’s side and putting his hand on Jackson’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” said Jackson, head swimming, gasping for air, unable to pull enough oxygen into his lungs. “I don’t know.”

“Hey, hey, easy, Jack,” said Rodger. “We’ll find him. We will. But I need you to calm down. Can you do that for me?”

Jackson swallowed thickly and nodded. He forced himself to take several deep, shaky breaths and
let them out slowly.

“That’s it,” said Rodger, sliding his hand down to rub at Jackson’s back between his shoulder blades. “Just breathe for a moment.”

Several deeper breaths, and Jackson felt a little less light-headed, though his pulse was still racing.

“Well,” said Rodger. “Close your eyes and think about him. Remember how it feels when he’s with you, and focus on that as hard as you can.”

Jackson obeyed, too frantic to question why Rodger thought this would work. He shut his eyes tightly as he fought through his panic to focus on the best moments he’d had with Isaac. Ones that had helped him keep from shifting on the full moon. He remembered the sensation of Isaac’s fingers pulling through his hair… the way that, even when he and Isaac had been at their worst, the sex had always been fun… how Isaac had made him feel important, wanted. Jackson’s brain flashed through every kiss they’d shared, singling out the one Isaac had given him just before Jackson had fallen asleep after school before Sarah’s show; the one that had been simple and hadn’t led to anything but Isaac throwing a blanket over him. The one that had meant something.

His eyes snapped open.

“Well, which way are we going, then, Jack?” said Rodger, recognizing that Jackson had found the answer.

It was like following a scent, except instead of following his nose, there was a tug pulling Jackson’s body forward, or maybe it was like a strong wind pushing him from behind. He felt it under his skin, right down into the marrow of his bones. Every inch of him screaming, *This way, this way*, as he and Rodger walked, then ran, then tore through Central London as fast as they dared, like hunters were at their heels.

Isaac was barely even conscious of which way his feet were taking him as he stumbled through the streets of London in a daze. He was trying to get to the bus station, he reminded himself again, for all the good that was going to do. He had walked these streets countless times in the past two months but now they all seemed unfamiliar and confusing. He couldn’t find street names, or maybe he just couldn’t read the signs, so he just kept going in what he thought was maybe the right direction. He was lucky that he hadn’t walked into traffic yet, he thought dimly, and a hysterical hiccup of a laugh escaped him.

He had no sense of time or direction anymore. He was just filled with the overwhelming feeling of wrongness. There was nothing but guilt and fear and panic. He wondered if he was scaring people. A hunter was probably coming to put him down right now and Isaac couldn’t make himself care.

He shouldn’t be doing this, he shouldn’t be leaving, why was he doing this?

More than anything he just wanted to go back to Jackson. To curl up in bed with him, to make breakfast together, to watch those ridiculous British quiz shows, and just stay.

A hard, unexpected contact knocked the wind out of Jackson’s lungs and sent him to the ground, where he landed sprawling on top of something--someone--familiar. A memory flashed lightning-quick through Jackson’s mind: another collision, not so very long ago, that had caused Isaac to literally crash his way into Jackson’s life. That fucking swan.

Had it all been a coincidence, Jackson thought as he shook off the sense of *déjà vu*, or had that
been some kind of sign, before Isaac had even known where Jackson lived, that they would end up here? Some kind of hint that a bond had already formed somehow, long ago, when they had barely known each other, or ignored each other, or fought each other? Before Derek’s bites, even? If so, how?

Jackson was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of Isaac babbling almost incoherently. His hands were clenched in Jackson’s coat, forehead pressed to Jackson’s shoulder, determinedly not looking at him.

“I-- I can’t-- I—I’m sorry. I tried to leave and I just couldn’t-- I don’t want to go. I was walking and then I was walking back and I just-- I couldn’t leave. I’m sorry. I tried, but... Tell me to leave. Please. Tell me to get out of your life. I think I could do it if you just--”

Maybe it was the apology, or the plea for Jackson to make him leave, but Jackson finally felt the anger that had been distracted by his panic. He snarled at Isaac, cutting him off, before grabbing his shoulders and pinning him to the ground, shifting so he could straddle Isaac and make sure he was listening.

“Why the hell would I tell you to leave?” Jackson didn’t care that his eyes were glowing or that his fingertips felt like his claws were going to come out at any second. “You’re so fucking oblivious and self-centered! You just walked the fuck out on me, you fucking coward--”

Jackson jerked his face away with a growl. He didn’t want to be shouting at Isaac. That wasn’t why he’d come to find him. And the last thing Jackson wanted to do was be one more person who scared or hurt Isaac. Jackson took several deep breaths, forcing his eyes back to normal, before looking down at Isaac again.

Isaac had been crying. Jackson’s eyes traced up the wet tracks Isaac’s tears had made down his cheeks and when their eyes met this time, it was like a band of pressure that had been constricting Jackson’s chest immediately eased. He dropped to his elbows so he could rest his weight on his forearms, ignoring his bones’ protest at the impact. Then he framed Isaac’s head with his hands, tangling his fingers in his hair, and kissed him roughly, desperately, like it was the most important thing he had ever done and it had to be done right that second.

From nearby, Jackson could hear Rodger chuckle. Apparently he’d caught up at some point between the impact and the snogging.

“Now that’s a mate bond, if ever I saw one. Told you he’d be trouble, Jack.”

At the same time that Jackson lifted his arm to flip the two-fingered ‘go fuck yourself’ in Rodge’s general direction while masterfully maintaining the kiss, Isaac did the same with one finger.

Rodge laughed. “Made for each other.”

After another thirty seconds or so of kissing, Rodge hauled Jackson off Isaac and pulled him to his feet. “All right, pups, no need to draw any more attention to us after all that superhuman running, which I will forget to tell Josie about."

Isaac was brushing grit from the sidewalk off himself and Jackson, but Jackson was too preoccupied with Isaac to do anything useful. He had unconsciously hooked his fingers in one of Isaac’s belt-loops and had hold of his wrist. There was no way in hell he was letting Isaac leave again. The wolf in him wouldn’t allow it.

“Jackson, I--"
“No,” Jackson said firmly. “Not one more word from you until we’re back home.”

“I’ll just bugger off, then, shall I?” said Rodger, but he was grinning. “You do realize that Josie’ll have my head for leaving the den, and following you out of Holborn on top of that.”

Jackson winced at the thought. Once again, he was getting Rodger in trouble.

“No call for guilt, Jack,” said Rodge. “I’ve got a mate of my own. I know what it can be like. I’ll try to hold Josie off until you two sort things out. Just be quick about it, mind.”

“Thanks, Rodge,” said Jackson, and gave Isaac a warning look when he opened his mouth to speak.

“See you,” said Rodger, and left them on their own.

As soon as Isaac had crossed the threshold and set down his bag, the wrongness from earlier was gone. The anger remained, however. Jackson locked the door behind him and glared daggers at Isaac. Yes, Jackson had been worried sick about losing Isaac and was relieved to have him back, but that didn’t mean Isaac was instantly forgiven.

“Never again,” said Jackson, voice tight. “You hear me? Never do that again.”

“Jackson--”

“Let me talk,” Jackson snapped. He was careful not to yell, but his tone was still severe. “What the fuck even was that? You just randomly announce that you’re leaving and walk out, like this is a fucking hostel and your vacation is over? You don’t get to just decide you want to live here without being invited and then pack up and leave when things get complicated. You’re the one who made them complicated!”

Isaac ducked his head, fingers fidgeting uncomfortably at his side.

“You can’t just do whatever you want because you think that’s what’s best for us, or whatever bullshit justification you used to pull the shit you just pulled. You don’t get to decide what’s best for me. You made me feel like this. Take some fucking responsibility.”

_I couldn’t leave. Not like that. I’m sorry. I tried, but... Tell me to leave. Please. Tell me to get out of your life._

Jackson frowned. Maybe Isaac really had thought that he was leaving for Jackson’s sake. That somehow if Isaac wasn’t here, Jackson’s life would be better. But that idea sounded insane now. Jackson knew now that that would never be the case.

“Never again,” Jackson repeated, voice softer. “Promise me. And for once, keep it. Just this once.”

“Never again,” Isaac said quickly, desperately. “I promise.”

And with that, finally, the anger in Jackson was appeased. He stood before Isaac helplessly, physically and emotionally exhausted. Isaac took a cautious step toward him, then another, and then Isaac’s arms were around him, hugging him tightly as he murmured apologies over and over again into Jackson’s hair. Jackson closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, letting the familiar scent wash over him, reassuring him that his mate--yes, that’s what Isaac was, he was sure of it now--
was home.

Isaac pulled back slightly so he could look at Jackson. “Now can I explain?”

Jackson raised an eyebrow at him. “Is what you’re about to say going to make me want to hit you?”

“...It can wait.”

“No, say it. I really need to hear whatever Bizarro World logic you used on this one, Lahey.”

Isaac rubbed at the back of his neck and looked away as he explained how he really had thought that that’s what would be best for Jackson, how he hadn’t thought Jackson felt the same way he did--an idea that Jackson met with a loud snort of derision.

“Excuse me for getting the idea that you were tired of me being around. It’s not like you were coming on to me.” Isaac looked almost shy. “I was kind of worried that I’d...”

“What? Overstayed your welcome?”

Isaac shrugged a bit. “Among other things.”

“Isaac, if I really didn’t want you living here, you wouldn’t have been. That goes double for everything else. And I didn’t ‘come on to you’ because you got all weird. I figured either you weren’t really interested to begin with, or you were bored of me.”

“Trust me on this, Whittemore, I will never get bored of you. You are way too much fun.”

“No.” Jackson frowned at Isaac’s smirk. “You’re not getting off that easy.”

Isaac’s smirk widened. “What if I--”

“No.” Jackson cut off Isaac’s obvious come-on and rubbed his temples with the pads of his thumb and fingers. He was exhausted even though it was only the middle of the afternoon. To be fair, they’d had a busy and stressful couple hours. Hell, busy and stressful had been their whole lives recently, and it was pretty much all Isaac’s fault. Still (as Jackson had just discovered) he wasn’t ready to let Isaac go that easily.

Jackson sighed. “I was right. I do want to hit you.”

“But you won’t?” Isaac asked hopefully.

“Too tired,” said Jackson, though he hoped his tone conveyed, I would never actually do that. “Come on.”

Without waiting for Isaac’s response, Jackson proceeded to drag Isaac into the bedroom where he shoved him down on the bed. Apparently bemused, Isaac didn’t even try to resist, and a moment later Jackson was lying beside him, wrapping Isaac in his arms. Jackson didn’t care that he was being possessive and demanding, and he didn’t think Isaac minded much either, judging by the fierce way he clung to Jackson in return.

“So... you really don’t want me to go?” Isaac asked quietly.

“If you even try to leave, I will chain you to this bed.”

“Promise?” Isaac smirked, but it still lacked his usual lightheartedness
“I have the chains,” Jackson said seriously.

Isaac shifted, fidgeting uncomfortably. “You said it yourself, your life became a hell of a lot more complicated the minute I showed up.”

“Complicated doesn’t always mean bad,” said Jackson.

“In my experience, it doesn’t usually mean good,” Isaac said wryly.

Jackson frowned. “Are you still trying to make me tell you to leave?”

“No,” Isaac replied quickly, tightening his grip on Jackson almost like a reassurance. “It just...”

Jackson waited for Isaac to finish his thought. He was quiet for so long, Jackson almost thought Isaac had fallen asleep when he suddenly continued:

“This seems too good to be true. You. Actually...”

This time Jackson didn’t wait for Isaac to finish his thought, it was pretty obvious where he was going with it. “Actually wanting you here?”

“...Yeah.”

Isaac looked so fragile that Jackson couldn’t help but pull him even closer and kiss him, shifting so there wasn’t any space between them. Was it the mate bond that was making it feel like he couldn’t get close enough?

“Yeah. I actually do,” Jackson said when they finally broke apart.

Isaac made a relieved sound and closed his eyes. Jackson could tell how important it had been for Isaac to hear those words and it made him feel guilty for not saying them earlier. If he had, maybe Isaac wouldn’t have left.

Isaac wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that, but just before he drifted off, Jackson whispered, “Never again.”

“Promise,” came the simple response. And this time, Jackson believed it.

Isaac watched Jackson sleep, enjoying the feeling of being wanted. Even unconscious, Jackson refused to let go of him. Like he was still worried that Isaac was going to try to leave. Isaac knew now that he couldn’t. Not just that he didn’t want to; that not being with Jackson would kill him. Maybe not literally, but Isaac was sure he wouldn’t be himself anymore.

This, right here, with Jackson, felt right.

He still felt exhausted, all of the fear and stress from the last few days had left him feeling empty, but his relief that Jackson felt the same way balanced it out. Now, for probably the first time in his life, Isaac was just completely and utterly content.

Isaac was just starting to fall back asleep when someone knocked on the door, and he realized that was what had woken him up in the first place.

He searched his brain to see if he knew if Jackson was supposed to have visitors, but then he remembered that he’d been planning on leaving today, so he hadn’t been aware of pretty much anything after that point.
“Jackson,” Isaac said as he tried to extricate himself from Jackson’s possessive hold.

“Hmn?” said Jackson, brow crinkled in irritation, eyes still closed.

“Door,” said Isaac, just as another knock emphasized his point.

Jackson made a grumpy sound and, slowly and reluctantly, let Isaac go. Isaac shivered after crawling out from underneath the duvet. He was only doing this so Jackson wouldn’t have to. He would just tell whoever it was to fuck off and then he could go back to the warm bed with his warm mate and sleep until the rest of the wrongness he had been feeling was gone for good.

“What,” he said irritably as he opened the door to find a very short, very angry punk chick glaring up at him with her arms crossed. Great.

“Hello, Isaac,” Josie said tersely.

“Jackson’s asleep,” said Isaac, casually leaning an arm against the door frame to create a barrier with his body, because like hell was he letting anyone into Jackson’s flat without his permission, and like hell was he waking Jackson up to ask for it. He didn’t care if this was Jackson’s alpha. After the day they had been through, she could wait a couple of hours to talk to Jackson.

“I’m not here to see Jack.”

Isaac raised an eyebrow at her skeptically.

“I’m here to speak to the omega who has completely undermined my authority and put my pack in danger.”

Isaac sighed deeply and rubbed at his face. Seriously? She wanted to do this now? Isaac didn’t have the energy to deal with this kind of crap. Still, he knew that if he didn’t at least hear her out, she’d wake Jackson up, and a few hours of good sleep were the very least Isaac owed Jackson right now.

“Fine,” said Isaac. “Make it fast.”

Josie looked like she was putting considerable effort into not letting Isaac make her angrier, but her baseline was already pretty high. Isaac could smell the fury on her. She did not like him.

“Have you made your decision yet?” she practically growled between clenched teeth.

Isaac blinked a few times. “Decision?”

“You’ve a few hours left, I know, but in consideration of the fact that you keep causing my betas to disobey me, I need an answer now.”

“For what?” said Isaac, staring at her blankly. He had no idea what she was talking about and it was more than a little annoying.

Josie cocked her head to the side, giving him this look like she was trying to figure out if he was fucking with her. Which was ironic, because on any other day, Isaac probably would be trying to fuck with her.

“Seriously,” said Isaac. “Can you just explain what the fuck you want so I can go back to bed?”

“Should I assume Jack did not relay my orders to you?”
Okay, this was starting to get really irritating. “He hasn’t ‘relayed’ anything to me, so why don’t you just spit it out?”

“Fine,” Josie ground out. “You’ve got the same choice Jack did when he arrived: join my pack or get out of my territory. Although by this point, I’m not even sure why the offer’s still on the table. Not sure I need a troublemaker like you becoming a permanent resident.”

Isaac took a moment to size her up. Josie was maybe a little taller than Hannah, but had none of Hannah’s muscle. Not like that meant anything when Josie had werewolf strength—alpha’s strength at that. Isaac knew she was out of his league. But it didn’t matter. Isaac didn’t want to have to fight her, but he would if it came to that. After everything he and Jackson had been through, Isaac wasn’t about to let her—or anyone else, for that matter—chase him off.

“So, pup, what’s it going to be?”

“No.”

Josie blinked up at him. “No?”

“No.” Isaac shrugged. “I’m not leaving and I’m not joining your pack.”

Josie raised an eyebrow at him. “And what’s Jack got to say about that?”

“Honestly, Jackson and I need to work on our communication skills. Mostly he’s just been yelling at me for trying to leave and made me promise not to do it again. Like I’d be crazy enough to put myself through that a second time.”

“You tried to leave?” said Josie. “What’s that mean? He stopped you going?”

“Eventually,” said Isaac said with a shrug. “Guess he decided he couldn’t live without me.”

“Touching,” said Josie, “but I’m not buying it. I think there’s more to it.”

“I kind of really don’t give a shit what you think.”

“You ought to,” Josie said coldly. “Because as of tomorrow, you’ll either be my beta or you’ll be on an airplane out of this country.”

Isaac snorted. “Is that right?”

“Absolutely,” said Josie. “So what’s it going to be?”

“I’m not joining your pack,” he repeated. He had no intention of joining any pack. Despite the fact that he was bonded to Jackson, that hadn’t changed. He was done taking orders.

“Then you’re leaving. Tonight.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You will leave my territory tonight,” Josie said firmly, eyes flashing red. “You will leave my country. Or I will make you leave.”

Isaac felt his eyes glow gold in defiance. He would’ve liked to be able to say that her alpha eyes and authoritative tone didn’t affect him at all. But there was a tiny part of him that remembered how to be a beta, and a few very unpleasant memories of Derek’s darker moments flashed through his mind. He was not going to let another alpha bully him.
His eyes stayed lit as he planted his feet in the doorway and crossed his arms.

“Try it then.”

He’d barely gotten the words out before Josie kicked his stance wide to throw him off balance and slammed her shoulder into his stomach. Isaac knew the usual follow-through for a move like that would be for Josie to throw him over her shoulder and out the door, so Isaac staggered back with the hit and out of her range (which wasn’t very far). They glared at each other for a long moment.

Well, so much for not fighting her. Isaac did wish they weren’t doing this in Jackson’s flat, with him asleep in the next room. At this rate, they were bound to wake him up.

Josie might have been thinking the same thing, or maybe she just really didn’t want to fight Isaac either, because she tried to give him an out. “Last chance.”

“I’m not leaving him,” said Isaac, deadly serious for once. “You can hate me, you can think I’m bad for your pack. Hell, I’ll admit you’re probably right on that one. But there are way bigger reasons for me to leave than the opinion of someone else’s alpha, and I’m still here.”

Josie assessed him for a long moment, saying nothing.

“Besides,” Isaac added, “if you care about Jack so much, maybe you should think about what it would do to your beta if you managed to get rid of me after he asked me to stay.”

“Jack is the only reason I didn’t drive you off weeks ago, pup,” Josie growled, “so you ought to think twice before accusing me of not being concerned for my beta’s feelings. I’ve given the both of you far more leeway than any other alpha would, including Holborn’s previous alpha. You ought to be thanking me.”

Isaac snorted, but didn’t respond. There was no way in hell Isaac was going to thank Jackson’s alpha for making exceptions to rules that were ridiculous in the first place.

“I love that boy,” Josie said fiercely. “You may not understand what a beta means to an alpha because you’ve never had a proper pack, but you ought to at least respect it. You knew Jack before he came here, which means you know even better than I do what he was like before he joined Holborn. You know that we’re good for him, that he needs us.”

“Yeah, well, I love him, too,” Isaac countered, tone just as fierce. The words left his mouth before he had even registered them in his mind. But they were true. God, both terrifying explanations for his sick feeling were true. Isaac was so, so fucked. Still, he added quietly, “He needs me, too.”

Josie’s eyes darted to something behind Isaac, and Isaac knew what it was, what it had to be, before he even turned around.

*Jackson.* Of fucking course.

And there was no way he hadn’t heard what Isaac had just said. Especially not with the way Jackson was looking at him, a little scared, a little shocked. But at least he didn’t look angry. That was an improvement on earlier.

Behind him, Josie cleared her throat. “Sounds like you pups have a few things to sort out. I expect you both at the den first thing tomorrow morning with an answer for me.”

Isaac turned back just in time to see her march out the door, shutting it firmly behind her. Leaving him and Jackson alone with the weight of Isaac’s words still hanging in the air.
Jackson hadn’t known what to expect when the sound of arguing in his living room had woken him up. Definitely not his mate and his alpha fighting.

He was just lucky Josie had left before she forced him to pick a side. Jackson didn’t know what he would’ve done, how he could’ve chosen between what were objectively the two most important relationships in his life.

“I didn’t mean for you to hear that,” said Isaac, avoiding Jackson’s eyes and rubbing at the back of his neck in that way he always did when he was nervous. “Hell, I didn’t mean to say it. I just… She was acting like she cares about you more than I do. Which is bullshit.”

*I love him, too.* Jackson’s face heated as Isaac’s words rang in his ears. *He needs me, too.*

“Like I didn’t have enough reasons to be pissed at that chick,” Isaac muttered. “Now she’s made me say it for the first time to her instead of to you.”

“You don’t… I mean…” Jackson made a frustrated sound. How did you tell someone ‘You don’t have to tell me you love me, it kind of freaks me out’ without it sounding horrible? It wasn’t that Jackson didn’t want Isaac to feel that way. He wasn’t exactly sure how to process the information right now, but his gut reaction was that he was happy that Isaac felt that way. But if Isaac said it to him, then the expectation would be that Jackson would say it back. And Jackson couldn’t say it back. Even if he felt it.

“Is it…” Isaac sighed. “Is it okay if I don’t say it to you for now? I just… This is new for me. And I haven’t said that… to anyone… in a long time.”

Jackson felt a massive rush of relief at those words. For once he was grateful that Isaac was just as (well, more so) emotionally stunted than Jackson.

“Me neither,” said Jackson. “It’s cool.”

“Well… Cool, then,” said Isaac, giving Jackson a cautious smile.

But even though Isaac hadn’t said it to Jackson directly, he had still said it. Jackson needed to acknowledge that somehow, didn’t he? It wasn’t fair that Isaac had laid his cards on the table (though unintentionally) and Jackson hadn’t.

“You’re my anchor,” Jackson said quickly.

Isaac stared at him, wide-eyed, for a long moment.

“Since when?” he asked. It had looked like he’d been cycling through a dozen questions before deciding on that one.

“At least a few weeks, I guess,” Jackson said, starting to feel self-conscious. “Before the last full moon.”

“Well… That’s a really terrible idea,” said Isaac.

“Oh, I know,” said Jackson, unable to completely stifle a smile. “I definitely didn’t pick you on purpose, Lahey. I’m not that dumb. I blame my wolf.”

Isaac shook his head and tucked his hands in his pockets before closing the space between them in that cocky way of his. “When’re you gonna learn, Whittemore? There’s no wolf just hanging out in
there, fucking things up for you and busting out when you’re pissed off or there’s a full moon. It’s just you.” Isaac’s eyes flashed gold for a moment, apparently to emphasize his point. “All of it’s you.”

Isaac bumped his forehead gently against Jackson’s.

“And I like you,” he added.

Leave it to Isaac to preempt a debate by saying something unsettlingly sincere. So Jackson let the issue go and slid his head to the side and buried his burning face in Isaac’s neck, nuzzling into the warm skin there, breathing in Isaac’s comforting scent. Isaac’s hand came up to cradle the back of Jackson’s head, while his other arm slipped around Jackson’s waist. Jackson’s own arms were around Isaac’s back before he’d realized he was doing it. When had hugging Isaac become a normal thing for Jackson?

Isaac’s head dropped to Jackson’s shoulder, and suddenly Jackson felt, for the first time in a very, very long time, like maybe everything would be okay. He’d still have to face Josie tomorrow morning, and he didn’t know what she’d decide about Isaac, and things between Zach and Hannah weren’t going to magically fix themselves, but Isaac was with him. His mate was with him. And as long as they were together, they could figure out the rest.

After another long moment, Isaac gently pulled back, and Jackson loosened his hold. Isaac gave Jackson a lopsided smile. He pressed a kiss to Jackson’s forehead, then one to his lips, and then he pulled back a little farther so he could ‘fix’ Jackson’s hair.

“Lunch?” he asked, pulling Jackson out of whatever spell he’d been under for the past few minutes.

Jackson nodded his head. “Kebabs,” he pronounced.

“God, you’re so British now,” Isaac teased. Still, he grabbed Jackson’s laptop and flopped down on the couch with it. He didn’t even need to ask Jackson what he wanted to order.

An hour later found them both on the couch, empty takeaway wrappers and containers on the coffee table. Isaac was laughing at the quiz show they were watching (they agreed they should probably lay off *Breaking Bad*, at least for a while) while Jackson pressed close to his side, recuperating from what had quite possibly been the worst and best day of his life.

Despite it still only being mid-afternoon, Jackson was almost asleep again when there was a knock at the door. Jackson’s first thought was that Josie was back, which made him want to flee to his bedroom. But when Isaac got up to answer the door, Jackson realized he could hear people talking.

“--not sure where else they might be,” murmured a voice from behind the door. Zach.

“Isaac’s not answering his phone either. Think everything’s alright?” said another familiar voice. Hannah.

Isaac opened the door to reveal (unsurprisingly) Zach and Hannah, both looking somber and a little anxious. Zach was carrying a suitcase and backpack, while Hannah had a box full of books and school supplies in her arms.

“Hi,” said Hannah, smiling weakly. “Can we come in?”

Chapter End Notes
So we decided to take pity on you guys and post this chapter early to put you out of your misery ;) See, wasn't it worth it?

In case you didn't see it before, we've posted Part II of *The Strength of the Wolf: Star Crossed*: a short side series about Hannah and Zach. You can find the fic [here](#).

Thank you all again so much for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. We appreciate all of you!
You're the One

Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: YOU’RE THE ONE (Hoobastank)

It hasn’t always been
the best of times,
but if you’d ask
I’d do it all again.
I’m ready to begin
a brand new chapter of our lives.
Just tell me where and when.

“You guys okay?” said Jackson, starting up from the couch as Isaac ushered Hannah and Zach into the flat and closed the door behind them. They set down the bags and box near the coffee table and stood there together awkwardly.
“Yes and no,” said Zach.

“What’s happened?” Jackson stepped around the coffee table to look Zach over. He could probably sense the same anxiety Isaac felt rolling off them, hear their slightly elevated pulses, smell the salt of dried tears.

“We’re leaving,” said Hannah.

“What?” said Jackson, at the same time Isaac said, “When?”

“As soon as we can,” said Hannah. “And don’t ask why, because I think it’s become fairly obvious that we’ve only got two choices, and we’re taking the one we can live with.”

The movement of Zach taking Hannah’s hand in his and lacing their fingers together caught Isaac’s eye. Maybe Zach’s fear that he’d developed a mate bond with Hannah had turned out to be true, after all. If that was the case, Isaac agreed that there was only one choice Zach and Hannah could live with, or at the very least, that Zach could live with; Isaac couldn’t imagine Zach being much better equipped to leave his mate than Isaac had been.

Isaac suddenly felt a certain ‘rightness’ at seeing Zach and Hannah together, like it would be strange to see either one of them on their own now. Even their scents seemed to blend well together. It made Isaac smile, in spite of the somber mood in the room. Would other wolves see that, smell that, when they looked at Jackson and Isaac now? It was an intimidating thought, but not an unpleasant one, Isaac decided.

After today, Isaac understood the couple’s situation on a very personal level. If they felt they couldn’t stay in London and be together--And really, how could they?--then Isaac would do whatever he could to help them.

“Where’re you going?” Jackson asked, looking like he was having trouble processing the idea of them (mostly Zach) leaving. Isaac had forgotten what Zach meant to Jackson. Hannah had been a good friend to Isaac and he cared about her a lot, but Jackson had known Zach for a lot longer and considered him a brother. It wouldn’t be easy to let him go.

“We could ask you the same thing,” Hannah said with a nod to where Isaac’s duffle bag still sat by the door. “You leaving already, Wolf?”

“No!” both he and Jackson exclaimed at the same time.

Hannah and Zach shared a curious glance, but Isaac could practically see the moment they both decided not to pry, which was probably for the best. They had their own lives to sort out right now and Isaac wanted to focus on that.

“It’s been a busy day,” said Isaac, hoping that might be enough of an explanation for now. “When did you guys decide to leave?”

“Just before coming over,” said Hannah. “We cleaned out Zach’s flat and came straight here.”

“Well, not straight here.” Zach cleared his throat. “We had to evade the tail Hannah’s family put on her. So perhaps indirectly here.”

Hannah responded to Isaac and Jackson’s questioning looks with a shrug. “Guess we’ve all had a busy day.”

“Just a bit,” Zach agreed. “We haven’t actually gotten around to the part where we decide where
we’re going yet.”

“We were hoping you could help,” Hannah said to Isaac. “You know people abroad, yeah? In France and America?”

“I’ll call Chris,” said Isaac. It was the perfect solution, actually. Chris understood hunters but was also sympathetic toward werewolves. Hell, his own daughter had-- In any case, Chris would be able to find them someplace safe. Isaac went to get his phone while Jackson got Zach and Hannah to sit down and explain more of the situation.

The worry in Chris’s tone when he answered warmed Isaac’s heart, though it also made him feel a little guilty. It was nice to know that Chris cared, but it reminded Isaac that he could be better about staying in touch. With everything going on, their texts had become few and far between, and Isaac couldn’t even remember the last time he’d actually spoken to Chris. No wonder Chris assumed a phone call meant trouble.

“What is it with werewolf boys and hunter girls?” Chris said, exasperated, after listening silently to Isaac explain the situation.

“To be fair, he’s not technically a werewolf,” said Isaac.

“I’m guessing that argument didn’t go over well with her family.”

“Yeah, sounds like we might be trying to avoid a war or something now,” said Isaac.

“There goes my relationship with the Bristows,” Chris said with a heavy sigh. “Remind me not to visit England for a while.”

“Sorry,” said Isaac. “I blame Jackson.”

“Of course you do,” said Chris. “All right, let’s figure out what to do with your star-crossed lovers.”

“Not a good comparison if we want to keep them both alive,” said Isaac, and could practically hear Chris praying for patience.

“This is the part where you say, ‘Thank you for agreeing to help my friends, Chris. You are a kind and generous soul.’”

“Thank you for agreeing to help my friends, Uncle Chris,” Isaac said sweetly.

“Good boy,” said Chris. “The easiest thing to do would probably be to send them to meet me in Mexico. If they don’t have money, use the account I gave you. Unless you’ve blown it all on alcohol and dance clubs, you shameless delinquent.”

“While that does sound like me, I think I still have a few euros left,” said Isaac, smiling. He hadn’t realized it before, but he’d missed Chris’s teasing.

“When are they leaving?”

“As soon as possible, they said. I think they’re worried Hannah’s family’ll find out and try to stop her.”

“I can be in Mexico City in about a day. Give them my number and tell them to text me their flight information once they have it. I’ll stay near the airport until they get here.”
“Thanks, Chris,” said Isaac. The words seemed feeble considering that within five minutes Chris had gone from not knowing that Hannah and Zach existed to arranging for them to meet him in a foreign country so he could help them. Chris was a quick-thinker and a problem-solver, even when it came to being compassionate. Allison would’ve approved.

“And tell them not to tell anyone besides you and Jackson where they’re going. It’ll be safer for Jackson’s pack if the Bristows know they can’t get information on Hannah’s whereabouts from them. But Hannah should call from the airport to tell them she’s going of her own free will.”

“Got it,” said Isaac, trying not to imagine the methods some of the Bristows might use on Jackson’s pack to get them to give up information.

“And Isaac?”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you, kid.” There was a rare note of sincerity in Chris’s tone. “Stay out of trouble, okay?”

“You know I won’t,” said Isaac, smiling to himself though his throat felt a little tight. Maybe he’d missed Chris more than he’d realized.

“One last thing,” said Chris. “What do they look like? In case they can’t reach me after they land.”

“The two most gorgeous people you’ve ever seen in your life.”

“That is not remotely helpful. Text me a photograph.”

“Will do,” Isaac said sheepishly.

“I’ll call you when I’ve picked them up,” said Chris.

“Sounds good,” said Isaac. And since he’d already thanked Chris and he didn’t want things to start feeling awkward, he said goodbye.

When Isaac returned to the living room, Hannah and Zach were tangled up together at one end of the couch, as desperate to stay close to each other as Isaac and Jackson had been earlier. Isaac opened his mouth to explain the situation, but Jackson preempted him:

“I could hear the call,” said Jackson. “I told them everything.”

“Cool,” said Isaac. “When do you guys wanna go, then?”

“I’d like to say goodbye to the pack,” said Zach.

“Josie’s a little… stressed at the moment,” said Jackson. “Maybe we could go over there tomorrow morning?”

“Stressed?” Zach raised an eyebrow. “Even more so than she already was about us going to the hunt, and finding out Hannah’s a Bristow? What’ve you done now, Jack?”

Luckily, Hannah saved Jackson from having to explain details by jumping in. “We can afford to wait a day.”

“Are you sure?” Zach asked Hannah.

Hannah rolled her eyes. “You think I’d make you leave without seeing your pack?”
Zach gave Hannah a smile so sweet it almost made Isaac’s teeth hurt. “Thanks.”

They all agreed that it would be best for Zach and Hannah to stay at Jackson’s for the night and then go over to the den first thing the next morning. Zach could drop off the stuff he wasn’t taking with him to Mexico and introduce Hannah to the pack before they said their goodbyes.

Since they still had most of the day to kill, they decided to spend it preparing an amazing going away dinner. He and Jackson went to the store armed with a grocery list from Hannah while she and Zach laid low in the flat. They didn’t need to bring any more attention to themselves than they might have already, especially if Hannah’s family really was tailing her.

When the two of them got back, they all set about preparing the most Britishy dinner Isaac had eaten yet.

“If I’m leaving the country, I’m getting in a few of my favorite foods before I go,” Hannah had said, and Isaac couldn’t blame her at all considering all the foods from the States he still missed.

As long as they stayed busy, it was easy to ignore the ramifications of what they would be doing the next day. Apart from what Josie would say or do about Hannah and Zach, Isaac still had to give her an answer about whether he was staying. As much as he wanted to blow her off and ignore her ridiculous rules, she had been right about one thing: Jackson needed his pack.

So when Hannah and Zach had settled in to watch TV on the couch after dinner, Isaac (as subtly as he could manage) pulled Jackson into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. When Isaac didn’t immediately jump Jackson’s bones, Jackson gave him an expectant look.

“I’ll join your pack,” Isaac said quickly, before he could let himself change his mind.

Jackson blinked at him in surprise. “You don’t want a pack.”

“No,” said Isaac, “but I want you.”

“But--”

“Don’t try to talk me out of this unless you really don’t want me joining your pack.” Isaac tried to smirk to lighten the sentiment, but he could tell it fell flat. Jackson probably knew as well as Isaac did that it wouldn’t take much to talk Isaac out of joining.

Jackson frowned. “I don’t want you to join just for me.”

“Can’t you let me do something nice for once?” Isaac laughed.

“Not when it’s going to make you miserable,” said Jackson. “You like hunting.”

“I wouldn’t be miserable,” said Isaac. “I’d have you, right?”

“Yeah, but…”

“Jackson,” Isaac said firmly. “Stop. Your alpha’s not gonna let me be with you unless I’m part of your pack, and she’s already made her stance on hunters pretty clear. If I have to choose between you and hunting, I choose you. Every time. Okay?”

There was a long beat where Jackson looked like he was torn between wanting to keep arguing with Isaac and wanting to kiss him, so Isaac made the decision for him. The sound Jackson made when Isaac deepened the kiss was something between a frustrated groan and a moan, but his hands
tangled in Isaac’s hair immediately.

Jackson broke the kiss long enough to growl, “We’ll figure something out,” and then his lips were back on Isaac’s with a renewed fierceness. Jackson’s blunt nails scratching down his back and then teasing up the hem of his shirt brought Isaac back enough to remind Jackson that they had guests (despite Isaac’s willingness at this point to let Jackson do literally anything to him). Jackson’s usual reserve set in, along with a faint blush across his cheeks as he stepped away from Isaac. They each took a moment to calm their breathing and adjust their clothes before heading back out into the living room. It didn’t seem like Hannah and Zach had noticed their brief disappearance, but it was more likely that they were just being polite.

They all spent the next several hours watching TV together and talking. By midnight, Zach was yawning pretty steadily. Around one o’clock he fell into a doze in Hannah’s arms.

“You guys can have the bed,” said Jackson, and Isaac nodded his agreement. He and Jackson could fit on the couch together. It might not be a deep sleep, but they could make it up tomorrow after Zach and Hannah left.

Zach woke up enough to make a sound of protest, but Hannah shushed him and helped Jackson haul him off the couch. Jackson overrode Zach’s insistence that he could stay up and that he and Hannah could sleep on the couch, and helped him stumble toward the bedroom.

“Hang on,” said Hannah, following them in. “Give us a moment. He won’t be comfortable sleeping in what he’s wearing.”

She gave Jackson a pointed look and shooed him out of the bedroom. There was a minute where Isaac could hear rustling clothing and sleepy impatient sounds from Zach, then Hannah let Jackson back into the bedroom so they could tuck him in. He was snoring within thirty seconds.

“You really want someone who snores that loud for your mate?” Jackson said to Hannah when they were back in the living room.

“I’ll get noise-canceling headphones,” said Hannah with a fond smile.

Isaac chuckled and took Zach’s spot on the couch next to Hannah (not quite as cuddly, but still pretty cuddly). They talked for a little while longer, Jackson interjecting every now and then but mostly just listening. By half-two Jackson was nodding off as well.

“Go to bed,” said Isaac. “Hannah can kick you out in a bit, right?”

“Count on it,” said Hannah.

Jackson didn’t argue, and soon Isaac could hear both him and Zach snoring through the closed bedroom door. Hannah and Isaac settled on opposite ends of the couch, facing each other.

“Quite the pair we’ve chosen,” Hannah mused.

“Didn’t really feel like a choice,” said Isaac, smiling slightly. He could blame the mate bond for giving him no choice in whether he stayed with Jackson, but that was mostly a cop-out. He could admit, to himself at least, that the bond had been able to form because of dozens of choices Isaac had made when it came to Jackson. He just hadn’t known where they were leading at the time.

Hannah looked briefly toward the bedroom, like she could see Zach through it. “I know what you mean.”
A comfortable silence settled over them for a moment before Hannah spoke again.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“No problem,” said Isaac, figuring she was talking about the escape-to-Mexico plan. “Chris is pretty good at taking in strays.”

“No, I mean… Thanks for bringing me to the cafe,” said Hannah. “For dinner and the club. For him.”

“Will it be worth it?” said Isaac. “Giving up everything?”

“Yes,” Hannah said without hesitation. “But I’m not only doing it for him. I’m doing it for me. I can’t stay here any longer. What my family do…” Hannah bit her lip. “They’ve been planning to send me away.”

“What?” Isaac asked. James would never, or at least, Isaac didn’t think he would.

“Wendy’s champing at the bit to take over the family,” said Hannah. “Sounds like she wants me brainwashed so that I won’t be a threat to her new manifesto.”

Isaac paled at the idea. It almost sounded like what had happened with Gerard and…

“Lucky for me,” Hannah continued, cutting off Isaac’s train of thought, “Pol said something that made me stay with Zach last night, or else Wendy might’ve already sent me off without so much as a goodbye.”

“That’s horrible,” was all Isaac could think to say.

Hannah shrugged, as if to say that the situation was what it was, and they lapsed into a friendly silence.

“I’m gonna miss you,” Isaac said after a while, feeling how true it was only after he’d said it. She really had been a good friend to him these past couple of months.

“Me, too,” said Hannah, gracing him with a beautiful smile. “Is that why you foisted me off on your friend? So you can keep track of me?”

“You caught me,” said Isaac. “Nah. It’s a perk, but Chris is a good guy. He’s what hunters should be. He protects people. Even if they have glowing eyes and sharp teeth every now and then.”

“What a novel idea,” muttered Hannah, clearly a little bitter.

There wasn’t much more to say after that so Isaac went to wake Jackson up so Hannah could sleep in the bed. But when he opened the bedroom door, he found Jackson and Zach curled up under the duvet together, Jackson’s arm slung across Zach’s waist and his face hidden in Zach’s unnaturally bright red hair. It was heartbreakingly beautiful in a strange, indefinable way.

When Isaac didn’t go into the room, Hannah joined him at the doorway.

“What is it?” she whispered as she peered in.

“Pack,” Isaac said simply.

Hannah probably couldn’t see much in the dimly-lit room, but she stood in the doorway for a long moment anyway, watching Jackson and Zach in silence.
“What does it feel like?” Hannah seemed unable to move away from the door just yet. “A pack bond, I mean.”

Isaac shrugged. “Honestly? I’m not sure I’ve ever really felt it. I’m kinda weird that way.”

“Zach said he feels a bond with me. Is that like a pack bond?”

Isaac looked over at Jackson and felt himself smiling. “That’s a mate bond.”

“A mate bond,” Hannah repeated. “What’s the difference?”

“What did Zach say about it?”

“He said it’s impossible to explain, but that he’d do anything I asked.” Hannah looked troubled, chewing at her lower lip anxiously.

“You think that’s a bad thing?”

“I don’t want him to do things just because I say.”

Isaac chuckled and dragged Hannah away from the door, closing it behind them and leading her back toward the couch.

“It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?” Hannah huffed in frustration as she dropped back down on the couch.

“Like being in love, I think,” said Isaac. “I don’t know for sure. I’ve never been in love before.” Before now, he silently amended.

“I used to think I had,” said Hannah, “but not like this.”

“And it’s like… it hurts to be apart. Like, physically hurts. And you can find the other person. Even if you don’t know you’re looking for them.”

“So basically I’m stuck with him?” said Hannah, arching a perfect eyebrow at Isaac.

“Unless you can live with making him a miserable wreck for five years or so,” said Isaac.

“So no pressure, then.”

“Absolutely not,” said Isaac.

The smiles they had both been stifling broke through after a few seconds of deadpan silence. They settled in on the couch, head-to-foot. There was an unspoken agreement that an uncomfortable night on a couch was worth it to let their mates sleep peacefully. Tomorrow was already going to be difficult enough for them. Zach leaving wouldn’t break the pack bond, but it would still be hard for Jackson and the rest of his pack. Isaac fell asleep wondering what it might be like to have a family that actually cared when he left.

Jackson watched Zach’s face as Zach led Hannah up to the den for what would probably be the first and last time. For Zach, bringing his girlfriend home to meet his family for the first time probably would’ve been stressful enough—even without considering the fact that she was also a hunter that he was bringing straight to their pack headquarters—but Josie was already in a bad mood because of Isaac. There was no way to anticipate what they were going to face inside.
So why did Zach look so... confident? So resolved? Like this was the easiest choice he’d ever had to make in his life.

Maybe it was. Jackson could see just by the eager look in Zach’s eyes as he pointed out the brownstone to Hannah that she was the most important thing in the world to him now. Maybe Zach would have needed Josie’s alpha stamp of approval a few weeks ago, but when it came to Hannah, Zach only needed, well, Hannah.

“--ready?”

Isaac’s fingers twining through his was what brought Jackson out of his thoughts.

“What?” he asked. Hannah and Zach had apparently already gone inside, leaving Jackson and Isaac standing on the stoop.

“Are you ready?” Isaac repeated.

Jackson took a deep breath, squeezed Isaac’s hand in response, and led him inside.

“--followed Josie’s order, Dad, I swear.”

Zach’s voice. It looked like over half the pack was in the parlor. And everyone was so focused on Zach and Hannah that they weren’t paying attention to Jackson and Isaac. Which was kind of a relief.

“But she showed up at my flat and I just...” Zach sighed deeply. “I couldn’t tell her to leave. I wouldn’t.” His tone grew more confident, and Jackson could see him grip Hannah’s hand as he said, “I won’t.”

“So... you’ve come to say goodbye?” Helen asked, voice tight with emotion.

“For a little while, at least,” said Zach, frowning.

“Where do you plan to go?” said Will.

“I can’t tell you,” said Zach. “If I do, the Bristows might try to get it out of you. I don’t want to give them reason to hurt any of you.”

“As if they need a reason,” said Dominic. His voice was tinged with bitterness. Jackson supposed he couldn’t blame Dominic for being wary of hunters, given what had happened to his sister.

“They’re not all bad, Nic,” said Sarah. “This one isn’t. She loves Zach. You’d need to be blind not to see it.”

Sarah gave Hannah a warm smile and went over to hug her. Zach didn’t let go of Hannah’s hand, and Sarah pulled him into the hug, too. When she let go, she said, “Someone will no doubt give you the ‘If you hurt him...’ speech, so I might as well do it.” She gave Hannah an exaggeratedly stern look and said, “If you hurt our brilliant, gorgeous boy, you’ll have the whole wrath of Holborn down on your head, little huntress.”

“I won’t,” Hannah said earnestly. “He’s... He’s my mate.”

This statement was met by murmurs of approval from most of the rest of the pack (Dominic being the notable exception). Hannah seemed to have won them over.

Which of course meant that this was the perfect moment for Josie to come in from outside. She was
holding a package, which she had opened. When she saw Hannah and Zach in the living room, she heaved a resigned sigh.

“I suppose this explains why I’ve just been sent a parcel with the Bristow pup’s name on it.”

Hannah eyed the package dubiously, clearly as confused as the rest of them. Josie reached into the box and pulled out two envelopes. Then she gave the box to Hannah and handed Zach one of the envelopes before opening the other. She read it aloud to the pack:

“‘To Alpha Holborn. Expect no retaliation. None of my clan will know of your pack’s involvement in her disappearance. The Bristows honor their treaties.’ Signed by Pol Bristow herself, no less.”

Josie gave Zach and Hannah a weary, almost defeated kind of look.

Hannah stared at Josie in obvious bewilderment. “But I didn’t… Nobody knew I was running away. I didn’t know I was running away.”

Nobody had an answer for that. Zach peered into the package and said, “Can’t tell if she’s given us her blessing or her forgiveness, but it looks like your passport’s in here, so I won’t argue.”

“I suppose that settles it,” said Josie. She went over to Zach and placed a hand on his shoulder, locking eyes with him. “You don’t need to tell me you’re leaving. You’re not leaving, not really. You’re Holborn. Nothing will ever change that. You’ll just be Holborn a bit farther away for a while, yeah?”

Zach finally let go of Hannah’s hand so he could throw his arms around Josie’s neck. Jackson felt himself smiling as Josie hugged Zach tightly and nuzzled her face into his hair. When they broke apart, both of their faces were damp with tears.

“Right,” said Josie. She quickly wiped at her eyes and sniffed once, regaining her composure. Jackson froze when her gaze turned on him, then flitted to the side. To Isaac. “I hope you haven’t come to tell me you’re taking another one of my wolves away.”

“I…” For once, Isaac was speechless. But Josie only rolled her eyes and kept talking.

“Lucky for you, a hunter omega werewolf who’s mated to my teenage Yank beta is somehow not my biggest concern right now. You two stay here until we’ve got Romeo and Juliet here sent off safely.”

“I really think people should stop making that comparison,” Isaac muttered, and Jackson stifled a smile in his sleeve.

Josie ushered Zach, Hannah, Will, Helen, and Sarah into the other room to plan what exactly needed to be done and sort out who was going to do what and when. Jackson was so caught up in all the commotion that he nearly jumped when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

“So this is the source of all our trouble, eh?” said Rodger. He was looking up at Isaac, sizing him up. “He didn’t seem quite so tall last time I saw him, but then, someone had him pinned to the ground, didn’t they?”

Jackson felt himself flush, which made Rodger laugh.

“I don’t see what the fuss is about,” he said to Jackson. “Honestly, Jack, I think you could do better. This one’s a six, maybe a seven.”

Bronagh snorted. She had appeared at Rodger’s side, between him and Jackson. The four of them
were standing in sort of a half-circle now. “I suppose you think you’re a ten, do you?”

“No,” said Rodger. “I know I am. As are you, love,” he added, smiling innocently at Bronagh.

“Is yours a sweet-talker as well, then, Jack?” said Bronagh.

“Absolutely,” said Isaac, grinning. “You gonna introduce me to your pack, Jack?”

“You know Rodger,” said Jackson. “Sort of. This is Bronagh. His mate.”

“We’ve seen each other before,” said Bronagh. There was something slightly disapproving in her tone.

Isaac looked at her quizzically for a moment, then his eyes widened in recognition. “The wolf from the graveyard!”

Bronagh made a sound that Jackson could only interpret as, ‘Yes it was, now prove that you’re not the threat I’m inclined to think you are.’

At least Isaac had the decency to look very slightly regretful about that whole mess.

Jackson and Isaac chatted relatively pleasantly with Rodger and Bronagh for a while. Eventually they were joined by Dominic, Eva, and Ada, who Jackson introduced to Isaac in turn. Justin and Colin made an appearance and got thoroughly overexcited about the exceptionally tall, very climbable new werewolf in their den. Their antics made Isaac grin like an idiot, which was somehow endearing and unsettling at the time. (Oh God, what if Isaac wanted kids someday?)

When Josie, Zach, and the others finally reemerged, it looked like everything had been settled. Zach and Hannah went up to Zach’s room to sort through the box and repack Zach’s bags.

The goodbyes were about as awful and awkward as Jackson had expected. The air in the den was thick with anxiety and sadness, and nearly everyone got at least a little misty-eyed. Dominic was still stony-faced and a little cold to Hannah, but he gave Zach a fierce hug goodbye and wished them well. Helen and even Will hugged Hannah, though their proper goodbyes would be said at the airport; Zach’s parents and Sarah were going with them to make sure they got there safely.

The most surprising interaction for Jackson was Zach yanking Isaac down to his level by his jacket lapels and giving him a rough but long hug. When he let go, he fixed Isaac with a serious look and said quietly, “Don’t run off on him again. He needs you. And I know you need him.”

Jackson flushed, feeling a little self-conscious hearing someone else talk about his relationship like that, but he appreciated the sentiment. He half expected Isaac to make some smartass comment, but Isaac only gave a solemn nod. Zach smiled and reached up to ruffle Isaac’s hair affectionately. When had they become so close?

Then came the moment Jackson had been dreading: Zach saying goodbye to him. He was dimly aware of Hannah hugging Isaac nearby. Jackson surprised himself by how long and how tightly he held on to Zach. His packmate. His brother. Jackson nuzzled his face into Zach’s hair and inhaled, memorizing his scent. He tried to remind himself that this wasn’t goodbye forever. Zach and Hannah would be with Argent, which meant that they’d be safe and that maybe they would end up in Beacon Hills at some point. Who knew--maybe they would be there next time Jackson went back to see his parents. It would all work out somehow, in the end.

“Hang on,” said Isaac as Zach and Hannah headed for the door. “Need a pic to send to Chris.”
He snapped a photo of them together on his phone and sent it off.

The den felt unusually empty after Zach and his family and Hannah finally left, even though the rest of the pack and Isaac were still there. It seemed like nobody really knew what to do next. Luckily (or perhaps not, for Jackson at least) Josie quickly took charge again.

“Right,” she said as she surveyed the group. “Has everyone met the ridiculously tall, smart-mouthed omega who started all this mess? Because it seems we may be stuck with him for a bit.”

“I was just about to suggest a little pack expedition to the park, actually,” said Eva. “We may as well enjoy this lovely day while we get to know the boy.”

Justin and Colin practically shrieked in excitement at the prospect of going to the park. Josie nodded her approval of Eva’s plan and Dominic, Ada, and Eva wrangled the twins into their jackets. Isaac shot Jackson a bemused smile as the twin pups each took one of Isaac’s hands and began dragging him towards the door. Their mums, Rodger, Bronagh, and Dominic fell in close behind.

Just as Jackson was about to follow, he felt a hand settle on his shoulder, holding him back.

“Not you, Jack,” said Josie, and Jackson knew what was coming.

Jackson saw the look of fear sweep over Isaac’s face when their eyes met again and Isaac realized that he was going to be alone with Jackson’s pack just before the door closed behind the group, and Jackson didn’t quite know who he felt sorrier for--himself or Isaac.

“All right, pup,” said Josie. She looked careworn, but her tone was still authoritative. “I’ve been far more patient than I should. It’s time for the truth.”

Josie steered Jackson to the sofa and sat him down. Jackson knew there was no getting out of this now, but despite the nervous way his heart was pounding, he was oddly relieved. Maybe it would be nice not to have any more secrets.

“Okay,” said Jackson, swallowing a nervous lump in his throat. “What do you want to know first?”

“I don’t even know where to begin with you.” Josie sighed deeply and sat down next to him. “I’ve given you so many allowances, but this mess with Zach and Hannah, not to mention Isaac...”

Josie frowned and shook her head. “There are rules, Jack. He might think they’re unnecessary or outdated, but when they’re followed they keep us alive and safe--from hunters and from other packs. An omega living in my territory for a long period of time without joining my pack makes me look like a weak leader. It’s only a matter of time before another alpha tries to recruit him, or worse, challenges me for Holborn. I’m strong, but I’m young, and I’ve only been at this for a few years. The other packs know that. If one of their betas isn’t sure about challenging their own alpha but wants to be one, killing another pack’s alpha might be an appealing option.”

“We’d never follow another alpha,” Jackson said vehemently.

“Like I said,” Josie said ruefully, “there are rules.”

Jackson shook his head, more because he didn’t want to contemplate the possibility rather than denying that it was one. He couldn’t imagine what another alpha might have done in this same situation. What Hale might have done. Jackson shivered. “Isaac said he’d join, but I know he doesn’t want to. The alpha who bit us was... Well, he wasn’t like you.”
“All these secrets, Jack.” Josie’s frown deepened. “That’s another rule I’ve let you off. Any other alpha would’ve made you tell me about those eyes of yours before accepting you as a beta. But I decided to trust you.”

“I…” Jackson cringed internally. Josie was right, of course; Jackson shouldn’t’ve been allowed to join Holborn and keep his past a secret. Rodger had said as much about what had happened when Dominic had joined. “I’ll tell you everything. If you let him stay, but don’t force him to join the pack, I’ll tell you all of it. Anything you want.”

“This isn’t exactly a negotiation, Jack.”

“Please,” said Jackson. “Just… Just listen. Maybe if I tell you the whole story you’ll understand why I can’t ask him to join.”

Josie didn’t look convinced, but she nodded and squeezed his knee gently in reassurance. Jackson took a deep breath and started with the worst of it.

“I killed Isaac’s dad.”

He watched Josie’s face shift from confusion to alarm to concern, understanding that there had to be more to it.

“I asked him for the Bite,” said Jackson. “Well, I demanded it. And when Derek said it meant I was part of his pack, I rejected him. And my body half-rejected the Bite… Sort of.”

Jackson still didn’t fully understand it himself, so he hurried on before Josie could ask him any questions.

“I was… a bad person. I didn’t deserve to be a wolf. So the Bite made me a monster instead.”

Josie began slowly shaking her head and Jackson could practically hear the reassurances on her lips that he wasn’t, but Jackson quickly continued. Now that he’d started, he was scared to stop before he told her the whole story.

“It’s called a Kanima. This disgusting giant lizard thing that’s basically only good for killing people, and I… I killed a lot of people. Matt—” Jackson couldn’t control the shudder that just thinking about their classmate sent through him. “—this guy, Matt, he was my… my master. He controlled me. Told me who to kill. And Isaac’s dad was at the top of his list. At first it was just people who’d hurt Matt when he was a kid, but then it was anyone who got in his way. Innocent people.”

There was a hint of recognition in Josie’s expression that suggested she was thinking about Jackson’s eyes.

“There was another guy after Matt died. I don’t remember most of it, even though Isaac filled in a
lot of the details, but every now and then, bits and pieces…” Jackson swallowed the bile that was
threatening to escape his stomach. “I remember… I remember how good it felt, doing what they
told me. I know they were sick psychopaths and they were using me to murder people, but still…”

Jackson glanced up at Josie. “It was like some fucked-up, twisted version of having an alpha. I had
to do what they wanted, but what they wanted was so evil…”

He broke off, starting to get overwhelmed by his memories. He had never talked about this before
with anyone but Isaac.

Josie cupped his cheek in her hand and drew him close to her. “I’m so sorry, Jack,” she murmured,
nuzzling his hair.

Jackson let himself bask in Josie’s comfort. After a long moment, he pulled back a little and Josie
let him go. He cleared his throat.

“So how does Isaac figure into all of this?” Josie asked suddenly. She was kind enough not to say
the words, apart from you killing his dad.

Jackson bit his lip, uncomfortable with sharing Isaac’s past without his permission, but it was
necessary if Josie was really going to understand why Isaac didn’t want to join the pack.

“Isaac… Isaac’s dad…” Jackson tried to explain, but trailed off when he realized he didn’t know
how to start this part of the story. So maybe he’d start with something Isaac had told him after
Jackson’s nightmare.

“Isaac and Matt were friends when they were kids. They’d share comic books and hang out and
stuff. But one day, Isaac wasn’t around and some of Isaac’s older brother’s friends were and they
thought it would be funny to throw Matt in the pool. But Matt couldn’t swim or something, and
Isaac’s dad had to save Matt from drowning.”

Jackson felt a brief rush of primal fear at the thought of drowning. Matt’s fear of water had never
fully left Jackson.

“He threatened Matt, told him not to tell anyone. And Matt believed him. He didn’t even tell Isaac,
just suddenly wasn’t his friend anymore.”

Jackson frowned. In addition to how fucked up everything else about that situation was, it only
occurred to Jackson just then how it might feel to find out that your childhood friend became a
homicidal psychopath because of something your dad did.

“Anyway. You can probably see that Isaac’s dad wasn’t a great person. But nobody knew how bad.
He abused Isaac and nobody stopped it. Until Derek. Derek figured out somehow that Isaac’s dad
was hurting him. So he offered Isaac a way out. Offered him the Bite. Offered it to a couple of
other messed-up kids, too. Pretty much all of us--the ones he bit--were almost as fucked-up as him
in one way or another.”
“That’s a gang, not a pack,” Josie said disapprovingly, but she didn’t elaborate, so Jackson pressed on.

“So, yeah, Isaac took the Bite, and then I--the Kanima--killed Isaac’s dad, so Isaac started living with Derek.” Jackson shrugged. “I don’t really know the details, but it’s a safe bet things weren’t a lot better for him there.”

Josie made another disapproving sound.

“Long story short,” Jackson said after a deep sigh, “if you’d had Isaac’s dad and then Derek for an alpha, you might not want a pack, either. Hell, I’m kind of surprised he’s okay with being stuck with me.”

Josie gave Jackson a long, thoughtful look. “How long have you known he’s your mate?”

Jackson stared at her, caught completely off guard. Had Rodger told her? Surely if he had, Josie would’ve brought it up before now, wouldn’t she?

“How--?”

“Just answer the question,” said Josie.

“Since he tried to leave,” said Jackson. Even thinking about it caused a twinge of anxiety.

“It must have been painful.”

“Yeah,” said Jackson. “I couldn’t--”

“You couldn’t breathe,” said Josie. “Couldn’t think. Couldn’t imagine how you would live if you weren’t together.”

“How did you…?”

“You weren’t here when I came to Holborn,” said Josie. “The pack are kind enough not to talk about it, so you’ve not been told.”

“Told what?”

“I had a mate. Well, I never had him. I had the bond. But he… didn’t.”

“Josie, I’m…” What, sorry? What could Jackson possibly say to that? Even thinking about that possibility--that Isaac wouldn’t want him--had been more upsetting to Jackson in those days before Isaac had tried to leave than Jackson had realized at the time.

But, Josie waved him off.

“As you can imagine, given your situation, I don’t like thinking about it,” said Josie. There was a forced detached quality to her tone. “But I’m telling you because you’ve finally been honest with me, and because I want you to understand that this is the only reason I am making an exception. Because I know what it’s like to leave a mate. And I know what it’s like to leave a pack. And I never want you to experience the pain of either of those things.”

Jackson felt indescribably selfish in that moment. He had already felt guilty about disobeying Josie and keeping things from her, and he had been grateful that she was giving him more leeway than he knew other alphas would give him. But he had only been thinking about her decisions with regard to her being an alpha and wanting to protect the pack. He had figured that she had been
lenient on Jackson because he was young and she knew he was kind of messed up. It had never even occurred to him that there might be factors from Josie’s own life that could influence how she treated Jackson.

“Josie, if I’d known…” he started feebly.

“Now, now, Jack, don’t you go pitying me,” she chided him. “I’ve made my peace with it, and Holborn is the best thing that could’ve happened to me. Even with the headaches my betas have been putting me through lately.”

Her stern tone was undermined by the beginnings of a smile on her lips.

“So… He can stay?” Jackson asked tentatively. “Without joining the pack?”

“Here are my conditions,” said Josie, all business again. “First, you move into the den--both of you--immediately and until further notice. I gave you freedom and you took advantage of it. You’ll have to earn it back. You staying here will also give other packs the impression that Isaac’s joined.”

Jackson readily nodded his agreement. He liked the privacy of his flat, but Josie definitely had a point, considering that none of this probably would’ve happened if Jackson had been living at the den when Isaac had come to London.

“Second, he will no longer associate with the Bristows. In fact, he will have no contact with any hunters in Britain. He will also inform me in advance of any hunting or consulting he plans to do outside of the country. It ought to go without saying that you will not associate with hunters, either.”

She was actually going to let Isaac keep hunting? That was more than Jackson had hoped for. He had been trying to prepare for Isaac’s disappointment at having to give up that part of his identity.

“Finally, and most importantly,” said Josie. “You are completely responsible for him. Any rules he breaks, any trouble he stirs up, it comes back to you. If you can’t keep him in line, the next chat you and I have will be much less pleasant.”

“I understand,” said Jackson, locking eyes with Josie to show her how serious he was. “I agree to all of that. He will, too. I promise.”

Jackson bared his throat to Josie for good measure, but she tsked and guided his head back toward her with a warm palm pressed to his cheek.

“I believe you,” she said solemnly. “As for your mate, I suppose time will tell.”

Chapter End Notes

Merry/Happy Christmas! We apologize for the slight today, but we both had a lot of work recently plus holiday travel, etc. This is the second-to-last chapter, so with any luck the fic will be done by the end of the year. Crazy!

The third and final installment of Star-Crossed will be posted tonight or tomorrow as well :D
Thank you all for your lovely comments and kudos and everything. They really make our day! We hope all of you have a wonderful holiday and that your 2015 ends well :)
Chapter Summary

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back;  
For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

--Rudyard Kipling, "The Law for the Wolves" from The Jungle Book (1894)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: PROMISE (Eve 6)

_I promise not to try not to fuck with your mind._  
_I promise not to mind if you go your way and I go mine._  
_I promise not to lie if I’m looking you straight in the eye._  
_I promise not to try not to not to not to leave._  
_I won’t leave._

The trip to the park was… kind of amazing, actually. Isaac had expected Jackson’s packmates to be wary of him, or at least annoyed about all of the problems Isaac had caused for the pack (not the least of which was introducing Zach to Hannah, though Isaac couldn’t say he regretted that), but for the most part they were very welcoming. Only Dominic, who seemed to be the oldest guy in the pack besides Zach’s dad--and as far as Isaac could tell, was the twins’ father--was somewhat reserved. But it was still a lot better than it could’ve been. Rodger even smiled when he gave Isaac
the “If you hurt my brother I will break every bone in your body, rip you into unrecognizable pieces, and scatter you across half the UK” speech, and Bronagh followed it up with, “He’s having you on. Mostly.”

The twins were great. It had been a blast playing with the little Bristow hunters-to-be, but trying to wear out a couple of werewolf kids was a challenge, even for a young, full-grown werewolf. Isaac could see why it would be a benefit to have an entire pack raise born werewolves. It was fascinating to see their wide eyes flash gold every now and then while Isaac chased them around the park. This earned them some scolding from their parents because they were in a public place, but none of the humans nearby seemed the wiser.

A full hour later, Justin and Colin had finally calmed down. When it was time to go home, one of them hopped up on Isaac’s back to be carried, while the other (after grumbling about not being the one to go with Isaac) demanded that Rodger carry him on his shoulders.

As they were walking back to the pack’s den, Dominic surprised Isaac by falling in step beside him. Dominic reached up to ruffle his son’s hair affectionately, then said to Isaac gruffly, “You’re good with pups. Might be… nice. To have you around for a bit.”

Judging by the warm smile one of the twins’ mothers gave Isaac, this was high praise from Dominic.

Isaac shrugged (which was somewhat difficult to do with a werewolf ‘pup’ hanging off his shoulders). “It was fun. They seem like good kids.”

“Should’ve seen ‘em when they were teething,” Eva—or Ada; Isaac couldn’t remember who was who—said, prompting rueful laughter from the rest of the group. Isaac had a mental image of werewolf toddlers chewing at furniture with their sharp teeth like puppies, and joined in the laughter.

The difference between the Holborn wolves and the only pack Isaac had ever known was like night and day. Jackson’s pack was friendly and supportive. It was clear how much they cared about Jackson, and Isaac could really see now that Jackson’s change in personality since he’d moved to London was due to the support of the pack. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to be a part of that.

As much as he liked them, though, Isaac still didn’t really like the idea of joining another pack. He didn’t like the person that he’d been when he had been under Derek’s authority. He didn’t want to lose his freedom, or be beholden to anyone. Except Jackson. Isaac had meant what he’d said to Jackson: he could live with giving up his freedom if that’s what it took to be with his mate. There were a lot of things Isaac would miss if he had to join a pack and stop hunting. But none of them were worth giving up Jackson for.

So as soon as they got back to the den, Isaac asked Josie if he could talk to her in private. Well, her and Jackson. Jackson counted as ‘in private’ now, as far as Isaac was concerned. Josie led them down to a basement room that made Isaac a little nervous, but Jackson squeezed his shoulder to reassure him, and Isaac’s anxiety eased.

“I’m in,” Isaac blurted out as soon as they had all reached the bottom step. He didn’t want to give himself the chance to turn back. “I mean, I’d like to join your pack, if it’s still okay.”

Josie assessed him, frowning. She could probably sense the half-lie. Isaac wouldn’t like to join the pack, technically.

“Isaac—” Jackson started, before being cut off by a motion from Josie.
“No,” she said after a long moment of silence.

Isaac’s blinked at her a few times. “No?” he echoed, too shocked to do anything else. His heart sank, a cold fear creeping in. He had waited too long to accept the offer. What would he do now? Surely Josie wouldn’t forbid Jackson from seeing Isaac anymore. ...Would she?

But Josie continued before Isaac could look to Jackson for some kind of reassurance.

“You will not be accepted as a member of this pack until you can tell me that you want to be a part of it without lying. I’m betting that’s not likely to ever happen. That being the case, I have a new offer.”

Isaac stood before Josie, speechless, as the alpha laid out her terms. The offer was better than Isaac could’ve possibly hoped for. Sure, living in the den would be awkward, but once he’d proven that he was serious about Jackson and that the pack could trust him, Isaac would be allowed to hunt again. He could take trips back to France or wherever else Chris had contacts outside of the UK, and he could do research in London and consult with them over the phone or Internet. That really wouldn’t be too much of a loss, then, at the end of the day. Isaac was forbidden from interacting with the Bristows anymore, but his business with them was done anyway, and Hannah was the only one of them who he’d really miss.

“You’re both grounded to the den until further notice, mind,” Josie added. “I’ll take Jack to and from school, or send one of the pack who hasn’t been flouting my rules for two months.”

Isaac knew that the unsaid name was Rodger.

“You,” she said, pointing to Isaac, “will stay here and learn about how this pack is run. You will not leave the den without my permission and without an escort. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” Isaac said quickly. “Absolutely.”

The smile Jackson gave Isaac then made all of it worth it already.

Josie wouldn’t let Jackson and Isaac go back to Jackson’s flat alone to get their things, but the wolf she sent with them was Dominic, who was more than happy to wait downstairs after Jackson awkwardly turned down his offer to help them pack. They didn’t really need to bring much with them, anyway; all of the furniture and dishes and everything would stay, including the bedding, since Zach’s room was fully furnished. So it was just a matter of packing up most of Jackson’s clothing and some toiletries.

“Guess it’s lucky I’m already packed, huh?” Isaac joked. Jackson shot him a sharp look that he hoped conveyed the full extent of how completely not funny that comment was.

Dominic carried one of Jackson’s bags but hung back a little ways behind them while Jackson and Isaac walked together. Jackson wasn’t sure if it was to intentionally give them privacy or if Dominic was on the lookout for other wolves or something, but he was grateful. This would likely be one of the last times he and Isaac would be able to talk to each other without half a dozen pack members within hearing range at any given point, at least for a while.

Isaac’s mood was about ten times lighter than Jackson had seen it in weeks. Jackson listened to him go on about the trip to the park and how much he liked the Holborn wolves he’d met, and it all sounded genuine.

“Those twins are insane,” Isaac said with a fond smile. “I mean, I knew some people were born
werewolves, like Derek and Cora, but I never thought about what they would’ve been like as kids.”

Jackson again had the somewhat disconcerting thought that Isaac might want to have kids someday—which was way too much for Jackson to contemplate at age seventeen and having just found his mate—but it was nice to see Isaac excited about something. Especially something to do with Jackson’s pack, which Isaac had been so wary of before.

“I’ve never been threatened by so many well-meaning people before,” Isaac added. “They really care about you.”

“I know,” said Jackson. The words weren’t nearly enough to encompass how much Jackson knew that his pack cared about him. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that they had saved him, and they had asked so little of him in return. It was more than Jackson could ever repay them, and he still sometimes grappled with the fact that they didn’t think there was anything to repay.

“Judging by the intensity of the threats, Rodger cares about you the most,” said Isaac. “He painted a pretty colorful word-picture of what he’ll do to me if I hurt you. Man, I would love to get him and Chris in the same room. They could swap elaborate threats. Derek just had his usual ‘I’m gonna rip your throat out with my teeth’ thing. Powerful, but not very creative. He-- Hang on.”

Isaac’s phone had buzzed in his pocket. He picked it up and laughed at the message he’d gotten.

Jackson raised an eyebrow at him, curious.

“So I told Chris that when he went to the airport in Mexico he should look out for two of the prettiest people he’d ever seen in his life,” Isaac explained. “And he said that wasn’t helpful, so I sent him a picture. I think he understands now.” He was still laughing when he showed Jackson his phone.

Uncle Chris: …
Uncle Chris: I see what you mean.

Jackson frowned at the screen, reminded of something he had thought he’d heard when Isaac had been on the phone with Argent yesterday. Thank you for agreeing to help my friends, Uncle Chris.

“So I…” Jackson started haltingly. He wasn’t sure he was supposed to be bringing this up, but now seemed like a good opportunity. “I heard you on the phone yesterday… with Argent. You called him your uncle.”

Isaac put away his phone and answered Jackson’s unasked question by pulling out his Paris ID card—a different one from the fake one Jackson had seen him use at bars—and handing it to Jackson.

“Isaac Argent?” Jackson asked, incredulous. Was that what Isaac’s other ID said, too? Had Jackson just not noticed it before?

“Yeah,” Isaac said sheepishly, tucking his ID away again. “Turns out there are all kinds of laws in place to keep people from kidnapping minors and taking them out of the country, and they get a lot more suspicious if you have a different last name from the people you’re traveling with when you look young, even if you get an ID that says an older age. My passport says ‘Argent,’ too. Chris figured it made sense to keep up the pretense until I turn eighteen, just in case my name is flagged in any Child Protective Services databases or anything. Which it probably is. So the fake name ended up solving a couple different problems.”

“So according to Interpol, Chris is your uncle?”
“Pretty much,” said Isaac. “Helps with other hunters, too. If I’m caught out on my own, I can show them my ID or this, and they’ll usually leave me alone, or at least let me call Chris.” Isaac pointed to the silver ring on his middle finger, which Jackson had never really looked at closely before. It had an ‘A’ etched into it, with an arrow on either side. ‘A’ for Argent. A hunter’s ring.

“I don’t just call him that because it’s a convenient lie, though,” Isaac continued. “Chris looked out for me when he didn’t have to. I think I’m almost to the point where I don’t feel like I’m just a burden to him. He’s the closest thing to family I have now, so.”

Isaac shrugged, like he was kind of self-conscious about it.

“Was the closest thing,” said Jackson. It sounded cheesy as soon as he’d said it, but something in him was desperate to remind Isaac that Isaac would always have Jackson now. He laced his fingers through Isaac’s.

Isaac smiled and squeezed Jackson’s hand. “Anyway, I think he feels the same way about me, after...” Isaac trailed off meaningfully.

Isaac’s smile faltered, and the unspoken name hung heavily in the air between them. They were both quiet for what felt like a long time.

“Did anyone tell you what happened?” Isaac finally asked.

Jackson shook his head. He’d had so many questions about the dark shit that had happened in Beacon Hills after he’d moved to London. He had only heard about in bits and pieces from Lydia and Danny over the past year, but he had never dared to ask about it. He was pretty sure that no good would’ve come from it anyway.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Isaac added quickly.

Jackson shrugged, not wanting to pressure Isaac. “We can if you want to. I promise I won’t be such a dick this time,” he said, referring to a few nights ago when Isaac had opened up and Jackson had stormed out, unwilling to return the favor.

“She was saving me.” Isaac sighed deeply before shaking his head and quickly amending, “I mean, not like that. It wasn’t some big romantic self-sacrificing gesture or anything, but... Anyway, she saved me, and then she wasn’t paying attention, and...” He broke off. “Such a stupid fuck-up.”

It was completely inappropriate and unfair, but Jackson felt an internal twinge of jealousy at how clear it was that Isaac had cared about Allison. He wasn’t sure how deeply or in what way, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but it still bothered him. Apparently, despite all of the personal growth he’d done in London, Jackson was still enough of a dick to be jealous of a dead girl. A dead girl he had known, and even maybe almost been friends with. Poor Allison. Too noble and brave for her own good.

“We should’ve waited for Chris.” Isaac swallowed thickly. “We were so fucking stupid. We should’ve-- If we’d just waited like five fucking minutes, she--”

Isaac’s voice was choked off by sudden, half-contained sob. He sniffed and rubbed at his eyes, like he was confused and embarrassed by his own emotions. Jackson had never seen Isaac break like this. The panic attacks were one thing: fear and frustration and bewilderment. Even when he had told Jackson all about what his dad had done to him, he’d held it back. But this... Jackson had never seen Isaac grieve.

He didn’t know what he could do, how he could help. Isaac had always made calming or
comforting Jackson seem easy: soothing words in quiet tones, his arms around Jackson, distracting him if necessary. But, like with Isaac’s dad, Jackson had no experiences that could compare to what Isaac must be feeling right now.

Isaac stopped walking. He was sort of hunching in on himself, body starting to shake. Jackson could hear the pounding of his heartbeat, his erratic breathing. Jackson guided Isaac to sit down on the front steps of a nearby flat so he wouldn’t fall over. He caught a glimpse of Isaac’s reddened, tear-streaked face before Isaac hid it in his crossed arms, and the sight of it made the corners of Jackson’s eyes sting. Isaac was hurting and Jackson had no idea how to make it stop.

Jackson reached his hand out and placed it on Isaac’s shoulder. Isaac started in surprise, like he’d almost forgotten Jackson was there. He looked up at Jackson, and as soon as their eyes met, Jackson was prompted to action. He sat down on the steps next to Isaac and shifted close to him, throwing an arm protectively around his shoulders. Isaac pressed close to Jackson and hid his face near his shoulder, and Jackson let him stay there and cry for as long as he needed to.

They stayed like that until Dominic caught up. There was no way he had been that far behind, so he must’ve sensed that something personal was happening and given them space. Jackson gave Dominic a grateful look, and Dominic nodded an acknowledgement.

“Come on, pup,” Dominic said gently, running his hand over Isaac’s hair as if Isaac were one of his own sons. “Let’s get you home.”

*Home.* The word echoed in Jackson’s head, spreading a warm sense of calm through him. *Home* was the den now, and Isaac was coming to live there with him. Jackson would be able to stay with his pack and still have Isaac. It was nearly miraculous, given everything that had happened over the past few days.

The three of them shouldered their bags and walked in peaceful silence for the rest of the short trip back to the den. By the time they got there, Isaac’s eyes were dry and he was no longer giving off any signs of anxiety.

“You boys take your things upstairs,” Dominic said when the den’s front door had closed behind them. “We’ll make sure there’s food for you when you’ve gotten hungry.”

“Thanks, Nic,” said Jackson. He hauled the bag Dominic had been carrying up onto his shoulder, and started up the stairs with Isaac on his heels.

“So, this is Zach’s room, huh?” Isaac observed when they got there, probably able to tell by scent. He dropped his bag on the floor near the bed, and Jackson followed suit. Jackson watched him immediately begin to study one of the posters on the wall with undisguised amusement. Of course it was a detailed chart of various canine species dating back into prehistory. Unsurprisingly, werewolves hadn’t made the list.

“Was,” said Jackson, unable to keep a hint of sadness out of his voice.

“Is,” Isaac insisted. He moved to where Jackson was standing and stepped into his space. “We’re borrowing it. We’ll just take good care of it until he gets back, right?”

Jackson’s frown gave way, lips turning up slightly as he let Isaac reassure him. “Right.”

“Of course, I hope that includes defiling every inch of it,” said Isaac. He raised an eyebrow and gave Jackson a lascivious smirk. “Because I’m not going to stop fucking you senseless just because we have neighbors now.”
A familiar pang of want hit Jackson’s stomach, and he felt his face flush.

“Oh, God.” Jackson groaned. “I might regret this.”

“Regret it all you want,” said Isaac, still smirking. “As long as you regret it over on that bed. Or on the floor. Or up against the wall. I’m not picky.”

Jackson chose the bed.

It was weird, being sort of, partially, unofficially part of a pack. Most of the time, the Holborn wolves treated Isaac like he was one of them, but every now and then Isaac would butt heads with Josie and Jackson had to remind him that Jackson was responsible for everything Isaac said or did. Isaac would back down, for Jackson’s sake, but sometimes he needed to take a walk to cool off, and it added insult to injury that Josie always sent one of the Holborn wolves to keep an eye on him. It would have been easier if he could make himself be submissive to Josie, the way a beta was supposed to be, but no matter how they fought, Isaac always dug in his heels until he had to give in because of Jackson. Isaac suspected that was the real reason Josie would never make him officially join; she could tell that he was an omega through and through.

Things weren’t perfect between him and Jackson for every moment of every day either, because that would’ve been impossible between two strong-willed teenage boys in closed quarters, even ones who were literally soulmates. Luckily, their arguments could usually be solved with sex, during which Isaac got to play his favorite game of trying to get Jackson to be as loud as possible. It was a little mean, maybe, but it was just so fucking adorable seeing Jackson blush when his older packmates gave him knowing looks. He had been absolutely mortified when Eva had asked them to at least keep it down when the twins were home, since “We’d like to wait a few more years before explaining this sort of thing to them.”

Isaac got stir crazy every now and then, especially with Jackson still going to school and Isaac not allowed to go anywhere alone. Even though he wasn’t supposed to hunt, he did manage to get away with doing general research on monsters, studying the Argent bestiary, and tracking suspicious news posts about supposed animal attacks occurring in Europe. He couldn’t do anything about them on his own, but he texted Chris in case Chris thought it was worth contacting hunters in the area.

For safety’s sake, Hannah and Zach didn’t contact them directly, but Chris checked in every now and then to let Isaac know that everything was okay. After a few weeks, Isaac started to sense a note of affection in Chris’s voice when he talked about “the kids” (they didn’t take any risks by saying the fugitive lovers’ names or putting them in writing), which was encouraging. Maybe Uncle Chris would have another ‘nephew’ and a ‘niece’ soon.

Overall, Isaac was feeling pretty content, which was something he would not have thought possible a few months ago if someone had told him he’d be living with a pack of werewolves and only sleeping with one person. In fact, the idea probably would’ve scared him. But things changed. People changed. And Isaac liked to think that they had changed for the better.

Jackson and Josie met weekly to talk about how things were going with Isaac. It wasn’t too long before Josie admitted that, so far, it was working out better than she had expected. Which raised the question of what would need to be done to ensure that other wolves and hunters still recognized that Isaac ‘belonged’ to Holborn once he was allowed to leave the flat on his own again, and especially once he was allowed to continue hunting.
The hunting was something Jackson thought about more and more. In Isaac’s antsiest moments he
unconsciously twisted the silver ring on his finger, fidgeting with it like it was suddenly something
he couldn’t ignore. Jackson had even caught himself playing with it idly if Isaac insisted on
holding his hand while they watched TV or something. Isaac never seemed to be content unless he
had his hands on Jackson in some way. Jackson liked to pretend to be annoyed by it, but he found
that he didn’t really mind Isaac being a little possessive (most of the time). After all of that
uncertainty about whether Isaac really wanted him, it was nice to have it affirmed on a regular
basis.

It was the Argent ring that eventually gave Jackson the idea for how to mark Isaac as ‘Holborn.’

“Jewelry,” Josie said flatly. “We’re not proposing to him, Jack.”

Jackson flushed at the very idea. Being soulmates or whatever was one thing, but he had absolutely
no interest in marriage, at least at this point.

“Just a ring,” said Jackson. “Argent gave him one. If we want to have a claim over him as strong as
the hunters’, we should have a similar symbol, shouldn’t we?”

Josie considered this for a moment. “You want it to be silver? That’s a fun bit of irony.”

“Do you have another idea?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to disrupt his impeccable sense of style,” Josie drawled. “All right. Have it
made. I’ll give it to him when I decide he’s earned it.

Isaac knew something was up from the way Jackson had been sneaking around recently. School
was over for the summer, which Isaac had thought would mean that he and Jackson could start
spending more time together again (Jackson had been way too good of a student lately) but so far it
had just meant that Jackson and Josie spent a ton more time on “walks.”

Isaac was getting pretty tired of the secrecy, but he respected that Jackson would tell him whatever
it was when Jackson was ready and no sooner. He knew better than to push when it came to
Jackson.

Still, it bothered Isaac. Luckily, he was saved the trouble of trying to figure out how to confront
Jackson without causing a fight, when Josie and Jackson finally decided to clue Isaac in.

“Oi! Ollie!” Josie called from the kitchen. “Come in here.”

‘Ollie’ had been Isaac’s nickname since Rodger had started calling him Oliver (as in Twist; Isaac
had been less than flattered when he had read the book to find out where it came from). In
retaliation, Isaac called him Dodger, which made sense considering Rodger’s name, until you
thought about the fact that Dodger’s real name in the book was Jack, and then the whole thing
became a mess. ‘Ollie’ had stuck, though, and Isaac had stopped fighting it about two weeks in,
decking to see it as a sign that the pack was becoming comfortable with having him around.
Besides, the only other nickname Isaac had had in his life was Zac, which he had never liked, and
which would also have been especially confusing in Holborn.

Isaac rolled his eyes—he didn’t understand why Josie couldn’t just ask him to do something--and
set down his battered copy of Twelfth Night that he was rereading because he hadn’t had a chance
to ask anyone to take him to the bookstore. He definitely made sure to take his sweet time
following Josie’s voice into the kitchen.
“Yeah?”

“Got something for you.” She pulled out a small, unassuming white box tied with a simple black ribbon and tossed it toward him. “Catch.”

On reflex, Isaac caught the box with one hand and stared down at it quizzically. Josie was giving him a present? Surely this was some kind of prank.

“Generally it is customary to open gifts,” Josie drawled. “Unless you really like boxes, I suppose.”

Isaac eyed Josie suspiciously, but figured he’d have to open it at some point, so he might as well just do it now and get it over with. He slipped the ribbon off the box, opened the lid, and peered inside.

“...You got me a ring.”

“We did,” said Josie.

“We?” Isaac raised an eyebrow at her.

Jackson emerged from the other room, glancing at Isaac uncertainly. “Well, it was my idea, but I figured Josie should give it to you.”

Isaac took the silver ring out of the box and inspected it. It was almost exactly the same as the Argent ring Chris had given him, except instead of the ‘A’ and two arrows, there was an ‘H’ etched into it.

“To go with your other one,” Jackson explained quickly. “Not to replace it.”

“I…” Isaac rolled the ring in between his fingers before finally slipping it onto his left middle finger, where it fit snugly.

“How did you...?”

“Sized your other one the last time you took it off. And since you’re right-handed, I figured a half-size down...” Jackson trailed off.

Isaac could tell Jackson and Josie were both watching him intently, waiting for some kind of sign, but the surge of conflicting emotions inside Isaac made it impossible for him to explain how the symbol made him feel.

Pack but not pack, hunter but not hunter. Isaac stared at his hands and thought about what the rings really meant: family, trust, protection.

Jackson made a small, uncertain sound, reminding Isaac that he wasn’t alone.

In one fast motion, he grabbed Jackson and pulled him into a fierce hug, burying his face in Jackson’s shoulder. The hug was so sudden, and clearly unexpected, that Jackson just stood there for a moment before reciprocating it.

“I love it,” Isaac said against Jackson’s neck. He pulled back to give Jackson a kiss before turning to acknowledge Josie.

“Thank you,” he said seriously, trying to convey how much it meant to him. Josie smirked knowingly and nodded.
Isaac looked back at Jackson, excitement building. “Now I can flip everyone off as a wolf and as a hunter at the same time,” he said, grinning.

“Glad to know the symbolism is so meaningful to you,” Josie said wryly, but she was still smirking.

Isaac had to ask. “So, does this mean…”

“It means I’m allowing you out of our territory. Unsupervised. As long as you behave, mind,” Josie added. “And you’re free to work with hunters on the Continent, provided you give me advance notice of any travel and I have veto power.”

Isaac almost laughed out loud. After spending so long being either cooped up or followed around, Isaac couldn’t wait to be a free man again. Not that having an excuse to keep Jackson close all the time had been a bad thing, but Isaac figured Jackson was probably ready for some freedom, too.

“Wear that, and you’ll have Holborn’s protection in London,” Josie continued. “Just remember that it also means everything you do goes back to us.”

Isaac nodded solemnly because he knew that’s what he was supposed to do and thanked Josie again. Josie probably could tell how eager he was to take advantage of his newfound freedom, however, because she dismissed him and Jackson pretty quickly after that.

Isaac practically leapt down the brownstone steps, feeling positively giddy about being allowed to leave the den by himself. There were so many places he wanted to go, so many things he’d been wanting to do, not least of which…

He spun around to face Jackson, who was watching Isaac with undisguised amusement from the top of the steps.

“Come to Paris with me.”

“What?” Jackson blinked at Isaac.

“You’re done with school for the summer and I’m finally off probation,” Isaac reasoned. “It’s the perfect time!”

“We can’t just go to Paris.”

“Come on,” Isaac wheedled. “I’ve been cooped up in that house for months. Do you realize we’ve been dating since February and we still haven’t even been on one real date?”

Jackson scoffed and followed Isaac down the stairs at a more reserved rate.

“We have not been dating.”

“Oh?” Isaac lifted an eyebrow at the challenge. “Then what have we been doing?”

“We’re mates.” Jackson shrugged, uneasily. He passed Isaac and kept walking down the street. Isaac jogged to keep up, refusing to let Jackson off the hook that easily.

“Is that all we are?” he asked, dragging out the ‘all’. He was baiting Jackson, of course; being mates was definitely not something Isaac took lightly. But it wasn’t a conscious decision between the human parts of them.

Jackson flushed and kept walking, making Isaac’s smirk grow wider.
“I mean, we’ve been living together for months, we’ve been sleeping together for months, we’ve been doing a lot more than just sleeping together--”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Jackson cut him off before Isaac could take the thought further.

“Say it,” said Isaac.

Jackson groaned. “You already know it.”

“Yeah, but I want to hear you say it.”

“Fine. You’re my boyfriend,” he muttered. “Happy?”

Isaac pulled Jackson to a stop and kissed him thoroughly. When they finally broke for air, he said, “Incredibly.”

He made a show of examining the ring and grinned at Jackson.

“Pretty smart making your alpha give this to me.” Isaac smirked. “Wouldn’t want me to get the wrong idea, after all.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and groaned as he pulled away, clearly fighting a small smile of his own.

“So.” Isaac hooked his arm in Jackson’s as they walked. “Paris?”

Isaac still hated the “Tube” (Subway. It was a friggin’ subway.), but it was the fastest way to get to the train station, so Isaac could handle it. He would make himself handle it. Anyway, it was easier if Jackson was with him. And if it wasn’t rush hour. And if the car wasn’t more than half full. Physical contact with Jackson helped the most, but since Jackson thought that holding hands in public was “too girly,” sitting close together would have to do.

Despite his protests, Jackson had been packed for the trip and ready to go before Isaac. At least last minute train tickets to Paris from London weren’t as ridiculously expensive as they could have been. Isaac hadn’t even been aware that there was an underwater tunnel between London and Paris, let alone that trains ran through it like every hour. The thought of being trapped in a small space in an underwater tunnel was even less appealing than being trapped in a small space in the sky, but at least Isaac would be able to get up and walk around on a train. Of course, they’d checked with Josie before actually buying the tickets, but she’d thought the trip might do them both some good, which had effectively overruled Jackson’s objections.

Isaac tapped his foot against his duffle bag, glancing around the subway car restlessly. They were only going for a few days, but they were going to be busy: shopping, clubbing--good for dancing and fooling around--crepes, museums, the obvious tourist traps--also good for fooling around--and Isaac supposed if there was time, he’d like to pick up the rest of his few belongings that he’d left at the apartment he had shared with Chris.

Isaac tried to focus on all of those things he wanted to do in France, but the thinness of the air in the subway car was beginning to take its toll on his concentration.

Just as Isaac’s breaths were starting to quicken, Jackson dropped his head onto Isaac’s shoulder. Without even thinking about it, Isaac shifted so he could put his arm behind Jackson’s back. The
familiar position helped to slow Isaac’s breathing and settle his anxiety (which was probably
Jackson’s intention, Isaac realized belatedly). Isaac’s fingers found Jackson’s fluffy-soft hair and
stroked through the strands idly. He smiled to himself, amazed at how something so simple could
make him immune to the tension that would threaten to take over if he were alone right now.

The small car shuddered as it rounded a corner at terrifying speeds and Isaac felt his stomach shoot
up into his throat. Okay, maybe not immune, then.

Jackson reached over and gripped Isaac’s knee.

“Hey,” Jackson suddenly whispered.

Isaac swallowed hard and made a ‘hmm’ of acknowledgement. The blood pounding in his ears was
almost enough to drown out the next words Jackson spoke. The moment he realized what he’d
heard, Isaac’s eyes widened. He simultaneously felt the urge to make out with Jackson and burst
out laughing at the same time.

“You’ve been learning French,” said Isaac, very pleasantly surprised. “Terrible, terrible French.”

“Can’t get my mouth to move the right way,” Jackson grumbled.

“Really?” Isaac leaned in and whispered close to Jackson’s ear. “In my experience your mouth
moves in all the right ways.”

Jackson emitted a sound of annoyance that was clearly intended to cover up a groan. Isaac wasn’t
quite sure, but he thought he could hear Jackson’s pulse speed up ever-so-slightly.

“Oh, come on,” said Isaac, grinning. “You walked right into that one.”

“Well it got you to calm down, didn’t it?” Jackson shot back dryly.

“Touché,” said Isaac. He really did feel a little better now. “That’s French, too, by the way.”

“Yeah, I got that, thanks,” Jackson drawled. “So are you going to teach me French while we’re
over there?”

“Oh, I have a lot of things I want to teach you,” Isaac said suggestively.

That time he definitely heard the spike in Jackson’s pulse.

“Promise?” Jackson asked seriously, maybe even a little desperately. They both knew that he
wasn’t just talking about sex. Jackson wanted to know that they had time. Time for Isaac to teach
Jackson things, time for Jackson to teach Isaac. Just some fucking time, for once, to be together.
Whatever that meant for them.

Isaac’s smirk slipped into a warm, genuine, affectionate smile.

“Promise.”

EPILOGUE
It took Jackson several months to work up the courage to ask Isaac what he wanted--what he needed to ask him. During which time, Isaac had made three trips to France, one trip to Finland, and a quick trip over to Ireland (after winning an argument with Josie about whether Ireland was too close to the UK), all in the name of being a “Werewolf Consultant.” Even after five years, Isaac was still required to double check his travel plans with Josie ahead of time. He had neglected to mention the business cards, though; he and Jackson both knew she wouldn’t approve.

And while Isaac was off traveling Europe (and sometimes back to North America, even to Asia twice) giving advice and stopping monsters, Jackson had spent his time primarily going to classes--finishing secondary school and then doing his undergrad at King’s College, which was conveniently both extremely prestigious and a fifteen-minute walk from the den--doing homework, eating leftovers, and worrying about Isaac.

There had been a few incredibly stressful full moons early on, after Josie had given Isaac permission to hunt again, when Jackson had needed to ask Josie to keep him in the den’s basement because he couldn’t calm down and was worried he was going to hurt someone. The first time that had happened, it had really become clear to Jackson just how dangerous it was to have a person as his anchor. What if something happened to Isaac on one of his jobs or just in general? What would Jackson do then?

When Isaac was with him for the full moon, it was almost ridiculously easy--easier than it had ever been--for Jackson to maintain control. Even after Jackson and Isaac had moved out on their own again they would both still come over for the full moon and it would feel almost like any other social call. They would have an early dinner with the pack, Isaac helping Eva and Ada in the kitchen while Jackson and Rodger looked after the twins (except when the twins wanted to play with Isaac and invaded the kitchen). After dinner the pack, minus Dominic, the twins, and someone to try to put them to bed, would sit in the parlor together, talking or dozing on and off until dawn.

But when Isaac wasn’t there, things could get dicey. Jackson had eventually gotten much better at containing the wolf, but he’d still have relapses now and then when Isaac was on a mission that was longer than usual or sounded particularly dangerous. It had been Josie’s idea to bring Dominic down to the basement when that happened. A few years ago she had decided that fifteen years was more than long enough for Nic to wallow alone every full moon. After spending months’ worth of full moons up in the loft with him, she had finally gotten him to the point where he felt mostly comfortable with coming downstairs. Both Jackson and Nic had vehemently objected to the idea that it would somehow help to have the two Holborn wolves with the worst control in the same room on a full moon, but Josie had put her foot down.

It turned out that she had been right. Jackson still suspected that it was because she didn’t want to let either one of them out of her sight, but whatever the reason, it had worked, for the most part. It helped Jackson, perhaps perversely, to not be the only completely messed up werewolf in the room during a full moon.

Plus it had been kind of fun to be the first person to notice that Josie and Nic were growing closer with each moon. Two years after Jackson and Isaac had become mates and Zach and Hannah had left, Josie and Nic were sharing a bedroom.

All of that being considered, though, Jackson had yet to survive one of Isaac’s absences without spending the majority of it worrying. Which was why, even five fucking years later, he now found himself sitting at the dining room table, tapping his fingers nervously and waiting for Isaac to get back. If he got back. When, he told himself firmly. Josie had insisted that Jackson remove the word “if” from his vocabulary when Isaac was away. Still, it had a way of sneaking back in.
Jackson knew it was stupid to be worried. Isaac was coming back. He always came back. But what if this was the time he didn’t? What if.

Isaac was an experienced and skilled hunter, but the monsters weren’t the only danger to him. What if someone took serious exception to his double role as wolf and hunter? Josie had taken a big risk giving that ring to Isaac, more or less announcing to the supernatural world that Isaac’s actions were, if not strictly endorsed, at least allowed by Holborn. It had drawn a lot of attention to the pack, some of it unwanted, but eventually the other London packs had accepted it. But that didn’t mean werewolves outside of London would. That was one of the reasons Isaac usually wore it on a chain around his neck when he went on consultations (as Isaac liked to call them) for various hunter families. Just in case.

“Besides, if my Argent ring can’t protect me, nothing will,” Isaac had blithely said back when he had first been allowed to start hunting again. He had seemed oblivious, as usual, to the dangers of working with hunters.

That first time back on the job, he’d gone back to France to help the Baudins with some case. Some kind of living skeleton roaming the catacombs or something. Early on, Jackson had struggled with how much he hated knowing the details about whatever dangerous situation Isaac was launching himself headfirst into, but it was worse if he didn’t know.

Jackson had made Isaac swear to keep his phone charger with him at all times, so as not to exacerbate Jackson’s worrying. And every trip, Isaac was always good about checking in when he could, which helped. Jackson only wished that “when he could” was a lot more frequently sometimes.

This time Isaac was hunting trolls in Norway. In the dead of winter. With hunters he’d never worked with before. In the mountains where he had no cell service. Would Argent’s ring be enough to protect Isaac if things went south? The question plagued Jackson, running on a loop through his head, every moment Isaac was away.

Jackson spun a different ring--hammered white gold--on the table and stared at his phone, willing Isaac to call.

Norway had been amazing. And the trolls had actually been a lot more reasonable than Isaac had thought they would be, which meant that he was back in London almost a week before he’d expected.

Normally, Isaac would tell Jackson if there was any kind of change of plans when he was out on a hunt, but Jackson had already known that reception would be spotty, and Isaac wanted to surprise Jackson. After all, if wasn’t every day that your boyfriend graduated from university.

Isaac patted his pocket again to make sure the envelope was still there, just before heading up the steps to their flat. Just as he was about to put his key in the lock, the door flew open and Jackson was standing in the doorway with an adorable mix of relief and confusion written all across his face.

“Surprise?” Isaac offered with a slight wince when they’d been standing there for just a few seconds too long.

Then Jackson was kissing him and Isaac dropped his bag so that he could tangle his hands in Jackson’s hair, and just like that, the subtle sense of wrongness that was with Isaac whenever Jackson wasn’t was gone.
Leaving Jackson behind when he traveled for hunts and consultations was never easy, but Isaac loved coming back. Coming home.

Isaac started gently pushing, guiding Jackson back inside without breaking the kiss. He even managed to kick his bag inside just enough to shut the door behind them.

“Missed you,” Jackson murmured, unnecessarily, between kisses. Unnecessary because Isaac could tell, but he still loved hearing it.

After one final, lingering kiss, Jackson seemed to remember his confusion.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were on your way home?”

Isaac grinned sheepishly and pulled himself away from Jackson to crouch down beside his bag.

“I told you, I wanted to surprise you. Like I was going to miss your graduation! I even thought of the perfect gift.”

Jackson’s eyes lit up at the word ‘gift’ before almost immediately narrowing in suspicion.

“It’s not another toy, is it?”

“No.” Isaac chuckled at the memory of Jackson’s face when he’d opened that particular box. “This is something a little different.”

Isaac reached into a side pocket of his bag for the small, thin silver disc and tossed it to Jackson, who caught it easily and examined it for a moment.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to wear this on a collar,” he said, noting the small hole punched into it near the edge.

“Read the back, asshole.”

“‘Promise’?” Jackson read out loud after turning it over.

“Veto power,” Isaac said as Jackson ran his thumb over the etched word.

Jackson looked up at Isaac and cocked his head to the side, confused.

“For you, for one hunt,” Isaac rushed to explain. “If you don’t want me going on a hunt for whatever reason, you can cash that in and I won’t go. No questions or arguments.”

When Jackson didn’t say anything, Isaac rubbed the back of his neck, starting to feel awkward. “I swear this isn’t just me being cheap. I was just trying to think about what you might want and--”

“It’s perfect,” Jackson cut him off with a smile. “But I want that in writing.”

Isaac slapped a hand to his chest in an imitation of being wounded by Jackson’s words, already reaching with his other hand for the envelope in his pocket.

Jackson stepped up to take the letter, leaning his back against Isaac’s chest. Isaac eagerly wrapped his arms around Jackson’s waist and rested his chin on Jackson’s shoulder as he watched Jackson open the envelope.

Inside was a written and signed agreement, as well as a thin silver chain for Jackson to hang the token on, if he wanted.
“There’s your ‘collar,’” Isaac said smugly.

Jackson leaned his head up and nuzzled his cheek against Isaac’s in a sign of thanks. Isaac let him go just enough for Jackson to unfasten the chain, slip the disc on the chain, and clasp it around his neck.

“Good surprise?” Isaac asked hopefully, pulling Jackson back against him.

“Good surprise.” Jackson nodded, but his pulse was definitely speeding up.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Jackson said after only a moment of hesitation. “Hang on a second, I’ve got a surprise for you, too.”

“Is it a toy?” Isaac teased. Reluctantly, he let Jackson go.

“You wish,” Jackson shot back over his shoulder as he headed for the bedroom.

Isaac laughed and dropped heavily onto the couch, tired from traveling.

When Jackson came back, his pulse was racing. He looked more nervous than Isaac had seen him in a long time, but he also looked determined.

“Stand up,” Jackson ordered.

Isaac lifted an eyebrow, amused. “Why don’t you join me down here?” he asked, reaching for Jackson.

“Just for a minute,” Jackson insisted. He grabbed Isaac’s outstretched hand.

Instead of tugging Jackson down on top of him like he wanted to do, Isaac allowed Jackson to pull him to his feet. They stood there for a moment while Jackson took several deep, calming breaths.

“Isaac Lahey,” he began, before taking another deep breath.

Okay, now Isaac was getting a little nervous, too.

“Isaac,” Jackson started again. “Will you...”

Jackson shut his mouth mid-sentence. Then he opened it again, but no words came out. He shut it again. Then, hesitantly, he held out his hand, palm-up. There was a ring resting in it.

Isaac’s jaw dropped. Well. That wasn’t what he had expected. He felt the corners of his mouth turn up.

“Is this one from your alpha, too?” Isaac teased. Despite his shock, he was determined to have fun with this.

Jackson gave Isaac that look that Isaac knew very well by now meant ‘You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?’

“You gonna get down on one knee?” said Isaac. “Because I think I kinda like you on two knees better.”

“Isaac,” Jackson groaned. “Can you be serious for like five seconds?”
“You like me not being serious,” Isaac countered.

“Not the point,” Jackson muttered, exasperated.

“You are way too nervous for a guy who knows the answer’s going to be yes.”

Jackson ducked his head and shrugged a little, though his skin was flushed and his pulse was still elevated. “I didn’t… I mean, I wasn’t sure it was your… thing.”

Isaac shrugged, too. “I’m good either way. If it’s your thing, it’s my thing. If it means something to you, it means something to me.”

Jackson stared at Isaac like he was something very wonderful, very weird, and slightly annoying. “Well, it does, so… So can you just give me a straight answer?”

“Yes,” said Isaac. “Yes, I can give you an answer, and the answer is yes. Of course it is, you fuckin’ ridiculous Scaredy Wolf. Now gimme that.”

Isaac snatched at the ring, but Jackson closed his hand tightly around it. In retaliation, Isaac balled his own left hand so Jackson couldn’t get to his ring finger. There was a playful struggle, during which Jackson succeeded in prying Isaac’s fingers open and slipping the ring on before Isaac could stop him. When the tussle was over, Isaac was wearing three rings and holding Jackson’s wrists in his hands. Isaac and Jackson both glanced down at Isaac’s left hand, then at each other. A split second of hesitation, and then Isaac let go of Jackson’s wrists and pulled him into a crushing hug.

“Always gotta one-up me, huh?” he murmured against Jackson’s ear. Jackson laughed, his relief so strong Isaac could feel the tension leave his muscles. Isaac pulled back so he could kiss Jackson, long and slow and sweet.

When they broke apart, Jackson had this almost heartbreaking look of sincere, fragile happiness on his face. His voice was thick when he smiled and said, “Obviously.”

The whole situation seemed kind of ridiculous when Isaac actually stopped to think about it. Especially the way he felt now, with or without the beautiful, probably very expensive ring. It seriously would’ve been laughable to him when he was seventeen; living in Paris, trying to ignore all the shit he had been through as a kid, as a teenager.

The last five years had really given Isaac perspective. Five years, and somehow Isaac wasn’t even close to being tired of Jackson. Not that he minded. He had long since learned not to question the good things in his life.

If fate or some so-called higher power wanted to try to make it up to Isaac for all the shit he’d been through when he was younger, he was cool with that. He was becoming used to a particular feeling--one that he had once thought he might never really feel again:

Isaac was happy.

Chapter End Notes

We're done! Can you believe it? What a crazy adventure this has been!

We hope you all enjoyed TSOTW and that you're happy with its conclusion. We can't
thank you enough for reading, leaving kudos, and commenting on this fic. We had no idea when we started out that this would become such a long and involved project, and all of you have been so encouraging and made it so rewarding. Saying goodbye to this fic is bittersweet since we've come to love these boys an the Holborn pack and Bristow clan so much, but we felt that it was time to wrap things up. All good things must come to an end, as they say.

On that note, however, we may post little side one-shots once in a while about some of the original characters or events that might take place before, during, or after the fic. No promises, and no set time frame for that sort of thing, but if you're interested in potential future related works, you might want to set up an alert so you'll be emailed when we post them :)

Much love and many thanks again to all of you! You are amazing and we will miss you and this fic.

Best,
Lenna and Savannah

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