Don't Savage The Messenger

by exclamation

Summary

There is an uneasy truce between the werewolves in the woods and the humans who live in Beacon Hills, protected by a magical boundary that gives warning any time a werewolf crosses it. Then the sheriff is taken by the werewolves and his son offers himself in exchange.

Stiles promises to serve the werewolf pack, not knowing what horrible use they might have for him. But it turns out his most useful skill is the ability to cross the boundary line between humans and werewolves. Life with the werewolves is nothing like he feared and the werewolves themselves are nothing like the hunters' stories would have him believe.

Notes

Make yourselves comfortable, this is going to be a long one. And when I say it will be long, you can believe it. :) I'm going to be pacing myself with chapter posting. I'll aim to add a new chapter 3-4 times a week, but don't expect daily updates.

I've not included the rape warning because there's no actual rape, however there are fears of rape and there is a potentially triggering chapter where rape is threatened.

This will be a very slow build. I've included the Sterek tag, but that's a long way down the
road.
Chapter 1

The boundary of the werewolf territory was clearly marked. There were warning signs along the edge of the road advising all humans not to go any further. A few metres beyond that was the boundary itself, with yet more warning signs explaining the danger of death. Carved into the trees were other markers, strange symbols of mystical power that were part of the town’s defence. If a werewolf crossed the boundary, it would trigger an alert down in Beacon Hills and bring force the full weight of the hunters, the police force, and the volunteer defenders. But a human could cross freely.

The only consequence would be his death.

Stiles walked past the first warning signs without hesitation but at the main boundary line he froze. He stared at the carved symbols. Once he crossed into werewolf territory, nobody would be coming to save him. It wasn’t like his dad would be running to the rescue. In a few hours he would probably be dead, or transformed into the enemy by the bite.

That was what he feared more than anything else, more than the high probability of death. He was afraid that he’d turn into one of those monsters and that he’d attack his dad himself. But all of those fears meant nothing if his dad died. Assuming he wasn’t already dead.

Knowing how slim his chances of success were, knowing all the consequences of this act, Stiles still stepped across the boundary line.

Nothing happened. No werewolves leapt out of the trees to disembowel him. The wind moved through the woods in a chill breeze, rustling the leaves, but there was no sound that anyone had heard his act of trespass. He could still run. He could still step back across that line and go back to his jeep and he’d be safe.

He pulled out of his pocket the white flag he’d made by taping a piece of paper to a stick. He hoped werewolves would acknowledge its meaning. He waved it at the trees as he walked forward, listening out for anything that might be a sign of attack. It was possible they’d attack him before he even knew they were there and then all of this would be for nothing.

“Is anyone out there?” he called. “I’d like to talk to the alpha. Preferably without getting clawed or bitten or mutilated in any way. I’m unarmed. I just want to talk. And right now I’m talking to trees so if anyone’s there, please come out and talk back. All I want to do is talk.”

“What makes you think the alpha will see you?” a voice asked from behind him. Stiles yelped and spun round, tripping a little on the uneven ground and nearly dropping his white flag. He tightened his grip on the stick and held it in front of him like a shield. The owner of the voice smirked a little.

She was hot. Ridiculously hot, wearing pants and t-shirt so tight as to emphasize every curve of her body, a few tears in the fabric showing pale skin beneath, but Stiles forced his eyes to stay on her face because gawping at a werewolf would not help in anyway. She looked about his age and her current form was impossible to distinguish from a human. There was something strangely familiar about her.

“I’m Sheriff Stilinski’s son,” Stiles said, “and I’d like to talk to the alpha and make him an offer.”

“What offer?”

She stepped closer to Stiles. He forced his feet to stay rooted on the ground even though his every
instinct was to run far and fast.

“That’s for the alpha to hear,” Stiles said. She was right in front of him now, looming into his personal space. Stiles kept his eyes on her face, trying not to think about either how hot she was or how she could rip him in half in a heartbeat if she wanted to.

“I’ll take you to him,” she said. “But if he doesn’t like your offer, it won’t be pretty for you.”

She clamped a hand of his shoulder, fingers pinching tightly into his flesh.

“You can loosen the grip just a little,” Stiles suggested. She started walking, towing Stiles along beside her. He had no choice but to follow because he didn’t think he’d be able to break her grip on his shoulder if he had a blow torch, and all he was armed with was his little white flag. So he walked quickly through the trees, weaving between patches of undergrowth and stumbling over roots and uneven ground. The werewolf never once slowed her pace and his sense of direction was quickly shot to hell as they dodged the barriers nature threw in their path. Stiles realised he probably wouldn’t stand a chance of getting back to his jeep even if he could get away from her.

After a few minutes, she shoved him into a clearing and let go of his shoulder. Stiles rubbed at the sore points her fingers had left, but he was too busy staring around at the heart of the werewolf territory.

There was a large old house taking up most of the clearing, the ground in front of the house turned into neatly ordered vegetable plots. It wasn’t what he’d pictured for the home of the monsters who lurked on the edge of town. There were a couple of people working in the vegetable plots, but now their eyes were locked on him. Stiles looked around further and saw what he was hoping for and dreading at the same time.

His dad was at the edge of the clearing. He was strung up by the wrists, the rope stretching to the branch of one of the trees. His body was strained and stretched, forced up onto his toes by the ropes. There was blood on his shirt, his jacket gone. But he was alive. A cloth gag filled his mouth, but Stiles didn’t need to hear to know his dad was basically screaming at him to get out of there. His eyes were vocal enough, looking at Stiles in terror.

Stiles started towards him, but the werewolf girl grabbed his arm and held him in place.

“You said you were here to speak to the alpha,” she said. “You see him first.”

The door of the house opened and two men walked out onto the front porch and then down the steps. Neither of them looked like a hideous monster bent on destroying the town, but Stiles knew better than to judge by appearances. One was probably younger than Stiles’ dad, maybe in his thirties, the other was probably in his twenties and droolably hot. Not that Stiles was going to think about things like that when these people had his dad strung up to a tree and bleeding.

The older of the two men walked up to Stiles, other waiting a few feet away. The man, who had to be the alpha, reached out. Stiles flinched away, but the guy just snatched the white flag from Stiles’ fingers. He held it up, looked at it closely, and smirked.

“It’s not often a human walks into our territory wanting to talk,” the alpha said.

Stiles swallowed and the spoke in a hurried rush of words, spilling out the sentences he’d carefully planned.

“Hello. My name is Stiles Stilinski. I’m here to offer myself in exchange for my father’s life.”
“Exchange?” the alpha asked. He still seemed amused.

“Yes. I will give myself over to the pack willingly, to serve you however you want, if you agree to let my father go.”

“But you’re already here, in our territory. In our power.”

“Yes, but I came under a flag of truce,” Stiles words sounded high and strangled. The werewolves could probably smell how terrified he was right now. “Most peoples would respect that. Don’t shoot the messenger, and all that. Or claw, as the case might be.”

“You are invoking the protected status of a messenger?” the alpha asked. “Does your offer come from the people of Beacon Hills?”

“No. Just from me. Just this person.”

“Then it doesn’t count. You’d only be a messenger if you were delivering a message for someone else. You should probably study protocol a little more before you attempt to invoke its protection.”

Stiles hadn’t intent to invoke any protocol. He’d just been talking, words spilling out in a nervous flow. He didn’t know what to say to make the werewolves listen and he had a feeling they were just toying with him, making a game of his pleas. But he had to go through with this because his dad was captive and bleeding. This might be his only chance to get his dad out of here alive.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Stiles said. “Of course, for your advice to be of any use, you’ll have to let me out of this situation alive. I’m just saying.”

The alpha smirked again.

“Even considering that,” he said, “why would I accept your deal? Your father is the sheriff. A valuable hostage.”

“Not really because if people think he’s dead or that you’ve bitten him, there’ll be an election and there’ll be a new sheriff to deal with. But if you keep me here and send him back, then there’ll be a sheriff in Beacon Hills who will have a good reason not to hurt the pack.”

“Good logic, but if the sheriff is compromised, his superiors will probably remove him from his position and hold a new election anyway. At the very least, he would probably not make it into office again the next time there was an election. So try again. Why would I want to trade him for a useless kid?”

“I could find a use for him,” said the other werewolf. There words were said quietly, without any inflection that Stiles could interpret in a useful way. Still he swallowed, seeing the intensity of the way the guy was looking at him. Hot or not, he didn’t want to guess what kind of use the werewolf would have for him.

The alpha looked at the other werewolf, then back at Stiles, then over at Stiles’ dad. After a moment, he turned to the werewolf beside him.

“Very well,” he said, “but he’s your responsibility and this better not end up like the last time you were given a pet.”

“I was six years old,” said the younger werewolf. “Besides, mice don’t live very long anyway.”

“Actually with proper diet and care they can live for up to five years,” Stiles said. He found himself
pinned by two werewolf stares. “I should just shut up now.”

“You should say goodbye to your dad,” the alpha said. “Erica, cut the sheriff down. Derek.” The alpha turned to the younger werewolf, the one who was apparently now responsible for Stiles. He said something too quietly for Stiles to hear. Derek nodded and walked quickly towards the house.

The alpha swept his hand towards Stiles’ dad. Stiles hurried over. The werewolf girl was already there. She jumped into the air and slashed her claws sideways. The ropes snapped in an instant and Stiles’ dad crumpled to the ground.

“Dad!” Stiles hurried over. He quickly eased the gag out of his dad’s mouth and then checked the shirt, seeing the torn fabric and the gashes beneath, no doubt caused by claws.

“Don’t do this,” Stiles’ dad said. “It’s not worth it. Just get out of here. Don’t do this.”

“It’s done,” the alpha said. “Say your goodbyes.”

“Dad, I had to do this. I couldn’t let them... I love you. I love you.”

“I love you,” his dad said. “I’ll find a way to get you home and I’ll make these bastards pay.”

“No,” said the alpha. “You won’t. Because this is how it’s going to work. Your son’s life is contingent on your behaviour. If you harm any of my pack in any way, your son will suffer the exact same harm. If you act in a way that threatens the safety of my pack, your son will pay for it. And if either of you try to break this arrangement, you will both die for it.”

He crouched down beside them, extending the claws on his hand, holding them up for Stiles to see. When he slashed out, Stiles gave a cry of fear, but the alpha simply cut through the fabric of Stiles’ father’s shirt, pulling away a blood-stained piece. He beckoned the other werewolf, Derek, forward. He’d returned from the house with some ziplock bags. The alpha put the blood-soaked shirt into one of the bags. Then he lifted up Stiles’ dad’s arms and slashed another bit of cloth from beneath his armpit, where the fabric was dark with old sweat. That went in another bag. Derek sealed them both up. Stiles realised then what this was about. The werewolves were trying to preserve his scent so they could track him down.

The alpha looked at Stiles now.

“Your father’s life is protected by your deal,” he said. “If you try to run away or if you hurt one of my pack, we will track your father down and kill him in the most agonising way we can manage. Do you understand?”

Stiles nodded.

“Good.” The alpha stood. “Erica, take the sheriff to the edge of our territory. Derek, see to your new pet.”

He walked into the house.

Erica put her arm round Stiles’ dad and lifted him to his feet, half carrying him out of the clearing. He didn’t even have the strength to try and fight her grip.

“Stiles, I love you,” he called back. “Be careful. Don’t do anything reckless. I love you.”

“I love you,” Stiles yelled after him, knowing that this was probably the last time he’d see his dad. He fought to keep from crying. He didn’t want these werewolves to see him broken before he’d even
discovered what it meant to be a werewolf’s pet.

Derek was staring at Stiles.

“Did you bring anything with you?” he asked.

“No.”

“Empty your pockets.”

Stiles pulled out everything he had on him: his phone, his wallet, his car keys, and of course the small stash of Adderall he carried everywhere in case of emergencies. He kept them in the paper prescription bag because he was aware how suspicious it was to carry a bunch of pills around everywhere. Derek took the bag from his hands now and looked inside. He raised an eyebrow.

“It’s my medication,” Stiles said.

Derek handed the bag back, but he took the rest of Stiles’ things from him. Stiles didn’t even try to argue because not having his phone was probably the least of his problems right now.

“You didn’t bring anything else?” Derek asked. “Food? Supplies? A change of underwear?”

“Just me.”

“Naturally. Right, follow me.”

Stiles had a feeling he’d done something wrong already. He didn’t think this was a guy to argue with. He looked like he could snap Stiles in two without even trying. So he walked along behind him. If nothing else, he probably should wait until his dad had got out of the werewolf territory and getting medical treatment before he did anything to anger these guys too much.

Inside the house, Derek took him through the kitchen, where a couple of people were working on food. They looked at Stiles with curiosity, neither of them saying anything. Stiles wondered how many people were out here. Derek didn’t stop, he went to another door and opened it to reveal a set of stairs down into a basement. Stiles hesitated at the top step, imagining the horrors that probably lay below. His mind filled with images of chains and cages and torture implements.

“Hurry up,” Derek snapped. Stiles followed down the steps. His dad’s last request to him had been for him not to be reckless. Ignoring a direct order when he’d been here three seconds probably counted as reckless.

The basement was full of boxes. They were stacked in piles that nearly reached the ceiling, positioned in rows of two that left narrow spaces between the box towers to get around the basement. In some places, the boxes were replaced with crates, just to make things interesting. Stiles really hoped these weren’t full of torture implements.

Stiles lost sight of Derek amid the boxes and wove between piles until he saw him again. Stiles’ belongings were nowhere in sight. Stiles didn’t know if Derek had pocketed them or if they were in one of the ridiculous number of boxes. Derek grabbed a box off the top of a pile and lifted it down. He opened the flaps to reveal a mass of fabric inside.

“I don’t know what I was expecting, but that wasn’t it,” Stiles said. Derek threw a couple of t-shirts at him. He fumbled a bit but managed to catch them.

“Huh?” Stiles asked. He took a closer look and made a face. One had a hideous design in lurid
colours, the other was apparently advertising a second hand car dealership. He made a face.

“You should have brought supplies,” Derek said. He went into a few more boxes, and pretty soon Stiles was holding a spare pair of pants, a handful of pairs of socks, and a pack of five pairs of underwear. Thankfully the packet was unopened, but everything else was clearly second-hand.

“You should probably write your name in the underwear,” Derek advised as he replaced the boxes. “If you lose anything, you will not get replacements. Come with me.”

Stiles followed him out of the basement and then up to the second storey. Derek paused to grab a pillow from a hall closet and then showed Stiles into a bedroom. A double bed was in the centre of the room, but an air mattress took up most of the rest of the floor space. The room had the messy feel of a lived-in space with the bed and mattress both unmade, a worn book on a bedside table, and some dirty bits of clothing scattered on the floor.

“You can share the bed with me or you can take the air mattress,” Derek said.

Stiles swallowed. So this was when he found out Derek’s use for him.

“Air mattress,” he said. The words came out in a squeak.

“OK,” Derek said.

He put the pillow down on the air mattress and picked up the one that was there already. That pillow he placed at the foot of the bed, over to one side. He pushed the pillow at the head of the bed across to the opposite side, so two people could lie in the bed head to toe. Maybe Stiles had been wrong in his assumption.

“How many people live here?” Stiles asked.

“More than we have beds for,” Derek answered. “Put your stuff in the bottom drawer over there.” He gestured to a set of drawers, the bottom of which was half empty. Stiles shove the contents to one side and put his collection of clothes in the other half.

“Now to make you useful,” Derek said. “Do you know anything about installing solar panels?”

“What? No, but if you give me twenty minutes and an internet connection I can find out anything you need to know. I am the Google King.”

“We don’t have the internet.”

“Right. Of course you don’t.”

“We did, but our ISP cancelled our service shortly after the war broke out.”

“That sucks,” Stiles said.

Derek glared at him. “Thousands of people died, we were banished from all human towns and cities, the government stole our assets, and we’re attacked wherever we go, but you’re right. Losing the ability to watch cute cat videos on YouTube is what sucks.”

Stiles decided to shut up before he lost a limb.

“Do you have any knowledge about architecture or construction?” Derek asked.

“Not a thing.”
Derek nodded like he’d expected that answer. Stiles found it odd that Derek was trying to uncover his skills given his comment earlier about having a use for Stiles.

“You any good at cooking?” Derek asked.

“Decent, I guess. I cook for my dad sometimes when he’s working late. I’ve never poisoned anyone.”

“Know much about gardening?”

“No.”

“Any good at sewing?”

“I once sewed Scott’s hand to his pants. You probably don’t want to know the details about that.”

Derek raised an eyebrow and agreed, “Probably not. What are your skills?”

“Well, I’m pretty smart and there’s the whole research thing, which I guess is not all that useful in the middle of the woods so…” Stiles shrugged.

“Right,” Derek said. “Come with me.”

They walked downstairs, Stiles trailing along behind Derek again. This wasn’t turning out like he’d expected. He’d expected considerably more pain than this. And possibly being bent over hard surfaces and being turned into a werewolf’s bitch. He wasn’t going to complain that none of that was happening, but he was still confused.

Down in the kitchen, there were now three people working on food including...

“Oh my god!” Stiles turned around and put a hand over his mouth in the hope of keeping the vomit from coming.

There were dead things on the table. Fluffy dead things that were now covered in blood because a werewolf was skinning them with his claws. That was a lot of blood.

“Seriously?” Derek asked. “Do you faint at the sight of blood or something?”

Stiles didn’t take his hand away from his mouth to answer because doing so would probably induce vomiting. Derek sighed and grabbed him by the arm, towing him out of the kitchen and out of the house. Stiles stumbled down the steps of the porch and then just stood there for a minute, his hands on his knees, drawing in deep breaths of clean air that didn’t remotely smell of blood.

“You are going to struggle here,” Derek commented.
Stiles had been put to work. He was picking raspberries, still trying to work out what the hell was going on. Derek had given him a stack of plastic boxes and sent him into the gardens that covered every inch of clear ground around the big house. So Stiles was filling the boxes with raspberries and trying not to get too tangled up in the nets that protected the berry bushes from birds.

Derek had left him here, saying he had other work to do. There were other people around, but they were busy with their own work, not paying Stiles the slightest bit of attention. As Stiles plucked berry after berry, he wondered if he should take advantage of this chance. He could slip away into the trees. He could run. His dad would have crossed the boundary by now. Maybe he could get away. Maybe all that stuff about scent samples had been a bluff and the werewolves wouldn’t follow him across the boundary. After all, if they crossed the boundary line, the hunters would be on them in an instant.

But Stiles couldn’t take the risk. This was his dad’s life he was thinking of. If he ran away and the werewolves took it out on his dad, he would never forgive himself.

So he picked berries, and looked around at the place he found himself in.

The big house had clearly been around since before the war had begun, built in the clearing in the woods. The clearing itself had been converted into a large garden, which was entirely given over to fruits and vegetables. There wasn’t a thing growing here that wasn’t useful. Under the shade of the trees, Stiles could make out other structures, low huts and fences built of wood. From the clucking sounds emanating from behind one of the wooden fences, he guessed that structure contained birds. He wasn’t sure about the others, though he could make out some white box things in the woods that might have been bee hives.

It was like the pack had tried to turn a posh house into a farm. No, it wasn’t like that. It was exactly that.

Now that he thought about it, Stiles realised he probably shouldn’t be surprised. It wasn’t like the pack could go into town and buy food and there wasn’t a restaurant in town that would deliver takeout to the werewolf territories. He just hadn’t ever pictured werewolves digging up potatoes and picking tomatoes.

He finished with the raspberries. The ones left on the bushes now weren’t ripe yet. He looked down at the boxes he’d filled. He was hungry. Apparently being terrified for himself and a family member worked up an appetite. He wasn’t sure when these guys would let him eat and it wasn’t like anyone would miss a couple of raspberries. He lifted a small one out of the box and started raising it to his mouth.

“Don’t even think about it.” The voice sounded behind him, making Stiles jump and nearly causing a cascade of raspberries. He spun round and saw Derek there, looking at him sternly.

“I was just... testing,” Stiles said. He put the raspberry back into the box. Derek’s eyes on him felt heavy.

“We will feed you, Stiles,” Derek said. “For as long as you’re here, and as long as you’re making yourself useful, you will get food. But all the food here belongs to the pack. If you take food that’s not given to you, you will be punished for it.”
“Punished?” Stiles echoed.

“This is the only warning you’ll get.”

Derek took the raspberry boxes from him and handed him a plastic bag in exchange. He left Stiles picking some kind of bean while he took the raspberries inside the house. Stiles didn’t argue. He just crouched down next to a line of low bushes and started picking the long beans from between the leaves. He was aware of the other garden workers watching him, speaking in tones too quiet for human ears to pick up what they were saying. They must have heard the entire exchange with Derek.

How long had Derek been watching him? Stiles didn’t believe that he could have just shown up at the precise moment Stiles decided to eat, just by chance. He must have been watching to see what Stiles would do. Stiles just wasn’t sure what it meant that Derek had stepped in. He might have thought that Derek had been lurking to catch him doing something wrong so he’d have an excuse for punishment, except that he’d given him a warning instead, stopping him before he broke the no-snacking rule.

Either he’d learned whatever he needed to by watching Stiles, or the thing about the food was important enough that Derek wasn’t going to let him break the rule by accident. Or both.

He wondered how many other rules he didn’t know about.

After he’d done with the beans, one of the others took the bag off him, gave him an empty one, and set him to digging up leeks. She’d given the instructions clearly and politely, but there was a hostile edge to her tone. She wasn’t happy that he was here.

Looking around, Stiles saw people walking through the trees, coming into the clearing, and heading to the house. There was a range of ages. Some were little children, being herded along by adults. The oldest was maybe fifty, or perhaps a well-preserved sixty. Given werewolf healing, it was possible that they stayed fit and young-looking for longer and maybe that person was older. He didn’t know. All of them looked at Stiles as they walked past, some with suspicion, others with obvious hatred.

“Is he a human?” a girl asked. Her eyes were on Stiles, wide and frightened.

“Yes,” said the man who held her hand, guiding her towards the house.

“Is he going to kill us?”

“Of course not. Peter wouldn’t let him.”

Then they’d walked around the corner of the house and Stiles couldn’t hear anymore. Stiles almost wanted to laugh. How the hell could a werewolf, even a werewolf child, possible think that Stiles could hurt them? That little girl probably had the freaky strength and the healing and the claws, and be capable of kicking Stiles’ ass if he tried anything.

Stiles was still thinking about it when Derek reappeared, telling him he could stop for the day. Inside the house, there was a queue outside the bathroom as people waited their turn to go in and wash their hands with cold water and the thin slither of soap. Derek stood in the line right behind Stiles. Everyone glanced in his direction, those same looks of suspicion and hatred.

“What’s he doing here?” one man asked Derek.

“Making himself useful,” Derek answered.
“He’d better not get my share of the food,” someone else muttered, loud enough that Stiles was sure he’d been meant to hear.

Stiles washed the dirt from his hands and followed the people through into a dining room. There was clearly some sort of shift system in place. When they walked in, a group of kids, who must have all been younger than ten, were sitting around the table, while adults and older kids waited around the edge of the room, chatting or just glaring at Stiles. When each child finished eating, they stood up and carried their dirty plate through to the kitchen and someone else emerged with a plate full of food to take their place. Peering through the kitchen door, Stiles could see those who’d finished washing up their plates so that there would be enough clean plates for the next diners. There was only space for eight people at a time around the table, and it didn’t look like there were more than about a dozen plates, but Stiles guessed there were about a hundred people trying to get fed.

“So Erica wasn’t kidding,” a voice said. A familiar voice. Stiles turned and saw a teenager with a mess of curls and a cheerful smile. Isaac. The pieces clicked and Stiles realised why Erica had seemed so familiar. Both of them had been at the same high school as him, until they’d disappeared, missing presumed mauled and eaten by werewolves. They were here, alive and apparently well. The change in both of them was obvious enough that it was clear they’d been bitten. The werewolves had made them part of their pack.

“Isaac,” Stiles said, while he tried to think of something more intelligent to follow it up with.

“He’s taken your bed,” Derek told Isaac.

“Damn it,” Isaac complained. “I’m not sharing with Erica and Boyd again.”

“We don’t want that either,” someone called across the table. It was a large, black guy, also familiar. Vernon Boyd. It seemed that everyone who’d disappeared from Beacon Hills High School had ended up out here, joining the press of people waiting to get food.

The little kids were ushered away, told it was bed time, and some of the adults took their places at the table. The alpha was among them, apparently oblivious to Stiles’ place in the crowd. Stiles wasn’t sure if there was some special order to who went for food first, but there didn’t seem to be any favouritism in terms of portions. Everyone, including the alpha, got identical portions of some kind of stew.

Derek continued the conversation with Isaac, saying, “You can share with me or go out to the dorms.”

Isaac made a frustrated noise and said, “Fine, I guess I’m with you then.”

The alpha stood and carried his dirty plate through to the kitchen. Stiles was surprised by that. He’d assumed that the alpha would get his betas to wait on him hand and foot, but the man walked over to the sink and wiped clean his plate like everyone else, while one of the other werewolves took the place he’d been sitting in.

Once they’d eaten, the werewolves disappeared off, into somewhere else in the house or out into the woods. The dining room was almost empty when Derek took Stiles through to the kitchen. Stiles picked up a plate and went over to the stove, where an older woman served him a spoonful of the stew. Stiles noticed that his portion was slightly smaller than the one Derek received but he decided it was safer not to notice. So he pretended he didn’t see the difference and took his food through to the dining room. He also pretended that he hadn’t seen the fluffy rabbits being skinned earlier to make this stew.
There wasn’t much meat in it, to be fair. Mostly it was vegetables and gravy, with chunks of potato to give it bulk. He’d imagined werewolves hunting animals through the woods and eating them raw, so this was definitely better. It also didn’t involve anyone eating him, which he was thrilled by.

When he’d finished, those who’d been serving in the kitchen were now eating in the dining room, the stew pot scraped out. Stiles carried his plate over to the sink and washed it quickly, but Derek didn’t usher him from the room again. Instead, he lifted the huge pot that the stew had cooked in and set it in the sink. He looked pointedly at Stiles.

“Make myself useful, right?” Stiles said.

He started pouring the water and grabbed the sponge. He was telling himself that this was a lot better than the torture and death he’d anticipated, when he saw Derek carry over two more, identically huge stew pots for him to clean. He started to wonder if torture would have been better.

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It turned out that cleaning duties included three stew pots, some knives and some cutting boards, one of which had a rather alarming amount of blood on it. When he was done, he was expected to clean the entire kitchen, scrubbing the stove top, wiping the counters and then mopping the floor. Stiles spent most of the time resisting the urge to sing songs from Cinderella.

At last, he was done. Derek appeared through some supernaturally enhanced lurking ability right as Stiles finished pouring the dirty mop water away.

“Come with me,” Derek said.

“It’s going to introduce you to the concept of ‘please’ at some point,” Stiles said, but followed Derek out of the kitchen and back upstairs to the bedroom.

All the way there, Stiles’ sense of dread rose with every step. This was the moment he’d been dreading since Derek had said he had a use for him. This was what he’d feared since he’d made the decision to cross into werewolf territory. This was the instant when the werewolves truly used him. Stiles’ heart was hammering as he stepped into the bedroom and he wasn’t sure he could remember how to breathe. The dizzying terror of an impending panic attack rose up around him.

But all that happened was that Derek held out his phone. Stiles stood there, his panic receding slightly in the face of his confusion.

“What?” Stiles asked.

“Call your dad. Let him know you’re alive. You’ve got five minutes.”

Stiles took the phone and Derek left the room, shutting the door behind him. Stiles didn’t have any illusions about privacy though. With werewolf hearing, everyone else in this house could be listening to him. Still, he wasn’t going to decline this chance.

He turned on the phone, fretting and fidgeting while he waited for it turn to turn on. It felt like he might lose half of his phone time just waiting for this thing to start up. Eventually it did come on and he found his dad’s cell number in the phonebook. He called it, waiting with more anxiety as he listened to it ring.

What if something had happened to him? What if the werewolves had just dumped him at the boundary and he’d been too hurt to do anything? What if his injuries were so severe he’d died?
“Hello?” a voice answered. “Stiles?”

It wasn’t his dad’s voice, but it was one almost as welcome.

“Mrs McCall? Is my dad OK?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s sleeping off surgery right now. There was a lot of damage but he should make a full recovery. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. They haven’t hurt me.” The ‘yet’ hung unspoken on his lips, but he was sure she heard it anyway.

“Your dad told us what happened.”

Stiles was aware of how little time he had. He didn’t know when Derek would come and take the phone away again.

“I had to do something,” Stiles said. “I don’t know if they’ll let me call again. Tell Dad I love him and I’m sorry.”

“I will, Stiles.”

“And make sure he eats right. God knows what will happen without me there to keep an eye on him.”

“I promise.”

“And tell Scott sorry. I couldn’t see him to say goodbye. I was afraid he’d try to talk me out of it.”

“I’ll tell him. Is there anything we can do?”

“No, just... just take care of my dad. And goodbye,” Stiles could feel the tears welling up. His last chance to say goodbye to his dad and he didn’t even get to speak to him. But at least his dad would be OK. He was in a hospital with Mrs McCall to look after him and make sure he was healed and would be safe. That was all he needed in the end.

“Be careful, Stiles,” Mrs McCall said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I think it’s too late for that warning.”

“Just don’t antagonise them. We’ll be here, thinking of you. If you need anything, if we can help, we’ll be here.”

“Thanks.” The word came out, choked and desperate. The call ended soon after and Stiles sank down onto the bed, sobs wracking his body.

Derek walked into the room. He didn’t say anything, just held out his hand for the phone. Stiles gave it up without a fight and then waited there, crying, while Derek left him alone in the bedroom.
Chapter 3

Stiles didn’t get much sleep. The combination of air mattress, missing his pillow, and the sounds of two other sleepers in the room kept him up most of the night. He dozed a little as the night went on, but would wake up whenever one of the others stirred in their sleep. When Derek declared it was time to wake up, Stiles was almost glad to give up on any thoughts of sleep. He felt utterly drained though and didn’t hold out much hope of getting decent coffee here.

He didn’t get any coffee at all. He also didn’t get a shower, because apparently their water supply was limited and their usage had to be carefully managed. There was a schedule for who could shower when and for how long, and Stiles was on the bottom of the list. He was allowed to have a quick wash and a spray of the deodorant that was shared among the occupants of the house.

He expected to be put straight to work after his meagre breakfast, but it turned out that mornings were for study. Everyone under the age of eighteen was expected to do schoolwork in the mornings and Stiles was no exception. He joined Erica, Boyd and Isaac along with the younger kids, squeezing into a living room and finding any spare patch of floor to sit on because a group of girls had claimed the couch and a couple of little boys were sharing the armchair. The other chairs were taken by the teachers, two adults who offered help and answered questions when the kids got stuck working through problems in the collection of home schooling textbooks.

School was another thing Stiles hadn’t considered, he realised now, looking round at the group of kids sharing books because there weren’t enough to go around. It was obvious, now he thought about it, that werewolves didn’t go to school, but he hadn’t ever taken the time to wonder how they managed. He hadn’t really thought about the existence of werewolf kids, to be honest.

The two adults essentially ignored Stiles but they took time talking to the other kids, going over to them when they looked puzzled, explaining things that weren’t clear in the books. At least they tried to. It was clear they had areas they knew about, and other areas they didn’t. The woman was able to help out with the geography questions and the basic arithmetic, the man seemed to know a lot about history, but they were vaguer on other subjects, giving waffling answers or parroting the explanations printed in the textbooks. Stiles wondered if these two always taught, or if it was a task that was shared among the pack, because it was clear that the two of them couldn’t cover the whole range of subjects that the kids were expected to learn.

Stiles read passages and did exercises in the science book he shared with Isaac. It didn’t take him long to get restless and fidgety. He was used to getting up and walking between classes. Sitting for the entire morning was going to be torture. It wasn’t even like a normal class, where the teacher might ask questions or have discussions or switch between lecturing and exercises. Stiles was just expected to work through the book without any variation.

It didn’t take long for him to start going crazy, fidgeting and shifting on the floor, tapping his pen against his teeth, thinking about anything but the subject at hand. He looked around the room, seeing kids working quietly or whispering to each other, or signalling for one of the teachers to come and explain. He wondered how many of them had actually been inside a real school.

Was there any oversight of their education? He knew that kids that were home-schooled still had standardised assessments to track their progress. Was anyone in authority making sure these kids got a real education? He was pretty sure the answer was no. The war was mostly a stalemate now, but human authorities weren’t going to control werewolf day-to-day life. Stiles doubted there was the werewolf equivalent of a department of education to impose standards over the packs. These kids were probably lucky they got a schooling of any sort.
“Of course he won’t kill you,” Boyd said suddenly, as he reached over and snatched Stiles’ pen out of his hand.

“Huh? What?” Stiles looked round at him.

“You’re annoying people with your tapping,” Boyd said.

“Sorry. But what was that about killing?”

“Millie was worried you’d kill her if she asked you to stop.”

“What?” Stiles almost wanted to laugh. It wasn’t like he could kill anyone under normal circumstances, much less sitting in a room full of werewolves, even child werewolves. How the hell could anyone possibly think he was a threat?

But looking round, he could see that they did. The older kids looked at him with a mixture of anger and hate, but the little ones looked at him like he was the boogieman suddenly among them. A girl of about nine or ten, presumably Millie, looked like she was trying to hide behind a teacher’s chair so that Stiles wouldn’t spot her. Werewolf kids were afraid of humans in the same way that human children were afraid of the werewolves in the dark.

Stiles got to his feet. He couldn’t stand those eyes staring at him, the way the little ones flinched back as he moved.

“I should... I’m sure someone’s got work for me to do.”

He stumbled from the room. He wasn’t sure what he was playing at, sitting there with books like he was going to learn something from them, like he was one of the pack’s kids. He’d sacrificed himself to save his dad, offering his services to the pack. This wasn’t serving the pack. He wanted them to put him to work, he wanted them to use him. Being forced to slave for a pack of monsters would have been easier than this. Easier than seeing little kids look at him like he was the monster.

He went into the kitchen, where a group of adults turned to look at him with suspicion in their eyes.

“Can I...” Stiles started. “Is there work for me?”

They exchanged a few words and then sent him outside to weed the strawberries and pick slugs off the cabbages.

***

Derek carried a load of wood back from the new field. He’d been walking back and forth all morning, adding to their woodpile with the chopped bits of stump and root from the trees the pack were clearing. He was beginning to regret the decision to try and clear ground. He’d assumed it would be a straightforward thing. All they had to do was chop down a few trees and then they’d have an open space to plant wheat so they could make their own flour and be less dependent on supplies. He hadn’t thought about the enormity of effort involved in digging up roots from trees that had been there longer than he’d been alive, clearing the ground above and below so they could plough.

They’d cleared some ground, but it was shaded by the trees on all sides so any crops wouldn’t get much sunlight. They needed to get rid of more of the trees. Even with werewolf strength it was slow business, hacking away with axes. Derek wondered if any of the other packs had a chainsaw they could trade for.
He dumped his wood load on the wood pile near the house, tucking it under a sheet of plastic to keep the wood dry. The pile was away from the house, under the trees, so as not to take up too much of the precious clear ground, but it was close enough to be convenient. From here, he could look between the trees and see the gardens. As he did so, he spotted the human boy working with the plants. The kid should be with the others studying. He might be human but he was still a kid. He needed to earn his food, but Derek wasn’t comfortable interfering with his education.

Derek had set the kid to studies that morning and he’d assumed the kid would obey. He’d seemed too nervous to be disobedient so far, yet here he was, defying his instructions. Derek wasn’t going to go over and yell at him now. It wasn’t like he was avoiding study to slack off. He’d find out from the others later what had happened. For now, he just watched Stiles go about his work.

Derek was aware of movement beside him but didn’t bother to turn around as Peter’s scent reached him. Peter came to stand beside him, also looking across at Stiles.

“Don’t you think you’re giving the boy too much freedom?” Peter asked.

“No,” Derek answered.

“You’re letting him walk around the property unwatched.”

“Exactly. I’m seeing whether he can be trusted not to run away.”

Derek glanced at Peter and saw him nod. There might have been a trace of approval on his face, or that might be wishful thinking on Derek’s part. Peter had left what happened with Stiles up to Derek. Derek suspected Peter had been testing him as much as Derek was testing Stiles.

“You said you had a use for him,” Peter said. “I figured you’d put him to better use than digging up weeds. I figured you’d at least have fucked him by now.”

“I’m not raping a kid.”

Peter gave a little shrug, as though to say that he accepted Derek’s personal taste even if he didn’t understand it.

“Do you have a use for him?” Peter asked. Derek wasn’t sure if Peter was genuinely asking or if he was still testing him, trying to figure out if Derek was smart enough to come up with a decent plan on his own.

“He can cross the boundary lines,” Derek said. “He can go into town without getting an army of hunters swarming down on him. He can get us what we need.”

Peter nodded. He’d already figured that much out; it was clear from his face. Derek hated it when he thought he was doing something smart and it turned out that Peter had already had the same idea. Peter had probably known what Derek intended the second Derek said he had a use for Stiles.

“It’s not quite the same though, is it?” Peter said.

“What?”

“Your test, seeing whether he’ll run away from a house full of werewolves is very different from knowing if he’ll run away when he’s back in his own territory. And you haven’t given him a reason to run away.”

“A reason?”
“You’ve given him food and a bed, spoken to him kindly. If he weighs up the risks, it’s no wonder he’s not trying to run. It’s only a real test when we see if he keeps his promises when he has both reason and opportunity to make his escape.”

“What reason?” Derek asked. He looked across at Stiles, who was working his way along the line of cabbages, oblivious to the argument going on under the trees, by the woodpile. There was something in Peter’s tone Derek didn’t like.

“Don’t worry,” said Peter. “I’m not going to damage your pet. I’m just going to scare him a bit.”

“If you scare him too much, that might be the reason he runs when we send him into the town. It might be better to not give him any reason to want to stay away from the pack.”

“I want to test him. Properly. If you want to be cosy with him and tell him he’s safe with us, I won’t stop you. But do it after I’ve seen what this kid is made of.”

Peter walked away before Derek could argue further. He left the shade of the trees and walked across the garden, following the narrow path between potato vines and beans. Stiles looked up at his approach and there could be no doubt about the fear on his face. He was afraid of Peter before the test had even begun.

Derek walked away. He didn’t need to see what Peter might have in mind.
“Hello, Stiles,” the alpha said. Stiles jerked upright from where he’d been digging among the plants. He stood there, feeling the intensity of the alpha gaze like there was something solid behind it.

“Alpha,” Stiles said. It seemed the most appropriate response and would hopefully be seen as respectful. The alpha smiled.

“Please, call me Peter.”

“Peter,” Stiles echoed, still hoping he sounded respectful.

“Walk with me, Stiles.”

Stiles started walking. He followed Peter between neat rows of plants, towards the dark shadows of the woods. He hadn’t liked the look of Peter’s smile in the slightest, but he walked anyway because otherwise he was going to get torn to pieces. Peter was the one with all the power here. The one who held power over Stiles, and threats of death over Stiles’ dad.

They followed winding trails beneath the trees, narrow lines where the undergrowth had been worn away by the passage of people or animals. Peter said nothing for a while, until he reached a point that looked much like every other point they’d passed. The only difference was a rustling in the undergrowth. Peter crouched down, pushing branches of a low bush aside to reveal a skinny rabbit struggling in a snare. Cord was tight around one of its legs and the more it pulled to free itself, the tighter the cord became.

“Trapped animals are always such sad things,” Peter said.

“Then maybe you should free it from the trap.”

Peter reached out. He ran his fingers over the rabbit’s fur as it became frantic, trying to get away from him. Peter’s hand wrapped around the back of the creature’s neck.

“The world is not a kind place,” Peter said, “and we don’t always have the luxury of mercy.”

He shifted his hand suddenly, tightening his grip and twisting. There was a snapping sound and the rabbit twitched one last time before going limp.

“Oh my god!” Stiles cried.

“We have to eat,” said Peter, unfastening the loop of cord that had held the rabbit. “There are children back in the house. Most of those children lost a parent or even two during the fighting, when the humans decided to drive us out of the towns and cities, to trap us in the wild. They need protein in their diet. I have heard the sound of hungry children crying enough to last a lifetime.”
Peter stood. He held the rabbit out towards Stiles. Stiles stared at it, a limp, dead thing in Peter’s
hand. He told himself that this was OK. It would be just like a stuffed animal. Stiles reached out and
held the rabbit by a foot, trying not to look in the thing’s eye. It seemed to be looking reproachfully at
him even in death.

“You ate the stew happily enough last night,” Peter pointed out.

“There’s a difference between eating something when it’s cooked and killing it. I’m human. I don’t
have killing instincts.”

Peter gave a bark of laughter, but his face didn’t match the sound. He slammed a hand into the
middle of Stiles’ chest and thrust him backwards. Stiles found himself pressed hard against the trunk
of a tree, held in place by the firm hand and werewolf strength.

“Killing instincts?” Peter snarled into Stiles’ face. “You think being a werewolf gives me killing
instincts? Then how do you explain the humans who slaughtered my family? How do you explain
the hunters who slaughtered children in their beds? I kill rabbits so my pack don’t starve. You killed
for the sake of killing.”

“I’ve never killed anyone,” Stiles said.

“No,” said Peter. “You’re just a child.”

Peter lifted his hand from Stiles’ chest, laying it against Stiles’ cheek, a gentle touch after the harsh
one earlier. Stiles flinched away from it, but only a little. He couldn’t forget Peter’s threats. Stiles’
behaviour here was buying his dad’s life. Normally, Stiles would have argued about how he wasn’t a
child, but he couldn’t do that now either. He couldn’t afford to antagonise Peter more than his mere
presence did anyway. It was clear Peter didn’t have any affection for humanity.

“Derek’s put you to work in the gardens, I know, but that’s not really earning your food, is it? When
you came here, you promised to serve the pack in any way.”

The hand on Stiles’ cheek was almost a caress. Stiles’ heart pounded with fear and the urge to vomit
was back. He had a horrible feeling the direction Peter was taking this.

“I promised,” Stiles said. The tremor in his voice was minimal, but the words came out as barely a
whisper. He didn’t want this. He didn’t want this man, this werewolf, using him like this.

“I gave Derek his chance to claim you and he’s chosen not to. It seems a shame to let you go to
waste.” Peter leaned in, burying his nose against Stiles’ neck and breathing in his scent. Stiles
trembled against the tree, his hands against the trunk to hold himself up as his legs turned to jelly
beneath him.

He was doing this to save his dad, he reminded himself again. He’d promised his service to the pack,
knowing that this might be on the cards. He could just close his eyes and wait for it to be over. He
could survive.

When Peter pulled back from him, Stiles expected to be spun about and fucked hard against a tree.
But Peter gave an amused smirk. He seemed to know what was going through Stiles’ mind.

“Not in the middle of the woods,” Peter said. “I’m not an animal. Come to my bedroom tonight.
After dinner. You’re going to need your strength.”

Peter started to walk away.
“You can find your own way back to the house,” Peter called over his shoulder.

Stiles was left alone in the woods, leaning against a tree and shaking like he might never stop. He almost wished Peter would come back and get it over with, just take him there and then so he wasn’t left thinking about it.

Tonight. Peter was going to claim him tonight. And Stiles was expected to just walk into his bedroom and let Peter rape him. Peter was trying to get him to walk up to him and allow it. That was some seriously twisted mind game right there. If Stiles’ legs were working properly, he’d be running as fast as he could through the woods to get the hell away from the man.

Except maybe that was what Peter wanted. Peter had basically announced he planned to rape Stiles, and then left him on his own in the woods, away from the house. Unguarded. No one was here to see if Stiles started running. The temptation was so obvious that Stiles couldn’t believe that Peter hadn’t noticed, hadn’t even considered that Stiles would be tempted. And if he’d know Stiles would be tempted, then that meant this was all part of a plan.

Stiles had agreed to stay and serve the pack. He remembered the words the alpha had said when they’d made the agreement. If either Stiles or his dad tried to break the agreement, they’d both die for it. He guessed it would be a painful death. Peter probably just wanted an excuse. He wanted Stiles to run so he could justify Stiles’ brutal, horrible death. And after Stiles was a bloody corpse on the forest floor, the pack would take those scent samples and hunt down Stiles’ dad.

Stiles fought to get his trembling under control. He wasn’t going to let that happen. He wasn’t going to give Peter the satisfaction of seeing him run.

He pushed himself away from the tree and started back towards the house.

***

Stiles was the last to be served lunch. He got a bowl of soup and a wedge of bread, exactly the same food that the pack ate. Stiles was still hungry as he mopped up the last drops of soup with the remnants of his bread, but he couldn’t complain. No one else had eaten any better.

The kids were out of lessons, starting their chores. Boyd took Stiles with him, away from the house, over to a patch of ground that the werewolves were clearing. The trees had been chopped down, but there were stumps still rooted deeply in the ground, and a group of werewolves were hacking with axes and machetes, chopping the former trees into chunks, digging fragments of root out of the earth. Derek was among them, working away and not looking at Stiles. It was Boyd who gave Stiles his assignment. He loaded Stiles’ arms up with chunks of wood and showed him the route back to the house and a woodpile under a huge sheet of plastic.

Stiles’ job was probably easier than the werewolves’. It was boring as hell though. He walked back and forth, grabbing the pieces of root and trunk that they’d hacked to bits, carrying them from the clearing to the woodpile. In all his walking, he had plenty of time to think. His thoughts were mostly on what was to come, what Peter had in mind for him.

He figured that was the point. He was walking back and forth through the woods. No one was watching him. No one was guarding him. There was no way this was anything but a trap. Peter wanted him to run.

Stiles wasn’t entirely sure why. It could be to give him an excuse to hurt Stiles, or to give him an excuse to cross the boundary and go after Stiles’ dad. Neither one was an option as far as Stiles was concerned. If it was the former, then there were probably limits on what Peter would do without
justification. If Stiles kept on doing what he was told, then he would probably limit his suffering. He told himself he could survive rape, and tried not to let his mind linger on the thought of it. He would survive whatever Peter did to him just to spite the guy.

But the second possibility was the one that truly frightened Stiles. If Peter wanted an excuse to go after Stiles’ dad, then he would probably keep pushing to drive Stiles to break his promise. Rape might only be the start. Stiles remembered the way Peter had killed that rabbit. He could probably hurt Stiles in a million different ways. He would keep pushing until Stiles broke and tried to escape, and then Peter would have his reason to attack Stiles’ dad. Stiles knew he couldn’t break, for his dad’s sake, but he also knew how he reacted to blood and pain. He wasn’t sure how much he could take.

He tried not to think about it. He tried to think about nice things, like puppies, but his imagination furnished him with an image of Peter snapping the necks of cute puppies. He tried to think about the different types of tree he was passing on his walk back and forth, but that was made rather difficult by the fact he didn’t know what most of them were. He tried to think about Scott, but that just made him sad. He tried to think about stabbing Peter in the throat, but he knew how impossible that was and instead he got back to vivid images of Peter doing horrible things to him in revenge.

The day dragged on. The werewolves dug out a couple of the old stumps, hacked to pieces. Stiles carried the pieces back to woodpile. It felt like he’d walked that route a hundred times. The day was warm and Stiles grew thirsty, but he didn’t dare ask about getting something to drink. The werewolves were working harder than him. If he tried to complain about his work, they might set him to digging out trees with them. Or they might just laugh at him for being a weak human who couldn’t cope with the task of walking.

It was amazing to watch them work, but terrifying. Stiles didn’t stop long to stare at them, but he did notice. He saw the way they moved, muscles rippling as they swung axes, or tore lengths of root out of the ground with bare hands. Derek was a work of art, the curves of his arms responding to his efforts, a faint layer of sweat making his shirt cling to his torso. Stiles turned away before he started drooling. He had work of his own to do. He couldn’t stand around ogling the werewolves, no matter how perfectly proportioned their muscles might be.

After a while, he doubted he’d be able to run even if he wanted to. He was tired and thirsty, and if he ran they’d probably be able to track him by the growling of his stomach. He slogged back to the clearing to grab his next armful of wood. He noticed that Derek had stopped working and was staring towards Stiles. Stiles quickly looked away, wondering if he’d been caught watching earlier. He grabbed his next load and hurried to get out of sight.

The next time he returned to the clearing, Boyd walked over to him.

“You’ve done enough for today,” Boyd said. “Make this your last load and then go get cleaned up.”

Stiles nodded. He didn’t ask whether Boyd had meant clean up as in washing his hands before dinner, or in preparation for whatever Peter had in mind later. Either way, Stiles took his wood back towards the house and then took his time making sure the plastic sheeting was properly tucked in around the pile to keep it all dry. He knew he was just wasting time, but he did it anyway, putting off the inevitable for a few more moments.

At last, he had to do it. He walked back towards the house. No one tried to stop him. No one questioned him as he headed to the bathroom. He washed his hands, and then cupped them together to drink down handfuls of water. He took off his t-shirt to wash his chest and armpits, but then he pulled the dirty t-shirt back on because it wasn’t like he had a surplus of fresh clothes available to him. Besides, so what if he was dirty? Maybe he should do everything in his power to make tonight
as unpleasant as possible for Peter. If he was grimy and stinky, maybe Peter wouldn’t want to rape him.

He headed back downstairs and wondered what he was supposed to do now. The smell of cooking food drifting out from the kitchen made his stomach growl even more. He could offer to help, but he wasn’t sure he could stand being in the same room as food without being allowed to eat it yet. He peered into the living room, seeing a group of kids talking and sewing, fixing holes in socks or bending tears in t-shirts. Stiles couldn’t stand being in the same room as those kids.

He headed into the dining room. A woman was laying out placemats on the table. She glared at Stiles.

“You don’t get fed sooner because you were here first,” she said.

“I wasn’t... they sent me back to the house and now I don’t know what to do with myself.”

That turned out to be the wrong thing to say. Less than a minute later, Stiles found himself in the kitchen, at the sink, washing up the pots and cutlery that had been used during the cooking process. It seemed doing nothing wasn’t acceptable in the werewolf pack.

After a little while, the others started coming back from their own chores, washing up and waiting, talking in the dining room. Only then was Stiles allowed to slip away from the dishes and join them around the edge of the dining room.

Most of the werewolves gave him a wide berth, but Isaac came over to him.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

Stiles shrugged. He didn’t trust himself to speak. As soon as dinner was over, he was expected to go to Peter’s room. Hungry as he was, his stomach was now churning. He wasn’t sure that he’d be able to keep down anything he ate. But maybe that would be a good thing. If he threw up on Peter that would probably spoil the mood.

“You don’t look so good,” Isaac said.

Half-formed retorts swum in Stiles’ head. He could say something about thinking Isaac was ugly too. He could thank Isaac for his kind complements. Something. Only now he’d thought about it too long. Any quip he made would be just embarrassing now.

“You didn’t have to muck out the goats or something, did you?” Isaac asked. “Or the gut the fish?”

“No, just carrying wood.”

The first shift of children came in to eat, sitting down to some mixture of vegetables and tiny fragments of meat, poured over a small helping of rice. As with the day before, the children ate quickly and then got out of the way for the next round to take their place. Stiles stood watching, trying not to see Peter standing across the room from him, watching him.

When the last of the little ones took her seat, Peter walked across the dining room towards the kitchen, pausing in front of Stiles. He clamped a hand on Stiles’ shoulder.

“Come on,” Peter said.

No one argued. No one questioned. Stiles walked beside Peter into the kitchen and took up a plate. His hands shook as his figures closed around the edges. He tried to hold it still as one of the kitchen
workers spooned out a small helping of rice, and then another dolloped on top the mix of vegetables and skimpily bits of rabbit. Stiles took his cutlery and walked into the dining room, taking the seat a boy had just vacated.

He didn’t taste the food. He swallowed mouthful after mouthful without really noticing it. He wanted the meal to last. When it was over, Peter would take him upstairs and then it would happen.

Stiles scraped his fork along the plate, trying to scrape up the last bit of rice, the last trace of gravy. It wasn’t about hunger. It was about trying to get a few more moments of the meal because standing up from the table was something he couldn’t face.

“Just lick the plate and be done with it,” someone commented behind him. “The rest of us want to eat too.”

Stiles knew the comment was directed at him. His plate was clean now. The meal was as finished as it was going to be. Stiles couldn’t put this off any longer.

A hand gripped his elbow and pulled him out of the seat. Another hand gave him a shove towards the kitchen. Stiles stumbled out of the dining room, clutching the empty plate. He went to the sink, washing up his dish and cutlery like the others. His hands were shaking more than ever now. His stomach clenched and he nearly vomited up everything he’d just eaten.

“Come on, Stiles,” Peter said.

Stiles didn’t remember climbing the stairs, but suddenly he was standing in the doorway of Peter’s bedroom. Peter had a whole room to himself, with the large bed taking pride of place. He crossed to it now, casually. Stiles stood frozen in the doorway, fingers gripping the frame. His whole body felt cold. His heart was pounding in his chest. He couldn’t bring himself to step inside. He couldn’t bring himself to move.

Peter turned to look at him, waiting, his face cold and unreadable.

Stiles tried to pry his fingers off the doorframe but he couldn’t move.

“Do you want to do it there,” Peter asked, “where the whole pack can see? Or do you want to come in and shut the door?”

Stiles didn’t want either. He wanted to run. He wanted to throw up his dinner. He wanted to collapse into unconsciousness and forget this was all happening. He wanted to wake up back in his own bed with his dad safe and sound and all this just a horrible nightmare. But none of those things were going to happen.

Stiles forced himself to take a step into the room. He took hold of the door handle and shut himself in Peter’s bedroom with the alpha werewolf.

Chapter End Notes

This is the chapter the tags are about. Peter tells Stiles he plans to claim him, and makes it perfectly clear that the claiming is sexual in nature. Stiles spends most of the chapter thinking about the fact he’s going to be raped.
Stiles kept his grip on the door handle for a long minute, not turning round to face the room. He could hear Peter’s soft movements behind him. That didn’t mean he had to turn round and see him.

“Stiles,” Peter said, voice sickeningly calm about this whole situation. Stiles forced his hand to unclench. He managed a stumbling step, turning round to face Peter.

“You know what’s going to happen now, don’t you?” Peter asked.

“I’ve got a pretty good idea,” Stiles said. His fingers twitched at his sides. He wanted something to hold on to, but he had nothing but empty air.

“You don’t want to be here, do you?”

Stiles laughed. He couldn’t find words that adequately expressed how much he really didn’t want to be here. Of course he didn’t want to be raped by a werewolf.

“And yet you came anyway,” Peter said.

“I promised I’d serve the pack if you let my dad go,” Stiles said.

Peter walked over to him. Stiles remembered the way Peter had touched his cheek out in the woods. He felt it again like a sick residue on his skin, even though Peter hadn’t even reached out towards him yet.

“You could have run,” Peter said, and Stiles knew he’d been right earlier.

“I promised,” Stiles said.

“So you stayed. Even though you knew what I had planned, even though you’re shaking at the thought of it, because you promised?”

“I promised to serve if you let my dad live and you let my dad live.” Stiles hated how weak and trembling his voice sounded. He wished he could sound brave and defiant.

Peter stood in front of Stiles for a long while, staring at his face closely. Stiles tried to look anywhere but at Peter.

“Go on now,” Peter said. “You’re making my room stink of fear.”

“What?” Stiles wondered if he’d just imagined that, his fear making him hallucinate.

“I’ve changed my mind about this.” He gestured towards the door.

Stiles’ mind reeled. Peter wasn’t going to rape him after all. He’d just wanted Stiles to think he was. The thoughts he’d been having all afternoon shifted, his ideas about the situation adjusting to this new fact. Peter hadn’t be trying to trick him into running, he’d wanted to see whether or not he would.

“This was a test,” Stiles said.

“Clever boy. Go tell Derek you’ve passed it.”
The sick feeling in his gut hadn’t vanished, even though the threat of rape had been snatched away. But it mixed now with fury stronger than he’d thought he could feel. He felt like a mouse being toyed with by a cat before becoming dinner and he hated every instant of it.

“What would happen if I tried to punch you?” Stiles hadn’t intended to ask the question out loud, but the words left his mouth before he could hold them back.

Peter smirked, “I’d probably break your wrist. Do you want to try it?”

“Maybe later.”

Stiles let himself out of the room. He was still shaking as he made his way to Derek’s room. Derek wasn’t there but Stiles didn’t feel up for hunting for him. He sank down onto the air mattress, trying to remember how to breathe, his heart pounding, and the world seeming to shrink in around him. He gasped for air, shaking and fighting against the waves of panic. It felt like he was drowning in terror, the hatred a boiling mass surging inside him.

“Hey?” The voice was soft. Someone crouched beside him, a hand on his back.

“Stiles,” said the voice, “are you alright?”

Stiles tried to shrug the hand off him. He couldn’t think. The panic was all around him, a part of him. He was the panic.

“Stiles, it’s OK, you’re OK.” The hand ran in circles on his back. It felt warm, reaching through the cold that filled him. Stiles drew in another shaking breath. The voice kept murmuring that he was OK.

It wasn’t Peter. Peter was in another room. Peter wasn’t going to hurt him.

It seemed to take forever for the panic attack to fade and then Stiles was aware of who it was who was crouched down beside him, rubbing soothing circles in his back. It was Derek. Stiles jerked away from his touch.

“It’s OK,” Derek said again.

Stiles glared at him, “What out of all of this, do you think is OK? The part where your alpha is a sick fuck who threatened to rape me?”

“Did he... he said he was just going to scare you.”

“Tsk! I guess that makes it OK then,” he spat. “I guess I should be grateful that your alpha only threatened to rape me and made me feel like I need to shower inside my skin, and that he didn’t actually shove me on his bed and do all the things I spent the entire day imagining him doing to me.”

“I’m sor –“ Derek started.

“Don’t you dare! What is this? Some game of bad-werewolf-good-werewolf? Your alpha scares the hell out of me and now you act all nice and cosy so I think ‘I guess werewolves aren’t all so bad after all’ and open up to you? Is that it?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Then what? You’re trying to Stockholm Syndrome me?”
“No! I’m...” Derek stood. He moved away from Stiles. “No one should have to go through what you just went through, Stiles. I know you probably don’t believe me, but I am sorry. If anyone makes suggestions like that again, or touches you in a way you don’t want, tell me. I will find whoever did it and pummel them until they lose consciousness. Even if it’s my uncle.”

“Your uncle?”

“Peter. Even him. You agreed to stay with us, but that doesn’t mean you have to get used like that. I promise, if anyone tries anything you don’t like, I will make them pay for it.”

“What happens when you decide to put me to use?” Stiles asked.

“Tomorrow, I’ll show you what use I have in mind. I promise, it’s nothing horrible.”

Stiles carried on glaring at him.

“And why the hell should I believe a word you say?” he asked.

Derek didn’t answer.

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Derek left Stiles alone. He didn’t like the idea of leaving Stiles alone right now, but he doubted his presence would make Stiles feel any better. Stiles might be human, but he was still just a kid, and now he stunk of fear and loathing. No one deserved to feel that awful.

He amended his thought: no one except hunters deserved to feel that awful.

Derek paused in the hallway, listening, but there was no sound of movement inside Peter’s bedroom. He headed downstairs, finding Peter in his study instead, bent over inventory records. Derek walked round the desk and swung a punch.

Peter didn’t even look up. His hand snapped up and caught Derek by the wrist before the punch could connect.

“Really, Derek?” Peter asked. He gripped Derek’s wrist in one hand. With his other hand, he pulled over a sheet of paper which listed their raw ingredient inventory. Peter picked up a pen and wrote the word ‘flour’ on another sheet of paper.

“He wasn’t going to punch you and someone should,” Derek said. He tugged his arm. Peter held on for a few more seconds just to prove a point, then he let go.

“I didn’t touch the boy,” Peter said.

“You made him hate us more than ever.”

“He’s human. He was always going to hate us.” Peter added ‘oats’ to his list.

Derek wished he could argue about that, but Stiles had come here hating them. There was a difference though between the glares when he’d first arrived and the way Stiles had looked at him in the wake of his test. Derek didn’t like being hated like that, but what he really disliked was the fact that he probably deserved it for letting Peter go ahead with his test.

“You won’t do that to him again,” Derek said.

“I don’t need to. He passed the test.” Peter wrote down ‘brown rice’. He finally looked up at Derek,
but only to say, “Ask Kendra to see me about the children’s supplies.”

“So that’s it,” said Derek, “you’ve done your test and now you’ve moved on?”

“He will come back to us. He hates us and fears us, but he’ll keep his promise. That’s all we need. Now, Kendra?”

Derek knew there was no point in arguing. He walked out of the study and went to find the woman who took charge of the younger kids.

***

Stiles had another night of almost no sleep. Nightmares of Peter started almost as soon as he closed his eyes. As he waited for the dawn, he wondered how long he could keep this up. How many days until he collapsed from exhaustion? If he had his computer, he’d look up insomnia on Wikipedia and read up on it. Right now, all he could do was lie there and wait for morning to put an end to this futility.

Derek got him up when morning came. Stiles dragged himself downstairs for a chunk of bread smeared with raspberry jelly. He wondered if they’d made this with the raspberries he’d picked. Derek disappeared while Stiles was eating, but he was soon back. As soon as Stiles had finished, Derek told him to follow, pausing only to open a hall closet and grab a couple of large canvas bags. They were obviously stuffed full, but surprisingly light. Stiles peered inside the one he was given and saw more bags, cloth and canvas and plastic, all bunched up and stuffed inside. Stiles carried one and Derek the other as they started out into the woods.

“I said when you first arrived that I could find a use for you,” Derek said, “but we needed to know if we could trust you to come back if we sent you out. This is why we agreed to your deal.”

Derek pulled several sheets of paper out of a pocket and held them out to Stiles. Stiles took them and read a long list of words.

“Toilet roll, bleach, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, soap, tampons.” This last one had been underlined in another coloured ink and marked with three exclamation points. Stiles skimmed down the list and then turned the page over, reading out some more items: “Flour, oats, brown rice, granulated sugar. This is like a shopping list.”

“That’s exactly what it is. We survive on what we can grow and hunt, but not everything grows on trees. You are going to go into town and buy the items we can’t get out here.”

Stiles looked at the list. Three pages of items written in neat columns of small handwriting.

“How the hell am I supposed to get all this back here?” he asked. Derek reached for his pocket again and his hand came out holding the keys to Stiles’ jeep. Stiles took the keys.

“And money?” Stiles asked.

Derek reached into another pocket. This time he pulled out a roll of notes. Stiles took it and unfurled the roll enough to see the collection of hundreds and fifties.

“Holy crap,” Stiles muttered. There had to be four thousand dollars here. At least.

“The government seized most of our assets, but we were able to get some things sold and converted to cash before the world went to hell. And it’s not like we can spend it. But money’s not in infinite supply. Be sensible. Go to the bulk retail store and go for value, not brand names. Buy enough to last
“us a while and then bring it back across the boundary line. We’ll carry it from here back to the house.”

Stiles stared at the roll of money in his hands. He couldn’t imagine what might happen if he dropped this. He shoved it all deep into the pocket of his jeans, feeling the lump there. He didn’t think he’d ever carried so much money in his life.

He tucked the shopping list into his back pocket.

Stiles thought about the group of people back in that house, growing their own food and setting traps for rabbits in the woods. He thought of the times his dad had responded to alerts about werewolves crossing the boundary, reports about attacks and looting. He wondered how the hunters would have reacted to werewolves crossing the boundary and asking to buy deodorant. Probably badly.

They reached the boundary line and Derek handed over the other bag of bags. Stiles walked forward alone, crossing between marks cut into the trees without a whisper of alarm. He walked past the warning signs and down towards the road.

Where his jeep wasn’t parked.

Stiles turned back around and hurried back to the boundary. Derek stood there. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Stiles.

“My jeep isn’t there,” Stiles said. “My dad must have picked it up and taken it home, or had it towed, or something.”

“And you can’t go get it?”

“I can walk into town and hope my dad parked it at our house, but that’s going to take time. And if it isn’t there, I’ll have to come up with some other way of transporting all this stuff back here because I can’t carry everything on your list by hand all the way from town. So I guess what I’m trying to say is this could take a while. Please don’t decide I’ve run off and come hunting down my dad in revenge or anything if I’m not back right away.”

“Just be back before dinner,” Derek said.

“Right. See you before dinner then.”

Stiles walked back across the boundary, shopping list in one pocket and ridiculous amounts of money in another. He got back to the road and started walking along it, heading down towards town. His mind was already working. If he had until dinner, that gave him the entire day before he needed to be back here. He couldn’t be careless, and he had to make sure he did what he’d been told, but that was a lot of time for a shopping trip.
Chapter Notes

I didn't intend this update to take so long. There was a combination of work becoming suddenly ridiculously busy, and then my laptop's power supply stop working so that I couldn't get my computer to turn on. At least I didn't leave you with a horrible cliffhanger on the last chapter.

On another note, there are a few days left to enter a giveaway I'm running over on Tumblr where you could win a copy of one of my books, plus some extra goodies like a necklace, some custom soap, and jasmine tea.

Stiles hadn't ever considered how long the walk was between the woods and his house. As he trudged along, all his plans about spending the day in town started to seem less and less of a good idea. Derek might have said he had until dinner before they came out hunting his dad, but they probably wouldn’t take kindly to him wasting a day having fun when he was supposed to be serving the pack. He wasn’t going to ignore this opportunity, but he couldn’t flaunt it too much.

By the time he finally reached the house, he was sticky with sweat from his fast walk. He was thrilled to see the jeep still parked outside, but he didn’t go straight to it. Instead, he let himself into the house.

“Dad?” he called, not surprised when there was no answer. He was already heading for the house phone, picking it up and bringing up his dad’s cell number in the phone’s memory.

The call went straight through to voicemail.

“Hey, Dad. I’m at the house but I’m probably only going to be here for about ten minutes or so. After that, I’m going to take the jeep over to Costco. If you get this message, please come and find me there. I need to be back with the pack later today and I want to see you. I love you.”

Stiles hung up. He hesitated only a moment and then called Scott.

“Hello?” Scott answered cautiously, clearly not recognising the number.

“Scott, it’s me.”

“Stiles? What the hell? Where are you? Are you OK? Did you escape the werewolves? What happened? Are you hurt? Are you back? Does your dad know where you are?”

The questions seemed like they could go on forever. Stiles wondered if this was what it was like for people talking to him.

“Scott!” he cut in. “I’m at my house but I’m not going to be here long. If you get here in the next ten minutes I’ll answer all your questions.”

“Ten minutes?”
“Ten minutes.”

Stiles hung up and headed upstairs. He had a little bit of time before Scott got here and he hadn’t felt properly clean since he’d walked into the woods. He went into the bathroom and took a shower in water as hot as he could bear it, washing his hair and scrubbing every inch of his body thoroughly, albeit quickly. He probably used up most of the ten minutes and he hurried into his bedroom to get dressed, pulling on clean clothes that weren’t horrific in appearance.

Scott wasn’t here yet, so he thought about Derek’s initial comments about how he should have brought things with him. He pulled a bag out of his closet and started stuffing it with clean underwear, pairs of jeans, sweatpants, and t-shirts that he could bear to be seen in public wearing. He threw in his toothbrush and a few miscellaneous bits while he was at it. He put in the rest of his Adderall, of course.

He looked around the room, wondering what else he should pack. He saw his bookshelves, and the set of encyclopaedias he’d been given by his grandmother, a sweet lady who hadn’t noticed the rise of Wikipedia. He thought of those kids sharing text books and decided it couldn’t hurt. He found another bag to stick the book in and then started lugging everything downstairs.

The door was flung open and Scott nearly bowled him over, grabbing him into a hug.

“Hey. Let me put stuff down.”

Scott let go of him long enough for Stiles to drop the bags and then Stiles could return the hug with equal enthusiasm. As the hug broke though, Scott whacked Stiles round the head.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Scott demanded.

“They had my dad.”

“So you just sold yourself to a bunch of werewolves?”

“They had my dad!”

Scott glared at him.

“I can’t believe you didn’t say goodbye.”

“You’d have tried to stop me leaving.”

“Damn right I would have done. So does this mean you’re back now?”

“Only for the next few hours.”

Stiles got Scott to carry the bags of bags and they went out to the jeep. He tossed his stuff in the back and then locked up the house. He changed his mind and made a quick stop in the kitchen to grab a bag of chips, which he passed to Scott before locking up again.

“Feed me while I drive,” Stiles said.

“Are they starving you?” Scott asked.

“Not starving. Not really. There’s just not a lot of food to go around.”

Stiles grabbed a small handful of chips, shoving them in his mouth and crunching while he started up the jeep. His dad hadn’t arrived. Stiles just hoped he got the message to meet him. He really, really
needed to see that his dad was OK.

On the drive, Stiles filled Scott in with what had happened, summarising the events of the past couple of days. He left out Peter’s rape threat test. There was no need to worry Scott about that.

“They just want you because you can go shopping for them?” Scott asked.

“That’s what they say. They might by lying to trick me into a false sense of security or something.” Stiles didn’t actually believe that, since Peter had been doing exactly the opposite the day before. “They might have some secret use for me, but I think they really do need someone to do the shopping.”

He grabbed another handful of chips and shoved them in his mouth. He hadn’t been deprived, but two days of careful rations had been bad enough. He didn’t like the thought of having to go back to that until the next shopping trip.

“I wonder if they need me to stay there,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I promised to serve the pack, but if I stay with them, that’s another mouth they’ve got to feed. Maybe we can make an arrangement where I still live with my dad but I turn up once a week with supplies and pizza or something. If all they want from me is the ability to do shopping, maybe I don’t need to actually stay there.”

It was worth putting the idea to Derek. He didn’t think Peter would go for it, but Derek might be convinced, and Isaac would probably appreciate not having to share a bed. He could argue that he was serving the pack better if he wasn’t eating their precious rabbit.

Stiles pulled into the parking lot of the bulk buy store, looking around in case his dad’s cruiser was already there. It wasn’t. He tried not to think about what he’d do if his dad didn’t show up.

“Want me to help shop?” Scott asked.

“Please.” Stiles’ answer was as much about the length of Derek’s shopping list as it was about wanting an excuse for Scott to stick around. They each grabbed a cart and headed into the store, a huge warehouse structure that sold everything under the sun but only in large quantities. Stiles had occasionally come here with his dad, buying non-perishables in bulk and trying to keep his dad away from the bakery section on the grounds that no one needed that many cookies.

Stiles started working through the list, remembering Derek’s comments about the money not being infinite. He paused at every section, weighing up the costs of the options and choosing the one that provided the most value, filling the carts with cleaning supplies, toiletries, and even children’s vitamin pills. He couldn’t imagine that those werewolf kids were short of vitamins given that most of what they ate was made of vegetables, but he guessed winter wouldn’t be so bountiful.

The carts filled up rapidly. Stiles stared at the boxes of tampons for a long while, without the faintest idea what the different options meant. How did girls know what sort they needed? Did he need to get super-size or just regular? Should he get the ones with applicators or without? He didn’t even want to think about the choices when he looked at the range of towels and pads on the next shelves. In the end, he just added some of every single type of tampon to the carts. He remembered those exclamation points and didn’t want some pre-menstrual werewolf upset with him for buying the wrong sort.

“How are you paying for all this?” Scott asked.
“Derek gave me some money.”

Stiles pushed the cart further on. He stopped next to a long shelf of stationery supplies and went to get paper and pens. For a moment, he considered getting fun colours for the kids, but decided against it, remembering again the comments about money. The werewolves weren’t in a position to earn more.

“Where would werewolves get money?” Scott asked, clearly thinking along the same lines as Stiles.

“Apparently they had it before the war and they’ve not really been able to spend it since.”

There were always stories about werewolves going around pillaging, raiding farms and houses on the outskirts of town. Stiles wondered how much of that was due to werewolves being violent and attacking innocent people, and how much was due to them being starving and unable to buy food. The gardens around the big house were well established, but there must have been a time at the beginning of the war when the packs just couldn’t support themselves on the food they could grow or hunt.

“You don’t really think about werewolves having money and jobs and stuff,” Scott commented.

“No.” But they must have done. Before the war, werewolves lived in secret among humans. They kept themselves hidden, except when they hunted, and when they bit innocent people to grow their packs. Their secrecy could only have worked for so long if they pretended to be humans enough to blend in, and that meant things like having jobs and paying mortgages. Hiding in plain sight.

Scott and Stiles moved on through the shop, working their way down the list. They were trying to figure out how to deal with an entire pallet of toilet roll when Stiles heard the commotion. Someone was hurrying through the store, calling out a name.

“Stiles? Stiles?”

Stiles hurried towards the sound and there was his dad. He was in his uniform, looking frantic. As soon as he saw Stiles, his expression changed to one of relief. He pulled Stiles into a tight hug. He hissed in pain as he did so, but he didn’t let go.

“Dad, I’m OK. I’m fine. Let go. Your injuries.”

His dad loosened his arms and Stiles pulled free.

“What the hell are you doing in uniform?” Stiles demanded. “You were nearly sliced to bits. You should be resting.”

“I couldn’t sit at home doing nothing.” He reached out a hand and rested it on Stiles’ shoulder, as though needing the proof of physical contact to know that Stiles was really here. “Are you hurt? What did they do to you?”

Stiles’ mind instantly went to Peter and the sense of terror he’d felt standing in Peter’s bedroom. He pushed the memory aside.

“I’m fine, Dad. Look, not a scratch.”

His dad looked him up and down, inspecting every inch of exposed skin, but clearly not trusting in it. Other shoppers were giving them strange looks, pausing nearby to watch the exchange. They were probably putting on a hell of a show to the random strangers in Beacon Hills.
“They said they were going to use you,” his dad said.

“For this,” Stiles gestured at the carts. “They needed someone who could cross the boundary and buy supplies.”

His dad looked at the carts, with the pallet of toilet rolls and the multipack of bleach.

“Supplies,” he said. He looked back at Stiles. “They haven’t made you do anything else?”

Again, the memory of Peter’s face flashed through Stiles’ mind. He could almost feel the hand on his cheek again. But Stiles just shook his head.

“Come on,” his dad said. “Leave this lot. Let’s get you to Argent. He’ll make sure you’re somewhere safe and we can arm up for when they attack.”

“What?” Stiles stood there, feeling suddenly stupid. He hadn’t thought about his dad’s reaction to him being back in town. His dad was unlikely to let him cross the boundary line as easily as he had the first time.

“Come on,” his dad said again. He put a hand around Stiles’ arm, starting to pull him towards the door of the store. Stiles twisted his arm out of his dad’s grip.

“I have to go back,” Stiles said.

“Argent’s hunters will protect you.”

“And who’ll protect everyone else? If I go back, I’m making myself useful to them, I’m proving that I can keep my promises. If I stay here, they’ll want revenge. They’ll come after me, and you, and they’ll kill anyone who tries to stop them.”

He thought of Peter’s cold cruelty and he had no doubt.

“You are not going back to those animals,” his dad said.

“If I don’t, there’ll be fighting and death and... I don’t want people to die for me.”

The hunters protected against attacks. There were raids across the boundary, little scuffles. There hadn’t been an all-out fight in almost two years and Stiles was glad about that. When the pack came in force, they tore through humans, and even hunter weapons didn’t seem to slow them down. Stiles had been kept well away from the fighting, but he’d seen the aftermath and it had been enough. Stiles wasn’t going to let that happen again for his sake.

His dad’s hand clutched at his arm again.

“They let you out,” he said. “That might never happen again. We’ve got a better chance of fighting them on our turf than in their woods, with you as their hostage.”

His dad had been planning to rescue him. He’d probably been with the Argents and their hunters since the second he’d been let out of the hospital, if not before. They’d had something resembling peace for two years and now it was all going to come crashing down because of Stiles. They’d be back to having curfews and everyone barricading their doors when the moon was full, and alarms sounding across the town because the wolves had crossed the boundary. They were going to be back to the fear and the death.

“Dad, look at me. I’m fine. Not a scratch. If I take them the supplies like I promised, they’re not
going to hurt me. We can’t restart this whole war because of me.”

His dad gave him a long, hard look.

“I could kill that Whitmore boy,” he muttered.

“What?” Stiles said.

“What?” Stiles said.

“He went into the woods on a drunken dare. I thought if I was quick enough, I could get him out of there. There wasn’t time to wait for Argent. If that stupid kid had just stayed on this side of the boundary...” He trailed off. Stiles had known that his dad had gone into the woods to get someone else who’d crossed the line, but he hadn’t known who it was, or why they’d gone. If Jackson had gone into the woods on a dare, Stiles would happily kill him as well.

“Dad, you heard the alpha. If I break my deal, they’ll come after us both and kill us horribly, along with probably anyone who tries to stop them. If I go back...” Stiles wanted to say that he’d be safe, but he didn’t feel at all safe with Peter. Still, he thought he was more use to the werewolves whole as a hostage and personal shopper than he would be as a bleeding mess.

“It’s too dangerous for you to go back there.”

“It’s too dangerous for me not to.” Stiles folded his arms and glared at his dad. “I’m going back to them, with their supplies. If you want to stop me, you’ll have to lock me in a cell and put a guard on me.” Because he knew his dad wouldn’t hide away with the pack attacked. He’d be on the front line, protecting the citizens of Beacon Hills, and he’d get slaughtered for his efforts.

“Dad,” he said, “trust me.”

“I can’t let you go.”

“You know it’s the only rational choice. I promise, I will be fine.”
Chapter 7

Stiles’ dad accompanied him to the boundary. The jeep was packed full of supplies, the back and the passenger seat piled up with everything he’d bought, so there was no room for his dad to ride with him. Instead, he drove his cruiser behind. Stiles wasn’t sure if it was because his dad wanted to be with him for as long as possible, or if he was going to fight the werewolves that showed up to get the stuff Stiles had brought.

When Stiles parked, his dad parked right behind him, climbing out of his car as though he meant to go with him. Stiles grabbed a bag of perishables, filled with beef and other meats that the pack couldn’t hunt for themselves. He carried it into the woods, his dad following right behind him.

“Don’t cross the boundary line,” Stiles told his dad. His dad looked at him like he was an idiot for thinking he might.

Stiles stepped across without difficulty and set the bag down by the roots of a tall tree. Then he turned back to his car. His dad watched all this. Stiles wondered what would happen if Stiles brought the supplies into werewolf territory but then disappeared with his dad. Would they come chasing after him if he’d already given them all they’d asked for?

Probably, he decided. It wasn’t worth the risk. Either way, by the third trip, Derek had emerged from the woods. He stood just inside the boundary line, by the pile that Stiles was building. His eyes met Stiles’ briefly, but then he looked past him to the sheriff. Stiles’ dad stopped, just outside the boundary, staring across at Derek. Neither of them said anything. Stiles put down a bag of cleaning products and started back to the car, leaving them to the staring contest.

He grabbed the next bag from the jeep and carried it back into the woods, across the boundary, and over to the growing pile.

“My son tells me that you haven’t hurt him,” his dad said, once Stiles was back outside the boundary and walking past him again. Stiles slowed his pace to listen.

“If he keeps his promises, we won’t have to.”

“And this is the use you have for him? Fetching and carrying for you?”

“He is expected to contribute to the pack but I won’t expect him to do anything I wouldn’t ask of a full member of the pack.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? Everyone knows how you wolves hurt each other, the strong using the weak.”

“Pack is family,” said Derek. “We protect each other. We take care of each other. As long as Stiles keeps his promise, he can expect the same.”

“And what if I shot you where you stand?”

“Pack is also vengeance,” Derek said. “If you kill me, neither of you will live very long and you will spend most of the rest of your lives wishing you were dead.”

“Well Stiles is my family,” Stiles’ dad said, “my pack. If you hurt him, you’ll feel my vengeance.”

Derek nodded, his lips shifting into something that almost looked like a smile.
“I’ll remember,” he said.

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The evening’s dinner was the first satisfying meal Stiles had eaten in the werewolf house. There was a bolognese with lots of beef, sprinkled over with cheese, all sitting on top of a bed of pasta. Stiles actually felt like he’d eaten enough when he finished, but once he’d washed up his plate afterwards, he was presented with a couple of pieces of milk chocolate. The big house felt cheerful, with the little ones excited by the chocolate and the others talking about the supplies that they were now stocked up with.

Stiles put a piece of chocolate in his mouth and let it sit there on his tongue, slowly melting. He wondered what he was supposed to do now. No one had given him pots to wash up tonight.

Peter walked back into the kitchen and Stiles wished he’d just started washing up anyway, so he’d have some excuse for avoiding Peter’s eyes. But it seemed Peter was here for him.

“Come with me, Stiles,” he said.

Stiles wondered if he’d done something wrong. Or if he was going to experience the bedroom scene take to the next stage. Suddenly the chocolate in his mouth tasted cloying. He swallowed it down and then walked after Peter. Not to his bedroom, thank god, but to a small study in the back corner of the house. Stiles stood by the doorway, eager to have an escape route, but Peter walked over to the desk, where a pile of books stood stacked. Peter walked his fingers over the cover of the topmost book.

“You didn’t buy these with the money Derek gave you,” Peter said.

“No. They’re... um... they’re mine.”

“And yet you brought them here?”

Stiles couldn’t tell if Peter was angry about it or just curious. His face didn’t give anything away.

“The kids,” Stiles said. “They don’t have a lot of text books and stuff, and it wasn’t like anyone was reading those back at home, so I figured they might do some good here.”

“So you decided you would improve their education out of the goodness of your heart?” His tone was still unreadable, but Stiles had a horrible feeling that Peter was angry. Did he think Stiles was being patronising or something?

“If you don’t like them, I can always take them away again,” Stiles said. “Give me my jeep keys and I’ll take them back home right now.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Peter opened a drawer of his desk and Stiles edged closer to the door as Peter pulled something out. But it was a cell phone. Stiles’ cell he thought. Peter held it out towards him.

“I don’t understand,” Stiles said.

“It’s your phone. “

“I understand that, asshole. I don’t understand why you’re giving it to me. Are you letting me call my dad again or something?”
“You can call your dad, or your mother, or your friends, or whomever you choose. But remember that electricity must be conserved as much as anything else. Use it sparingly and keep it turned off when you’re not using it. I have a charger for when the battery runs out, but if you request that I charge it too often, I will take it away again.”

Stiles walked across the room carefully, as though navigating a field of landmines. He reached out for his phone, only for Peter to suddenly pull his hand back, out of reach.

“If you use this to call hunters and arrange an attack on this pack,” Peter said, “I will cut off your ears and turn them into a necklace.”

“And I’m sure you’ll make a wonderful fashion statement with it,” Stiles said. He took the phone.

He started to leave, but Peter had talked about even electricity being something they had to ration. Maybe now was the time to talk about leaving.

“You know,” Stiles said, “if all your resources are that tight, maybe I should just leave. I mean, I could still serve the pack by bringing you stuff from town, but the rest of the time I could live with my dad. Be a drain on his resources.”

“No,” said Peter.

“But when you think about it, my most valuable skill is the ability to cross the boundary so why not capitalise on that by making feeding me a human task?”

“I said no.”

“But you didn’t give a reason why. I just think it makes sense and it would keep my dad and the hunters happy.”

“You think I care about them being happy?” asked Peter.

“Well, when they’re unhappy, they tend to want to murder you.”

“They always want to murder us. Just go, Stiles.”

“Go as in ‘go home’?” Stiles asked hopefully.

“Go as in get out of my sight but stay on our territory unless you want me to hobble you.”

“Right.”

Stiles let himself out of the study. He headed upstairs to Derek’s room, thinking that he’d make a quick call to his dad and just let him know he was still OK. Except that Derek was sitting on his bed. He looked up towards Stiles, eyes noting the phone.

“So you’ve got phone privileges,” Derek said.

“Apparently.” Stiles hesitated. Peter hadn’t listened to him, but maybe Derek would. “Look, I’ve been thinking about the fact that you guys are struggling for food and stuff and I thought…”

“Peter already said no.”

Stiles narrowed his eyes.

“Were you eavesdropping?”
Derek shrugged, “You seemed worried about going with him so I decided to make sure he didn’t do anything.”

“That’s... um... thanks.” Stiles wasn’t sure what else to say about that. He guessed it was a good thing that Derek wanted to make sure his uncle didn’t rape Stiles or eat him or something.

Derek just shrugged again. He reached over and picked up a book from his bedside table. He clearly thought this was the end of the conversation but Stiles was ready to let this go. He couldn’t stop thinking of the way his dad had held him, the way he’d reacted when Stiles had insisted on coming back here.

“Look,” he said, “I know Peter said no to me, but he might listen to you. Maybe you could talk to him. I’m not backing out of my promise. You could call me with shopping lists and I can still bring you supplies and stuff, but then I wouldn’t be eating any of them. It’s better for everyone.”

“Stiles, Peter’s in a good mood with you right now. Don’t ruin it. Let this go.”

Stiles sighed. He wasn’t going to let it go, not completely. But he could wait. Maybe if he proved he wouldn’t run away by sticking around a bit longer, he could bring up the subject again in the future. In the meantime, he turned the phone on so he could call his dad.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The encyclopaedias were a huge success. There were six books in the set, not enough for every kid to read one at once, but enough that they could be worked into the teaching sessions. The kids were allowed to take half hour turns reading bits of the encyclopaedia instead of working through their text books. And they could read about any subjects that interested them. It was Stiles who suggested they each stood up after their turn and explained some interesting fact to everyone else in the room.

It seemed that the kids had stopped worrying Stiles would kill them. They weren’t exactly friendly with him, but the provision of a stack of books was apparently enough to win him some slack. Maybe they found working through self-study textbooks as boring as he did.

Stiles spent his mornings studying with the kids. His afternoons were spent on chores. Mostly, he picked fruit and vegetables in the garden, or cleaned in the house, but there were other tasks as well, like collecting eggs from the hen house or gathering sheets for washing. He was starting to learn his way around the territory now, at least the bits close to the house. There were other buildings in the woods, built away from the main house presumably because that involved getting rid of fewer trees. One was referred to as the dormitory, just a low structure filled with makeshift beds. Another was a workshop, mostly filled with werewolves building actual beds or other wooden implements to improve their lives.

There was another building that was being finished, built along the same lines as the others, with all the architectural inspiration of a cardboard box. There were no windows. When Stiles asked about that, he was told they didn’t have a source of glass. They did have solar panels though. One afternoon, Stiles was sent to carry water out to the workers on the new building, finding Derek struggling to set up the panels.

“You can get solar panels but not windows?” Stiles asked.

“We have a... contact who managed to get hold of the panels for us,” Derek answered.

“Unfortunately, the instructions that came with them are all in Japanese. No one here speaks Japanese.”

“Are there diagrams?”

Derek went to fetch a little booklet written in Japanese characters and handed it over to Stiles. There was something smug on his face as he watched Stiles flip through the booklet. He was waiting for Stiles to admit he didn’t have a clue.

Stiles could probably figure it out. Given enough time with the solar panels, he was pretty sure he could get them set up, but he decided it was better not to risk it. He didn’t want to be responsible for accidentally electrocuting anyone. So he yielded the instruction booklet back to Derek and headed back to the house to get on with work.

He learned that there was a windmill about a mile from the house which was the pack’s main source of electricity. There was a pump that had been sunk for water, with a filter on to clean it. There were bee hives under the trees. There was a patch of woodland that had been turned into an orchard, with apples, pears, plums and other fruit trees planted between the older trees of the wood. Stiles found himself increasingly impressed with the infrastructure they’d put in place to support this group. A
worrying thought kept coming back: this would only be possible if the pack had spent most of their energy since the start of the war more focused on building stuff for their community than waging war against the humans.

Despite himself, Stiles found himself settling in. He studied in the mornings, worked in the afternoons, and then, after dinner, he called his dad and usually Scott as well. So far, no one had tried to maul him or sexually assault him or anything. It was clear most of the pack didn’t want him there, but they’d seemed to become more open to the idea, especially after he’d brought them chocolate.

It was about a week after the shopping trip that he had his first real conflict with Kendra, the female of the two teachers. She’d clearly not been happy about him making suggestions in her classroom, but she’d let it go when he’d got the kids to talk about the encyclopaedia entries. It was the gravity discussion that really set things off.

One of the boys was studying his physics textbook and he’d come across a section about how objects would fall at the same rate despite having different weights. The boy didn’t understand the explanation in the textbook and so he asked for help. Kendra went over to him, talking through the explanation in the book, but Stiles quickly became convinced that she didn’t understand it either and was just repeating the phrases in the book. The boy remained as confused as ever.

Stiles put down his math book and said, “Let me try.” He then launched into an explanation, talking about forces and acceleration, even mentioning Newton’s laws for good measure. He broke his explanation into pieces, using gestures as much as words, scribbling down at relevant points, getting the boy to nod his understanding at every point.

“And when an object is falling in a vacuum,” he said at the end, “the only force acting on it is its weight, which is mass times this number nine point eight something something, that physicists just write down as g.” He wrote down the equation. “And remember what I was saying about moving heavy verses light things, so acceleration is the force divided by the mass, but the force includes the mass, so they cancel each other out.”

He scribbled the equation, with the fraction including mass above and below the line, then drawing a line to cross out mass both times.

“Oh,” said the boy, a smile growing on his face. “So the heavy thing needs a bigger force to move it, but because it’s heavy, its weight gives it that bigger force.”

“Exactly. And when astronauts went to the moon, they tested it out. There’s a video of one of them dropping two things and showing them fall, and because the gravity is lower on the moon, they fall much slower so you can see it in the video. And that’s what’s so cool about science. People think ‘this is what I think will happen’ and then they test it out and prove it right. Or the test doesn’t work and they know they have to get better ideas. And by testing things out, the ideas get better and better and people know more stuff.”

“Cool,” the boy said, catching Stiles’ infectious grin.

“Exactly,” Stiles said.

Kendra cleared her throat.

“You have your own studies to attend to,” she said.

Stiles left the boy to his physics and moved back to his place. As he did so, he noticed one of the girls, Millie. She’d been drawing a little doodle on her paper. There was a feather and a bowling ball,
but she’d managed to make the bowling ball’s holes look a bit like a face. It had a speech bubble and was telling the feather, “If I’m going down, you’re going down with me.”

“Nice,” Stiles muttered. She looked up at him, flashing a smile.

“Millie,” said Kendra sharply, “we’ve told you before; paper is precious and you should use it for your schoolwork, not silly doodles.”

“Sorry, Kendra,” Millie said. She went back to her work. Stiles went back to his. He was aware of Kendra staring at him but thought that was it. The rest of the morning passed in quiet boredom. After lunch though, Peter stopped him before he could start work in the gardens.

“Come with me, Stiles,” Peter said. His face was a stern mask. Stiles followed, fear twisting in his guts again, as they went through to the study. Peter sat down behind his desk. Stiles stood there, feeling like he’d been brought before the principle for misbehaving.

“I understand you had an incident with Kendra this morning,” Peter said.

“An incident?”

“She claims you challenged her authority and implied she was stupid in front of the children.”

“I...” Stiles thought back to the morning. “That’s not the way it happened.”

“Then what did happen?”

Stiles wondered if he was about to get punished in some painful and inventive way. He was a prisoner here. If Peter decided Stiles was throwing his weight around, things could get very unpleasant for him.

“One of the boys didn’t understand something in the physics book and Kendra’s explanation wasn’t helping him understand, so I tried explaining it a different way.” He added, “I was just trying to help,” in case it made Peter any more merciful.

“Did it help?” Peter asked.

“The boy understood when I was finished.”

“Kendra also told me that you encouraged one of the children to waste paper.”

“One of the girls had drawn this little cartoon. It was cute, so I said so. I didn’t realise having a talent for art was a crime round here.”

“We have limited resources. We have to be careful with them,” Peter said.

“So anything that doesn’t have instant practical application is a bad thing?” Stiles asked. “If people followed that logic, we’d still be living in caves eating food raw because no one would have experimented with how to make fire.”

“That’s not exactly the same thing.”

“No? How does learning about mitosis or the history of the French Revolution help them with practical skills?” Stiles asked. “You’re teaching them stuff based on a curriculum that has no practical application and you’re doing it in the most boring possible way, which is guaranteed to convince them that learning is some tedious thing they only have to do because you make them. You’ll have a new generation of werewolves who hate learning and who’ll teach their kids to hate learning. Pretty
soon, the entire werewolf population will be backwards and primitive while human scientists are still busy studying new things.”

“Including new ways to kill us.”

“Probably. Science isn’t always pretty. But if you get those kids into learning, maybe one of them will build their own lab and figure out an antidote for wolfsbane. Wouldn’t that be practical?”

“Practical, but also unlikely,” said Peter.

“My point is...” Stiles trailed off. He’d started off trying to explain that he hadn’t done anything wrong this morning and his rant had been a side track. “My point is, all I did this morning was help explain something and say something nice to one of the kids. If you’re going to punish me for that, then you’re just a jerk.”

Peter stared at him. Stiles wondered if insulting the alpha might have been a bad move.

“Their education really bothers you, doesn’t it?” Peter said.

“It’s boring. It’s worse than regular school, and no offence to Kendra and whatshisface, they can’t teach everything that they want the kids to learn.”

“I’m sure Damian will be not at all offended by the fact you can’t remember his name,” Peter commented.

“My point is that they don’t know everything and they can’t always explain things in a way that makes sense to whoever it is who’s confused. If I had my laptop, I could look stuff up on Wikipedia or educational sites or something so they could see other explanations which might click better.”

“We don’t have an internet connection,” Peter said. “Our phone company cut our lines shortly after the government started seizing werewolf property.”

“You can get mobile wifi modems now,” Stiles said. “They use a cell phone SIM and you can get online from just about anywhere without needing a physical phone line.”

Stiles wasn’t entirely sure how the conversation had ended up here. He’d started out just defending his actions that morning. He hadn’t intended to start talking the alpha werewolf into getting an internet connection in the name of providing the kids better educational opportunities.

“A cell phone SIM would require a contract,” Peter said. “Contracts require bank account details. No one here has a bank account anymore.”

“I do,” Stiles said. He wasn’t sure why he said it, but there was something in Peter’s eyes that was almost a challenge, as though daring him to make this offer.

“Would you take out a contract that would let us get an internet connection here?”

“Yeah. I mean, as long as I get to use it too. And it wouldn’t just be good for the kids. You could look up things like instructions for setting up solar panels or whatever. Hell, I could get a projector as well as we could use my Netflix account to have pack movie nights.”

“Netflix?”

“You have been cut off far too long.”

“How much money do you need to make this happen?” Peter asked.
“Honestly, I don’t know. I’ve got my own laptop at home so I could bring that, but I’d need to buy the modem and set up a cell contract. I’d want to deposit some money in my bank account to make sure that the contract didn’t use up all my own money. And then there’s the projector, which I think is a good idea anyway because there are educational videos and stuff the kids could watch. So... I don’t know how much that will cost.”

Peter nodded.

“Wait here,” he said. He walked out of the room, leaving Stiles standing awkwardly in the study. So it seemed he wasn’t in any sort of trouble about talking over Kendra. That was good. And an internet connection would be great for everyone, including him.

Peter returned shortly, handing over to Stiles another roll of notes. Stiles flicked through enough to see the numbers and swallowed nervously. He could probably buy an executive quality audio-visual suite with this money.

“Spend what you need to on the equipment,” Peter said. “Then put the rest in your bank account. Bring me a deposit receipt and the information on the cell contract. We may need to do this again in future for other transactions requiring a bank account, so I want to keep careful track of how much money in your account is ours at any given time.”

“That seems surprisingly fair.”

Peter handed Stiles the keys to his jeep.

Stiles turned for the door, tucking the money away in his pocket. He hesitated. He turned back.

“Could I have dinner with my dad?” he asked.

“You’ve already asked me about this and I’ve already given you my answer,” said Peter.

“Last time, I asked about living with my dad. This is different. This is one meal. One meal where you don’t have to feed an extra mouth. Everybody wins.”

“No. You will be back before dinner and you will eat with the pack.”

“Fine,” Stiles said. “But you know that logically my idea makes a lot more sense.”

He walked out of the room before there could be any further argument. It probably made sense to get out of there before he started yelling at an alpha werewolf. He took his keys and started walking through the woods towards the edge of the territory and the stretch of road where his jeep was still parked. He wasn’t allowed to have dinner with his dad, but Peter hadn’t forbidden him from seeing him.

Chapter End Notes

Reminder that tomorrow is the last day you can enter my Tumblr giveaway to win one of my books (and some other good stuff).
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

So the good news is that this is the second update in two days. The bad news is that this coming week looks really busy with work, so I'm not sure when I'll be posting the next chapter. So you'll be stuck with this ending for a few days. Yes, I know I'm evil. :)

Stiles’ first stop was at his house. Officially, he was there to pick up his laptop. That didn’t stop him taking the opportunity for a long, hot shower while he was there. The water heater at the werewolf house was just enough to keep the showers from being freezing, but not enough to provide actual hot water because apparently that was too much electricity. And possibly to discourage people from spending too long in the shower.

Stiles took the opportunity to tend to something else which he hadn’t dared do in a house full of people with a supernaturally enhanced sense of smell. He closed his eyes, stroked his cock with a soap-slick hand, and let his imagination fill with images. Guys and girls from various bits of porn he’d watched over the years, actors from films. He didn’t build up a fantasy, just let the images flow. He hadn’t done this in so long that he wouldn’t take much anyway.

Then he thought of Derek, the way he moved, the bulges of his arms as he chopped old stumps. His ass as he bent down to pick up the chopped pieces.

Stiles gave a groan and came all over the shower tiles.

Well, that had been embarrassingly quick. He rinsed down the shower and then made sure he was as thoroughly clean as was physically possible. The last thing he needed was for Derek to smell him and work out that Stiles had just masturbated to the thought of him. Not that even a werewolf would be able to smell what Stiles had been thinking at the time, but he would still rather no one knew about this.

He got out of the shower and got dressed. He took a brief moment to clean his internet browser history and then packed up his laptop. He looked around the room for anything else he should bring with him, and considered his bookshelves. There were books in the house, but the pack didn’t have TV or anything, so more books couldn’t hurt. Stiles tossed some in a bag.

He had enough clothes now, so there wasn’t really anything else he needed from his room. He took everything downstairs and then took the opportunity of a pit stop in the kitchen for some food that the pack didn’t have in ready supply. He stuck his pop tarts in the toaster and inspected the contents of the fridge, leaving a sternly worded note for his dad on the subject of vegetables and the quantities of such in the fridge.

Then it was shopping time.

Stiles headed into town and found a computer store. Getting a mobile modem was easy. Finding a projector involved very little choice because the shop only had two models in stock. Getting a SIM contract with unlimited data took a frustrating amount of paperwork and involved a guy in the shop trying to sell him a package with a new phone handset and some accessories for about three times the price. But he got it done. He put everything in the jeep and went to the bank to deposit the rest of
Peter’s money. He also filled out the forms to authorise a regular payment for the new SIM contract he’d just set up so he wouldn’t have to worry about the bills.

Only when he’d done all that did he check his watch. He had a couple of hours before he had to head back to the pack. There was only one place to go now. A few minutes later, he was parking his jeep up in front of the sheriff station.

Deputy Parrish was on the front desk, looking up with surprised joy to see Stiles and buzzing him through without hesitation. Parrish told Stiles that his dad was in his office, “Stuck on desk duty until he gets the all clear by the doctors, but that should be any day now.”

“Don’t suppose you could keep him stuck there longer?” Stiles asked.

“Would if I could, kid.”

Stiles headed into the building and straight to his dad’s office. His dad was there, working at his desk, but Stiles’ attention went straight to the board behind his dad’s head. Usually it held notes and information about whatever was the most difficult case he was working through. Right now, the centre of the board showed a map of the woods outside Beacon Hills, with the werewolf territory marked out.

His attention went back to his dad when he moved around the desk to wrap him in a hug.

“Hey, dad.”

“Hey, kiddo. Supply run or...?” He didn’t finish the question, letting the hope trail off.

“Just picking up a couple of things,” Stiles said. “If you get any letters addressed to me about a new SIM contract, don’t freak out.”

“I thought you had your phone back.”

So Stiles explained about the mobile modem and the computer and everything.

“So the good news is I’ll probably be able to email and update my Facebook status and stuff,” Stiles said, “so you’ll have more proof that I haven’t been eaten.”

“Unless they use your laptop to send me messages to keep me placated while they torment you,” his dad said.

Stiles started to say that would never happen and, after all, the idea to bring the computer and everything had been his. Or had it? He thought back to the conversation with Peter and tried to remember how the idea had been decided? Had Peter been manipulating him into making the suggestion for a purpose like the one his dad feared?

“I don’t think that would happen,” Stiles said. His dad looked at him with narrowed eyes, unconvinced. Maybe Stiles should have tried for a more convincing tone.

“I can keep phoning you,” Stiles insisted. “And if they take the phone away or try to pretend to be me on the computer or something, you can just insist on talking to me by phone.”

“Or you could not go back there.”

“If I don’t, Peter will send the pack to track us both down.”

“As soon as any one of them crosses the boundary, we will know and the Argents will be all over
them. They haven’t crossed the boundary in a long time; they probably won’t risk it now. If they do, the hunters can handle them.”

Stiles didn’t think Peter had been bluffing about coming after them if he broke his promise to serve the pack. That said, he hadn’t thought Peter was bluffing about the whole rape thing either, and that had just been a test. But it was clear Peter hated humans and Stiles didn’t want to take any risks with his dad’s life.

“We’ve already had this argument,” Stiles said.

“But this time I can drag you down the hall and lock you in a cell until you come to your senses.”

“I thought you usually arrested parents that threatened to lock up their kids,” Stiles said. His dad glared at him.

“It’s for your own safety,” his dad said. “The werewolves wouldn’t attack here.”

Stiles blinked.

“Holy crap, you’re serious.”

“I let you go back to them once. There’s no way in hell I’m letting that happen again.”

“Dad, no, they didn’t hurt me. If I do what they tell me, it will be fine.”

“For how long? And what about on the full moon? That’s three days away, Stiles. What will they do to you then?”

Stiles decided he’d had enough arguing. His dad wasn’t going to listen and if he stayed on this side of the boundary line, then the werewolves would come and exact their revenge. He wasn’t going to let that happen. So he started for the door.

His dad caught his arm just as he got the door open.

“Stiles, we can keep you safe here and if they come for you, we can stop them.”

Stiles twisted his arm, trying to get it out of his dad’s grip without hurting him.

“Unless they kill you and everyone else here.”

“We’ll stop them.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

Stiles got his arm free and ran out into the hallway outside his dad’s office, barrelling straight into the chest of one of the deputies. The deputy caught him before Stiles could slide past him.

“Put him in one of the cells,” Stiles’ dad said.

“Come on!” Stiles protested, writhing to try and get out of the deputy’s hold. “You can’t do this. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

The deputy was taller than Stiles and probably weighed twice as much as him, most of that extra weight muscle. He held Stiles easily with an arm around his chest, the arm managing to pin one of Stiles’ at the same time. His free hand caught Stiles’ other arm as he tried to flail his way free.
“You can’t do this,” Stiles said. “This is illegal arrest and you know it.” But his dad jerked a head to the deputy, who guided Stiles, kindly but firmly, towards the cells.

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Derek spent his afternoon trying not to think about the fact that Stiles wasn’t in their territory. He knew that Stiles had come back last time and so it was likely he would again, but it was hard to remember that. He just remembered the way Stiles had looked after Peter’s test, the hatred in his eyes. He despised being here. He despised being with them. He no doubt wished to be back in the human town with his father and his friends. What if Stiles chose not to come back?

He didn’t want to think about that, but he couldn’t help it. He knew Peter wouldn’t let it go. Peter would insist on making an example.

Derek remembered the last time Peter had made an example. He’d wanted to see Kate die but even he’d felt sick by the end of it.

He needed to be alone right now, alone with his worries and his thoughts. He set off into the woods, checking the snares and then heading down to the river to empty the fish traps. He walked the familiar route, trying to think about the job to be done and not the fact that Stiles was out in the town, away from their supervision.

Peter had said Stiles was Derek’s pet, his responsibility. If Stiles was stupid enough to try and run from the fact, would Peter make it Derek’s responsibility to punish him? He already knew he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t punish a kid for being afraid.

He’d had all these thoughts the last time Stiles had gone into town and it had all been fine. Stiles had come back with everything he’d been sent to get. The same thing would probably happen this time. Derek tried to comfort himself with that thought. He tried to believe it.

He carried two rabbits and a handful of small fish back to the house to be dealt with in the kitchen, then he headed out again. This time he checked their boundaries. The humans had marked the edges of the werewolf territories around the town, but the packs had defined the boundaries first. Derek started with the human-facing side, walking slowly between the trees, seeing the marks carved into bark that would set off the warning signals. He paid attention to them, but he also paid attention to the feel of the place, the way that the very earth felt right beneath his feet. This was his territory. This was his home. He looked for places where there might be signs of human passage, but there was little except for Stiles, and the earlier marks left by his father and the other human kid.

Derek walked the length, following the bends of the boundary, then he turned. The human-defined boarders ran on, but this was the edge of his pack’s space. He walked through the trees as he had done before, feeling the sense of territory, and looking across as where another pack dwelt. There were no mystic markers to dignify the edge of what was his, but he knew it just as strongly. He walked the boundaries and checked to see if there were scents of other wolves or signs that indicated anyone had crossed between them. He found none.

He reached the river and turned, walking along the bank on their side. The opposite side was Satomi’s territory. Up ahead, he heard sounds, voices and splashing. He picked up the scent of werewolves on the breeze, but not ones he knew. They fell silent as he walked closer. He rounded a bend in the river and there he saw some kids. Two young boys were in the water in their underwear; they’d been washing or swimming or playing, or perhaps all three at once. A girl a little older stood on the bank on Satomi’s side.

This side of the river was Hale territory. That side was Satomi’s. But the river itself was too
important to belong to either. One of the boys was closer to this side than that, but he was still in the
water. As long as he didn’t try to climb the bank on the wrong side, it was all good.

Derek nodded to the three kids. They nodded back, watching him with caution until he walked past.
He continued along the line of the river and soon he heard the voices resume behind him.

After a while, the river ran on, but Derek turned again, walking the boundary of his territory. No
pack lived in the area beyond. Not anymore. The Whent pack had claimed that territory back before
the war, but now they were dead. Most of them were, anyway. One had gone to Satomi as omega
and asked to join her pack. Another, who’d been part of the Whent pack by marriage, had gone back
to his birth pack. If any others of the pack had survived, Derek didn’t know what had happened to
them. No one lived in that part of the land, but still the hunters had marked it off as werewolf
territory. They didn’t bother to think about werewolf packs and territory claiming. They didn’t care
to take the time to understand. They just knew that werewolves had lived there, so they defined it as
werewolf space still.

Walking the boundaries was important. It wasn’t just checking for signs of incursion; he needed to
continually renew the connection with the territory. He was a Hale, he was part of the pack. By
treading these paths along the edges of what was theirs, he reaffirmed that it remained theirs, marking
it by scent and by something less tangible. Any other werewolves who came into this part of the
wood would feel that it was claimed.

He reached the first of the human-marked trees, the boundary defined by magic more than the magic
of the pack. He glared at that tree and the symbol cut into the bark, but he turned and walked, staying
on his side of the dividing line. He walked until he reached the trail of scent Stiles had left through
the woods, the point where he had crossed the boundary. And hadn’t crossed back.

Stiles should have been back by now.

Derek told himself it didn’t mean anything. Stiles had probably just got distracted with his dad or that
Scott guy he called every night. He could be back any moment. It didn’t mean anything that he
wasn’t back right now. It didn’t mean that he’d done something stupid like trying to run.

If Stiles ran, Peter would insist on making a point. He wouldn’t want to look weak to the hunters and
the other humans. He would insist on going after Stiles and his father. He would insist on blood to
balance out the slight, and to remind the hunters that the packs were still to be feared. They were
penned in, but they hadn’t lost their fighting spirit. If Stiles had defied Peter, he would pay for it and
he didn’t deserve that. He was just a frightened kid trying to save his father.

So Derek waited, looking through the trees towards the road, waiting for Stiles to come back,
waiting for the sound of the jeep.

There were cars on the road occasionally. They hurried past, as though afraid to even drive close to
werewolf lands. None of them slowed to a stop. There was no sign of Stiles.

Time crept onwards. Derek paced along the edge of the boundary, listening.

When he finally heard someone approach, the sounds came from behind him. Peter walked through
the woods and came to Derek’s side. He stood and looked out through the trees towards the wood.

“So he hasn’t come back,” Peter said.

“He still has time.”

“It’s time for dinner, Derek.”
“I’m going to wait for Stiles.”

“If he was going to come back, he would be here by now.”

“I’m going to wait.”

Peter shrugged and walked away. He seemed calm. It was impossible to know what he was thinking. He might have been plotting an all-out attack against Beacon Hills and Derek wouldn’t be able to guess. Derek stood under the trees and desperately hoped for the sound of the jeep returning.

The sky gradually grew darker. After a while, there were more footsteps behind him.

“Peter wants you back at the house,” Isaac told him. “He says you need to eat your dinner and then it’s time to plan the raid.”

So Peter had made up his mind. He intended to attack the town, to cross the boundary and go after Stiles. Derek wanted to wait. He wanted to deny the reality and keep hoping that Stiles would walk back.

But that wasn’t going to happen. Derek turned. He walked back towards the house. Peter was going to plan an attack and Derek knew he had to be there. He was the only one who was likely to talk to Peter about the possibility of mercy. Derek didn’t know what Peter had in mind, but he knew that Stiles couldn’t possible deserve it.
Derek’s dinner had been saved for him and he ate it because there was no question of doing anything else. Then he went through to Peter’s study which was uncomfortably crowded; most of the adults of the pack were squeezed into the room along with the teenagers Peter had recruited. Peter stood behind his desk, a map of Beacon Hills spread in front of him. He looked up when Derek walked in and then began to speak. He’d been waiting for Derek.

He started by naming those who were to remain behind, grouping them into those who would stay by the children, those who would patrol around the house, and those who would patrol the border with human lands. Derek counted and realised there would be twenty of them left to make the raid, including Derek and Peter. That wasn’t many for a direct attack against the town. Still Derek was pleased to notice that the teenagers were among those being left to guard the territory; even Peter wasn’t sending them into danger.

“Our priority is to track down Stiles and his father,” Peter said. “We don’t know where in the town they are, if they even are in town. Our first task is to track their scents.”

“And not get murdered by hunters,” Derek muttered.

Peter nodded, “And not get caught by the hunters.”

He outlined his plan. They would cross the boundary at different places to confuse the hunters and make them divide their forces. Three of the pack were to act as distractions. They were to go into town and make noise and draw the attention of the hunters who would no doubt be out in full force after them.

“But try not to kill anyone,” Peter said. He didn’t sound like he cared too much one way or the other, but it was good to hear that. “Only hurt them if they corner you. You’re there to draw their attention, not get into a fight. When they see you, run and make them give chase. The rest of us will do our best to avoid attention.”

The rest of them would be hunting for Stiles’ scent or his father’s. Peter pointed out routes on the map, directing them to weave through the town until they found a trail and then follow it. He brought out the samples of the sheriff’s scent and the pillow from Stiles’ bed so that they could all remind themselves of the scents.

“When you find one of them,” Peter said, “howl. If you hear a howl, go to it. The aim is to capture, not kill. Find one of them, it doesn’t matter which, and we’ll bring him back here as a pack.”

“What will you do with him then?” Derek asked.

Peter shrugged, “That depends on how we find them. And how much trouble they cause us bringing them back.”

“Stiles is just a frightened kid,” Derek said.
“He made a deal with the pack and now he’s broken it.” Peter’s tone refused all argument, so Derek fell silent. He would wait. Maybe it would be easier to convince Peter to go gentle on the kid once he was back here.

There were details to define. Derek listened as Peter outlined what to do if they got cornered by hunters, or hurt, or if they couldn’t find a trail, or found signs that suggested Stiles and his father had left town. Once it was planned out, they head out to their assigned positions. Those guarding the territory wished luck to those heading into town.

Derek felt anxious about this, more worried than he could remember being before. It wasn’t just that he was worried about what Peter would do to Stiles, though that was a large part of it. He hadn’t crossed the boundary in five years. He’d left the pack’s territory on rare occasions, but only to see other packs. It had been too long since he’d gone into human territory. That triggered some primal fear. He was going back into the realm of hunters and killers. He hated the thought of going, but he knew he couldn’t stay here. He had to go with the pack to make sure that they didn’t hurt Stiles.

He walked through the woods to the boundary line, finding his place. He couldn’t see the others, but he knew they were there, spread out on either side, each far enough away from the others that hunters wouldn’t be able to go after them as a group. It felt strange to divide the pack, but it made sense since their purpose was to search.

Derek let himself transform. It was easy to do so, the full moon only a couple of days out. He felt the power running through him, the strength the change brought. The world seemed somewhat brighter as he looked through wolf eyes. The scents came richer, like a second language he could read as fluently as writing. He felt the ground beneath his feet, the sensation of his place and pack. He felt the rising thrill of impending hunt.

But through it all, he felt his fear for Stiles. Maybe if they found Stiles quickly and he came without a fight, Peter could be persuaded to be gentle. He was just a kid, a human willing to defend his father with bonds as tight as pack loyalty. Maybe Peter could be persuaded to recognise that.

The first howl cut through the quiet of the night. Peter’s signal.

Derek ran. He bounded through the trees and across the line that divided their territory from the world beyond. The symbols carved in the bark placed brightly as he passed between them but he ran on.

He dropped to all fours, loping between the trees on the far side of the road, the wood like their own but foreign under his feet and hands. He raced down the sloping ground towards the town. Soon the woods faded to gardens and Derek leapt over fences and hedges, not slowing down.

He heard the sound of the alarms, the warnings ringing out from speakers attached to lampposts. The sound was horrific, deafening, but beneath it Derek could still pick out cries of frightened humans or the racing of cars trying to make it back home so the owners could shut doors against the night. Derek ignored it all, running in the shadows between houses and trying to find a trace of scent.

He turned at a junction, beginning his back and forth journey to hunt for a trail. He did his best to keep to darkness, avoiding the lampposts with their puddles of light and their warning sirens. He ran down suburban streets, turned and then ran again. He needed to find the trail. He had to be the one to find Stiles first, before one of the others could hurt him. But he didn’t know where Stiles lived, so he couldn’t try going there first in the hope of catching a scent.

The thought came suddenly. They were looking for one or the other. Maybe he could find the sheriff’s trail. It had been a long time since Derek had been into Beacon Hills, but he remembered the
vague location of the sheriff’s station. He turned his path, aiming for busier streets. As he went, there were fewer gardens, less shadowy places for him to hide in, but he ran on. Buildings came closer together. There were shops and apartment buildings instead of houses. A car screeched to a halt on a road as he ran by. Over the still-sounding alarms, Derek heard the scream of panic from the driver. He ignored the car and ran on.

He slowed to a halt as he approached the sheriff’s station, pausing in the shadow of an office building. There was a figure on the roof of the sheriff’s station, the shape of a rifle making a strange shadow in the darkness. Derek looked more closely, surveying the scene. There were other buildings around the sheriff’s station, shadowy places. As Derek looked for a route to get closer, he saw others waiting in those shadows. Hunters, he was sure of it, set up around this place in an ambush. The hunters weren’t all out chasing after the others of the pack. They were expecting an attack here. That meant there was definitely someone they wanted here.

Derek tried to listen. He tried to focus beneath the warning alerts. The sound of the alarms was hard to ignore, but he strained towards the sheriff’s station, stretching his hearing to its limits. And there, he heard Stiles’ voice, loud and complaining enough that Derek could make out the words, anger and fear giving it just enough volume to be there beyond the din.

“They’re here for me,” Stiles was saying. “Just let me go to them and there doesn’t have to be a big fight.”

Derek couldn’t hear whatever was said to him.

“And how many people will get killed?” Stiles asked. “Just let me out and maybe we can stop this escalating.”

Derek again didn’t hear the reply, but he’d heard enough. Stiles hadn’t wanted to stay away. Now he was asking to be let out, which meant he was being restrained. Derek could tell Peter this and persuade him that Stiles didn’t deserve to be punished since it hadn’t been his choice to break the promise. But Derek remembered Peter’s comment about how punishment would depend on how this raid went. If any of the pack were hurt, Peter would probably extract vengeance from Stiles. Derek had to make sure they could get Stiles out without any of the pack being injured, even with the hunters surrounding the building.

Derek knew Peter’s orders. He was supposed to howl, to summon the pack so they could attack together. But that would lead to an all-out fight with the hunters and then someone was bound to be hurt. If he could just get inside...

Derek stood in the shadows and shifted back to his human form. He let his features change, his claws recede and his eyes dim. He stood there, indistinguishable by sight from any human. Then he started walking towards the sheriff’s station. He walked quickly, as though he were any other frightened human hearing the sound of alarm. He paid no attention to the hunters in the shadows, as though he didn’t know they were there or had no reason to fear them.

When no bullets or arrows shot towards him, he decided it must have worked. They must have mistaken him for a human. So Derek walked straight to the front door of the sheriff’s station and hurried inside.

If the sheriff saw him, he knew his bluff would be over but thankfully it was another man at the front desk, a young deputy who looked towards Derek with reassurance instead of alarm. Derek let his fears show on his face.

“I heard the alarms,” Derek said. “My home’s on the other side of town and I can’t wait for a bus
As he spoke, he walked over to the desk, getting close to the deputy. Then, almost mid-word, he reached over the desk and grabbed the man. The deputy gave a yelp of surprise and Derek pulled him forward and over the desk, away from his place before he could press an alarm button. Derek threw the man down on the ground. His cry this time was from pain, but Derek hadn’t heard any snapping bones and the deputy was already reaching for his gun.

Derek got it first, pulling it out of the holster.

Derek didn’t need the gun but he didn’t know of a way to shut it down so that it couldn’t be used against him, so he shoved it into the pocket of his jacket. He let his fangs and claws grow again and glowered at the deputy with wolf-eyes.

“Stay down if you value your life,” Derek told him. He let go of the man and ran at the door into the rest of the station.

The deputy was already yelling about the werewolf but Derek didn’t bother to stop him. The sound of the door splintering off its hinges would alert them enough anyway. As Derek crashed through the wreckage of the door, Derek found himself face-to-face with the sheriff.

He didn’t pause. He didn’t even slow down at the crack of a gunshot and the blazing pain that tore through his right shoulder. Derek let his momentum carry him forward, doing his best to ignore the bullet now lodged in his flesh.

He caught the sheriff’s gun with his left hand and slammed his whole weight into the man’s body. The sheriff fell and Derek landed on top of him, pinning him and yanking the gun from his grip. Derek threw the gun aside.

“You should have let him come back,” Derek snarled.

For a moment, Derek considered just taking the sheriff and leaving Stiles here. Peter was angry but he’d take his rage out on this man and Stiles would be safe. But Derek knew that the sheriff would almost certainly die for daring to fight the pack so soon after trespassing on their territory. If Derek took Stiles back, Derek could speak in his defence. He could convince Peter that Stiles wasn’t to blame and that another raid was unnecessary risk. Taking Stiles was the best chance he had to see that no one got killed.

The decision was made in a heartbeat. Derek let go of the sheriff and moved again, as fast as he could, following Stiles’ scent and the sound of his frantic voice asking what was happening. Derek burst through another door, slamming his body and all his strength into it to break the locks. His body jarred at the impact and his shoulder throbbed in growing agony. The bullet was still inside, wedged in there somewhere, causing problems and pain with every movement. But he couldn’t deal with it now.

He dropped low beneath the first gunshot as another deputy fired into the door’s destruction, then he slammed into the man’s legs. He went down, his gun skittering away, and Derek leapt up, towards the bars of the cell in which Stiles cowered. He looked out at Derek, eyes wide and frightened, but Derek didn’t have the time to reassure him. He wasn’t sure what reassurance he could give that wasn’t a lie.

He seized the bars of the cell and wrenched the door open, lock snapping. Again, pain rose in his shoulder, agony flowing like molten lead down his arm and into his chest. Derek gritted his teeth against it and grabbed Stiles’ round the waist, ignoring his cry of protest. Derek hefted Stiles up over
his left shoulder, knowing that his right one wouldn’t bear the weight.

By now, the deputy had retrieved his fallen gun, but the sheriff was there, yelling at him to stop, that he might hit Stiles. Derek ran between them both, back the way he’d come. Again, he heard the sheriff yelling not to shoot.

Derek ran out through the front office and out into the night. He hoped the hunters would hold their fire as well. They wouldn’t want to hit the sheriff’s kid, especially since they’d done all this in the name of protecting him.

He was half-way across the parking lot when something bright exploded in front of him. Blinding light assaulted his eyes even as a sound rose above the still-wailing alarms. Derek stumbled, caught off-guard.

In that instant, something jammed into Derek’s side. He couldn’t resist the howl of pain as shocks convulsed his body. He fell, Stiles dropping to the tarmac beside him. The thing jabbed again and Derek’s whole body rang with the pain as his muscles spasmed, electricity tearing through him. He lay there, shaking, the pain in his shoulder mingling with this fresh agony and threatening to overwhelm him. He managed to twist around onto his back. He looked up and saw the face of Argent and the barrel of the gun aimed at his forehead.

Derek couldn’t react as Argent drew his finger on the trigger. But there was a sudden movement and then, when Argent fired, it was a patch of tarmac that exploded into fragments and not Derek’s head.

It took Derek a second to realise what had happened, staring up at Argent’s face as surprised as his own. Then he saw the foot and knew. Stiles had kicked Argent’s hand as he fired. Stiles had just saved Derek’s life.

That frozen instant seemed to last forever, none of them quite knowing how to react to this. Argent recovered first and took aim again.

This time, there was a howl of fury and a huge, dark shape leapt out of the night, tossing Argent aside and raking with claws. There were resounding gunshots from somewhere up above, someone shooting at the alpha werewolf, but not hitting him, presumably to keep from hitting Argent by accident.

Peter turned to Derek, his face animal in the darkness, eyes blazing red.

“Get up,” he snarled.

Derek tried, but his body didn’t want to respond. His legs didn’t want to hold his weight. All his limbs were shaking as he fought to stand and the pain in his shoulder seemed to be turning his blood to lava. He stumbled, falling again before he’d even fully stood.

Peter was there at his side, touching a paw to Derek’s shoulder. He hissed in anger.

“Wolfsbane.”

Derek was aware of movement around him, but it was getting hard to focus on it. He couldn’t tell if they were friend or foe. He heard Peter snarl, “Grab the kid,” and then Peter’s arms were around Derek, lifting him up as if he weighed nothing. Still in alpha form, Peter cradled Derek to his chest and ran.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

At least I didn't leave you with that cliffhanger for long. :)

It's really interesting reading the comments and seeing what gets picked up... and what appears to go unnoticed.

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Stiles was carried from town over the shoulder of one of the beta werewolves. He tried protesting that he could run, that he wouldn’t try to escape, but no one was listening to him. He was forced to let this happen, the werewolf’s shoulder digging uncomfortably into his stomach as he was jolted along. He couldn’t even kick or struggle to free himself because any attempt might be seen as trying to run away and he knew he was in enough trouble already.

Derek had been shot with wolfsbane. He’d gone from angry and fighting to half-dead in about a minute and Stiles had last seen him being carried away by Peter. What if he was already dead? What would Peter do to Stiles then?

Stiles knew they were leaving town by the way the alarms faded into the distance. He tried to raise his head from its dangling position and he saw the start of woods around them. The werewolf carrying Stiles didn’t slow down. He kept on running, fast and determined, until they reached the clearing and the gardens and the big house. The werewolf lowered Stiles down onto the porch in front of the house. Stiles didn’t even try to move, not even to stand up.

Peter emerged from the house, appearing human now. He held Stiles’ phone in his hand, already pressing it up to the side of his head.

“No,” he said into it. “I told you that your son would suffer the same injury as any you dealt my pack. Right now, my nephew is dying from a wolfsbane bullet. If he dies, Stiles dies.”

Stiles knew that Peter was talking to his dad. He felt a chill run through him at that threat, at the burning fury on Peter’s face. He tried to shrink into himself, to make himself invisible, but Peter’s eyes met his, red and terrifying.

“He’s right here,” Peter said, in answer to some question. Then he held the phone out towards Stiles. “Speak.”

“Dad?” Stiles said. “Dad, I’m OK for now, I’m...”

“That’s enough,” Peter cut him off, bringing the phone back to his ear. “He’s alive for now and if you want him to stay that way, you’ll bring me a bullet of the same kind that was used to shoot my nephew. Do it quickly.”

He hung up the phone and then glowered down at Stiles. His eyes were still burning red. Stiles wondered if Peter intended to wait for Derek to die after all. He might get started now, or hurt him in some other way to vent his fury.

But Peter just glared for a minute and then beckoned over one of his betas.
“Take him below and secure him properly,” Peter ordered.

The beta grabbed Stiles by the arm and hauled him to his feet. Stiles expected to be taken down to the basement, but the werewolf towed Stiles away from the house. Stiles didn’t say anything. Even he knew this really wasn’t a moment to argue. He wondered if he should try telling Peter that he’d stopped Argent shooting Derek, but he doubted it would do any good. After all, stopping one bullet wasn’t really in his favour if Derek died from another one.

In the woods, a short distance from the house, the werewolf took Stiles to a structure that looked, at first glance, to be a pile of rocks. As he got closer, Stiles saw the door, which the man opened. A passageway led steeply downwards, cut into the earth and rock. Stiles let himself be led into the darkness and pretty soon the passage levelled out. The must be almost beneath the house, perhaps in some second basement.

They reached a heavy door which the werewolf slid open. For a moment, all Stiles saw was darkness. There were a few high windows, barred and glassless, but they were overgrown by plants outside and so there wasn’t much light inside and it took Stiles’ eyes a minute to adjust. The room was like a dark cave cut into the stone. Across from the door, Stiles saw metal bars, like some old gate, set into the stone itself in the middle of the room and there, hanging from the bars by chains, were heavy manacles.

“This really isn’t necessary,” Stiles said. “I’m not going to run. I didn’t intend to stay away before. I was trying to come back. I’ll keep my promise.”

The hand at Stiles’ arm was unrelenting, drawing him into the room and over to those manacles.

“Peter gave his orders,” the werewolf said, but there was something in his voice that was almost pity. He put his hand on Stiles’ chest and pushed him gently but firmly up against the metal bars.

“What’s he going to do to me?” Stiles asked.

“That depends,” the werewolf answered, taking one of Stiles’ arms and lifting it up, closing the cold grip of the manacle around Stiles’ wrist. “He really does love Derek.”

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Derek felt the burning pain in his shoulder, agony searing out in waves through his bloodstream, torment raging through every part of his body. His screamed before he was even really awake, aware of nothing but the fire inside him.

He collapsed back down again as the agony receded, aware that in its wake he felt his strength returning. He forced his eyes open and looked around, seeing the living room of the house. He was lying on the couch, Peter kneeling beside him, an empty bullet case in one hand. Another wolfsbane bullet. Where had Peter got that?

Peter stood. He reached out and rested a hand on Derek’s shoulder, the one that wasn’t still throbbing with the memory of injury. Then he looked across to someone in the doorway.

“Go tell the sheriff that Stiles won’t die tonight,” Peter said, “but warn him he’d better be more careful in the future if he wants his son to continue receiving kind treatment.”

There were footsteps as someone hurried away to obey. Derek lay there on the couch, wondering how close he’d come. Even now, he felt the echo of weakness in his limbs.

Peter pulled a chair up beside the couch and sat in it, staring seriously at Derek.
“You should have called the pack,” he admonished.

“I saw a way to get inside without the hunters realising it was an attack,” Derek answered.

“This is why I make the strategies.”

“It nearly worked. I got in. I got Stiles."

“And got shot with a poisoned bullet,” Peter pointed out. Derek couldn’t argue that point. He waited. Pretty soon, Peter asked, “Who was it who shot you?”

Derek shrugged, his shoulder aching at the movement, even as his flesh knitted.

“One of the deputies,” he said. Peter studied his face carefully.

“You always were a terrible liar, Derek. Was it the sheriff?”

Derek considered trying to lie again, but he knew that would be useless.

“Don’t punish Stiles for this,” Derek said. “He didn’t disobey. They locked him in a cell to keep him from coming back.”

“I told his father I would hurt Stiles for every injury he dealt my pack. He should have listened.”

“But Stiles didn’t do anything wrong. Hurting him to get back at the sheriff isn’t justice and you know it.” When Peter just shrugged, Derek pressed on saying, “Stiles saved my life.”

“What?”

So Derek explained about Argent’s attack outside the station, and the way Stiles had kicked the gun aside as Argent went to fire it. A bullet in the brain would kill even a werewolf and they both knew it. Peter studied Derek now, probably looking for a sign that this too was a lie.

At last, Peter asked, “Why would he do that?”

All Derek could do was shrug.

***

It felt like Stiles had been trapped in that stone room forever. He was exhausted, the fear of the past night leaving him drained of energy. He wanted to sleep, but there was no way to be comfortable when he was chained up like this, his arms held above his head by the manacles. He could lean on the bars behind him, but even that gave no comfort because the metal was cold. He wanted to be safe at home in his own bed. He wanted this nightmare to be over. He wanted his dad.

He wondered if it was morning yet. There was no way to know down here. The windows, such as they were, didn’t let in much light at all.

He wondered if Derek was dead yet. No one had come down here to torture him to death, so presumably that meant he was still alive. Unless Derek had died and Peter’s plan was to leave Stiles down here to starve.

He stood there, waiting for something. Cold seemed to creep into him from the stone around him, from the metal at his back and the manacles at his wrists. His shoulders ached from the discomfort of standing with his arms raised. His wrists hurt from the way the manacles dug into him every time he moved and fidgeted. His legs and feet ached from standing. He began to feel that he’d felt comfort
for the last time.

All he could hear was the jangling of his chains and the soft rhythm of his breath. His imagination started playing tricks on him. He thought he heard whispers and scuffles in the shadowy corners of the room. He started to worry that there might be rats down here. Then he reminded himself that it was stupid to be afraid of a few rats when there was a very real danger that he was about to be tortured to death by werewolves. That thought was not as comforting as he might have hoped.

When he heard the footsteps outside, he thought he was imagining at first. Then the heavy door slid open with a metallic grind. Stiles stood there, fighting not to tremble, as Peter walked in.

“Is Derek dead?” Stiles asked.

“No. Your father brought me what I needed. But we still have to decide what to do with you.”

“I was going to come back,” Stiles said. He didn’t know if it would help, but he had to say it. “The hunters and everyone wouldn’t let me come, but I didn’t intend to break my promise. And I bought the internet stuff; it’s probably still in my jeep at the sheriff station.”

Peter didn’t say anything. He just stood there, watching Stiles with unreadable eyes. Stiles found his voice faltering.

“When we made this agreement,” Peter said, “I told your father that if he harmed my pack in any way, you would suffer the same injuries. He shot my nephew with a poisoned bullet. Under our agreement, I now should do the same to you. It’s only balance.”

He reached out and touched Stiles’ shoulder, the point of a single finger pressing lightly against his skin. Stiles supposed he should be grateful that it wasn’t a claw right now.

“And,” Peter went on, “I told you that I would kill you both if either of you tried to break the deal. I like to think I’m a man of my word.”

Stiles wondered if he should tell Peter about stopping Argent shooting Derek. He doubted Peter would believe him but right now he had nothing else to lose so he opened his mouth to speak. It turned out he didn’t need to.

“But,” Peter went on before Stiles could say anything, “Derek tells me you stopped Argent shooting him. You spared him a bullet. I suppose that should be balanced too.”

“Does this mean you’re not going to shoot me?” Stiles asked.

“That depends. Why did you protect Derek?”

Stiles considered the question. He hadn’t really thought about it at the time. There hadn’t been time to. He’d seen the gun and just reacted. He shrugged.

“I’ve not seen Derek do anything that he deserved getting killed over.” Stiles should probably have shut up at that point, but he couldn’t resist adding, “If it had been you there, I would’ve let Argent shoot you.”

He expected anger, but Peter seemed more amused than anything else.

“I expect you would,” he said. He pulled a key from a pocket and started unlocking the manacles.

“So is this the part where I get dragged outside and ritually slaughtered?” Stiles asked. Peter smirked
and unlocked the other manacle.

“This is the part where you eat breakfast,” he said, “and then you should probably get a few hours sleep. I think there’ve been enough lessons learned for one day.”

Stiles rubbed his sore wrist and rolled his shoulders to try and get some life back into them. He couldn’t quite believe this was it. Peter was just going to drop the issue. At least that was how it seemed. Peter started to walk away.

“So you’re not going to torture me?” Stiles asked. Peter stopped. He turned back. Stiles really wished he hadn’t spoken. He tried to back away but he was already pressed up against the bars.

“You saved my nephew’s life, Stiles. That buys you a little forgiveness. For you, at least.” The threat against his father lay there, resting just below the surface of the words.

“Enough forgiveness that you’ll call this whole arrangement off and let me go home?”

He didn’t expect Peter to go for that. Peter stepped in close, smiling in his cold, creepy way. Stiles leaned sideways to put a bit of distance between their faces.

“Stiles,” Peter said slowly, “you are home.”

Then he turned and walked away. This time, Stiles let him.
Stiles did not want to get up when Isaac came and woke him at lunch time. He still felt thoroughly tired but he supposed it was right to get up now otherwise he’d be fully awake when night came. He let himself be taken down for lunch and was then sent out to the garden to weed the vegetables. It was light work, probably because he wasn’t sure he was fully functional after a night of being locked up by first the sheriff’s department then the pack. No one had said that specifically, but then no one was really talking about last night and the fact that the pack had raided Beacon Hills to get him back and Derek had nearly been killed with a wolfsbane bullet.

Stiles hadn’t spoken to Derek since he’d got back. When he went up to bed after his brief breakfast, Derek had been in his big bed, asleep or pretending to be. He was gone by the time Isaac came to wake Stiles. So Stiles had no chance to talk to Derek about what had happened. He wasn’t sure what this meant now, since the moment with Argent and the bullet. Things didn’t feel quite the same, at least for him.

He finished working around the carrots and carried the weeds over to the big compost heap under the trees. Then he returned and set to work on the leeks. He was still kneeling in the middle of the garden when one of the betas came running up to the house. She looked across at Stiles even as she hurried inside. Stiles wasn’t sure what was going on, but that one look made it clear he was in the middle of it. So Stiles wasn’t surprised when Peter came out of the house a minute later and walked straight over to him. The beta followed after at a polite distance. For some reason, she had a tea towel hanging from one hand.

“Your father is at our borders again,” Peter said, “begging for proof that you’re still alive.”

Stiles got to his feet, stopping himself from running off towards the border only by great strength of will.

“Can I go talk to him?” Stiles asked.

“No,” Peter said. “I want him to think about what he risked. I don’t want him to try anything like this again. Just because I’ve decided not to punish you doesn’t mean your father needs to know that.”

“You’re going to pretend to my dad that you’re torturing me.”

“Essentially.”

“No.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. Stiles folded his arms and glared at him.

“I’ll buy stuff for you and weed your plants for you and carry wood, but there is no way in hell I’m going to let you scare my dad by making him think you’re torturing me.”

“If you object to lying to your father,” Peter said, “I’m happy to actually hurt you.”

Stiles was too tired to think of a witty response to that, so he settled for, “I hate you.”

“You can hate me down below. You’ll be chained again and this time I think a gag will be in order; I wouldn’t want you saying something stupid to your father. I’ll bring him down to see you and then send him on his way to wallow in guilt and decide not to threaten the pack again.”
“Or seethe in hatred and plot intricate revenge strategies with the hunters. Really, if you want my dad to not attack you, you’re better off convincing him that you’re not hurting me.”

“That hasn’t worked so far.”

“Because you come across as an evil murdering bastard,” Stiles said. “If you tried being nicer, my dad would find it easier to believe that you’re not going to string me up and use me as a piñata.”

Peter looked towards his beta and said, “Take him below and make sure he stops talking.”

Then he turned and walked away, leaving Stiles standing in the middle of the garden with the beta werewolf taking hold of his arm.

“So that’s it?” Stiles called. “We’re not going to finish this debate on the merits of not chaining people in your creepy basement dungeon?”

Peter didn’t even slow down. Apparently that was that. Peter was gone into the trees and the beta werewolf led Stiles back to the tunnel with a firm hand on his arm. Stiles could have tried arguing or fighting, but this was going to be tough enough as it was.

The werewolf didn’t say anything until she had Stiles back where he’d been this morning, standing against the metal bars. She lifted first one arm then the other, fastening the manacles in place.

“I can’t believe you argued with Peter like that,” she said.

“He’s trying to hurt my dad.”

“Yeah, but you called him a bastard to his face. He didn’t even react.”

“It’s not like it’s news to him that I hate him. I told him I would have let Argent shoot him in the head.”

“Nobody talks to an alpha werewolf like that.”

“Then it’s a good job I’m a nobody because he needs someone to talk to him like that.”

“You... a nobody wouldn’t do what you’re doing for your dad.”

Stiles didn’t have a chance to respond to that because she took the tea towel and twisted it into a band before forcing it into Stiles’ mouth, tying the ends behind his head. Stiles glared at her and made a complaint, but the sounds that emerged were muffled and unintelligible.

She waited in silence. Stiles was glad he wasn’t left along this time, and thankfully the wait wasn’t nearly so long. The first hint of ache had barely started in his shoulders when the door opened and Peter walked in, Stiles’ dad following a step behind. Stiles saw the horror-struck expression on his dad’s face and tried to talk around the gag, but he thought his muffled protests just made his dad’s look of terror worse.

His dad started towards Stiles, but Peter had a firm hold of his arm, keeping him by the doorway. Stiles suspected he didn’t want them getting too close. In the darkness down here, it would be difficult to see Stiles’ state. It wouldn’t be obvious that Stiles was perfectly unhurt. And all Stiles could do was stand there, looking at him, seeing his dad looking more upset than he had done since the day his mom had died.

“Please,” Stiles’ dad said to Peter, “Stiles hasn’t done anything wrong. He hasn’t hurt you. If you
need to punish someone, take me.”

“You wanted proof I hadn’t killed Stiles,” Peter replied, “there he is. Now you can leave.”

“I can’t just leave him here. If you want to hurt someone, hurt me and let Stiles go.”

“But I am hurting you,” Peter pointed out. “And this time I hope you’ll listen when I tell you not to hurt any of my pack.”

Stiles glowered at Peter. He tried to pour his hate out through his eyes. He wanted Peter to feel his anger burn. Peter either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“He’s just a kid,” Stiles’ dad said. “Please show mercy.”

“I distinctly remember saying that if either of you tried to break this agreement, I would kill you both. I think I’m being extremely merciful. You’re both still breathing, aren’t you?”

“I’m the one the broke the agreement. I’m the one who kept him away.”

“And the one who shot my nephew. Don’t forget that.”

“I’m sorry,” said Stiles’ dad. “I brought you the bullet when you asked. Please, I’m begging you, don’t hurt Stiles. He’s just a kid. He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“It’s time for you to leave,” Peter said. He turned to the beta, “Take the sheriff back to our borders and see that he leaves.”

“Will you let him come into town again?” Stiles’ dad asked. “You’ll need him to get supplies again, won’t you?”

“That depends on his behaviour. And yours. If you hope to see Stiles again, you should stop making me angry.”

Stiles’ dad glared at Peter with as much hatred as Stiles was feeling, but he stopped arguing. It was clear no amount of begging was going to change Peter’s mind. He let himself be led out. Peter waited. He walked over to Stiles after a minute or two and undid the knot that held the towel gag in place.

“You’re a monster,” Stiles spat as soon as the gag was gone.

“Humans use that word so much it’s ceased to have meaning for us.”

“Well I mean it. Tricking my dad like that, that’s just evil.”

“But isn’t this what you expected when you offered yourself to the pack?”

Stiles couldn’t argue with that point. He’d expected pain and imprisonment. He’d expected to be brutally used in every sense of the word. The treatment he’d received in general from the pack had been better than that, but that didn’t stop Peter’s actions today being thoroughly disgusting.

“I hate you,” Stiles said.

“I’d gathered that.”

Peter took out the key and unlocked the manacles. Stiles had a strange sense of déjà vu. He rubbed his wrists and continued to glare.
“Are we done with your sadomasochistic fantasies for the day?” Stiles asked.

“This isn’t one of my fantasies. My fantasies mainly involve beds, silk sheets, and the occasional use of whipped cream.”

“Eww! Gross! I really, really don’t want to know this about you.” Stiles made a disgusted face. He didn’t know whether to vomit or knee Peter in the groin. Peter smirked.

“You are enjoying this way too much,” Stiles complained. “Can I get back to my slave labour already?”

Peter gestured towards the door and Stiles took that as his invitation to stalk out of there.

***

It turned out that Stiles’ dad had brought everything that had been in Stiles’ jeep, possibly in an attempt to placate Peter. That meant that Stiles’ slave labour for the rest of the afternoon involved setting up the modem and projector, showing Peter and some of the others how Netflix worked, and finding educational resources for the kids. The he spent several hours sitting on the couch with the laptop on his knees, trawling the web for good educational videos he could show and other websites that they could use. The challenge was that everyone was at different ages and had different levels of skill.

He did find a few gems, including a website that taught math with exercises and explanations. That site also had videos on a range of other subjects. Stiles spent a while creating a separate login account for each of the kids so that they could track their individual progress.

Then, since he’d performed his duty to the pack, he went to his email and started typing his dad’s email address into the to line.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Stiles jumped and nearly flailed the computer off his lap. Peter was standing behind him, staring at the screen.

“Jeez!” Stiles cried. “How do you guys do that? Do you have special lurker training or something?”

“It’s a talent,” Peter answered. “Goes with the good eyesight and the excellent hearing. Don’t think I won’t know if you try to contact your father.”

“Can I contact Scott? You know, my best friend who has never shot anyone and actually helped me cart your supplies around the store.”

Peter considered for a minute and then shrugged, “A short email.”

Stiles typed in Scott’s email address and then wrote out what was probably the shortest email he’d ever written. Tell Dad I’m OK. He hit send before Peter could argue and then he turned round, letting a little smugness show on his face. That sense of smugness died when he saw how utterly unconcerned Peter was about that email.

“Now your father probably thinks I’ve tortured your email password out of you and one of us is trying to impersonate you.”

“I hate you so much.”
“You need to get a new line,” Peter said. “Now turn that thing off. Electricity is still rationed.”

Stiles reluctantly shut down the laptop.

***

Derek reappeared at dinner. All trace of his injury was gone. He met Stiles’ eyes briefly from across the dining table but said nothing, just got on with his meal when his turn came up. Stiles thought that was it. He waited for his own turn, which came towards the end as usual, and then ate his portion of fish stew quickly. When he finished washing up his dishes, he turned away from the sink and saw Derek standing there in the doorway of the kitchen. It was a good job Stiles hadn’t been holding a plate at the time because he would have dropped it.

“How are you guys so sneaky?” Stiles demanded.

Derek didn’t answer. Instead he started saying, “Let’s go,” then he stopped, cutting himself off. He started again, “Would you like to come for a walk with me?”

Stiles realised what Derek had done. He’d deliberately made this a request and not an order. He was inviting Stiles but he didn’t want Stiles to think he was in any way compelled to accompany Derek. But he was intrigued what Derek wanted, so he agreed with a simple, “Sure.”

They left the house, heading out into the woods and the dying light of the end of the day. Derek led the way, Stiles walking beside him. Derek didn’t say anything and Stiles wondered if that was because he didn’t know what to say, or because he didn’t want to talk where they could easily be overheard by everyone back in the house. Stiles hoped it was the latter because this would be a seriously boring walk otherwise.

“How’s the shoulder?” Stiles asked, when he couldn’t take the uncomfortable silence anymore.

“Fully healed. Once the poison’s cleansed, it doesn’t take long.”

They walked a little further. Night fell quickly under the cover of the trees and it was difficult for Stiles to make out Derek’s face in the darkness. He wasn’t sure what Derek was thinking, why he’d suggested coming out here. A flicker of fear suddenly bloomed. What if Derek wanted revenge for having nearly been killed? Stiles bit down on the question. He didn’t want to ask it because he didn’t want to hear the answer.

This time, it was Derek who broke the silence: “Did Peter... did he punish you for my injury?”

“No but... he’s letting my dad thinks he is. My dad probably thinks I’m being tortured right now, or at least chained up and gagged in your basement dungeon. He’s probably worrying himself into a heart attack and I can’t... I can’t do anything.”

Stiles’ voice choked a little on those last words. He didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to be about to start crying in front of his werewolf captor in the middle of the wood. But the tears weren’t paying attention to what he wanted. He felt them rising up behind his eyes, wanting to escape. He brought a hand up to his face, as though that might hide the fact he was moments away from breaking down.

Derek looked away, giving him the illusion of privacy.

“Peter,” Derek started. He stopped. He let out a small, huffing sigh and then said, “I’m going to show you something.”

He changed direction and started walking through the woods again, slowly so that Stiles could
follow. Stiles sniffled a little and trailed along behind him as they left the frequently-used paths behind and took a route that was clearly walked a lot less often.

In the darkness, it took Stiles a minute to realise what he was looking at when Derek came to a halt. There were shapes low to the ground, pieces of stone set into the earth, and other shapes made of chunks of wood. Stiles walked over to the largest of the stones and crouched down in front of it, running his fingers over carved letters to help interpret them in the shadows his eyes were struggling to penetrate.

“Talia Hale,” Stiles read.

“My mother,” Derek said. “That one’s my sister,” he pointed to another stone, “and that’s my brother. My aunt. My uncle. My grandmother. Those seven are my cousins, including Peter’s daughter. That’s my cousin’s wife; she was human, didn’t want the bite. We buried her with her kid; he was only six months old, didn’t seem right to put him in his own grave.”

The graves Derek had been pointing to were all ones with stones, proper grave markers that would belong in any cemetery.

“Why are some stone and some wood?” Stiles asked.

“The ones with wooden markers are the ones who died later, after we were cut off and couldn’t go into a funeral home and ask for gravestones. The ones with stones all died in a single attack. Peter’s afraid of history repeating itself. He wants your dad too scared of the consequences to let the hunters do anything like this again.”

“It’s not going to work,” Stiles said. “The more my dad thinks you’re hurting me, the more he’s going to be working with Argent to plot some complex rescue plan. He might get scared, but he’ll get angry too. He’s not going to just back off. My dad’s not really a violent man, but he’ll tear this whole forest apart if he thinks you’ve hurt me.”

“Sounds lot like Peter,” Derek said.

Stiles rounded on him, hoping Derek could see his glare in the darkness, “My dad is nothing like Peter.”

Derek didn’t try to argue, which was probably a good thing. If Derek had tried to press the issue, Stiles would have tried to fight him, and that would probably have resulted in broken bones for Stiles. Instead, Derek said, “Let’s go back to the house. I’ll get your phone back from Peter so you can reassure your dad.”

“Thanks.”

Derek shook his head slightly, “That’s actually what I came out here to tell you. Thanks. For saving my life.”
Stiles was working through a geography text book when Peter walked into the living room. All the kids looked up at him, but they were expectant and curious, not the slightest bit afraid. Stiles on the other hand, was afraid. He hadn’t spoken to Peter since Derek had given him back the phone and now Stiles wondered if Peter intended to punish him for talking to his dad, for spoiling the illusion of torture Peter had tried to create. Peter stood over him, looking with a cold expression.

“Come with me, Stiles.”

“I thought I was supposed to spend my mornings studying,” Stiles said. He wasn’t sure why he argued. Even he knew that there were some people he really shouldn’t argue with. But he just didn’t want to go with Peter and wanted to put it off as long as possible.

“I’m going to give you another lesson,” Peter said. Which wasn’t at all ominous.

Stiles couldn’t really argue, so he stood and followed Peter out of the room and then out of the house. It was probably not a good sign that Peter started walking off into the woods, but at least he wasn’t heading in the direction of the entrance to the creepy, torture basement.

“I understand Derek took you to the graveyard,” Peter said after about a minute.

“Yeah. If you’ve got a problem with me being there, maybe you should be taking him off to beat the crap out of.”

Peter glanced round at Stiles, puzzlement showing on his face, “Why do you think I’m going to beat the crap out of you?”

“I dunno, because you came in all, ‘I need to teach you a lesson, Stiles, mwa ha ha ha’.”

“You may have imagined the supervillain laugh.”

“But I wasn’t imagining you threatening to teach me a lesson.”

“It wasn’t a threat, Stiles.”

Stiles gave Peter a sceptical look. He’d spent a not insignificant percentage of his time here being threatened by Peter in one way or another. It was frankly ridiculous for Peter to think Stiles would interpret his comments in any way other than as a threat. Peter must have realised that.

“I’m sorry,” Peter said. Stiles thought this was the first time Peter had apologised to him. He couldn’t quite believe it was happening now.

“Come again?” he said. He still couldn’t quite believe he’d heard what he’d heard. Peter hadn’t apologised for the rape threats or the torture pretence or anything else, but he’d apologise for this.

“You heard me. I didn’t intend for you to take my words as a threat. In future, I’ll be more explicit when I’m threatening you so you know the difference.”

“Gee, I’m sure I’ll appreciate that when you next threaten me.”

Peter ignored the sarcasm.

“I wanted to talk to you about history,” Peter said. “Our history, specifically. Do you know how the
war between humans and werewolves started?"

“Of course.”

“Tell me.”

Now it was Stiles’ turn to look puzzled.

“You don’t know?” Stiles asked.

“I don’t know how humans tell it,” Peter answered. “I want to know.”

He walked over to a fallen log close to where they’d been walking. He sat down on it and gestured a hand towards Stiles in an invitation to speak. Stiles guessed, since apparently he wasn’t going to get beaten to a pulp, he might as well talk.

“Werewolves lived among humans for years,” he said. “Centuries. And they mostly stayed hidden and when they killed people, the deaths were generally mistaken for animal attacks. Then a werewolf killed some old guy and it was caught on camera and the video went viral and suddenly everyone knew the truth. People started panicking and getting scared because they didn’t want to be living next door to monsters. So there was violence, and a lot of it was against innocent people who just happened to, you know, be hairier than normal or get grumpy around the full moon. So some politicians started saying that there should be a list of who are werewolves so that ordinary humans didn’t get killed by accident. Werewolves objected and there were riots. A bunch of police were killed and then guys with big guns decided to come out and kill any werewolf they found and formed bands of hunters, so the government declared a state of emergency. They decided to round up werewolves to protect everyone until they could figure out a peaceful solution, but the werewolves didn’t want to be shipped off to god knows where and fought back. Known werewolves couldn’t stay in population centres because too many people wanted to kill them, so most packs ended up in places like this, where they could defend themselves. And since the point had been to round up werewolves, a lot of people were OK with the werewolves rounding up themselves. Then places like Beacon Hills had some people who practiced old skills and could set up alarms at the boundary and the local officials basically went, ‘You stay on your side, we’ll stay on our side’ and the all-out war dropped down to occasional skirmishes.”

Stiles finished talking. Peter had been listening throughout, a look of mild amusement on his face.

“Technically true, I suppose,” he said with a little shrug, “from a certain point of view.”

Stiles was pretty sure that wasn’t a deliberate Star Wars reference, but he couldn’t help asking, “Is this where you tell me that Darth Vader’s my father?”

“Not exactly. Not your father.”

“Darth Vader’s your father?”

Stiles wasn’t sure if the little huff of breath Peter let out was amusement or frustration.

“Are you capable of focusing on one subject for more than thirty seconds at a time?” Peter asked.

“This is probably a good time to mention that my supplies of ADHD medication are running low.”

Peter shook his head, dropping it forward a bit. Stiles thought it was so he wouldn’t be able to see Peter’s expression. Peter didn’t want Stiles to see that he was amused. Somehow making Peter laugh seemed like a victory. Maybe it was because he knew that he wouldn’t be able to get away with
punching Peter in the face so disrupting him when he was trying to have a serious conversation about human-werewolf conflict was as good as it was going to get.

“Do you know the name of the man whose death was filmed?” Peter asked, once he’d regained composure.

“No.”

“Gerard Argent.”

“Argent?”

“His son is still the leader of the hunters in Beacon Hills.”

Stiles guessed that explained Peter’s response to the first Darth Vader comment.

“No wonder he became a hunter though, if his dad was killed by werewolves,” Stiles said.

“He was a hunter long before his father’s death. There have been hunters as long as there have been werewolves. Some of them followed moral codes,” those two words dripped with sarcasm, “where they would only kill known werewolves who had taken a human life. Some pretended that they followed codes while looking for any excuse to make a kill. Some just killed. This war has been going on long before most humans knew about it.”

“So the guy that was killed, was he a hunter?”

“He was,” Peter answered, “and a rather merciless one. Shortly before our existence became public knowledge, there were a series of attacks. Some hunters killed a young werewolf who was still learning to control her abilities. Her parents were naturally furious that their child had been senselessly slaughtered, and they killed the hunters who’d killed her. The other hunters decided that the whole pack were vicious killers and started killing every werewolf in the area, guilty or not. So werewolves had to fight back. It got very bloody very quickly. Some of the alphas decided to try and end the bloodshed. The packs came together for a summit, my sister Talia among them, and decided to try and talk peace with the hunters.”

“Let me guess,” Stiles said, “very bloody, very quickly?”

Peter inclined his head a little. “Gerard Argent and some of his deputies came to meet with the representatives of the packs. The hunters set a trap. Two of the alphas were killed, Ennis and Deucalion, and some of the betas who’d accompanied their alphas. Even a human who was attached to Kali’s pack. There were rumours that Julia was Kali’s lover and given what happened next I can believe it. Most of the alphas went back to their own territories to protect their packs and lick their wounds, but Kali wanted revenge. She went after Argent and killed him, too angry to pay enough attention to her surroundings. She didn’t notice that girl with the camera.”

“Are you trying to tell me that the death that started this whole war was justified?” Stiles asked, “Because the guy had killed people at peace talks?”

“His death was justice.”

Stiles wanted to argue that it was vigilante vengeance, but it wasn’t like werewolves could go to the police and have a guy arrested for breaking the sacred trust of a supernatural peace conference. Assuming Peter was telling the truth, Stiles might be willing to give him something on this point.

“But there were other deaths later,” Stiles pointed out. “After the video got out.”
“Humans lost it,” he said. “Anyone with a gun and a grudge could murder their neighbour and claim they thought it was a werewolf and they stood a decent chance of getting away with it because of how terrified everyone was. Almost all of the humans that died were killed by humans. The ones that were killed by werewolves had mostly tried to kill the werewolves first. Then the government announced the plan to send us to concentration camps. Those of us whose identities as werewolves had already been revealed decided to protest.”

“You mean riot,” Stiles said. He’d seen photos of the riots. He’d been a kid at the time all this was happening, but the photos had been plastered all over every paper in the country and Stiles had been terrified that his dad was going to get killed while out in riot gear trying to keep the peace.

“They started out as peaceful protests. They weren’t riots until the police started shooting tear gas at us and using sound cannons. Do you know what a sound cannon does to a person with enhanced senses?” Stiles winced in sympathy and Peter continued, “And if you get enough werewolves hurt and angry, it’s guaranteed that someone will lose control and shift. After that, it all went to hell.”

Stiles was cynical enough that he was willing to acknowledge that Peter’s story might have a note of truth to it. He’d been young at the time, but enough recent peaceful protests had turned brutal due to police violently overreacting that he could believe a story like this. He didn’t have any proof though. Then again, he realised, he didn’t have any proof of the version he’d grown up accepting as common knowledge. And, Peter’s threatening behaviour aside, the werewolves here hadn’t acted at all like the violent monsters the media painted them as.

“All those gravestones Derek showed me,” Stiles said, “were they killed in the riots?”

“No,” Peter answered. “Those deaths came shortly later. During the chaos, one from a hunter family approached one of the pack, claiming that all this violence was something they never wanted, trying to have a second attempt at the peace talks that had ended so badly. It seems she was convincing.”

“I take it she was lying?”

“She convinced one of the younger and more naïve members of the pack to bring her into our territory to meet with Talia. But she was her father’s daughter and she slaughtered more than three quarters of the pack, most of whom were children.”

“Jesus,” Stiles breathed.

“Twice the Argents claimed to come to us offering peace and twice they betrayed us. Perhaps you understand why I have a hard time trusting humans.”

“What happened to the Argent who did it?”

“Justice,” Peter answered. Stiles decided in the interest of not having nightmares for the rest of his life, that he was better off not enquiring further. Peter just sat there calmly on his log.

“Why are you telling me all this?” Stiles asked.

“Derek showed you the graves. I thought you deserved to know the whole story. I thought you were ready to hear the truth, rather than whatever propaganda you’ve been fed out there.” He jerked his head in the direction of Beacon Hills. Stiles considered everything he’d just heard, trying to match it up to what he knew of Peter and the rest of the pack. He couldn’t deny that what Peter had described was horrific, but it didn’t mean he could simply brush aside other things. The thought of Peter’s rape test still made bile rise in his throat, and he couldn’t ignore the look of pure, miserable terror on his
dad’s face when he thought Stiles was being tortured. He couldn’t forget them and it wasn’t like
Peter had even attempted to apologise for any of that.

“This doesn’t change the fact that I hate you, you know,” Stiles said.

Peter shrugged calmly, “That’s OK. Your hatred for me is a personal thing based on your
experiences. You hate me for the things I have done, not for what I was born. I can respect that.”

Stiles almost laughed, “You respect me?”

Peter gave him a scornful look, “Only very little. You are too talkative by far, you’ve no sense of
focus, and you make inappropriate Star Wars references. And your reference would put me in either
the role of Luke or Obi-wan when clearly I’m more of a Lando Calrissian.”

“A back-stabbing traitor?” Stiles couldn’t help asking.

“A respected leader of a community trying to protect his people while evil forces attempt to impose
ever-more restrictive rules on us.”

“I think my explanation fits better.”

Peter looked like he was about to say something else, but then he looked off between the trees, back
towards the house. He stood up from the log, brushing off the back of his pants. Stiles was about to
ask what was going on when one of the betas, an older woman, emerged from the trees.

“A beta from Satomi’s pack has arrived,” she said. Peter nodded.

“Go back to your watch,” he said. She nodded and hurried off again. Stiles shouldn’t have been
surprised that Peter set his betas out to guard the territory; after all, he’d been caught incredibly
quickly when he’d first come here. He should be more surprised that other packs sent werewolves
here. Everything Stiles knew about werewolves said that they were highly territorial. That said, his
conversation with Peter showed that Stiles had some significant gaps in his knowledge.

Assuming Peter had been telling the truth. The weird thing was, much as Stiles hated Peter, he
suspected that he had been honest here. Something about the story rang true, and it fit with the mass
of graves Derek had shown him.

Stiles followed Peter back towards the house. The strange werewolf was waiting in front of it. He
was a young man of obvious Asian descent, possibly Japanese but Stiles wasn’t entirely sure. He
looked at Peter and took a few steps towards him, but his eyes kept straying, obviously curious, over
to Stiles.

“Alpha,” the young man said, “I am here on behalf of my alpha, Satomi, and ask that you recognise
me as messenger, with all the rights and safety that implies.”

He said the words in a slightly bored tone, as though they were a ritual performed so many times
they could now be uttered on autopilot.

“I recognise your status,” Peter answered in the same tone, “and grant all due rights.”

Stiles wondered if he’d trod on the edge of this ritual when he’d first come here. He’d implied, by
accident, that he was a messenger. It seemed that had important meaning here. This wasn’t the time
to ask though. Peter ignored Stiles utterly and walked over to the young man, gesturing him into the
house with an inviting sweep of one arm. The young man walked in calmly, not at all concerned to
be in another pack’s territory, but he did glance back one last time towards Stiles.
Stiles decided it wasn’t worth returning to the boredom of lessons right now. He waited, lurking outside the kitchen until the rest of the pack started showing up for meals. The kids poured out of their living room classroom. Millie looked up at Stiles.

“What did Peter teach you?” she asked.

“Oh, about the start of the war.” Stiles answered.

“You didn’t know?”

“Humans explain it very differently. When humans write history, the people writing the books tend to miss out the bits where they’re to blame.”

They walked into the kitchen, Stiles slotting in with the other kids to get today’s meal, which turned out to be a salad and a chunk of bread each. Stiles missed burgers. He was going to start dreaming about them soon. He wondered if this was how his dad felt when Stiles force-fed him vegetables.

As Stiles took his plate, the guy from the other pack walked into the kitchen. He was served a portion of salad and bit of bread like everyone else, but then he walked out of the room, away from the dining room.

“What was that about?” Stiles asked, walking into the dining room.

“Messengers from other packs get food,” Isaac said, a step behind him. They sat down at the table to eat. “The ones who’ve come a long way get a shower and bed for the night as well. It’s not exactly a law but it’s basic courtesy all the packs stick to. At least, all the packs Peter exchanges messages with.”

“But why isn’t he eating in here?” Stiles asked.

“Because he’s not pack, dummy,” said Millie from across the table.

The words hit Stiles like a sucker punch. All those occasions came flooding back, all the times that Peter had insisted that Stiles ate with the pack. Someone from another pack ate apart, not sharing in this group act. So what did it mean that Stiles ate with the others? What did it mean that Peter insisted on it to the point where he wouldn’t let Stiles have one meal away from here?

Not for the first time, Stiles wished he knew more about werewolf culture.
Chapter 14

There was an atmosphere of excitement in the big house. The children were buzzing like it was Christmas Eve and they were waiting for Santa. Even the adults had the same infectious energy to them. Miranda, who’d been preparing dinner in the kitchen, sang while she cooked. There was more laughter, more smiles. Except for the three teenaged werewolves. Erica, Boyd, and Isaac seemed nervous. Stiles heard Boyd snapping angrily at one of the little ones in a way that was entirely unlike him.

It didn’t take Stiles long to figure out the cause of all this. Tonight was the full moon.

Every instinct told him he should run and hide. In town, even though there hadn’t been attacks for ages, people stayed in on the full moon, just in case. For humans, this time of the month was a time to be worried, to shut the door and keep the family close. Clearly everything was different out here.

The children weren’t hurried away after dinner like they usually were. They lingered downstairs, talking to each other or rushing about and getting underfoot. Once they’d eaten, Isaac, Erica, and Boyd were taken off somewhere by Derek. Those three were still the only ones who seemed anxious.

“Where are they going?” Stiles asked.

“Below,” Damian commented.

Stiles knew what that meant now. Below meant that other basement, the one with chains and metal bars that could so easily be turned into a dungeon. He hadn’t ever dreamt that the werewolves would put their own down there.

“Why?” Stiles asked.

“They’re recently bitten. They haven’t got complete control yet.”

Stiles looked around, seeing the hoard of children in among all the adults.

“But the kids aren’t down there,” he said.

“We haven’t started to transform yet,” commented Millie. She was standing at the edge of the room reading a book. She didn’t even look up from her reading as she added, “Duh.”

“Millie, that wasn’t polite,” Damian said.

“Sorry,” she muttered. She still didn’t look up.

“There are a lot of things I don’t know about werewolves,” Stiles said. “Remember what we said in class the other day about how it’s OK not to know things if you are trying to learn.”

She did look up then. She met his eyes over the top of her book and said with considerably more sincerity, “I’m sorry.” Then she added, “I can teach you.”

A part of Stiles wanted to laugh at the idea of this little girl, who couldn’t have been much older than eight or nine, offering to be his teacher. But he couldn’t laugh at the honest look on her face as she offered to help him.

“I’d like that,” he said.
When the werewolves went outside to watch the moon rise over the trees, Stiles went with them. He ought to feel afraid, but all his anxiety faded with each moment as he was surrounded by the anticipation of the pack. He stood on the porch and most of the children stayed with him, while the majority of the adults went down into the garden. They stood as a group, waiting.

Stiles couldn’t feel the moon rise, but he saw the change in the pack around him. They didn’t turn into violent monsters. They just all turned to the same point, where the moon was still hidden by the trees, and looked joyous.

Peter, at the heart of them all, threw his head back and howled. Instantly, others joined in. The noise was so huge that Stiles slammed his hands over his ears, feeling the porch shaking under him like in an earthquake. But still he wasn’t scared.

One man ran off into the woods, others chasing after him. Stiles wasn’t sure if they were going off to hunt something or just running, or maybe even playing tag. They ran. Stiles turned to Millie, who stood next to him, staring up at the sky, book put away for now.

“Can you feel it too?” Stiles asked.

She nodded. “I feel awake. Like I could play forever.”

“But you don’t change?”

Peter walked up the porch steps towards them, saying, “As she gets older, the feeling will get stronger. In early puberty, she’ll feel the pull of the moon and she’ll start to lose control.”

“And then you’ll lock her away in a basement?” Stiles asked.

“Then we’ll teach her control, and keep her from hurting herself or others until she’s mastered it.”

Stiles gave him a sceptical look. Peter shook his head, letting disappointment show on his face.

“Whatever you may have been told about us by hunters,” Peter said, “surely you don’t think we would hurt our own children?”

“I guess not.”

Peter nodded and walked away. Stiles leaned on the pillar at the corner of the porch and looked out at the werewolves of the pack. Millie came to stand beside him.

“Peter protects us,” she said. “Sometimes he’s strict, but that’s because he put rules in that are good for all of us. He keeps us safe.”

Stiles decided this was as good a time as any to take Millie up on her offer to teach him about werewolves.

“What does he do as an alpha?” Stiles asked.

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Derek ran beneath the moon. There was no greater feeling in his experience than that of running with the pack. The sensation was a familiar one. It was the buzz of energy under his skin, the rush of power that flowed through his veins. There was another sensation though. The sounds and scents of pack were all around him. Derek dodged between trees, dancing under the moonlight with his pack-brothers and —sisters. There was unity and connectedness. He was part of a whole.
After a time, Derek ran back to the house, the heart of the territory. He felt the sense of place flowing up from the ground beneath him. He was where he belonged. He knew it down to his bones.

As he stepped into the clearing, he looked across at the rest of his pack, many of whom were still scattered around the house and garden. He saw the members of his extended family. And he saw the figure of Stiles, standing in the moonlight on the porch, talking to Millie. He was asking her about the full moon, about how it felt to werewolves.

In the moonlight, Stiles seemed somehow different. Physically, he looked just the same as ever aside from the fact his hair was a little longer than when he’d first come here, but somehow Derek spotted features that usually passed unnoticed. He saw Stiles not as an annoying kid whose existence had somehow become Derek’s responsibility. He instead saw a young man who’d been brave enough to face possible death or torture for the sake of someone he loved. He saw a person who cared about children, even the children of his enemies, enough to fight for their education and try to make their lives better. He saw the human who’d saved his life, even though his freedom had been at stake.

Stiles stood there, smiling at Millie and doing his best to learn about the people he’d come here hating. Derek’s breath caught in his throat. Stiles seemed to shine in the moonlight, that smile becoming a second moon. His scent drifted across the clearing, mingling with all the others the night wind brought. He smelled of pack now. He smelled like he belonged. He smelled like he could be one of theirs. Derek’s.

Derek wanted to run across the garden and press his lips to that smiling mouth. He wanted to run his fingers through the soft hair. He wanted to see if the patterns of moles continued down his entire body. He wanted to hear what Stiles sounded like at the height of passion. Would he still be talking constantly? Or would words give way to moans?

Derek closed his eyes to shut away the sight. This was the moon in his blood stirring his imagination. This wasn’t anything that could be real.

“You should have just fucked the kid when he got here,” Peter said quietly, suddenly at his side. His voice was too quiet for Stiles to possibly have heard, but still Derek’s eyes shot open to make sure Stiles hadn’t. Over at the house, Stiles was oblivious; he hadn’t even noticed that Derek had come back.

“He didn’t want it,” Derek said. Derek remembered Stiles those first days, the way he’d stunk of fear, the way he’d cringed away whenever Derek got close, even when he spoke defiantly. Derek had hated the thought of anyone fearing him like that, even a human.

“You could ask him now. He might think differently.”

Derek shook his head. He remembered the look of absolute hatred Stiles had sent his way after Peter’s test. He wasn’t going to risk Stiles looking at him that way again. He wouldn’t put any pressure on Stiles. In this situation, with the power Derek had over Stiles, he couldn’t be certain if Stiles felt coerced. He would never want anything with Stiles that was tainted like that, even a little.

He was aware of Peter beside him still, watching him watching Stiles. Derek said nothing. If Peter had something to say, he’d say it.

“Maybe it would be easier if he was one of us,” Peter said.

Derek turned sharply to Peter.

“You’d give him the bite?” he asked.
Peter shrugged absently as though he didn’t care one way or the other. “If he wants.”

Derek couldn’t believe that Peter was as casual as he was pretending to be. He could be quite impulsive about accepting new members into a pack, which was why they had the challenges they did around finding space for everyone, but there would be serious consequences to Stiles taking the bite. They would lose the benefit of having a pack member able to cross the boundary line. More than that, they couldn’t be sure how the sheriff would react. He might shy away from conflict with the pack if his son were a part of it, or, if he were anything like the Argents, he might decide his son was lost and declare all-out war.

“When will you ask him?” Derek asked.

“Soon. Not tonight. It’s not a decision that should be made under the full moon.”

***

“Stiles, would you come in here please,” Peter said, surprisingly pleasant. Stiles had just come from lunch and had been waiting for Derek to give him his tasks for the afternoon. Instead, he went with Peter into the small study. Peter gestured to him to sit. Stiles once again felt like he’d been called before the principal for a dressing down, even though he didn’t think he’d done anything wrong. Peter sat down calmly behind the desk while Stiles fiddled with a loose thread on his t-shirt sleeve.

“You said something recently,” Peter said, “about your medication.”

“It’s for my ADHD,” Stiles said.

“Hmm. Interesting.”

“What’s interesting?” Stiles felt annoyed, though he wasn’t entirely sure why. Peter shrugged aside any hostility in Stiles’ tone.

“I wonder what would happen to that if you became a werewolf. The bite is a gift that can cure a great many illnesses and improve a great many physical conditions. Old injuries, diseases, even long term conditions like asthma and diabetes can be eradicated by the change. I don’t know what would happen with a neurological condition though. We’ve never done scientific studies on the bite process, for obvious reasons. It would be interesting to see whether you would still need your medication if you became a werewolf.”

Stiles shifted uncomfortably in the chair. He hadn’t been particularly worried about this meeting with Peter, but all the old anxieties rose up again. The thought of becoming something other than what he was burrowed out of the back of his mind and took residence in the foreground.

“You’d want to give me the bite to indulge your scientific curiosity?” Stiles asked.

He tried to console himself with the fact that the bite wouldn’t necessarily turn him into an evil, vicious monster. But he couldn’t stop thinking that Erica, Boyd and Isaac didn’t seem quite the same now as they had been back in Beacon Hills. Stiles couldn’t know how much of that was due to the difference in lifestyle and the inevitable changes of being in a new situation, and how much as a side effect of the bite. Either way, Stiles didn’t want to become someone else. He didn’t want to be changed.

“The bite is a gift in its own right,” Peter said. “Indulging my curiosity would just be a benefit. What do you say?”

Stiles realised that Peter meant the question seriously. He was asking for Stiles’ opinion. No, he was
asking for Stiles’ permission.

“You’re offering me the bite?” Stiles said.

“If you want it. You’d be stronger, faster, and maybe even cured of pesky conditions that require you to take daily medication.”

“And if I don’t want it?”

“Then you’d better get a top up for your medication,” Peter said.

Stiles let out a breath of relief. Peter caught it.

“You don’t have to decide right now, Stiles,” he said.

“I don’t want the bite,” Stiles said. “I won’t ever want the bite.”

“OK. I won’t ask again so if you change your mind, you’ll have to be the one to bring up the subject. In the meantime, that means you’ll need to go back into town.”

“You’re letting me go back?” It was only a few days since his last, disastrous trip over the boundary. He’d worried that Peter would keep him here for weeks as punishment to his dad.

“We don’t have a pharmacy out here.”

“I’m going to visit my dad,” Stiles said. He didn’t make it a request for permission. He made it a statement of fact, immutable.

“Tell him that anyone can make a mistake once, but making the same mistake twice is harder to forgive.”

There was unmistakable threat in that statement. Peter was telling Stiles that a second attempt to keep Stiles from returning would lead to some horrific punishment. Stiles nodded his understanding. Peter smiled.

“There are a few other items you should get while you’re in town,” Peter said. He took a list out of his desk drawer. Stiles took it, wondering a little. If Stiles had accepted the bite, he wouldn’t have been able to cross the boundary. Peter must have guessed that he’d refuse. If that was the case, then why had he made the offer in the first place?

Stiles decided that rather than just stew with his questions, he would risk asking them for once.

“What would you have done about this if I’d said yes?” Stiles asked, holding up the list.

“I would have given you some time to say goodbye to your father and your friends,” Peter said, “and I would have written you a much longer list.”
Stiles’ jeep was still parked up by the preserve. His dad must have left it there, hoping Stiles would get another chance to come back into town. Stiles had spoken to his dad on the phone and done his best to convince him everything was OK, but he wasn’t sure his dad believed him in the slightest. Stiles got in the jeep and headed first for the house. He needed to pick up his prescription information in any case, but the main reason was the idea of a shower and processed food. They’d been eating better at the big house since Stiles’ first shopping trip, but he missed eating junk.

When Stiles pulled up, he saw his dad’s cruiser in the driveway. What day was it? It must be the weekend. He’d not paid the slightest attention to days of the week for a while.

The instant he opened the front door, Stiles was wrapped in a fierce hug, arms squeezing tightly. Stiles hugged back. Then his dad pulled away, staring at Stiles closely, eyes flicking up and down, inspecting him for signs of damage.

“I’m so, so sorry. I swear, I thought they were bluffing. It’s been so long since they crossed the boundary, I didn’t think they’d come after you. I thought we could just call their bluff and it would be alright. I’m sorry.”

“I’m fine,” Stiles said. “I told you on the phone, they didn’t hurt me. They just wanted to scare you so you don’t try and pull something like that again.”

“We could leave town. We put the lights on the car and we could be miles away before they even know to look for you. They’d never track the scent.”

“Dad, trust me, I’m fine, and I’m not going to put you or anyone else at risk. Now I’m going to take a shower and then I’ve got shopping to do.”

They were still in the doorway of the house but Stiles edged past his dad, who didn’t try to argue or fight. Stiles headed for the stairs.

“Can I get you anything?” his dad asked. “Make you anything?”

Stiles grinned back at him, “Something horribly unhealthy that I’d never let you eat. Everything I eat with the pack is full of fresh vegetables.”

“And I thought you said they hadn’t been torturing you.” It was a weak attempt at a joke, but it was an attempt. That was the first sign Stiles had seen that maybe his dad would be OK after all.

Stiles took his shower and then ate the grilled cheese and bacon that his dad prepared. Stiles didn’t even berate his dad about the fact he’d had bacon in the house. His dad asked him at least three more times if he was really alright. Stiles threatened to throw bacon at him if he asked again.

“I just worry about you,” his dad said.

“I know, but you don’t have to.”

“At the full moon, I kept thinking about what they might do.”

“Full moon felt like a party,” Stiles said. “The kids got to stay up late to watch the moonrise and there was a lot of running around in the woods and howling. There was nothing violent about it.”
Most of them hadn’t even changed, though some had let their eyes shine blue or yellow in the
moonlight. They certainly hadn’t turned into the raving animals that Stiles and his dad had both
feared. Stiles decided not to mention the three teens though, and the way they’d been taken away
while they learned control. His dad might be comforted to know that the werewolves kept the
dangerous ones away, but he was more likely to be scared about the younger werewolves losing
control.

Stiles finished up his meal and announced that he had shopping to get to. Today’s list was a strange
one. He had the prescription to get refilled for his Adderall, but then he had to buy a selection of teas
for Peter. There were names that sounded Chinese, others that sounded Indian, some which he
couldn’t place at all, and many of which Stiles had never heard of before. He recognised ginseng as a
type of tea, but only because Uncle Iroh had drunk it in Avatar. The others were far more obscure.
Apparently there used to be a specialist tea shop over on Victory Street that would be able to help,
and a Chinese herbalist on Twenty-Second Street that might have some. Assuming the shops were
still there. Peter obviously hadn’t been in town in a long time to check.

“I’m coming with you,” Stiles’ dad said. It was the same tone of voice that Stiles had used to
announce his intention to visit his dad. Stiles didn’t argue. They went first to the pharmacy and Stiles
got enough Adderall to last him another two months. Then Stiles drove out in search of the tea.

He found the specialist shop eventually, though he walked past it once and nearly walked past a
second time. It didn’t have any advertising or banner, just an old wooden sign with paint that had
peeled and faded so much that it was almost impossible to make out what it had once said. Stiles tried
the door and stepped into a narrow room. On each side, shelves loomed with metal canisters, labelled
with Ceylon or Darjeeling, or other names that Stiles had never come across before.

An old man looked up at Stiles and his father from behind a counter in the shadows at the back of the
shop.

“How can I help you gentlemen?” he asked.

“I’ve got a list,” Stiles said. He didn’t fancy looking through the hundreds of metal containers to try
and match up all these varieties. He’d never imagined there could be so many different types of tea.

The old man stood with a creaking of joints and came out from behind the counter to take the list,
peering through thick glasses at it. He ran a finger down the list.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he muttered, “I might have some of this in the back, yes, you’ll struggle to find this
one, yes, yes.” He froze, finger resting against a name that to Stiles looked like a convoluted mass of
random syllables: Cractoriino Ijunst. “I’ve not had anyone ask me about this in a long time. Not since
Satomi could come into town.”

It took Stiles a moment to place the name. The werewolf who’d come as messenger had come from
Satomi. Stiles wondered if Peter was trading on Stiles’ ability to cross the boundary. Was Stiles now
buying things for the other packs?

“Do you have any?” Stiles asked. The old man looked at him suspiciously, then at his dad.

“Are you human?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Then no,” the old man said. “I don’t have any of that one. I can get you most of the others though.
How much do you want?”
“The tea’s not for me. It’s for a werewolf.”

The old man’s eyes remained narrowed. He didn’t move to fulfil the order. Stiles wondered if he’d just screwed up. It was entirely possible that this man would refuse to serve him, knowing where the produce was going.

“You’re not going to drink it?” the old man asked.

“I don’t even like tea,” Stiles said. Then added, “Sorry,” because that wasn’t something you said to a guy who ran a specialist tea shop.

“The Ijunst teas are very dangerous for humans,” the man said. “I’ve seen stupid kids who think this is fun to play around with, making a strong brew and losing themselves forever. Are you a stupid kid?”

“Of course not!” Stiles protested.

“That’s debatable,” his dad commented. Stiles turned to glare at him.

The old man looked at Stiles’ dad and seemed to relax a little. Stiles wondered what the fuss was about. This guy was acting like Stiles was trying to buy something dangerous. Tea was tea, wasn’t it? He supposed that it might be some weird, herbal thing. He wondered if he was buying drugs. He’d never dreamed that he might buy dangerous substances with his dad standing beside him.

“I have a little left in stock,” he said, “because I had some on order for Satomi before that boundary went up. I can’t promise it will still be at full potency though.”

“I’ll take what you’ve got,” Stiles said.

The old man shuffled off through a narrow door into a back room.

“What the hell kind of tea are you buying?” Stiles’ dad asked in whisper, leaning in close. Stiles shrugged.

“Hell if I know. All I know is I’m not accepting if Peter ever offers me a cup of tea.”

“Good call.”

The old man returned, carrying a small glass jar half-full of leaves, dried into curls of dark green. The jar had a glass stopper in, sealed in place with a pale, soft substance that was probably wax. The name of the tea was written on a peeling label. The man held it out towards Stiles but didn’t let go of the jar right away.

“Remember what I said,” the old man told him. “This is a dangerous brew for humans.”

“I’ll remember,” Stiles said. Then the old man took Stiles’ list again and went in search of the other teas, taking down the metal canisters from the shelves and weighing out quantities before tipping the teas into paper packages which he closed with stickers. Stiles’ dad helped with reaching down of teas from high shelves, and soon there was a little cluster of packages on the counter, while Stiles still held the glass jar with the dangerously unpronounceable tea.

The old man rang up the total, and Stiles’ dad let out a low whistle when he announced a price of eight hundred and forty seven dollars.

“For tea?” Stiles dad asked. But Stiles just got out the roll of money Peter had given him and handed
it over without complaint. It occurred to him then that he’d used Peter’s money to get his prescription. He wondered if that OK. He decided he’d ask Peter about it later and if Peter was bothered by it, they could work it out with the amount in Stiles’ bank account.

In the end, there were only two teas on Stiles’ list that he didn’t get at that shop. He tried to find the Chinese herbalist that Peter had mentioned, but there was no sign of it. It had probably shut down in the years since Peter had last been in town.

Stiles checked his watch.

“I should probably be heading back. I can drop you off at home.”

“You can’t even stay for dinner? We could get curly fries from the diner?”

“Peter likes me to eat meals with the pack. Insists on it really. I’m not sure why.” He didn’t say what he suspected, about how Peter was trying to make him part of the pack. He was fairly certain his dad would freak out about it. That was the same reason Stiles was never going to mention the fact that Peter had offered him the bite.

Stiles drove them back to the house but his dad didn’t get out right away. He sat there, looking across at Stiles.

“I keep thinking about it,” he said. “I keep trying to come up with a plan to get you out of there and keep you safe. Without causing another attack.”

“You don’t need to. I keep telling you, they haven’t hurt me and I don’t think they’re going to. I’d punch Peter if I thought I could get away with it, but some of them are nice. Even Peter, I don’t think would hurt me. He hates humans in general for killing his family, but I’ve not given him a reason to hate me.”

“They’re still dangerous.”

“Not to me.”

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It was two days after that conversation with his dad when Stiles got his first injury with the pack. He was helping one of the boys with an exercise in verb tenses when Stiles sliced his finger on the edge of the exercise book. The paper cut stung with a sharp pain and Stiles muttered a swear word.

“Stiles!” Kendra snapped loudly from across the room, anger in her tone.

“Sorry,” Stiles muttered, and stuck his finger in his mouth to suck the blood from it.

A few seconds later, the door to the living room burst open and Derek was there. He looked frantic, glaring across at Kendra.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“Stiles used a bad word,” a boy tattled.

“I smell blood.” There was accusation in his tone as he glared across at Kendra. Stiles wondered if Derek had heard Kendra’s angry use of Stiles’ name and come here to protect him from her wrath. It was strangely sweet.

“I got a paper cut,” Stiles said, taking his finger out of his mouth to show the tiny cut, so fine he had
stopped bleeding already. “That was the cause of the aforementioned bad word.”

Derek stared at Stiles’ finger for a few seconds and then turned and walked out of the room without another word. Stiles almost wanted to laugh at this ridiculous overreaction to something so tiny, but he couldn’t resist the sense of comfort it gave him. If Derek would come to his defence over a paper cut, then it was a good sign that he would be safe from more serious hurts. Stiles returned to trying to explain past participles to a bored kid.

Later, while the class were watching a video on the water cycle, projected from Stiles’ laptop, a folded sheet of paper slipped into his hand. He glanced across and saw Millie staring at the screen, trying so hard to look inconspicuous that she was instantly noticeable. Stiles unfolded the paper.

She’d drawn a little comic strip with three panels. The stick figure in the first panel cut his finger on a book. There were dots on his face that Stiles guessed were supposed to be moles, and the stick figure had a buzz of short hair, even though Stiles’ hair was no longer that short. The second panel showed another stick figure, this one with the fangs and ears of a transformed beta, with eyes dotted in with blue pen. He was snarling over the first stick figure. They had speech bubbles. The werewolf asked, *Squishy human, who dared hurt you?* The Stiles stick figure replied, holding up a hand, *It was just a paper cut.*

In the final panel, the Derek figure tore up a book with much snarling, declaring, *You hurt squishy human! You must die!* Meanwhile the Stiles figure was shown with eyes rolling. The real Stiles had difficulty keeping his laughter discrete enough to not disturb the class.

Stiles flashed a grin at Millie. She noticed out of the corner of her eye and grinned back. The picture was crudely drawn but it captured something of the moment, the quirk of Millie’s humour making Stiles want to laugh aloud.

After class, Stiles waited to reclaim his laptop, and he gestured for Millie to stay while the others went off to get lunch.

“Did you like it?” she asked.

“It’s brilliant. Do you have others?”

She nodded, “Kendra doesn’t like me drawing. She says it’s a waste of paper, but I’ve got a few doodles. Sometimes I draw in the edges of books, where they don’t have writing.”

“Can you get me your favourites?”

Millie hurried off and Stiles sat down with the laptop on his knees and typed an address into an internet browser. He hit a button to create an account and typed in a few options. In another tab, he went to another site and created an account there as well. He was just changing a few last settings when Millie returned.

“What are you going to do with my pictures?” Millie asked.

“I’m going to introduce you to the world of blogging,” Stiles said. He took photos of the doodles with his phone, saving them up to the cloud and then bringing them back onto his laptop. He started with the bowling ball drawing she’d doodled in class weeks ago, showing her how he posted it onto the site.

“Now other people using this site can see it,” he said. “If they like it, they can click this button and you’ll get a little message telling you they liked it. And if they want to show it to other people, they’ll click this button here, and it will show up on their blogs. And if you like, you can look at other
people’s blogs and see the things they post and put those on your blog too.”

He typed in a search for ‘cute pictures’ and then reblogged images she cooed over. He let her try navigating herself and she soon found a few blogs to follow. Stiles kept an eye over her shoulder, just in case something showed up that wasn’t really appropriate.

He’d put a Paypal donate button on her blog, just in case, but he didn’t explain that right now in case she got excited. The odds of anyone donating anything worth mentioning were slim to non-existent. He just watched her figure out her way around the site and explained his plan for her to post a couple of her doodles every day until she had a collection. By the time she’d gone through her favourites, she would have had a chance to draw others that could go up.

Then they had to stop because Derek came to summon them to lunch. Millie was excited about her computer exploits to the extent that Stiles worried he’d unleashed some terrible monster. He might end up having to explain social networking to all the kids in the pack.

Or he might have to explain his actions to Peter, he realised soon after, when he was summoned to the study to sit before the alpha. Again. Maybe he should just stop trying to show initiative.

“I hear you’ve made Millie a blog,” Peter said.

“It could be good for the pack,” Stiles said. “I put a donate button on it. If she gets famous, people might send her money.”

“And how likely do you think that is? Really.”

“It’s not outside the realm of possibility.” Stiles met Peter’s sceptical gaze. “I mean, when I came here, I didn’t expect to be setting up social media accounts for werewolf kids. Just because I don’t think something is likely doesn’t mean it might not happen.” He then frowned at his own words, trying to figure out the twist of negatives in that sentence to see if it came out the way he’d intended.

“It matters to you that Millie is encouraged in her drawing, doesn’t it?” Peter said.

“Her pictures are cute,” Stiles said. “They’ve got a nice twist of humour to them. If she practices, she could get really good. Artistic expression is as important as anything else in education.”

“It’s strange that you care so much about the education of the pack’s children.”

“Everyone deserves a good education.”

“And you don’t think the education they’ve been having is good.”

“It’s better than it was,” Stiles said.

“Damned by faint praise.” Peter seemed amused. “What other changes would you make?”

“The laptop helps, but there’s only one between them. It would be better if there were more. And they should get more hands on. All they’re doing right is reading text books and now watching videos. The exercise sites are better, but they could have so much more. There are chemistry kits you can get for kids which let them do experiments, or electronic kits, and stuff like that. Things that would let them actually do stuff. And Kendra and Damian still insist on sticking to traditional syllabus stuff, but you’ve got an opportunity here to create an educational system from scratch. You could decide what to teach and what’s important without worrying about what some old, white guy in a government building thinks they should learn. It’s not like you have to teach to standardised tests. You can teach them fun things, show them that the world is a big, fascinating place they could
“You would completely scrap the way that Kendra has been running things and create a new teaching strategy for them?” Peter asked. It was hard to tell from his voice what he thought about the idea.

Stiles just stuck to his ideas and said, “Yes, I would.”

“OK,” Peter said.

“What?”

“Do it. I will tell Kendra that you are now in charge of the children’s education. She will assist but you will drive the focus of their schooling.”

“What?” Stiles said again. “In charge? I can’t be in charge.”

“You seem to be the one with all the ideas on how to make things better for them.”

“But I’m not a teacher. I’m still in school myself. At least, I should be. I guess I’m not right now because of being here. How can I teach a pack full of kids when I haven’t even graduated high school?”

Peter appeared to consider this. Stiles sat squirming under the weight of unexpected responsibility. He didn’t want to be in charge of the kids’ education. What if they didn’t listen to him? What if he couldn’t teach them? What if they ended up ignorant and Peter blamed him for it? What if he let them down?

“When does your next semester start?” Peter asked.

“I... I have no idea. Soon.” The next school year had seemed like a distant event back at the start of the summer. Then Stiles had crossed the boundary and it hadn’t been worth thinking about things like school because they were impossible. He’d been too busy thinking about his dad and Scott to consider the other aspects of his life that he was cut off from.

“You need to find out,” Peter said. Stiles almost asked why, but there was only one answer, only one reason why Peter would be asking about this.

“You’re going to let me go to school?” Stiles asked.

“You seem to think it’s necessary.”

“I...” Stiles thought about it, about the normality of it. He could go to school and hang out with Scott and play lacrosse and everything else that he’d left behind. He could have this chunk of his old life back. He could graduate high school and then maybe, if he ever got away from here, he could still have a future waiting for him.

“Thank you,” Stiles said.

Peter shrugged aside the thanks, “You can go to school in the day, but I’ll still expect you to come back here afterward. You still belong to us.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

At least one person guessed some of the events in this chapter.

And on an unrelated note, I've just revealed the cover art for my upcoming book over on Tumblr in case anyone's interested.

Stiles had told his dad the good news, but he’d asked his dad to keep it from Scott. He wanted it to be a surprise. When the day came, all his gratitude vanished. Derek kicked Stiles out of bed at a hideously early hour and then made breakfast while Stiles took a shower and dressed in clean clothes. He’d been allowed to queue jump his place in the shower schedule so as to make a good impression on his first day of the school year, but he would be expected to make use of the school showers whenever possible so as to avoid the strain on the pack’s water supply.

Stiles ate a breakfast of porridge and fruit and then set off through the woods to get his jeep, a backpack of school supplies on his shoulder. He arrived at school early, but there were plenty of others who’d done the same. He walked into that bustling rush of the first day, hearing on all sides conversations about vacations and holiday adventures. No one seemed to pay Stiles any more attention than usual. Stiles waited for someone to ask him how he’d spent his summer.

“Stiles!” Scott’s voice cut across the chaos at a yell and Stiles was nearly bowled over as he turned. Scott pinned him in a fierce hug.

“You’re here,” Scott said. “How are you here?”

Stiles laughed a little. The delight on Scott’s face was exactly what he’d been anticipating and he grinned to see it. It was nice that his best friend cared so much about him being in school.

“Peter wants me to get my education so I can teach the pack kids,” Stiles explained. Scott looked surprised. In their occasional emails, Stiles hadn’t mentioned Peter’s plans to put Stiles in charge of the kids’ education. The idea still seemed too ludicrous for Stiles to put it into words.

Stiles sorted his stuff out in his locker and then went off to put an idea into practice before class started. He went to find Coach.

“Bilinski, what the hell are you doing here?” Coach demanded as soon as Stiles stepped into the office. “You can’t be causing trouble already; we haven’t even started the first class.”

“I wanted to ask your permission to film your classes,” Stiles said.

“Why the hell would you want to film my classes? Most people have enough of classes while they’re in them.”

“I’m working with a group of kids who are being home-schooled,” Stiles said. “and the people teaching them aren’t particularly good. They mean well, but they don’t exactly have the range of knowledge and the textbooks are boring as hell. I thought I could record some lessons and the kids could have those to supplement their education.”
“You’re tutoring home-school kids?” Coach asked. “What the hell are their parents thinking?”

Stiles decided not to say that these were werewolf kids and that the pack didn’t have much choice in who got involved in their education.

“So can I do it?” Stiles asked.

“You can show my classes to your kids, but if I find auto-tuned videos of me on YouTube again, I’ll make you eat your video camera.”

“You got it, Coach.”

“And you need to promise me you’re not going to use these videos as evidence for the school board that I’m an unfit teacher. I’m not going through that hell again; it was worse than losing my testicle.”

“Maybe that would be less likely to happen if you stopped bringing up the subject of your testicle in class.”

“Just get out of here, Bilinski, and if you misuse the videos, I’ll shove your camera down your throat until you’re crapping MP4s.”

Stiles made his escape while he still had Coach’s permission and went to talk to some of the other teachers. Miss Finch, the biology teacher, was OK with the idea the second Stiles mentioned the quality of the home-schooling texts the kids were using. She muttered something about religious propaganda and agreed to Stiles making videos. Stiles decided not to mention that religious views on evolution had nothing to do with why the kids weren’t in a school. He just took the permission and went to the next teacher.

His English teacher refused point blank. Mr Holtz thought that Stiles wanted to make videos so he could fall asleep in class and not have to worry about taking notes. He refused to believe the existence of the kids Stiles was helping to educate. Apparently he couldn’t believe any parent would hire Stiles as a tutor. Mr Ellison was worried about data privacy and whether they’d need to get disclaimers from the parents of the kids in the class. Mrs Eisenhower told Stiles he should stick to the teaching materials the kids were supposed to be studying. Stiles didn’t even bother to ask Mr Harris.

In the end, only Coach and Miss Finch had agreed, but it was still better than nothing.

By then, it was time to get to class and the new school year began.

***

Stiles went back to the pack that afternoon, arms laden with books from the school library. The kids pounced on him like he’d brought home treasure. Stiles went into the living room and got started on homework, mentally cursing Mr Harris for giving out homework on the first day back. When he was done, there wasn’t enough time to start doing any real work before dinner. Waiting his turn for food, Stiles heard grumbling that Stiles shouldn’t get his full share because he wasn’t contributing to the pack anymore.

“He brought us books,” Millie said, glaring at the man who’d complained.

The man muttered something about how Stiles should bring back useful things, instead of getting the kids to waste time with fairy stories and useless facts.

“Stiles is helping ensure our children are educated,” Peter said, voice quiet but clear. “Just because you are happy to wallow in ignorance, it doesn’t mean we all should.” His tone left no room for
argument. Stiles heard no more complaints and the waiting werewolves took their food in their proper turns, talking about the new building or the gardens or the way that the field might be ready for ploughing soon. They could have a proper crop in there next year.

Stiles ate his dinner in his turn and cleaned up his plate. He took a turn washing the kitchen surfaces to quell any further arguments about how he wasn’t contributing.

Derek came into the kitchen while he worked and picked up another cloth, wiping down the stove. They worked in silence for a while, scrubbing away side by side. The last of the diners came through the kitchen and washed up, and the hubbub of conversation died away as the pack drifted away to their own corners for the evening’s rest.

“It was a good thought about the books,” Derek said.

“They get more stuff to read and it doesn’t cost anyone anything,” Stiles said. “It made sense. They’re from the high school library though, so there’s not much there for the little kids.”

“Still, it was a good idea.”

“Thanks.”

They seemed to have exhausted all possible conversation. Stiles wiped down the sink in silence. Then Stiles headed up to bed, exhausted from his early start and ready to get up just as early the next day.

***

It was the third day of school when Stiles found himself cornered by Jackson in the hallway. Stiles had been on his way to lunch when Jackson slammed a hand into the door of a locker, blocking Stiles’ path. Up until this point, Stiles had thought Jackson hadn’t been aware of his existence.

“I heard you were werewolf chow,” Jackson said.

“Turns out I’m too chewy,” Stiles said. “Not worth the effort of eating.”

Jackson didn’t look impressed.

“Did they bite you?” he asked.

“No. Obviously. I wouldn’t be here if they’d bitten me.”

Stiles wondered if he should punch Jackson. It had been Jackson’s stupid prank that had caused this mess in the first place. But Jackson would probably just punch back harder and then Stiles would be in trouble for starting the fight. He could imagine doing it though. In his imagination, it was very satisfying.

“What do they use you for?” Jackson asked. There was a suggestive note to his tone.


“Just wondering what the hell they’re playing at, letting you wander in and out of their territory at will.”

Stiles wasn’t going to admit that it was hardly at will. He could leave the territory only when Peter agreed to it, and only when it benefited the pack.
“Maybe I’m too bad ass for them to keep my locked up for long,” Stiles said.

Jackson let out a derisive noise.

“Or you’re too pathetic to stand up to them so they know you’ll come crawling back when they call.” Jackson loomed in close, crowding in front of Stiles in a way that was probably meant to be intimidating. A couple of months ago, he probably would have been intimidated, but Jackson had nothing on Peter when it came to being threatening. If Stiles could stand up in front of Peter, he wasn’t going to cower in front of Jackson.

“You don’t know anything,” Stiles said. “All you do is cause trouble for other people. You don’t know anything about what the past few weeks have been like, even though you caused them. You crossed the boundary on some stupid, drunken prank and my dad had to rescue you and got captured. If you’d just stayed on the right side of the line, none of this would have happened.”

Stiles jabbed Jackson in the chest and Jackson took a surprised step back. He came back snarling.

“I didn’t ask him to come.”

“He saved your life, you ungrateful bastard!” Stiles snapped. Except, that wasn’t exactly true. The werewolves weren’t really killers, no matter what the media and propaganda said. Those people that were presumed to be killed by werewolves were all out there in the woods, living as pack. Erica and Boyd and Isaac, they’d gone into the woods and not come out, but it didn’t mean they were dead. And they hadn’t been taken. They’d gone willingly to Peter.

“You wanted the bite,” Stiles said.

“And I could have had it, if it weren’t for your dad.”

“Life with the pack isn’t all that great.”

“F*ck the pack,” Jackson said. “I just want the bite. I could have had it and been back over the boundary before the change. No one would know.”

“You’d want to be a werewolf but all on your own among humans?”

“Tell them. I can give them whatever they want. Whatever they need. I’ll give it to them in exchange for the bite. Tell them.” Jackson put a hand on Stiles’ chest, shoving him back into the lockers. “Tell them!”

***

Stiles went straight to Peter’s study on his arrival back at the big house. He tapped quietly on the door and went in at Peter’s quiet invitation.

“Yes?” Peter asked, calm and pleasant, not at all annoyed about the interruption.

“I’ve got a message for you.”

“Really?” Peter sounded almost amused. “From whom?”

“The guy my dad came to rescue the day he came into your territory.” Stiles quickly summarised Jackson’s message, his request for the bite. Peter sat back in his chair, fingers linked in front of him, listening carefully.

“What do you think of this boy?” Peter asked once Stiles was done.
“He’s a dick.”

“So not pack material, you think?”

“He doesn’t want the pack. He just wants the bite. Probably wants to be stronger and with better reflexes to help out with his lacrosse performance. He wants to get the bite and then hurry back over the boundary before he changes enough that the alarms would be triggered.”

“So I should give him the bite and then let him leave with it?”

“He says he can pay you,” Stiles said. “His family’s got money. He could probably sell that ridiculous Porsche of his for a few thousand. If you wanted to, you could top up for funds.”

Peter was quiet for a moment, looking intently at Stiles. It was hard to tell what he was thinking; his face didn’t give much of anything away unless he let it. Stiles waited. He wondered if he could leave. He’d given his message, now it was up to Peter to think about it.

“Tell me, Stiles,” Peter said before Stiles could move, “do you think this boy would cause trouble?”

Stiles gave a snort. Peter’s mouth twitched in a faint smile.

“I take it that’s a yes,” Peter said.

“He’s a jerk,” Stiles answered. “He’s an entitled prick who thinks the world revolves around him and gets pissed when it doesn’t. I think Jackson as a werewolf would be a disaster. He’d think he could get away with anything and probably end up hurting someone. But he asked me to ask you so I’m asking. I’m just the messenger.”

“Yes, you are. Well, give him my message and feel free to use these exact words: if he came wanting to be part of the pack, eager to contribute to our whole, I would have welcomed a brother but I won’t give this gift to one who only wants it for himself.”

“I’ll tell him.”

Peter looked like he might say something else. All this talk about bites and becoming pack made Stiles think about the offer Peter had made to him. He wondered if Peter was thinking about it as well, if he would make the offer a second time. But Peter didn’t. Maybe he was waiting in case Stiles brought the subject up, but Stiles had no intention of doing that. Maybe it was foolish, but he still clung to that little thread of hope that if he was human, he might be able to go home someday.
Jackson didn’t take rejection well. Stiles told him before school the next day, standing out on the steps in front of the main doors, that Peter had turned down his request for the bite. He tried to remember the exact words Peter had used about not wanting someone who only wanted the bite for himself. Jackson had been furious.

“What did you tell him?” Jackson demanded.

“Exactly what you told me. I said you offered to pay him for the bite but he didn’t go for it.”

“You told him not to bite me.”

Stiles wasn’t sure whether to point out that an alpha werewolf was unlikely to listen to a human pet, or to play up to the idea that he had influence with the pack. He quite liked the idea of people thinking he could give advice to the Hales.

“I passed on your message and got your answer,” Stiles said. “We’re done.”

Jackson grabbed Stiles’ arm as he turned to leave, fingers gripping tightly into the skin and muscle, digging painfully in. It was weird. Stiles had been dragged around by werewolves so often in recent weeks, but though they also took a firm hold, it was never as painful as this fierce hold of Jackson’s. Stiles tried not to let the pain show though.

“Ask again,” Jackson said. “Tell him.”

“I’m not going to tell an alpha what to do,” Stiles said. Jackson didn’t need to know that Stiles was perfectly willing to argue with Peter on other subjects; it was better if Jackson didn’t know Stiles agreed with Peter on this one.

“What does he want?” Jackson asked. “I can get him what he wants.”

Stiles thought of the graveyard, of one stone marker amid so many that Derek had said was Peter’s daughter, so close to the one that had been Peter’s sister, and all those others. If Jackson became a werewolf and caused trouble, it would draw Argent’s attention and the blame would fall on Peter. The Argents would attack again, as they had done before.

“He’s not going to change his mind,” Stiles said. He twisted his arm in Jackson’s grip, trying to get him to let go. Jackson held on for a minute more, glowering at Stiles.

“I know you don’t him not to bite me,” Jackson said. “I know this is your fault.”

“Because naturally it couldn’t have anything to do with your winning personality,” Stiles said. He looked pointedly towards the hand that was currently bruising Stiles’ arm. Jackson glared, but he let go. Stiles walked away. He had an economics class to get to and a camera to set up for it.

***

By Friday, everyone in school knew that Stiles was living with the werewolves as their prisoner. He endured stares every minute of every day and heard the whispers that called him a werewolf’s bitch. He was just glad none of them had heard Peter referring to him as Derek’s pet, or he would never hear anything else. No one really said anything particularly bad, at least not loudly enough for Stiles to hear it, but he still felt like he was walking through a sea of judgement.
When he went to biology, Miss Finch looked at the video camera Stiles was setting up as they’d agreed. The rumours must have reached her too because she asked, “Is the video for the werewolves?”

There was no point lying, so Stiles answered, “They have a bunch of kids in the pack. They may be werewolves but they’re still just kids and they’re not allowed to go to school because they’ll get shot if they cross the boundary.”

He was genuinely worried that she was going to tell him to put the camera away. She might not want werewolves seeing her classes. But she didn’t say anything more. She just went to the front of the classroom to begin teaching and Stiles took that as permission to record. He was going to get everything he could before anybody actually forbade him to do this. He sat there, the camera in front of him with the little red recording light, aware of most of the class turning around from time to time to look at the camera.

“What the hell’s that for?” asked Marty after class, while Stiles packed the camera away. He was one of the jerks who was constantly in orbit around Jackson, trying to achieve the same pinnacle of doucheness.

“I have permission to film this class,” Stiles said.

“But why? You jacking of to it at home? Miss Finch isn’t even that hot.”

“No. I don’t find discussions of single celled organisms particularly erotic.”

Stiles slung his bag over his shoulder and started for the door, hoping that would be an end to the conversation. Marty was persistent though. He trailed Stiles from the classroom.

“What do they want it for?” Marty demanded. “Are you spying for them? Helping them scope out new targets to bite?”

“I’d hardly be filming a high school biology class if that was the goal,” Stiles said.

“Then what the hell is it for?”

It was clear Marty wasn’t going to let this go and he’d probably dream up all kinds of crazy notions if this was left to his defective imagination. Telling him the truth was probably the easiest way to get him to shut up.

“Because there are kids out there in the woods,” Stiles said. “Kids who haven’t stepped foot in a classroom in six years because they were born werewolves. They can’t come to school so I’m taking school to them.”

“What the hell would you want to educate the animals?”

Stiles didn’t intend to hit him. He just thought of Millie with her drawings and offering to help him understand werewolves. He thought of the boys, Alfie and Ted, who’d been so excited to finally understand how rainbows happened thanks to a YouTube video. He thought of Erica and Boyd, sitting together, Boyd’s arm around Erica, while they quietly worked. He thought of Marty calling
those people animals and the next thing he knew, Stiles’ fist slammed into the side of Marty’s face.

“Ow! Damn it!” It was Stiles who yelled, pain bursting in his knuckles and up through his hand. Who knew a guy’s chin could be so hard?

Marty looked more surprised than agonised, raising a hand to the point Stiles had hit, as though trying to figure out what had just happened.

“Stilinski!” Harris’ voice cut through the hubbub of the school corridors and Stiles became acutely aware of everyone staring at him. The fact that Stiles was rubbing his sore hand would probably be taken as proof, even if Harris hadn’t seen the whole thing.

In the end, a week’s worth of detention wasn’t too bad considering what could have happened. Stiles wondered how Peter would take it if he got himself suspended. At the end of the day, Stiles was left sitting in Harris’ classroom, working through his homework, wondering what the werewolves would think if he was late home.

That thought almost slipped through his mind unnoticed. When he realised he’d thought it, he froze, the words on the page in front of him becoming unreadable. It felt like he was betraying his dad. It felt like he was betraying his own anger. But the thought was there and he couldn’t deny that he’d thought it, if only for a moment. He’d thought of the big house in the woods as home.

What did this mean for him? He hadn’t given up on the hope of someday going home to his real home, to his dad, but was it a bad thing that the big house was starting to feel like a home? He had a place there, he knew. And the people, Peter aside, were good people, whatever they may have been born or become. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d spent a sleepless night lying in terror of what the morning might bring. Maybe he should just accept that the big house was home and be happy with it. At least for now.

***

The detention seemed to last forever, but eventually Harris let Stiles pack up his stuff and leave. He hurried out of the school. He needed to get to his jeep and back to the pack before it got too late, before they decided he’d broken the agreement again. Most of the cars were gone from the parking lot by now, but the jeep was still there. And there, leaning the hood of the jeep, was Marty, surrounded by a cluster of the douchebag patrol. There was no Jackson, but there were plenty of others lurking there for him.

There was nothing pleasant about the way they looked at him. Stiles would have gladly walked in the opposite direction, but he needed his jeep to get back to the pack. He really, really hoped this was just posturing because of the punch earlier. He resigned himself to the fact that Marty probably wanted to punch him back to even things out now that Mr Harris wasn’t watching them, but maybe there was a chance he could get out of here with just a single punch.

“Can I help you with anything?” Stiles asked.

He wished he had his phone, but that was back with the pack. He wished he had some kind of weapon. He wished he had a second car parked around the other side of the school so he could just get out of here.

“You can help me understand why a human would roll over and let the wolves treat you like their bitch,” Marty said.

“Because they’re not monsters,” Stiles said. “They’re people. Some kind, some cruel, some sweet,
some selfish. They’re no different from humans when you get down to it.”

“Apart from the fact they’re murderous killing machines.”

“Well it’s not like humans have a great track record in that area, what with homicides, school shootings, lynch mobs, wars,” Stiles waved a hand, indicating that he could go on forever. It didn’t seem like Marty, or any of the others, were actually listening to his reasoned argument.

“They’re killers,” one guy said.

Another continued, “And if you’re helping them, then you’re just as bad.”

Stiles was aware of how vulnerable his position was. The douchebags had surrounded him now. Marty was still between him and the door to the jeep. He could probably make a break for it and get out of the circle of guys, but then what? He couldn’t just run from them forever.

When the first punch came, he managed to avoid it with a clumsy block, but then they were on him. It wasn’t a fight. It was a hailstorm of pain raining down on his skin. For the first few moments, he tried to block or dodged or land a few punches of his own, but there were too many of them. Punches landed on every part of him from every direction.

He fell under the torrent of blows, arms scraping against the ground as he went down. He tried to pull himself into a ball, burying his face in his arms, even as the kicks started. They kicked every part of him that was exposed: his legs his arms, the parts of his back not shielded by his backpack. He tasted blood from an earlier blow that must have split his lip.

He fought down sobs of pain as each kick landed on top of the forming bruises the earlier ones had planted.

“Hey!” Scott’s voice rang loud across the parking lot. “You’d better get out of here! I’ve already called the cops!”

The flurry of kicks stopped. Stiles lay there, curled in a ball on the ground by his jeep, because even the thought of moving hurt. Every part of him throbbed and ached and stung.

Then Scott was at his side, already wheezing from the run across the parking lot.

“Don’t try to move,” Scott said, between gasps and wheezing. “I’m gonna... call your dad... get an ambulance.”

He pulled out his phone with one hand his inhaler with the other. He took a long draw from the inhaler and held his breath, tucking it away again while he unlocked his phone.

“I thought you said you’d called the cops,” Stiles said. Scott let out his breath.

“I lied. Figured it would get them out of here quicker if they thought I’d called already.”

Scott had his phone out. Stiles untucked himself a little, sharp pain shooting through his side as he straightened, but it was nothing he couldn’t handle. Bruises and scrapes. He didn’t think there was anything worse.

“Don’t,” Stiles said to Scott.

“You need a doctor.”

“I’ll be fine. Just bruised. I need to get back to the pack.”
Scott still had his phone in his hand, but he hadn’t dialled.

“They’re werewolves. They’re not going to know how to deal with human injuries.”

“But if you take me to hospital, they’re going to insist on waiting for my dad, and doing paperwork, and there’ll be a wait before anyone can even see me. It takes too long. I have to get back to the pack before they start freaking out that I’ve been gone too long.”

He put a hand down on the ground and tried to use it to push himself up. Sharp stabs of pain raced up his arm and he hissed.

“You can’t drive back to the woods like this,” Scott said. The drive wasn’t what worried Stiles. The walk at the other end would be a nightmare. His left leg throbbed and ached, feeling like someone had replaced his bones with hot pokers. Maybe he could just walk from his jeep to the edge of the territory and then wait there until someone came to look for him.

“I’ll be fine,” Stiles said. “Help me up.”

“You’re not driving,” Scott said.

“Fine. You drive me back to the woods.”

“Stiles, you need to doctor. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

Stiles shook his head. That was starting to pound now as well. Maybe his head had been feeling left out because every other part of him was hurting. He couldn’t take the time needed for a hospital trip; he was already late. But he could go to the pack and let them see that he was hurt, and then Peter would almost certainly let him come back to the town for treatment. He just needed to make sure the werewolves knew what was going on first.

Scott crouched beside Stiles and put an arm around him, lifting him up. Stiles leaned heavily against Scott. The burning in his leg was worse now that he tried to put weight on it. His arm was no better as he clung to Scott and walked in an awkward hop round to the passenger seat of the jeep. He felt exhausted and agonised from that journey of just a few feet. He slumped down in the seat as Scott took the keys and got in the driver’s side.

Stiles just sat there, breathing through the pain, trying not to move. He closed his eyes for a minute, hoping that stillness would help his agony to recede.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the road they were heading down.

“We’re going the wrong way,” he said. A hint of panic edged in around the fear.

“I swear I’m going to get you back in time,” Scott said. “And if I have to, I’ll run to the pack myself and tell them what’s going on. You’re not going to get in trouble. But you need someone to take a look at you.”

“Not the hospital.”

“No,” Scott agreed. “Not the hospital.”
“I don’t usually take human patients,” Deaton commented, as Scott helped Stiles to sit on the table in the back of the vet’s clinic. Stiles had his arm around Scott’s shoulders, leaning almost all of his weight on his friend. His left leg stabbed with pain with every step and most of the rest of him was throbbing in protest to the movement. Scott had parked as close to the back door of the clinic as was physically possible, but it still felt like the walk had been far too long.

“If it’s any help,” Stiles said, “I’m technically a werewolf’s pet.”

“I would have thought a regular doctor would be more appropriate,” Deaton said. He looked to Scott, “Or your mother.”

“My mom’s working right now and Stiles is worried that a hospital trip would take too long. Can’t you just take a look?”

Deaton considered for a moment, looking between the two of them.

“Alright,” he said, “but only because you don’t look too badly hurt. I don’t want you getting in the habit of this.”

Stiles let out a breath of relief.

“How long will this take?” Stiles asked.

“It depends what I find wrong with you.”

Deaton went to a sink in the corner of the room and started washing his hands thoroughly. Stiles turned back to Scott, who was hovering near the table.

“Can you go to the pack and tell them what happened?” Stiles asked.

Scott stood there, looking rather nervous, “You actually want me to go to the werewolves?”

“You said you would.”

“Yeah but this won’t take long.”

“Please,” Stiles said. He didn’t want to think about what was happening back at the big house right now. Stiles should have been back ages ago and if he stayed here too long they might cross the boundary again. They might go after his dad. Or they might get hurt by the hunters. Stiles thought of Derek, so close to getting his head blown off last time. Even if they didn’t attack him and his dad, they might end up hurt and Stiles didn’t want that either.

“Will they eat me?” Scott asked.

Stiles gave him his best don’t-be-so-stupid look, “What?”

“It’s a valid question! You’re so worried about what they might do, surely I have a right to be concerned about what they might do to me?”

“They’re not going to eat you! They don’t eat people. Beside, you’ll be there as a messenger.”

“And that will make it OK?” Scott still seemed worried.
Stiles tried to remember the conversation he’d overheard when the messenger had arrived from Satomi’s pack. The words had been so clearly a ritual, and that had to mean something.

“Tell them you’re a messenger,” Stiles said, “and ask that they recognise it and grant you all the normal rights.”

Scott didn’t look convinced, “And what the hell does that mean?”

Deaton returned to the table. He’d been letting them talk while he made his preparations, but clearly listening to every word.

“Most cultures recognise messengers,” he said, “and grant them free passage and avoid hurting them. It’s where the phrase ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ comes from. If you official declare yourself to be a messenger, the werewolves won’t harm you.”

Scott seemed slightly more relaxed now that Deaton was agreeing with Stiles, but he still didn’t look convinced. He agreed though. He’d go take Stiles’ message to Peter and the rest of the pack.

“Will you be OK if I take your jeep?” Scott asked.

“I can give him a lift when we’re done here,” Deaton offered. So it was agreed. Scott headed off with keys to Stiles’ jeep while Stiles stayed sitting on the table in the back of Deaton’s clinic. Deaton turned his attention fully to Stiles.

“Where hurts?” he asked.

“Everywhere, but mostly my leg,” Stiles answered.

Deaton pushed up Stiles’ pants leg and started poking at the tender flesh. Stiles hissed in pain. The skin was already bruising, his skin purpling. Stiles wasn’t sure if it was swollen or just his imagination.

“Must be strange for you to have patients who can tell you what’s wrong,” Stiles said.

“It’s not happened for a while, I must admit,” Deaton said.

“Do you get a lot of particularly helpful parrots?”

“The parrots usually swear at me. Surprisingly common for parrots to have a filthy vocabulary.”

He pressed down on a particularly sore spot and Stiles did a very loud impersonation of a parrot.

“I don’t think it’s broken,” Deaton said, “but it’s possible you have a simple fracture. If the swelling doesn’t go down you should probably get someone to give you an x-ray.”

“Don’t you have an x-ray machine?”

“Not one I can legally use on humans.”

Stiles wasn’t sure what the difference was between a hospital’s x-ray machine and a vet’s, but he decided he didn’t want to take chances when it came to being blasted with high levels of radiation, so he didn’t argue. He could wait and see about the leg.

Deaton moved on, inspecting Stiles’ arm and cleaning up the grazes from where he’d scraped on the ground earlier. Whatever he used to disinfect them stung like a bitch, but Stiles avoided swearing this time.
“How are the werewolves treating you?” Deaton asked.

“Surprisingly well. Better than the humans right now, present company excepted.” Deaton swiped at another cut with the stinging solution and Stiles hissed in pain. “Maybe excepted.”

Deaton treated the split in Stiles’ lip with the same stinging disinfectant. It was even more painful than on the arms. Stiles couldn’t swear this time because Deaton was dabbing at his mouth.

“Nearly done,” Deaton reassured him.

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Derek waited by the boundaries of the pack. He felt a rising sense of apprehension. It had been rising for some time now, since the time when Stiles usually came in from school. At first, he told himself it meant nothing. Stiles might have been delayed. He might have received detention. He might have had some afterschool commitment. He might simply have taken a little time to visit his dad. It didn’t mean anything that he wasn’t back immediately on time.

He paced out along the edge of the territory. He hated waiting. He hated not knowing. He hated the marks on the trees here that kept him from running out towards the town to find out what was going on.

He couldn’t believe Stiles would be stupid enough to disobey Peter again so soon on the wake of all that had happened last time. He hoped the sheriff hadn’t made another foolish attempt to keep Stiles away. He hoped something terrible hadn’t happened to Stiles.

The time for dinner was coming close. Derek finally heard the sound of an approaching engine, with the familiar rattle of Stiles’ jeep. Derek let out a breath of relief.

“You’re cutting it fine,” Derek called. But it wasn’t Stiles’ scent that the wind carried between the trees. There was another scent, this one filled with a stink of fear. A boy of Stiles’ age came through the trees, slowly. He looked at Derek with obvious apprehension.

“Um,” he called out. “I’m here as a messenger and ask that you, um, give me the rights of a messenger and, you know, don’t kill me.”

It was hardly the fluent initiation of a traditional right, but the meaning was there. That was enough. The boy stood a little way from the boundary line, by the first warning signs. Derek waited on his side.

“Who sent you as messenger?” Derek asked.

“Stiles. He’s coming back. He didn’t want you to think he wasn’t.”

“Where is he?”

“He was hurt. He’ll be back. He just needs to get his injuries checked out first.”

“What happened to him?” Derek asked. His imagination furnished him with a hundred images of Stiles bleeding and injured. He remembered the terror he’d felt when he’d caught the scent of Stiles’ blood and feared something terrible had happened. He felt that all again right now. And he couldn’t go and help.

“Some guys from school beat him up.”
Derek realised his hands were closed into fists at his side. He forced them to relax. He hadn’t shifted though, which was good. He didn’t think this kid would react well to seeing Derek suddenly sprout claws and fangs.

“You should talk to Peter,” Derek said.

“I’m OK staying on this side of the boundary. I’ve delivered the message so you can just relax and Stiles will be along soon.”

“You’ve not really delivered it until you’ve delivered it to the alpha. You can come into the territory. You’re protected.”

The kid didn’t look like he believed it. He was worse than Stiles had been. At least Stiles hadn’t been scared to walk across an invisible line.

“Would Stiles have sent you here if we were going to hurt you?” Derek asked. That did the trick. The kid walked forward. He looked anxious the whole time, like he expected Derek to leap on him the second he was inside the boundary. Derek waited, keeping his distance, and then started leading the way to the house.

When they arrived, the others in the pack were heading towards dinner. The kids were clustered around the dining room and Millie looked up, frowning at the kid Stiles had sent as messenger.

“Who’s he?” she asked. “Where’s Stiles?”

“Stiles will be back soon,” Derek said. He gestured for the human kid to go down the hallway to the door of Peter’s study. He walked a step behind him, but Millie wasn’t letting go so easily. Maybe she read something of Derek’s worry in his scent or his face.

“Is Stiles OK?” she asked. And Derek couldn’t take it, because he couldn’t lie to her and he didn’t know enough to give a decent answer. He rounded on her with a snarl and a flash of teeth.

“Go eat your dinner!” he growled. She startled back a step and then slipped into dining room. Beside him, the human kid’s heart was racing so hard Derek was surprised it hadn’t burst. So much for Derek trying not to scare him.

“It’s this way,” Derek said to him and went to Peter’s study, tapping on the door. He went in without waiting for an answer. Peter was putting away papers in a filing cabinet. He looked at Derek, then at the human, then back at Derek. He raised an eyebrow.

“Stiles sent him as messenger,” Derek said.

The human kid swallowed and said quickly, “Stiles is coming back. He got hurt and he’s getting checked out and he’ll come back here as soon as he’s done, but he didn’t want you to think anyone was breaking the arrangement so he asked me to talk to you.”

He looked ready to bolt as soon as he finished talking, but Derek had positioned himself in the doorway. The kid’s heart was racing like crazy, but Derek didn’t think it was from lying.

Peter went back to his desk and sat down. He gestured to the chair in front of him. The kid went nervously towards it.

“I take it you’re Scott,” Peter said.

“That’s right.” The kid sat.
“Can we get you something to eat or drink, Scott?”

“No. I’m alright. I don’t plan on being here long.”

“So, tell us what happened to Stiles.”

“I don’t know all the details,” Scott said. “Stiles got in trouble for punching a guy. He got detention. I hung around after school so I could hang out with him because I’ve hardly seen him, for obvious reasons. But when I went to find him, the guy he’d hit earlier and a bunch of other guys were all attacking him. Punching, kicking, that sort of thing. I told them I’d called the cops and they ran. Stiles was worried what you’d think about him being late, but I insisted he needed to get checked out.”

“How badly is he hurt?” Peter asked.

“Well that’s what they’re figuring out now. Mostly bruises and scrapes, I hope. Anyway, that’s what I came to tell you so...” Scott started to stand. Peter started talking again before he was even half out of his chair.

“The boys who hurt him,” he said. “Tell me about them.”

“They’re just some boys from school.”

“Scott,” Peter said, voice deceptively calm. Derek could hear the tension just below the surface. “Stiles is ours now. I don’t like people damaging my things. Now you can tell me everything you know about the people who hurt him, and I will see to it that only the guilty suffer for it, or I might take my anger out on whoever happens to be closest. Do you understand me?”

Derek didn’t believe that Peter would hurt this kid. He’d come here as a messenger. No one hurt messengers. No one respectable anyway. Human or not, hurting this kid could cause problems in their trading with the other packs. But the kid clearly didn’t know that. He took the threat seriously and the scent of his terror made the air difficult to breathe.

“The guy Stiles hit earlier was Marty,” Scott said. He started talking, giving full names of half a dozen boys. Peter asked for addresses and Scott shook his head, saying he’d never really been friends with any of them so he’d never been to any of their homes.

“Are these boys on a sports team at your school?” Peter asked. Scott nodded.

“Lacrosse.”

“Derek, go fetch Stiles’ computer.”

Derek headed off towards the living room, where the computer was still sitting after the morning’s lessons for the kids. He kept his hearing focused on the study though and heard Scott ask, “What are you going to do to them?”

“I’ll make that decision when I see what they did to Stiles. If they gave him a few bruises, they’ll get a few bruises. If they broke his bones, we will break their bones. If they’ve killed him...”

“He’s not dead!” Scott said quickly. In the living room, Derek picked up the computer and carried it back towards the study.

“That’s good,” Peter told Scott. “Then I won’t have to kill anyone.”
Derek carried the computer into the study and handed it over to Peter, who thanked him politely and turned it on.

“This is my friend we’re talking about,” Scott said. “He’s hurt and you’re upset because someone damaged your property and now you want revenge. Stiles isn’t property.”

“He is ours,” Peter said. “He accepts that. It’s time other people did.”

Scott didn’t keep arguing but at least he’d said something. At least he’d tried to stand up for Stiles’ rights. Derek might see a little of why Stiles would want to be friends with this boy.

Peter had been tapping occasionally at the computer during Scott’s indignant speech. He turned it round now so that Scott could see the computer screen. Peter smiled coldly.

“Now,” he said, “point out to me the boys who hurt Stiles.”
Chapter 19

Stiles leaned on Deaton, limping heavily. His leg still throbbed like crazy. It was a bit better now, thanks to a small pill Stiles had swallowed down back at the animal clinic. He’d decided not to ask whether the pain killer had been intended for human or animal consumption. Some things he’d rather not know.

They made their way up the slope from the road and into the trees, past the first warning signs. He could see the real boundary up ahead. Waiting just on the other side were Derek and Scott. Scott looked entirely unmauled and extremely relieved to see Stiles. He hurried forward and took position on Stiles’ other side. Stiles put an arm around Scott’s shoulders and then could put even less weight on his leg.

At the boundary line, Deaton stopped. Stiles hesitated, confused, for a moment, then realised that Deaton probably didn’t want to cross into werewolf territory. Particularly with the way Derek was glaring at him like he’d killed Derek’s favourite kitten or something. Maybe Scott hadn’t explained properly and Derek thought that Deaton was the reason half of Stiles’ body was now covered in bruises. Either way, Stiles hopped the last couple of steps across the boundary leaning on Scott alone.

Derek was at his side in a heartbeat, shouldering most of Stiles’ weight and helping him over to a half-rotted log. Derek helped Stiles sit, before he turned back to continue glaring at Deaton.

“Do I have your permission to enter your territory?” Deaton asked, perfectly calm.

“No,” Derek said.

“I would like to talk to your alpha.”

“I think Peter’s made it clear that he doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

Maybe Stiles’ guess had been wrong. He looked between the two of them in confusion. There was clearly some history here he was missing.

“Even when I bring your strays home?” Deaton asked. He nodded towards Stiles. Derek looked towards Stiles. He looked back at Deaton, jaw clenched in anger.

“Thank you for your help with Stiles,” Derek said, as though every word pained him. “Now leave.”

Scott gave Stiles a questioning look, silently asking what was going on. Stiles gave a shrug and a shake of his head. He was utterly lost.

Derek turned to Scott and said with somewhat less ice in his voice, “Thank you for your help, Scott.”

“You’re welcome,” said Scott. “Are you guys going to be OK from here?”

“Yes.”

“Come on,” Deaton said. “I’ll drive back to the clinic.”

Scott handed Stiles back the keys to the jeep and then set off with Deaton. Stiles waved, hoping to give an impression that everything was right with the world. Scott looked back a couple of times but he crossed the boundary and walked with Deaton back to his car. Derek watched them leave,
waiting until the car engine had started and driven off before he returned to Stiles.

“How badly are you hurt?” he asked.

“Bruises and a few scrapes. My leg hurts like hell but Deaton doesn’t think it’s broken. I’ll be fine in a day or two.”

“It’s a long walk back to the house. It will be easiest if I carry you. Are you OK with that?”

Stiles weighed up the humiliation of being carried against the pain of trying to walk all the way back to the big house. He didn’t want to be carried but he really, really didn’t want to have to put weight on his leg the whole way. Derek waited patiently for an answer. He could have just picked Stiles up at any time, but he wanted to make sure Stiles was OK with it, which was surprisingly sweet.

“OK,” Stiles said. “But piggyback. I’m not letting you carry me bridal style or anything.”

Derek nodded and came over to the log. He turned his back on Stiles and crouched down, hooking his arms under Stiles’ thighs. Stiles wrapped his arms around Derek’s chest and leaned into him as Derek stood. Then Derek was standing, Stiles clinging like a limpet to his back, their bodies pressed together. Stiles’ face was up against the back of Derek’s head and he breathed in his scent, soft strands of hair brushing against his cheek.

Stiles swallowed down a moan. He couldn’t think about this. He couldn’t think about how close they were. He couldn’t think about the fact that his hands were clasped over Derek’s well-defined muscles. Because if he started thinking about it, his body might start to react and there was no way Derek could avoid noticing with the way Stiles’ legs were hooked around Derek’s hips. Of all the ways he’d imagined getting his legs around Derek, this hadn’t been it.

“You OK?” Derek asked.

“You mean aside from the pain and the humiliation about being carried like a baby?”

“Not a baby. No one would carry a baby like this. Maybe a toddler.”

“Which makes it so much better.”

He could only see the edge of Derek’s cheek from this angle, but Stiles knew Derek was smirking at him.

“Laugh it up,” Stiles muttered. “I’m pretty sure I could kick you in the groin from this angle.”

“Try it and I’ll drop you.”

Stiles didn’t try it, and not just because he didn’t want to be dropped. It was actually nice of Derek to offer to carry him, however embarrassing it might also be. It would be mean to kick him right now.

“So, what the hell was that between you and Deaton?” Stiles asked.

“He’s not welcome in our territory.”

“I figured that much out. Why?”

“It’s complicated.”

“We’ve got a whole walk for you to explain it to me.”
“Stiles, this is private, pack business.”

“So I don’t get to know because I’m not pack?”

Stiles expected Derek to say that was exactly the case or to simply tell him to shut up. Instead, the hands holding his legs tightened slightly and Stiles saw Derek clench his jaw a little.

“Damn it,” Derek muttered. Then continued a little louder, “Fine. He was a friend of my mother’s before the war. After... after she died, Deaton had an argument with Peter. I’m not sure about the details, but it ended with Deaton going to the hunters and helping them put up the boundary.”

“Wait. You’re telling me that Deaton, the vet Deaton, helped put up a magical barrier between the town and the woods?”

“When he did that, Peter said that Deaton had clearly sided with our enemies and told him that if he ever set foot on our territory again he’d... well, you don’t need to know the details of the threat but it was rather graphic.”

“Yeah, I’m OK not knowing the details.”

“So that’s the story.”

“Not the whole story. How the hell did Deaton know how to make a magic barrier?”

There was the briefest of pauses, then Derek said, “I don’t know.”

“Are you lying to me?”

Another brief pause then, “Yes.”

“So you do know?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re not telling me?”

“No.”

“No, you’re not going to tell me or ‘no’ because I’m wrong and you are going to tell me?”

“Stiles,” Derek growled the name out, sounding annoyed, but Stiles was close enough to see that the corner of Derek’s mouth kept twitching up like he was fighting a smile.

“No, I get it,” Stiles said. “I’m just the puny human. I’m just the pet. I don’t get to know your secrets.”

“Stiles, it’s not like that,” Derek said, voice softer this time. “There are some things that are private. Peter told me some things because he wanted to make sure someone knew in case anything happened to him, and I’m the only family left. But they’re private things. No one in the pack knows.”

The word ‘pack’ rang in Stiles’ ears. Stiles had taunted him with that word only moments ago and Derek’s response had been to let him in on the secret. He remembered the conversation when the messenger came to visit and didn’t eat with the rest of them, and all of the times Peter had insisted Stiles eat with the pack.
“Derek,” Stiles said, voice quietly serious, “am I part of the pack?”

“Of course,” Derek said, like it was blindingly obvious.

“Since when?” Stiles asked.

“Since... Stiles, you’ve been living with us, sleeping with us, eating meals with us, working with us, studying with the kids. You’ve been pack since you got here.”

“When were you planning on telling me?” He didn’t mean for it to sound like an accusation, but he worried that it did anyway. Derek didn’t answer right away. When he did speak, his words were slow, as though every one was carefully chosen.

“Some things,” he said, “are so clear to a werewolf that we don’t even think about it. Scents and habits and traditions that just make sense without ever needing conscious thought. I never thought that it wouldn’t be so clear to someone who isn’t a werewolf. You’ve been part of the pack since the beginning.”

“I thought I was just your pet.”

“And pets aren’t generally considered part of the family?”

“That’s... a surprisingly good point.”

Stiles had started out assuming that pet was a euphemism for sex slave, and then progressed to assuming it was a euphemism for property. He hadn’t ever considered the number of families for whom the pet was a beloved companion. It still wasn’t an ideal situation; Stiles didn’t want to consider whether Peter was the sort of person to neuter his pets or consider having them put down at some point in the future. The term certainly didn’t denote equal status with the others in the pack.

“Stiles,” Derek said, “it’s very rare for humans to be part of the pack. Sometimes a werewolf and a human will marry, but usually the human takes the bite. You’re not one of Peter’s betas and you’re no one’s mate, so it’s hard to see how you fit into the pack structure. Peter could have declared you an omega but that... that implies any beta can order you to do stuff you wouldn’t want to do.”

“And that’s different from this situation, how?” Stiles asked.

“It would be different. When new werewolves joined our pack, Peter made them betas instead of keeping them as omegas, so you’ve not seen how omegas generally get treated. Trust me, you might not like him calling you a pet, but it’s a whole lot better than the betas thinking of you as an omega. By saying you belong to me, that means no one else will risk hurting you.”

“He called me your pet to protect me?”

“He doesn’t ever explain his motives,” Derek said, “but that’s my best guess.”

Stiles thought about this, considering the new angle. It certainly wasn’t anything he’d thought about before. Maybe he could live with being a pet, at least for now.

They reached the clearing. No one was working the garden now, but someone must have seen them approach because Boyd came and held the front door open for them. Stiles was tempted to tell Derek to put him down, but he wasn’t sure that limping into the house clinging to Derek’s shoulder would be much better.

Derek carried Stiles inside and heads poked round doors. People looked out at him from the kitchen,
living room, and dining room. Peter walked out of his study and followed them as Derek carried
Stiles up the stairs and towards the bedroom. Stiles expected Derek to set him down on the air
mattress, but Derek turned round in the middle of the room and lowered Stiles down until he was
sitting on the edge of the big bed. Stiles let go of his hold and then was just sitting there, the two
werewolves standing over him.

Derek reached out and brushed Stiles’ cheek with the tips of his fingers. It was a gentle touch, almost
a caress.

“What are you doing?” Stiles asked. Then he felt something. It was like a warmth flowing through
his body, a soft liquid drifting along skin and through veins, carrying away some of the pain as it
went. The soreness of his bruises drifted away. The throb of his leg faded.

“How?” Stiles asked. He saw the dark lines on Derek’s arm, as though blackness was flowing into
him from those fingertips.

“I’m drawing your pain,” Derek said.

“The injuries are still there,” Peter said from where he stood by the door. “So don’t try running any
marathons or anything. You’ll just feel them less for a time.”

“Thank you,” Stiles said to Derek.

Derek gave a smile and let his hand drop to his side.

“How serious are your injuries?” Peter asked.

“Bruises. There’s a slim possibility my leg has a minor break, so I’ve got to check whether it stays
swollen and get an x-ray if it doesn’t go down. It’s probably not though. Superficial injuries only. I
should be fine in a couple of days.”

Peter nodded.

“Your friend told us some names of the boys who did this to you. He seemed to think the leader was
someone called Marty?”

Stiles started to nod. He looked suspiciously at Peter.

“What are you planning on doing?” Stiles asked.

“Superficial injuries only,” Peter said with a cold smile. “Possibly a broken bone.”

“You can’t seriously be thinking of attacking them over this.”

“They hurt you. I don’t like people damaging what’s mine.”

Stiles blinked at him for a moment.

“It’s possible,” Stiles said, “that you meant this in a nice way, but you sounded way too much like a
psychopath right then.”

“We need to send a message that they can’t get away with hurting one of ours,” said Peter.

“No. No, you don’t. I can call my dad and get him to go and arrest Marty and the others for assault
and it can be handled in a human way without you needing to cross the boundary and draw the
wrath of Argent’s hunters.”
“The hunters are the reason we have to do this. If they see a bunch of teens attacking one of the pack and us doing nothing, they will see that as weakness. They will see it as an invitation to come after us all. We need to remind the town why they feared us.”

“Or, you know, you could try making peace and not making anyone fear anyone else?”

“Fear is the only language the hunters understand.”

“So try talking to them in a different language.”

“It’s not that simple, Stiles. There has been an attack against the pack, now we must balance the scales. Those boys that hurt you must suffer in kind.”

He walked out of the room. Stiles wasn’t quite ready to give up on the argument, so he called after him. “Do you always walk away when you worry the person you’re arguing with might have a point?”

Peter didn’t answer.

Derek remained behind, standing awkwardly beside the bed.

“Do you need anything?” Derek asked. “Blankets? Food? I remember hospital shows when I was little, people always brought grapes when someone was hurt. Do grapes help healing? What do you need?”

It was sweet in an awkward way. Werewolves probably never had to deal with injuries that lasted more than five minutes. Derek was out of his depth but trying in his own, slightly inept way, to be helpful. It would have made Stiles smile if it weren’t for the fact he was worried about the werewolf war kicking off all over again because of him.

“I need you to go with Peter,” Stiles said. “Please, try and keep him from killing anyone.”

Derek nodded.

“And try to keep from getting shot in the head,” Stiles said. Derek gave a little, amused smile.

“I’ll do my best. You, rest. You can have my bed tonight; Isaac can take the air mattress.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said. So he’d spent a portion of the evening with his arms around Derek and now he was going to sleep in Derek’s bed. Both of those things had been considerably more fun in his imagination.

“I’ll send someone up with your dinner,” said Derek. “I’ve got to go make attack plans with Peter.”

“Be safe.”

Derek nodded and walked out of the bedroom.

Stiles adjusted his position on the bed, shifting so that he was sitting up against the pillows. He looked around, wondering what he should do now. He didn’t feel like attempting to walk out of here, even after whatever the hell it was Derek had done to get rid of the pain. There was a book on the table beside the bed. Stiles reached out and picked it up, ignoring the bookmark partway through it, and started to read.

He was only on the second page when Miranda came up from the kitchen with a plate of reheated casserole on a tray. Behind her, Millie peeked in through the bedroom doorway. Stiles took the tray
with quiet thanks and Millie came and sat down on the bed near his feet. She stared intently at Stiles’ face.

“You’ve gone all purple,” she said.

“They’re called bruises,” Stiles said.

“Are they going to stay looking like that forever?”

“No. Over the next week or two, they’ll fade and change colours and then go away altogether.”

“Do they hurt?”

Stiles opened his mouth to say that yes, of course they did. Except that they didn’t really anymore. Even his split lip wasn’t bothering him much despite the fact he was eating. He shook his head and said, “Derek did something to make them stop hurting.”

“Why did people hurt you?” Millie asked. “Is it because you’re part of the pack?”

Stiles wanted to deny that, but lying to werewolves was a dangerous thing to attempt, even with a werewolf as young as this.

“That’s part of it,” Stiles said.

She shifted, crawling up the bed until she sat down beside him, back resting against the pillows. Her side pressed gently against his, not enough to disturb any of the bruises.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “Nothing that’s happened has been your fault.”

They sat like that for a time, with Stiles eating his dinner and Millie at his side. She stayed there until Kendra came and told her it was time to go to bed.
Derek sat across the desk from Peter, the map of Beacon Hills spread between them. Peter had spent time on Stiles’ computer. He’d always liked his technology, back before the war, so it wasn’t much surprise how quickly he’d picked up the latest developments in how people communicated over the internet. It didn’t take Peter too long to find out the address of the boy who’d been the instigator of the fight, as well as of two of the others Scott had named. He pointed them out now on the map.

“Only three of them?” Derek asked.

“The others grasped the basics of privacy settings on social media,” Peter said, “and not embedding geotagging on photographs taken in their own homes before sharing them publicly.” Derek looked at his uncle blankly.

“Three will be enough,” Peter said. “And I’ve found the one that matters most.”

“Scott might have told Stiles’ dad or the hunters everything he told us,” Derek said. “They could be prepared. They might have the boys’ homes under guard, or they might have moved the boys to another location. We don’t have their scents to track.”

He didn’t think he stood much chance of persuading Peter away from this course, but he had to try, for Stiles’ sake. Derek wanted to hurt someone for hurting Stiles. He understood exactly what Peter felt right now, but that didn’t change the fact that Stiles didn’t want this. What Stiles wanted had to count for something, even in matters of pack vengeance.

“If the boys are heavily guarded or not to be found, I have a back-up plan,” Peter said.

“Of course you do.”

Derek listened while Peter detailed his plans. They weren’t going to use the same approach as last time because Peter believed it foolish to attack in the same way twice in a row.

“We must be surprising,” he said.

“We could be really surprising and listen to a human’s advice,” Derek said. “Stiles doesn’t want us to get revenge for him.”

“It’s not for him. It’s for the pack. It’s to remind all the humans that they shouldn’t threaten us.”

Derek went quiet again, knowing his words were going unheard. He let Peter continue his explanations. Then Peter folded up the map and went to tell the teenagers the role they were to play. Together, they walked together out into the woods as darkness fell.

Derek paused at the boundary line, waiting for Peter’s signal. This was a stupid idea. Peter had planned it out, but there was such a strong possibility that the hunters were out there waiting for
them. Peter was putting them both at risk out of some stupid notion of pride that insisted he had to get revenge. Derek could understand where Peter was coming from; when he’d first seen the bruises covering Stiles’ face and the way he was limping, Derek had wanted to tear someone to pieces. But that didn’t mean they had to disregard common sense and Stiles’ own wishes to make this attack.

Derek hadn’t seen Peter this obsessed with revenge since...

He froze. His mind caught on that thought so much that he almost missed Peter’s signal. Then he was off and running, tearing out of the woods in the direction of the town, but for the outskirts instead of the heart. He would skirt the town one way, Peter the other. And the other three would cross the boundary again and again for about a minute to give the hunters the impression that the entire pack was pouring out of the woods. They would be looking for a whole onslaught and might not notice two werewolves coming in from directions other than the woods.

At least that was the theory.

Derek loped at top speed, cutting across fields and empty ground and more patches of trees, the lights and noises of the town to his right. While he ran, his thoughts were on Peter and how he’d reacted, insisting that this was about proving the pack strong, about not being seen as weak by the hunters, and about not liking people taking his things. He’d made a point of saying it multiple times. Enough times that Derek knew that couldn’t possibly be the reason.

Peter was insisting on this attack because he was upset. He was upset that Stiles was hurt. Derek shifted his route slightly to avoid a house on the outskirts of the town, but his thoughts were still more on Peter than where he was running. He was sure he was right about this. Peter was upset about Stiles being hurt and he was playing it off as pack pride because he didn’t want to admit what it really was. As Derek ran on, step after step, he became more convinced this was the truth: Peter actually cared about Stiles. He just had a messed-up, Peterish way of demonstrating it.

Derek turned into the town at last, running along streets that were dark and quiet, except for the blaring warning of the alarms. People had already shut themselves inside. Houses were dark and shadowed. Shops and bars that should have been open were boarded up. Derek wondered what would happen if he shifted back to human form and ran up to one of those buildings, asking to be let in. It would probably be like the sheriff’s station all over again. They’d probably assume he was human and open the door for him.

He ran past them all though, on into the town.

When he reached the house he was aiming for, Peter was already there. He was in his beta form, dragging a teenaged boy out of the house. Literally dragging. Peter was towing the boy along by his upper arm while the kid’s legs flailed and kicked along the ground. It was the boy Scott had identified as Marty in the photographs, the one who’d started the attack against Stiles.

Once the boy was out in the open, Peter yelled.

“You hurt one of ours,” he cried. “That requires punishment.”

Derek had no idea how many people were cowering in the houses around them, but they would have heard Peter’s words. This was about sending a message. This was about letting the entire town know that hurting Stiles would have personal consequences.

A woman came out of the house, holding a shotgun and fumbling to load it. All her attention was on Peter and Marty. She didn’t notice Derek until he vaulted a garden wall to her side and wrenched the
gun from her hands. She made a terrified whimpering noise.

“No one needs to die tonight,” Derek said. If she understood what he meant, her face didn’t show it. She looked with wide, frightened eyes between Derek and Peter.

There was no sign of the hunters or the sheriff. Scott must not have reported what had happened. Derek wasn’t sure whether that was because the kid was scared of Peter, or if he had secretly wanted something like this to happen. Either way, Derek was glad that they weren’t under instant attack, but he knew that they wouldn’t have long. Someone would have called the hunters already.

Peter slapped the boy across the face with an open palm, and then brought his hand back round again in the other direction, striking with the back of his hand. Both blows sounded huge in the dark street, with enough force to whip Marty’s head back and forth, but Peter had been careful with his claws. He hadn’t cut into the boy’s skin.

The woman made a soft noise in the back of her throat. Derek was pretty sure she was Marty’s mother. Derek almost wanted to reach out and comfort her, to tell her everything would be OK, but he knew that there was no way anything he said or did could possibly bring her the slightest comfort right now, as she watched Peter slap her son a few more times, striking face and arms with an open palm.

Peter let go of the boy’s arm and he crumpled to the ground. He was talking now, quietly pleading, muttering, “Please,” and, “I’m sorry,” and, “Please stop,” over and over in a whimpering loop. Peter didn’t listen. Peter placed his foot on Marty’s leg and slowly increased the weight he put on it. The boy whimpered again, but Derek didn’t hear any sounds of snapping bones.

“You attacked Stiles,” Peter said, almost shouting the words so that any listeners would be able to hear. “You and your friends beat up an innocent boy. You ganged up on him and hurt him without caring what injuries you gave him. Why should I care what injuries I give you?”

All the boy was saying now was, “I’m sorry,” over and over again.

“You should be sorry,” Peter said, more quietly.

The mother was begging now as well, whispering, “Please,” she looked to Derek. Derek wondered if he could convince Peter this was enough. They didn’t want to get caught by hunters after all.

Almost as if summoned by his thoughts, Derek heard the sound of car engines, getting rapidly louder. Derek walked quickly towards Peter. He must have heard them too.

Peter gave the boy a kick to the ribs, not quite hard enough to break any. Then he stepped back and addressed the world at large.

“No one hurts Stiles,” he yelled. “If anyone lays a finger on Stiles, we shall see they pay for it.”

A car came screeching round the corner, breaks squealing as the driver slammed on the brakes. It was from the sheriff’s department, and there behind the wheel was the sheriff. Another car followed close behind but this one was unmarked. Still Derek recognised the driver.

The sheriff and a deputy got out of the first car; Derek thought it was the deputy who’d been on the front desk when Derek had gone to get Stiles. Argent and two other men got out of the second car. They bristled with weapons, aiming heavy guns towards Peter, but the sheriff yelled out, “Hold fire!”

He was the only one who hadn’t drawn a weapon.
“This boy and his friends attacked Stiles,” Peter said, voice calm. He gestured towards Marty, who was curled up on the ground, whimpering slightly.

Derek tried not to look worried. He couldn’t help worrying though, unsure what those hunters’ guns would be loaded with. If either of them got shot with wolfsbane again, he wasn’t sure how they would heal it. If they both got shot with wolfsbane, there was no guarantee they’d be able to get back to their own territory.

But the sheriff still had a hand out in a signal to the others to hold back. He took a small step towards Peter. Even in the darkness, his face was clearly pale. That was the only visible sign of fear, but the scent of it drifted on the night wind. The sheriff was scared.

“Is he alright?” the sheriff asked. Presumably he was talking about Stiles, and not the boy lying on the ground between them.

“Stiles will recover,” Peter said. “That’s the only reason this boy is still breathing.”

“Leave,” the sheriff said. “Walk away right now and go back to your territory. There doesn’t need to be any bloodshed tonight.”

Peter smiled coldly, “We’ve done what we needed to do. Come on.”

That last part was addressed towards Derek. Peter walked away, turning his back on the sheriff and the hunters. Derek hesitated a moment before following. Peter seemed perfectly calm, but Derek could only think of all those guns, of the men who would love to shoot him in the back.

Behind him, he heard Argent start to say something to the sheriff, but the sheriff cut him off with another, “Hold fire.”

Then Derek had rounded a corner. Now that there were buildings between them and the hunters, Peter broke into a run and Derek was glad to follow, fear adding speed to his limbs. He wanted to be away from Argent as quickly as possible.

Together, they raced through the streets and in the direction of their territory.

***

Stiles had intended to wait up for Derek and Peter to come back, to make sure that no one had ended up dead or mauled. He blamed the painkillers for the fact he’d fallen asleep. He was woken by someone climbing onto the mattress beside him. A sleepy part of him remembered that this was Derek’s bed and wondered if Derek was coming to share the bed with him. But he opened his eyes and saw Millie sitting on the edge of the bed, a piece of paper in her hands.

“Morning,” she said, “I’ve brought you a present.”

Stiles pushed himself up to a sitting position, cataloguing the aches in his body as he did so. It was a low soreness in his arms and face, and the slightly more prominent pain in his leg. Nothing enormously horrible.

“Is Derek back?” Stiles asked. Millie considered, tilting her head, sniffing and listening. Then she nodded. Stiles relaxed a little. He took the bit of paper she presented him with. It was another little cartoon, with stick figures that were clearly meant to represent Stiles and Derek. In each panel, the Stiles figure lay in bed, while the Derek figure kept turning up with items and with speech bubbles saying things like, *Humans get grapes when they’re sick*. *Squishy human must eat grapes.* Another panel had Derek with a large jug saying that, *Squishy human needs lots of fluids.* Other panels had
Derek presenting the squishy human with pillows, chicken soup, pain killers, and more blankets.

The final panel showed the Derek figure silently holding out a collection of sticks with blobby bits on the top. It took Stiles a couple of seconds to realise the cartoon image of Derek was holding out a bunch of flowers.

Stiles started laughing.

Over on the air mattress, in Stiles' usual place, the noise of laughter woke Isaac up. He came to see what the fuss was about and joined in, declaring that the picture was perfect. Millie grinned.

“This has got to go on your blog,” Stiles told Millie. She went running off to find the computer.

She returned a few minutes later, laptop in arms, and Derek walked into the room behind her.

“Was everything alright last night?” Stiles asked him. Derek nodded.

“The Marty kid will have a collection of bruises, but nothing serious. No one else got hurt.”

“That’s good.” Stiles wasn’t sure if he’d been worried about Derek getting hurt, or about what might happen if Peter hurt the boys from school, or killed him. Either way, he could relax a little now that he knew that hadn’t happened.

“What’s this?” Derek asked, reaching out for the piece of paper with Millie’s drawing on it. He glowered at the cartoon. “That’s not what I’m like.”

He glared at the image like it was a threat, like he wanted to tear it to little pieces. Stiles fought the urge to laugh again.

“I dunno,” he said, “the bit with the grapes is practically a quote.” He suspected that Millie had heard and that was what gave her the idea for the drawing.

“I’m not like that,” Derek insisted. It made Stiles want to laugh more.

“Protest all you like, big guy, we all know the truth: you are a marshmallow.”

Derek glared. Stiles suspected that if he wasn’t injured, Derek would be throwing him out of bed and demanding he get on with work, ordering him around to reassert his position as a tough guy. But of course Derek wasn’t doing any of that, further establishing the fact that Derek Hale was in fact a marshmallow.

He stood with arms folded, glowering, while Stiles photographed the drawing and posted it to Millie’s blog. Then he handed her the computer so she could look through the posts of the other blogs she was following. Derek hadn’t said a word this whole time, just glared at the drawing like it had personally offended him. Stiles couldn’t resist pushing the point about Derek’s secret softness.

“Could you do the pain sucky thing again?” Stiles asked.

Derek was at his side in an instant, laying his hand against Stiles’ arm. The glares were forgotten and Derek apologised for not offering sooner. The pain wasn’t actually too bad, but Stiles wanted to do this pre-emptively before attempting the walk to the bathroom.

Stiles exchanged a grin with Isaac, and muttered, “Marshmallow.”
Chapter 21

The kids still had studying, even on Saturday. Derek made sure that Stiles made it downstairs OK for breakfast and then helped him get settled on the couch. Then he headed outside. He needed to put some distance between them.

He hated that stupid drawing. He hated it because he knew that Millie had got it right. Seeing Stiles hurt like that stirred up every protective instinct he had. He wanted to guard Stiles and help him and heal him. He wanted to stay at Stiles’ side to make sure he had everything he needed until he was well again. But he couldn’t do that.

Peter had made Stiles part of the pack, but Stiles had made it clear he didn’t feel it. He didn’t want it. He’d refused to take the bite and become one of them. And he’d flinched away from Derek’s touch. When he’d thought Derek wanted to have sex with him, he’d cringed away in fear. Now Derek did want to have sex with him, he knew he couldn’t let Stiles see it. If Stiles saw the truth, if he realised what was hidden behind the behaviour the drawing revealed, he would stop laughing and he’d go back to fear. Derek didn’t want Stiles to be afraid of him.

He went to check the snares and the fish traps. Someone needed to do it and it was a task that took him away from the house. Away from Stiles. Out in the fresh air, away from his scent and the sight of those bruises darkening his skin, it was easier not to think about all the things he wanted to do to the kid.

They had a couple of rabbits and a bird in the snares, and a few fish in the traps. He carried everything back to the house to be dealt with and paused for a moment in the hallway, listening to Stiles trying to explain money as a sort of IOU. The teenage werewolves were joining in the explanations, trying to make the basics of finance make sense to kids who’d spent at least half their lives out here, without money, where everything they owned belonged to the pack as a whole, and where trades were done in the form of barters between packs. It seemed to be going quite well until Stiles got onto bank accounts and electronic fund transfers.

Derek left him to it and went out to walk the boundaries. He spotted Casey out near the river, on official scouting duty. The advantage of being the alpha’s nephew was that no one ever officially scheduled Derek for anything. He just did whatever job he felt like doing at the time. No one ever complained about him not doing his fair share, but it was nice for him. Especially on days like this. He was heading towards the road boundary when Ken came hurrying through the trees. He’d also been patrolling the territory.

“The sheriff’s at the borders,” he told Derek. “He says he wants to see Stiles and talk to Peter.”

Derek probably shouldn’t be surprised. The way he’d been last night, he was probably scared of how badly Stiles was hurt. He probably felt the same need Derek did; he needed to see Stiles and reassure himself that he was really OK. Derek wasn’t sure what Peter would say, but he could be absolutely certain what Stiles would want.

“I’ll bring him,” Derek said. “Go warn Peter.”

Ken headed off quickly towards the house. Derek walked through the trees in the direction Ken had come from, towards the place where Stiles always parked his jeep. The sheriff was waiting there, out of uniform, standing just outside the boundary. His hand twitched nervously at his side, just a little, in the same way that Stiles’ often did.
“Can I see him?” he asked.

Derek nodded, “He’s back at the house.”

The sheriff hesitated for a second, then stepped across the boundary. Derek waited for him to take a few steps inside and then he turned and walked towards the house. The sheriff hurried until he was walking at Derek’s side.

“How is he?” the sheriff asked.

“Bruised and sore, but OK.”

They walked in silence for a while.

“Marty admitted to it all,” the sheriff said. “When we took him to get checked out, he said what happened with Stiles. The other boys are now cowering in terror that they’ll get the same treatment.”

Derek said nothing. He was glad. Those boys had hurt Stiles; Derek wanted them to know fear. He wanted them to be punished for their actions.

“Will they?” the sheriff asked, when it was clear Derek wasn’t going to speak.

“Only if they hurt Stiles again,” Derek said. He hoped that was the truth.

“So it’s only OK for you to torment him, but no one else?”

“We don’t torment him.”

The sheriff gave him a disbelieving look. It was clear to see where Stiles got his ability to communicate non-verbally.

“See for yourself,” Derek said.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the house. As they walked up the porch steps and in through the front door, Derek listened out for the conversation in the living room. Stiles was now trying to explain the difference between tax avoidance and tax evasion. From the sounds of it, he wasn’t finding it particularly easy.

“One is finding sneaky ways around the rules so you don’t have to pay, but without breaking the rules. The other way is breaking the rules and lying and hiding money so that the government can’t get it.”

“But they’re both about people not wanting to give their fair share,” said Millie, “so what’s the difference?”

“Tax evasion is a crime that can get people arrested and all their money taken away,” Stiles said, “and tax avoidance is just mean, but it’s not a crime so people figure out ways to do it.”

“But they’re the same,” Millie insisted.

“Not quite.”

“But everyone should do their fair share. You can’t just decide you don’t want to.”

“Someone should tell them off,” put in Ted, clearly in agreement with Millie.
Derek stood waiting just outside the door to the living room, the sheriff beside him, listening to the lesson. Stiles was on the couch, his back to the door. He hadn’t noticed them yet, and the kids were all focused on Stiles, trying to make sense of the foreign concepts he was trying to impart.

“People sometimes do tell them off. And sometimes people decide not to buy things from companies that do this, but the people in authority can’t do anything because it’s not against the law.”

“But it’s not fair,” said Cath, one of the younger girls.

Stiles let out a soft, frustrated sigh, “I’m not arguing with you on that point. But the world out there isn’t perfect. It’s not always fair.”

At some point in this little speech, the teenagers had noticed Derek and the sheriff standing in the doorway. It took only a couple of seconds for the younger kids to notice too. The little ones looked scared. A human in their territory was one thing when it was Stiles, but quite another when it was a strange adult.

Stiles turned to look over the back of the couch and see what everyone was staring at. His eyes landed on his dad, a surprised smile growing on his lips.

“How are you doing?” the sheriff asked.

“Regretting sharing a lesson on economics with people who’ve never used money, but otherwise I’m good.” Stiles smiled.

“How are you doing?” the sheriff asked.

“Stiles,” his dad said again, looking pointedly at that arm with all its markings of pain.

“I’m fine,” Stiles said. He pulled his arm back from his dad, tucking it down behind the back of the couch so that the injuries weren’t visible. “A bit battered and sore, but I’ll be fine. Even my leg is feeling much better today.”

The door down the hall opened and Peter emerged from the study. He didn’t seem particularly angry that Derek had invited the sheriff into the heart of their territory. Still, the sheriff turned nervously towards him as he approached.

“I understand you have asked to speak to me,” Peter said.

The sheriff swallowed slightly before saying, “Yes.”

“My study then. Stiles, please join us. I’m sure there are others who can attempt to explain the basis of capitalism in your absence.” He nodded towards the corner, where Boyd and Erica was sharing a chair, and Isaac was sitting on the floor beside them. Then he turned and walked back to his study.

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Stiles stood, leaning heavily against the arm of the couch as he put weight on his leg. Whatever he might have said about doing better, he was still in obvious pain when he tried to walk. Derek started forward to help, but then the sheriff was there at Stiles’ side, letting him lean against his shoulder. The sheriff glared at Derek as he helped Stiles limp out of the room. Technically Peter hadn’t invited Derek to join the discussion, but Derek followed anyway. He stepped into the study and closed the door behind him while the sheriff helped Stiles to one of the seats in front of the desk. Peter was
already sitting behind the desk, leaning back casual and calm as he waited for the sheriff to speak.

“There are concerns, back in town,” the sheriff said. “People are worried. There have been two raids, close together, after so long without any and now rumours are flying and it won’t take much to create a panic. My officers are keeping the peace, but it wouldn’t take much for things to get ugly. I don’t want Beacon Hills to go back to the way it was six years ago.”

“What would you suggest?” Peter asked. “Should we have done nothing and let those boys attack what’s ours? Should we have just let people hurt Stiles, the way we let them steal our property, kill our families, and drive us from the towns and cities of this country? Should we just accept things as they are because to do otherwise would make your people worried?”

“I don’t want there to be more violence.”

“They started the violence when they attacked Stiles. Just like humans started the violence when they attacked our protests six years ago.”

“No one can change what happened six years ago,” the sheriff said. “I want to focus on stopping things escalating now. Some people are afraid of more raids and have been talking about pre-emptive strikes.”

He didn’t need to explain how terrible that would be. If humans attacked the werewolf territories, they would fight back and people on both sides were likely to get hurt, even die. If any of the pack died, Peter would insist on vengeance. They would be back to full war in no time.

“Argent may be able to hold people back from any foolish attacks,” the sheriff went on, “but he would need some sort of assurance.”

“Assurance,” Peter said. He still appeared calm, but the word was growled out with obvious distaste.

The sheriff obviously picked up on the tone, but he continued, “If you could reassure people that there won’t be more attacks, Argent might be able to calm down the people who are currently anxious.”

“And what assurance will Argent give us that he won’t slaughter our children?” Peter asked.

The sheriff hesitated.

“Maybe I could talk to him,” Stiles said. Peter raised an eyebrow. “I could go to Argent and explain why yesterday’s attack happened so he knows this isn’t the start of a bigger conflict.”

“Assuming I care about reassuring Argent,” Peter said.

“Why, yes, I am assuming you care about keeping him from attacking the pack,” Stiles snapped. His dad reached out and put a hand on Stiles’ shoulder in an obvious gesture of restraint.

Peter fixed Stiles with a long look. Even Derek couldn’t tell what he was thinking. The sheriff’s hand remained on Stiles’ shoulder, fingers tightening a little as Peter’s paused lengthened.

“You would go to Argent,” Peter said to Stiles, “and speak on behalf of the pack.”

“Yes.” Stiles straightened a little in his seat, returning Peter’s stare.

“Very well. I will authorise you to speak on behalf of the pack. You will go to Argent and negotiate for the continued peace between this pack and the hunters of Beacon Hills. Sheriff, I assume you can
“Then you should probably go and do that now. I wouldn’t want anyone to attack while we wait. Send the details of the meeting to Stiles’ phone. I will speak to Stiles now about what message he is to take and I will grant him the necessary authority to speak on my behalf.”

This was serious. Derek was surprised by the way Peter was saying this. He could easily send Stiles to explain yesterday’s attack to the hunters, but giving him authority to represent the pack was a much bigger deal. It would give Stiles the rights to actually negotiate with Argent around things like treaty terms. Peter had occasionally granted Derek authority to speak on his behalf in negotiations with other packs, but it was almost never done with a human, except of course for the pack’s emissary.

“Derek,” Peter said, “please escort the sheriff back to our borders.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Stiles said. His dad gave his shoulder one last squeeze and then followed Derek out of the study. The sheriff glanced towards the living room on the way through the house and then they were out into the garden and heading for the boundary.

After a minute, the sheriff spoke, “Stiles was teaching those kids economics?”

“Trying to. He’s taken quite an interest in their education.”

“They don’t have any formal schooling?”

Derek felt defensive. He felt like the sheriff was judging the pack for letting their children down, when this was something that had been imposed on them. He glared at the sheriff and said, “We had a few text books for them.”

“That’s... It’s good he can help.”

“Yeah.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the boundary. The sheriff hesitated there to reassure Derek that he would be in touch about the meeting with Argent. Then he walked away. Derek watched him leave. He didn’t want the pack to have anything to do with Argent, but he supposed it was necessary. At least Argent was unlikely to hurt Stiles.
Chapter 22

Stiles was left sitting in the study while Peter went off to fetch something. He was already feeling apprehensive about the future meeting. He’d made the suggestion thinking he was just going to explain a few things to try and calm Argent down, but Peter’s response made it seem like things were a lot more serious than that. Stiles wasn’t sure how ready he was for whatever it was Peter had in mind.

Peter returned after a few minutes with a small, flat piece of wood in a rough rectangular shape, and a length of cord. Peter sat down behind his desk again while Stiles frowned in confusion at the bit of wood.

“I thought you were going to give me authorisation,” Stiles said.

“I am.”

Peter balled his right hand into a fist and then sharply extended his fingers. Sharp claws now curved out from the ends. Stiles swallowed nervously, but Peter pressed the tip of one claw into the wood, near the centre of one of the short sides of the rectangle. He moved his finger back and forth a little, boring into the wood until there was a small hole. Then he pressed that claw tip to the centre of the wood and drawing a curving scratch on its surface. He repeated this gesture twice more until there was a triple spiral drawn in the middle of one of the sides.

“What is that?” Stiles asked.

“A symbol of the pack. While you wear it, it’s a sign that you are speaking as my official representative. It empowers you to make decisions that would otherwise require an alpha. You will be able to make agreements that will be binding to the pack.”

Peter pressed the tip of a claw to one of his fingers, drawing up a tiny spot of blood. He pressed that finger into the middle of the spiral, marking it with a dark stain.

“Hold out your hand,” Peter said. His claws were still extended.

“Do we have to do the blood thing?” Stiles asked.

“Yes. Otherwise this token won’t be bound to you. Anyone could mark it with their blood and claim the powers I’m offering to you. It only takes a drop.”

Stiles held his hand out over the desk. Peter pressed one claw to the tip of Stiles’ index finger, causing a sharp pinprick of pain. A moment later, Peter pressed the back of the bit of wood over the welling drop of blood. Then they were done.

Stiles stared at the token of authority while Peter let his claws retract tried to thread the cord through the hole he’d made earlier. Stiles was thinking hard about all the implications of what Peter was about to give him.

“When I wear that thing,” Stiles said, “I’m speaking with your authority. So I can make decisions and you’ll have to follow through with them.”

“I can impose restrictions on what you are authorised to agree, but essentially, Stiles, I hope you realise how important this is. I’m giving you the power to negotiate with Argent on behalf of this pack; that gives you the power to do untold damage. You could make agreements that will hurt me
or my pack. I’m trusting you to act in the best interests of the pack. I’m trusting you to not betray me.”

Stiles swallowed, nervous again, but his mind was still racing. He nodded.

“If you betray me,” Peter said, “if you side with the hunters to hurt this pack, I will do absolutely everything in my power to ensure you spend the rest of your life screaming. I know that there has been some misunderstanding between us in the past about whether or not what I say should be interpreted as threatening, but you should be absolutely clear that I mean this as a threat. A promise.”

Stiles nodded again. He hadn’t been planning on selling out the pack, but it was still worrying to hear direct threats. On the other hand, he could use the authority to get himself out of Peter’s power.

Peter had the cord threaded through the rectangle of wood and knotted it into a loop. He stood and walked round the desk. He stood over Stiles and lowered the thing over Stiles’ head, like he was presenting a medal at the Olympics. He kept his hands on the cord.

“With this token,” Peter said, “I am granting you authority to speak with Argent and the human authorities of Beacon Hills on behalf of this pack. I am granting you the right to make decisions and agreements to prevent bloodshed. But there are limits. I do not grant you the power to reduce the pack’s territory, to remove werewolves from this pack or territory, to make agreements that would injure or kill any of my pack.” Peter smiled coldly and added, “I do not grant you the authority to make changes to your position with the pack or to in any way alter the agreement made between you and I when you offered your services to the pack.”

“What?” Stiles asked. He wondered if mind reading was a werewolf skill because he’d been considering exactly that.

“You show your thoughts on your face,” Peter said. “You should work on that. Your position here is not something you can alter in your discussions with Argent.”

“But it could be relevant. What if Argent wants reassurance that you’re not going to hurt any humans and promising that I’ll be set free would give him that?”

“It’s not negotiable, Stiles. I want you focusing on the immediate issue, not on trying to force a way to include an end to our agreement.”

Stiles slumped back in the chair. He reached up and felt that little rectangle of wood, marked with his blood and Peter’s. He couldn’t help feeling that he’d come close. He could almost have gained his freedom. If he’d been a little less obvious about wanting it, maybe Peter wouldn’t have put in that specific restriction.

“However,” Peter said, seeing Stiles’ reaction, “perhaps this can be an incentive for you. If you do well in pursuing the well-being of the pack, you and I might renegotiate your situation here.”

“So if I do a good job, you’ll let me go?”

“It would have to be a really good job. I was thinking more that we would discuss the requirement for you to remain with the pack constantly except for authorised trips to town. Assuming your negotiations work to the pack’s benefit. You shouldn’t forget the alternative.”

The alternative being the gruesome torture if Peter thought Stiles betrayed him. Stiles almost regretted making the offer to speak to Argent; right now the risks seemed to strongly outweigh the rewards. But he could do this. It wasn’t like he was planning on selling out the pack. He could go to Argent and speak on Peter’s behalf and maybe, afterwards, he’d be allowed to go home to his dad at least
sometimes. He might still be called upon to help the pack and do deliveries for them, but he might not have to stay trapped here for the rest of his life. That was definitely worth a shot.

Peter left Stiles sitting there for a few minutes more while he left the room again. Stiles wondered if Peter would ever let him go. Probably not completely. But if Stiles proved he could be trusted, Peter might be less concerned about keeping him constantly under watch. He might get to live at home at least some of the time. Things like college might not be completely out of the question in the future. There was the chance of a normalish life. Maybe.

Peter returned with a pack of cards in one hand and a glass in the other. The glass was filled with a murky, brown liquid that bore a strong resemblance to pond water. Stiles looked at it in curious distaste. Peter caught the look and set the glass down on the desk between them, while he settled in his chair and fished out a pad and pen.

“That,” he said, “is the forfeit. Perfectly harmless and actually full of a vitamins, but with a rather unpleasant taste. One of us is going to have to drink it.”

He started shuffling the cards. Stiles was still thoroughly confused and he said so.

“You’re going to get a lesson,” Peter said, “a very important one. You’re going to get a lesson in lying.” He held the cards across the desk and Stiles took them, shuffling absently to give himself something to do while Peter spoke.

“You will take two cards at random from the deck, look at them, and put them face down on the desk without letting me see them. You will tell me which one has the highest value, or if they’re both the same value. I will then guess whether you’re lying or telling the truth. If you’re lying and I catch you lying, I will get a point. If I don’t spot that you’re lying, or if I think you’re lying when you’re telling the truth, you get a point.”

“What if I’m telling the truth and you get that right?”

“No points for anyone. So you have twice as many ways to get points as I do,” Peter said, “and we’ll keep going until it’s time for lunch. If, at that point, you have,” he paused, thinking, “let’s say a quarter of the points or more, that means you’ve won. Whoever loses, has to drink.”

Stiles looked at the glass on the desk. This was going to be difficult. The fact that Peter would consider Stiles to have won if he only got a quarter of the points was a sign that this was not going to be an easy game to win. But it was a useful thing to learn. And Peter was offering Stiles a way to have conversations with him that didn’t give away everything he was thinking. That had to be worth learning.

Stiles slid two cards out from the middle of the deck and looked at them for a second before placing them face-down on the desk. He tapped one of them.

“That’s the highest,” he said.

“Truth,” Peter said, instantly. Stiles turned them over, revealed the truth, and then shuffled them back into the deck.

Stiles tried again.

“Truth.”

And again. And again.
“You can’t simply tell the truth all the way through this game,” Peter said.

“A quarter of nothing is nothing,” said Stiles, “so technically I’d meet your criteria for winning if neither of us got any points.”

Peter gave him a hard stare.

Stiles went with the truth the next two turns just to annoy Peter, but he was right that Stiles would have to try a lie eventually. When he finally did, he nervous enough that he was probably signposting it in every possible way. Peter sighed a little, and said, “Lie.”

He checked the cards and marked down a point on a sheet of paper to keep the score.

Stiles decided he would have to try another approach. He could get points if he could get Peter to believe he was lying when he was telling the truth. He checked the next pair of cards and paused for a moment. He tried to think lies to himself, trying to generate whatever nervous signals Peter had picked up on. He pointed at the highest card and said that it was the highest.

This time, Peter hesitated for a tiny moment, but he said, “Truth.”

They continued on and Stiles was not doing well. Every time he lied, Peter caught it. When he told the truth, Peter got that too. Stiles tried being calm, projecting nothing, and that didn’t work. He tried to confuse Peter, by pretending to lie, but that didn’t work either. Stiles was almost tempted to throw the cards at Peter and just down the forfeit drink because he didn’t think he could take this for much longer. It was infuriating. But at the same time, he wanted to keep going. He wanted to win just one point against Peter.

He took a moment to try and calm down. Getting flustered wasn’t helping. He needed to go about this differently. He needed to try something different. He closed his eyes and thought of a plan. When he opened his eyes, he deliberately let them go unfocused. He recited his twelve times table to himself so that he wouldn’t be paying attention to the cards even as he pretended to look at them, then he set them down on the desk. He had no idea which was higher, but he pointed one of them out.

He didn’t know if he was telling the truth or lying. Peter looked at him, frowning a little. Stiles waited nervously.

“Lie,” Peter said. Stiles didn’t know if it was or not, but he had a fifty-fifty chance. Peter turned the cards over. It turned out Stiles had pointed to the higher value of the two cards. He’d been telling the truth.

“Yes!” Stiles punched the air. “Thank you, god!”

“One point for Stiles,” Peter said, smiling a little as he marked it down on his pad.

“No need to smirk.”

“Well, by my calculation you need to win another five points to win.”

Stiles managed to get one more point using the same trick but Peter got another three. It wasn’t like this trick would be particularly useful in real life negotiations because Stiles honestly didn’t know if he was lying or telling the truth, which wouldn’t happen in the real world. Getting a couple of points against Peter in a game wouldn’t help him be better at dealing with him in discussions. So he tried again to go for the poker face approach, trying to appear calm and hoping his heart rate remained steady.
That approach failed every time.

“Remind me never to play poker with you,” Stiles said, as Peter marked another point on the pad.

“At least Argent won’t be able to hear your heartbeat,” Peter said. They tried a couple more hands and then there came a knock at the door and Miranda poked her head in to tell them lunch was being served. Peter thanked her, and then looked significantly at the glass on the desk.

“I never actually agreed to your forfeit,” Stiles said.

“Consider it encouragement to do better in future.”

“You know, people have shown that positive reinforcement works better than negative when it comes to behavioural conditioning.”

“If you beat me you can get chocolate. Now drink.”

Stiles reached out apprehensively. He took the glass in hand and sniffed at it. It didn’t smell much of anything.

“How do I know this isn’t going to poison me?” he asked.

“Because I want you to negotiate with Argent. You can’t do that if you’re poisoned.”

“But I might be less inclined to help you if you make me drink disgusting stuff.”

“Stiles, just drink the damn thing.”

Stiles took a tentative sip. The brown drink had a surprisingly fruity taste, water with a hint of sweetness. Stiles blinked at the unexpected pleasantness and then glared at Peter, who looked smug.

“That,” he said, “is how you bluff.”

“I hate you,” said Stiles.

“Water, a bit of fruit juice, and some food colouring. I could have made you drink something truly unpleasant. And you should finish it; I was telling the truth about it having vitamins.”

Stiles drank the rest of the coloured juice, glaring at Peter. Peter still seemed amused. He walked around the desk and stood next to Stiles, offering his arm for Stiles to lean on. Stiles stood and, on principle, limped out of the study without accepting Peter’s assistance.
Chapter 23

Stiles didn’t need to lean on anyone now. His leg was still sore but it was feeling better already and Derek had done the pain-sucky thing prior to leaving the house. Derek walked at Stiles’ side as they headed through the woods towards the boundary. Stiles’ dad had arranged for Stiles to meet with Argent and discuss the situation between the werewolves and the humans of Beacon Hills. Stiles fidgeted with the token of authority around his neck, worried about all the ways this could go wrong.

“It will be fine,” Derek said.

“You guys really need to quit it with the whole mind-reading thing,” Stiles muttered.

“You need to practice your poker with Peter.”

The story about the card game had got round the entire pack by the end of lunch. It wouldn’t have been too embarrassing, given how difficult it was to bluff a werewolf, except that everyone kept coming up to him to explain how it was no big deal because it was difficult to bluff the werewolf. The more he was told that, the more Stiles was frustrated and how badly he’d done in the game.

“There’s something else you need to remember,” Derek said.

“Yeah?”

“You can describe yourself as Peter’s messenger or representative, but nothing else. There are other terms which sound like synonyms but which have other connotations. You don’t want to accidentally imply you have powers that you don’t, or it could cause problems later.”

“So if someone calls me Peter’s envoy or something, I should correct them and say I’m a messenger?”

“Precisely. It probably doesn’t make much difference, but it’s better to be safe.”

It seemed simple enough. Stiles couldn’t help wonder what other terms Derek might be thinking of, and what special meanings they might have. He didn’t think this was the time to ask though. They’d reached the boundary line.

“Wish me luck,” Stiles said, trying to appear cheerful.

“Good luck.”

Stiles hobbled across the line and down to the road and his waiting jeep. He started it up and headed towards town. The meeting was going to be at the town hall, which added official weight. Yet another thing to remind Stiles how important this was and how much could go wrong if he screwed up.

The parking lot attached to the town hall was half empty. Stiles guessed there weren’t many people working here on a Sunday morning. There were a couple of press vans though. Stiles hesitated in the jeep for a moment before getting out and limping towards the door. Once they spotted him, the cameras started flashing. Stiles might have made a point of emphasizing the limp. It couldn’t hurt to draw people’s attention to the fact that the attack had been, to some extent at least, justified.

A couple of reporters tried to ask him about the meeting, but Stiles quickly said, “No comment.”
He hobbled up to the steps in front of the main doors. His dad came out, glaring at the reporters and then hurrying to Stiles’ side. Normally, Stiles would have shrugged off the help. Today, with those photographers behind him, he put an arm round his dad’s shoulder and leaned his weight on him while he half hopped up the steps. More reporters tried to ask questions of the sheriff, but he ignored them until they reached the door, which he shut in the face of one of the photographers. There were more pictures through the glass, but no one tried to follow them inside. Stiles continued leaning on his dad as they headed towards the meeting room.

“How’s the leg?” his dad asked.

“Much better than it was,” Stiles answered, without letting go of his dad. His dad had seen him at the big house, so he must know that Stiles was playing his injury up here. He was wearing a short-sleeved top to show his battered arms and the bruises on his face were now brilliant shades of purple, with notes of green and yellow in places. Leaning against his dad, he must look a particularly pitiful figure, which was exactly what Stiles was aiming for.

A door stood open, letting them in to a meeting room where others were already waiting. Chris Argent, Stiles recognised at once. There was a stern-looking woman that Stiles thought was his wife, Victoria. There were a couple of other men Stiles didn’t recognise, probably other hunters, and then Mr Poldon, the mayor. They stood when Stiles entered, but Stiles just hobbled over to an empty seat at the large, oak table, sitting before doing anything else.

There were photographs on the table. They were in a stack, so Stiles could only see the top one clearly, and a couple of fractions of the ones below, but they seemed to be documents of injuries.

“Mr Stilinski,” Chris Argent said, coming round the table to offer his hand.

“Just Stiles, please,” Stiles said, “or you might confuse me.” He jerked a head towards his dad, who was seating him. Stiles took Chris’ hand to shake for the briefest of moments, before letting go. It wasn’t quite as rude as refusing to shake hands, but it was still an obvious insult. Especially when Mr Poldon offered his hand and Stiles shook it firmly, holding the grip for more than a couple of seconds. The other hunters didn’t even bother offering their hands to Stiles to shake.

“It’s interesting that the werewolves would choose you as their emissary,” Victoria said.

“Representative,” Stiles corrected.

“Of course,” she said, smiling like she understood. She had the same cold smile as Peter. Mr Poldon just looked confused, but the hunters clearly grasped the significance of Stiles insisting on the term used to describe his role. Both the Argents also looked at the piece of wood hanging round Stiles’ neck in a way that suggested they knew exactly what it meant.

“Shall we begin?” Mr Poldon asked as they resumed their seats.

“Sure,” said Stiles. “I’m here to explain the reasons behind the recent crossing of the boundary line,” he avoided the word ‘attack’, “so that you can calm people down and prevent any violence.”

“Any further violence, you mean,” Victoria said.

“Oh, of course,” Stiles said. He waved a hand vaguely towards his face, using a gesture that also made a point of the scrapes and marks on his right forearm.

“The werewolves attacked an innocent boy,” Victoria continued. Stiles gave a snort.

“Sorry. I was just amused by your definition of the word innocent. Particularly since it seems like
you usually treat someone beating up an unarmed teenager as a reason to hold councils of war.”
Stiles gestured around the table to encompass the group sitting here now.

“Perhaps you should explain the werewolves’ perspective,” put in Chris.

“OK. It started a couple of days ago at school.”

“School?” Mr Poldon asked. “I thought you were a hostage of the pack.”

“Oh, I am, but they still let me go to school. They understand the importance of education. It’s probably because it’s a basic right that’s denied to their kids. Anyway, I was at school and I got in a bit of an argument with a guy named Marty and I ended up in detention for it. When I came out of detention, Marty and a bunch of his friends were waiting around to beat the crap out of me.”

“Language,” his dad interrupted.

“Sorry. Marty and his friends were waiting to beat me up. They only stopped because a friend of mine interrupted and said he’d called the cops. If he hadn’t done that, it could have been a lot worse. As it was, I ended up with a mass of bruises and a leg that we thought might have been broken. I went back to the werewolves and they were angry about this unprovoked violence and they didn’t trust any human justice to see that Marty was punished. So they decided to go for the eye-for-an-eye approach. Peter, the alpha of the pack, took it upon himself to punish Marty. You should note that he went for the perpetrator rather than the guys Marty roped in to help him; none of those guys were hurt. But Peter wanted to make sure that no one targeted me in the future, so he made the punishment of Marty public to emphasise that this was about justice for what was done to me.”

“You expect us to believe that a werewolf cared about what was done to you?” asked one of the hunters, one of the ones Stiles didn’t know.

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“Because they’re werewolves.”

“And? They’re still capable of empathy. Really you should look at the squishy human comics if you don’t believe me.”

“The what comics?” asked Mr Poldon.

“They’re some drawings done by one of the pack. Do you have a laptop I could use?”

“I’m sure one could be provided. Give me a minute.” He pulled his phone out and started typing a text. Stiles turned his attention back to the others, particularly the hunters who were still looking at him with a mixture of disbelief and dislike.

“My point,” Stiles said, “is that the violence the werewolves demonstrated was in answer to the violence that was done to me.”

“This time,” said Victoria.

Stiles had been expecting this. The pack had crossed the boundary twice in recent weeks and the first time had involved an assault on the sheriff’s station. It was unsurprising that Victoria wanted to talk about that as well as the mess with Marty.

“If we’re going to talk about the violence last time,” Stiles said, “are we going to talk about how your husband nearly shot a man in the head.”
“I nearly shot the werewolf who was in the middle of kidnapping you,” Chris said. “One might think you’d show a little gratitude.”

“The werewolf pack made a deal with me,” Stiles said. “I agreed to stay with the pack. My father decided to interfere with that deal by keeping me locked up, which I still say is unlawful arrest, by the way.” He shot that last in his dad’s direction, before returning his attention to Chris and Victoria. “The werewolves came to take me back. If I’d been allowed to leave, no one would have been hurt. As it was, the werewolves made a point to disarm rather than hurt the people who stood in their way. How many people were killed in that raid?”

There was a moment of silence, before Mr Poldon admitted, “None.”

“And how many people were killed the other night?”

“None,” he said again.

“Any serious injuries?”

Victoria glared at him across the table. Stiles took that as his answer.

“You can’t possibly claim that the werewolves have been justified in the times they’ve attacked us,” Chris said.

“All the times, I can’t comment on. The ones I know about, they were reacting to things that were done by humans. If humans stopped instigating fights, maybe the werewolves wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“Werewolves are killers,” Chris snapped.

“Werewolves are people. Sure, there are probably some werewolves who get violent and hurt people, but the same can be said of humans. No one’s suggesting we round all humans up and steal their property and cut them off from civilisation, just because Marty beat me up.”

“That’s different,” said Chris.

“Why?”

“Werewolves are violent animals. It’s in their nature to kill, to cause harm. Some may have better control of their instincts than others, but all of them have the potential to slaughter.”

“And that makes them different from humans, how?” Stiles asked.

“Werewolves have violence under the surface. At the full moon...”

Stiles cut Chris off, asking, “Have you ever spent the full moon with a werewolf pack? I have. They went for runs in the woods. They hung out with their family. They laughed and joked and had fun. I spent the full moon with a whole house full of werewolves and I never feared for my life.”

“You were lucky,” Victoria said. “There have been numerous documented cases of werewolves losing control on the full moon.”

“So let them learn control. Or make sure the ones who don’t have control are kept away from humans on that night. It doesn’t mean you have to take their entire society and lock them away.”

“You seem determined to argue that werewolves are peaceful,” Victoria said, “but they have attacked this town time and again. Back when the barrier first went up, they raided every other week
and would have continued if we hadn’t protected Beacon Hills.”

“What was the purpose of those raids?” Stiles asked.

“What?” She looked like the question had never occurred to her. Stiles pressed on in the confused silence.

“When the barriers went up, loads of people had been dispossessed. Werewolves who’d been living in towns and cities, doing ordinary jobs and living peaceful lives, were suddenly forced out into the wilderness. They were cut off from shops and food supplies. Why were they raiding the town? Were they maiming and killing for the sake of it? Or were they trying to steal food to keep from starving? Because if you’ve been leading a life-long vendetta over people stealing a loaf of bread, you’ll have to forgive me; I’m not sure my voice is up to a full rendition of Les Mis.”

He saw his dad chewing his lip, ducking his head behind a hand in the way he did when he was trying to fight a smile.

“Werewolves killed people before the barrier went up,” Chris said. “They killed my father.”

“A werewolf killed your father. Last I checked, Kali had nothing to do with the Hale pack.” Stiles had spent yesterday afternoon with Peter, going over the details of Argent’s history with werewolves to make sure Stiles could speak confidently about this. He’d recited the events that led up to the war so many times that he could probably recite them in his sleep now.

“Also,” Stiles went on, “you’re conveniently forgetting that your father had just murdered Kali’s girlfriend, a human by the way, along with two alphas, Ennis and Deucalion, and several other betas. Your father had gone to meet a group of werewolves to talk peace, and he’d set a trap for them. If one of the people hurt by that decided to take revenge, it hardly justifies alienating an entire minority group.”

“The werewolves started the fight at the summit,” Chris said.

“The werewolves say otherwise.”

“Of course they would. It doesn’t make it true.”

“Do you have any evidence that your father’s version of events is true?”

“The werewolves were invited to talk peace and they attacked. It’s in their nature.”

There was a nervous clearing of throat from behind Stiles. He turned and saw a young woman who looked barely older than Stiles. She had a laptop tucked under one arm.

“Ah, thank you,” said Mr Poldon. Stiles wasn’t sure if he was thanking her for the laptop or for interrupting the argument. He signalled for her to set the laptop down in front of Stiles. Stiles opened up a web browser and typed in the URL for Millie’s blog. Across the table, Chris continued to glare at him.

“Here,” Stiles turned the laptop round, showing Millie’s recent drawing on him and Derek, “this is what your violent monsters are like when they’re not being attacked.”

Chris and Victoria leaned forward to view the screen. The others stood, going to lean over their shoulders so they could see the drawing too.

“This is hardly evidence,” Chris said.
“When I got hurt, the werewolves fussed around taking care of me. This isn’t just some silly drawing, this is based on how the werewolves actually reacted when I got hurt. Humans hurt me, werewolves took care of me, and yet you’re still convinced that their entire people should be treated like violent animals and locked away from society.”

“Amusing as that is,” Mr Poldon said, “it doesn’t really change the situation at hand. We do have to deal with the very real problem of people being concerned about future attacks from across the boundary.”

Everyone returned to their seats. Stiles stared across the table at the mayor.

“OK,” he said, “here’s my idea for how to stop people worrying about the boundary alarms: get rid of them.”

Chris started to say something, undoubtedly a protest about how ridiculous this idea was. Stiles ignored him and kept talking to Mr Poldon.

“Take down the boundary. Let werewolves back into town. Let them get jobs. Let them buy food. Let the kids go to school. Give them back the assets that were stolen from them and let them lead ordinary lives, exactly the way they did before they were persecuted and driven in the wild.”

“If you’re not going to take this seriously,” Mr Poldon started.

“I am being completely serious. That’s the only way to make the situation right. Give the werewolves back their place in society.”

“We can’t have werewolves walking around freely among humans,” Victoria said. “There’s too much risk. Any one of them could snap and lose control. And the segregation is for their protection as well.”

“Bullshit,” Stiles said. His dad cleared his throat.

“If werewolves were in town, they might be attacked. We’ve seen what happens next when that happens: riots and violence and death. Werewolves can’t be trusted to stay in control.”

“But what about the kids?” Stiles asked. “They don’t start transforming until early teens. Your argument about them being ticking time bombs of destruction has absolutely no validity. They’re being denied their basic right to education for no reason whatsoever.”

“This is really beside the point,” said Victoria.

“No, it’s not. Those kids are kids. They deserve to have a decent education and they’ve been prevented from going to school. They’re not at risk of growing fangs or losing control, especially the little ones. Give me one good reason why those kids shouldn’t be allowed to come into town and go to a real school?”

“The parents of the other children wouldn’t like it,” she said.

“The parents of the white kids didn’t like it when the first black girl was accepted into a previously all-white school,” Stiles pointed out.

“You cannot compare the two situations,” Chris said.

“Why not? Segregation, people being denied their rights, an entire people held accountable for the actions of one or two. How does any of this differ from racism? You not wanting werewolf children
in a human school is no different from white parents refusing to let their kids associate with black students.”

“Werewolves are dangerous,” Chris said. “You’ve already seen how they reacted to you getting hurt. What happens if these children get in a playground scuffle? Next thing we know, we have werewolves pouring over the boundary to take out their anger on kids who were just being kids.”

“Here’s an idea,” said Stiles, “don’t let kids get beaten up.”

“My hunters have enough to do without trying to protect a bunch of wolf pups,” Chris said.

“I’m sure I could spare a deputy to keep things under control,” Stiles’ dad said. He’d been quiet for most of the meeting, but this one comment almost made Stiles want to hug him there and then. It sounded like, despite all his misgivings and his dislike of Peter and the others, and everything that he’d been put through, he was willing to back Stiles up against not just the hunters but the mayor of Beacon Hills as well.

Stiles couldn’t help smiling. He turned back to Chris, “There you go. Your objection is taken care of. Now there’s nothing to stop the werewolf kids from going to school tomorrow.”

“It’s not so simple,” Mr Poldon said. “Things like this take time to organise. Paperwork. Adjustments to class schedules. Security arrangements. It can’t just happen overnight.”

Stiles continued to smile though, because Mr Poldon was talking details. He was talking about arrangements that needed to be made, but arrangements meant yes. He was trying to delay things, but the tone had changed from a definite no to a someday. And no one was saying anything about attacking the pack. Stiles would count this as a victory.

“How long do you think it will take to arrange?” Stiles asked.

Mr Poldon shot a look towards Victoria.

“This isn’t really the subject of today’s meeting,” she said.

“I disagree. It’s about relations between the humans and the werewolves, which is exactly what today is about. Letting the kids go to school won’t put anyone at risk but it will give the pack one less reason to hate everyone. It’s good all round. Unless you’re scared of pre-pubescent children.” Stiles smiled at Victoria. She met his gaze coldly.

“I can sort out a protection detail tomorrow,” Stiles’ dad said, “when we go over shifts for the deputies. How long will it take for the necessary arrangements to be made with the schools? It should only take a couple of days really, but should we say a week to be on the safe side?”

Stiles couldn’t help smiling.

Chris leaned forward over the table, “Stiles, you may think you’re helping. You may think you’re doing the right thing, but the werewolves will hurt you. It’s only a matter of time. If you persist with this, you’ll see that they hurt everyone else as well.”
Stiles stood on the steps of the town hall, leaning against his dad. Chris Argent stood a few steps away from him, as though trying to clearly demonstrate that he wasn’t connected to them. Mr Poldon stood on the other side, the gap not quite as conspicuous. Cameras flashed in their faces and at least two video cameras were filming every moment. Stiles didn’t think he’d been so nervous since Peter’s rape test. At least then, no one had been filming the outcome.

Stiles was still trying to figure out a way to say, “Werewolves will be coming into town to go to school,” without causing mass panic.

Instead, he started on what had already happened.

“We have been speaking about the events that happened the night before last, when two werewolves crossed the boundary line. They came into town because I had recently been attacked by a group of young men. They beat me and injured me and only stopped because of the threat of police involvement; if that hadn’t happened, my injuries could have been much more severe. The werewolves decided that their only option to get justice was to track down the leader of the attack against me, just the leader by the way, and give him a beating no worse than the one he’d given me, to give a message that attacks will not go unpunished.”

Cameras were still flashing in his face. He could practically feel Chris Argent gritting his teeth beside him. Stiles kept talking, “I’m sure some people will say that an eye for an eye is not a suitable method of justice, but it should be noted that werewolves have zero access to any normal form of justice system. They are not allowed to report crimes in the way humans can. They do not have the same options. Whether you agree with their actions or not, the ordinary people of Beacon Hills are safe. All you have to do to ensure you are not on the receiving end of pack justice is not go around beating people up who are under the protection of the pack.”

“Myself and my hunters,” Chris cut in, “will still be working to defend the people of Beacon Hills. Should the werewolves again attempt to hurt a citizen of Beacon Hills, whether they think it’s justified or not, we will be there to protect them.”

“But only if they’re attacking,” Stiles said. “Because there are children in the werewolf pack, children who’ve been denied any formal education. The younger ones will be coming into Beacon Hills to attend school, for some of them, this will be for the first time in their lives.”

Stiles tried not to see the reaction on people’s faces. Those people paused the camera flashing to just stare at him, shock and worry written on their expressions. Stiles smiled, trying to make it seem that this would be perfectly fine.

“The sheriff’s department will be on hand,” his dad said, “to ensure there is no violence on either side. These children will be coming to attend school, which is their legal right as citizens of the United States. There is no need for alarm.”

“And my hunters will be watching to make sure that the werewolves don’t take advantage of this decision. We will be on guard to protect Beacon Hills for as long as this... this experiment continues.”

“These children are not a threat,” Stiles said. “I think that’s important to remember. They’re young enough that they haven’t begun to experience the transformations that adult werewolves are capable of. They’re just innocent kids who deserve a chance to learn. That’s what we should focus on here.”
He didn’t believe for a second that anyone would focus on that, but at least that was on the record.

“Sheriff Stilinski,” one of the reporters said, “how do you respond to objections that you are soft on the werewolf issue?”

“My first priority is to protect the citizens of Beacon Hills. That’s what I’m focused on.”

“Mr Poldon, if werewolf children can cross the boundary, does this mean werewolf adults can follow?”

“No. Only the young children will be allowed.”

“Does this mean our children will be in the same classes as werewolves?”

“Yes,” said Mr Poldon, “but the sheriff’s department will be overseeing the schools to protect the children.”

“All children,” Stiles’ dad added. “We will also be protecting the werewolf children from harm. We wouldn’t want any repetition of the events of the other night.”

“But does that mean you won’t be protecting people from retribution from the pack?”

“Of course we will be protecting people, but that doesn’t mean we should invite violence. And remember, these are still just children. They don’t deserve to be attacked for what they are. I think that’s enough questions for now.”

With an arm around Stiles, he started down the steps. Stiles was fairly sure Chris Argent was still glaring at him, but he went along with his dad, pushing through the crowd of reporters to his jeep. After helping him inside, his dad muttered, “I’ll be right behind you.”

Sure enough, the sheriff’s cruiser followed behind him all the way back to the pack. When Stiles parked, his dad parked behind him and followed him up to the boundary line, where Derek was waiting.

“Can I?” Stiles’ dad gestured at the boundary line.

“I’m sure Peter will want to talk to you,” Derek said, gesturing for them both to cross. Stiles had stopped leaning on his dad now, walking with a painful limp but carrying his own weight. Derek noticed the limp though.

“Do you need me to?” he asked. He gestured towards the leg.

“I’ll be fine,” Stiles said.

“How did the meeting go?” Derek asked.

“I think the little ones will hate me now. They get to go to school.”

“What?”

Stiles gave the quick summary, “Any kid who hasn’t started to shift will be allowed to cross the boundary line and attend school with human children.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It’s not perfect. I mean, they’ll only get half an education.”
“But people are agreeing to let us back into town.”

“Only those of you who can’t sprout fangs and claws.”

“Stiles, will you stop arguing with me when I’m trying to thank you!” Derek snapped. Stiles drew a finger and thumb across his mouth in a zipping motion while Derek glared. “Thank you, Stiles, for getting our children this opportunity.”

“Mmm mmm-mmm,” Stiles said, lips pressed firmly together.

Derek muttered, “Idiot,” and tried to suppress a smile. Stiles turned his head a little to flash a smile of victory at his dad, who was watching the whole exchange with his own lips pressed firmly together. His expression wasn’t one of mocking though, but of concern. He probably still worried about Stiles getting hurt, so watching Stiles tease Derek must be scary for him. Stiles had hoped he was doing better at convincing his dad he was OK.

“How do the hunters feel about the situation?” Derek asked.

“Furious,” Stiles answered. “I think there was a point where Victoria Argent wanted to leap over the negotiating table and throttle me.”

“Are the kids going to be in danger?”

“No,” Stiles’ dad said. He explained about getting deputies to supervise the situation. It would help reassure the humans that someone was there to protect the kids, but they’d also be there to stop anyone who took it upon themselves to defend the town from a pre-teen menace.

They reached the big house and Derek took them straight through to Peter’s study. Peter held out a hand and Stiles took the wooden token from around his neck and handed it over, placing it on Peter’s palm. Peter closed his hand into a fist around it.

“Well?” he asked. So Stiles summed up the meeting once again, explaining everything he’d just told Derek about the plan, adding in the details about when it would happen and about how it had been announced in the press.

Peter had his poker face on so Stiles couldn’t tell what he was thinking. For the first time since the meeting, Stiles wondered if maybe Peter wouldn’t like this outcome. Maybe he’d think Stiles was trying to steal his kids and he’d get angry and do all the terrible punishment things he’d threatened. Maybe he was scared that the kids would get hurt outside of the pack’s defences.

But Peter looked at the sheriff and asked, “Will you be personally picking the deputies who will be supervising the situation?”

“I will.”

“You will need to make sure every child is supervised at all times. The hunters won’t be the only ones out to hurt these children.”

“My deputies will be on hand and I’ll make sure that they’re there to protect the werewolves from any violence, as well as to calm parents that the human kids aren’t in any danger.”

Peter nodded, apparently satisfied.

“This is a difficult situation,” Stiles’ dad continued. “A lot of people will be very upset about it. Argent and the hunters will leap on any excuse to end this. If one of the pack children gives another
child so much as a bruise, half the town will declare it proof that this is too dangerous and force a return to segregation.”

“I understand the situation,” said Peter, “but this is also our opportunity to prove that we’re not animals. The eyes of the entire country will be on us. I will see that the children understand what is being asked of them.”

“Well, I guess I should go then. I’m sure I’ll have a lot of upset people to deal with.” Stiles’ dad started to leave.

“One more thing,” Peter said, stopping him with a gesture. “Stiles, I made you a promise that if you did well, we would discuss your situation here. Sheriff, while Stiles is here, you are free to visit him. You can cross the boundary as you wish without penalty and come to and from the house. You are free to walk anywhere else in our territory so long as you are accompanied by Stiles or one of the others in the pack. I think we can extend the same invitation out to Scott as well. He seemed like a nice boy, unlikely to bring wolfsbane laced weapons into the house.”

It was something. Given how protective Peter was about territory, Stiles knew this was a huge deal for him, but it wasn’t quite the freedom Stiles was hoping for. Perhaps Peter saw some of the disappointment on Stiles’ face.

“I will also allow Stiles to spend one night a week away from the pack. You will discuss with me beforehand which night, so we know whether to expect you back after school.”

Stiles guessed this was as good as it was going to get, so he said a quiet, “Thanks.” Maybe there would be other opportunities to serve the pack in future that would let him expand on these freedoms.

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Peter sat the kids down in the living room. There were nine of them young enough that they hadn’t started shifting yet. They looked up at Peter expectantly and Stiles was certain that someone had eavesdropped on the meeting in the study and they already knew what this was about. Still, they listened attentively as Peter explained that in about a week they would start going to school in the town with human students.

“This may be difficult for you,” Peter said, “for a number of ways. Firstly, you have been learning different things with the pack and in different ways. You may not have studied all the things your human classmates have. Remember, this doesn’t make you stupid. You probably know a lot of things that they don’t. Just work and catch up. I’m sure Stiles, Kendra and Damian will help you to figure out anything you get stuck on. There may be things people expect you to know about schools that you have no way to know. Remember, there is no shame in asking. This will be new to you. Do you understand?”

Peter paused, looking each child in the eye, making sure that they all nodded their agreement. They looked nervous but excited. Stiles didn’t think he’d ever seen a group of kids so excited to go to school. He just hoped that excitement would last beyond their first class.

“There’s another reason this might be difficult,” Peter said. “Humans aren’t all like Stiles. You know that they can be bad. Some of the teachers might not like that they have to teach you. Some of the other children might not like that you are in their classes. People might say mean things to you, they might call you names or talk about werewolves in a horrible way. You cannot get angry. Even if they upset you, remember that you know what’s true. Ignore anything bad people say and think about what you know about being a werewolf. We have to prove that we’re not like the bad people
say we are. So if someone calls you a violent animal, you can prove that that person is an idiot by staying calm. We have to be better than they are. Do you understand?”

The kids were looking scared now, but they still nodded their agreement to Peter.

“Stiles’ father will be sending people he trusts to watch over you. They will make sure you’re safe, but if you play with the other children, it might get rough. I’ve seen how you play.”

He looked pointedly at Alfie and Ted, two boys who were practically the embodiment of the term rough-housing when they got going.

“You can’t do that with the humans. You can’t shove them or fight with them. Even if it’s just in fun. Even if they start it. If some mean boy shoves you in the playground, you can’t shove back. Go and tell a teacher or one of the sheriff’s people. If people are mean to you, tell someone, but you can’t be mean back. If anyone hurts you, tell me when you get home from school and I will make certain they never touch you again. But you can’t act directly yourselves. A lot of people are going to be watching what happens here so you have to be on the best possible behaviour. You are going to show people how good and kind and nice werewolves can be.”

Once again, Peter made a point of looking at each of them in turn. There was a smile on his face that Stiles thought might actually be genuine.

“You can do this,” he said. “All of you. You are good and you are going to let everyone see it. Together, we’re going to prove the hunters wrong.”
Chapter 25

Stiles didn’t know what to expect when he went into school on Monday. He just knew it wasn’t going to be good. By now, the entire town would know that Peter had beaten Marty and why. They’d also know about the arrangement for the werewolf kids and that Stiles had been involved in that. Stiles’ picture had probably been plastered all over the news talking about the deal.

He parked his jeep in front of the school and knew that eyes turned towards it. He climbed out and saw the faces turn towards him, and then quickly turn away. He started walking towards the building, limping a little. Whenever he turned his head, he saw eyes quickly avoiding his. Conversations fell silent as he walked past, as though he was walking in a personal bubble of quiet. No one said a single word to him.

He reached his locker and sorted out his books for the first classes, making sure he had the assignments ready. A girl a couple of lockers down fumbled her things and she dropped a book. It hit the floor and bounced against Stiles’ foot. She dived down to retrieve it.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly.

“For what?” Stiles asked. She looked scared, like she expected Stiles to snap and claw her eyes out for daring to let her book nudge his shoe.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. She slammed her locker shut and hurried away. Stiles looked around and saw at least a dozen people staring at him. They’d just seen someone flee in terror from him. Did they think he’d done something to scare her?

He made his way to his first class, past more avoiding eyes. They were all scared. He’d expected them to be angry or upset. He hadn’t expected the entire school to be terrified of him. He went into the class and sat down. Those that were there already were carefully studying their notes and trying not to see that Stiles existed.

Thankfully, Scott came in and slid into the seat next to him.

“Hey,” Stiles said. Scott was rummaging in his bag for his stuff and for one horrible instant Stiles was afraid that Scott might ignore him too.

Then Scott straightened with a smile and a, “Hey. How you feeling?”

“Better. Looks like the leg is definitely not broken.”

“That’s good news.”

“By the way, you’ve got an open invitation to visit me with the pack any time you like.”

“Really?”

“My reward for helping get the little ones into school. You and Dad are allowed to visit me.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“Of course it’s good,” Stiles said. He wondered if Scott was still scared of coming into the territory, even with an official invite. Maybe he could fix that. “Hey, do you want to come over after school today? I’ve promised the kids a Steven Universe marathon. Could be fun.”
“I’ve got work tonight.”

“Oh. Right.”

Stiles tried not to feel disappointed. After all, work was a valid reason. It didn’t meant that Scott didn’t want to be there. It didn’t mean that Scott was shunning him too.

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The rest of the day past in much the same way. Aside from Scott, the entire student population seemed determined to pretend that Stiles didn’t exist. Most of the teachers were the same. Coach was the only one that called on him like usual, even asking him if all those blows to the head had mashed his brains when he got a question wrong.

“Guess so, Coach,” Stiles said with a grin. At least one person, aside from Scott, here wasn’t scared of him.

There was no sign of Marty or any of the guys who’d taken part in the attack. Stiles wasn’t sure if they were just being good at avoiding him or if they’d skipped school entirely. He wondered if Peter had scared them into another school district. Or maybe his dad had got the school to suspend them for fighting on school grounds, since they’d apparently admitted to attacking Stiles. He glimpsed Jackson in the distance, but Jackson was quick to evade him.

It was a strangely lonely experience. Stiles had never been popular, but school had never been like this. People he’d been able to exchange hellos with in the past, now pretended he wasn’t there. In classes, everyone tried to leave seats around him empty. He wanted to scream that he was still the same person. He wanted to tell them that he wasn’t dangerous, that they didn’t need to be afraid of him. Instead, he walked around in his bubble of silence and felt every stare like a weight resting on his shoulders.

He was glad when the school day finally ended. He hurried out of the building, wanting to escape the oppressive weight of fear. He headed down the steps and then froze, seeing the woman in the smart suit standing next to his jeep, a cardboard folder tucked under one arm. She looked like a lawyer or something, from the perfect hair to the shiny shoes. Stiles wondered if he was about to get sued by the hunters or something.

He was tempted to go and hide, but she’d seen him now. She turned and flashed him two rows of perfect teeth in a professional smile. Stiles tried not to look nervous. He walked up to his jeep. At least he could drive away if he didn’t like what she had to say. And she didn’t look like she was about to beat him up.

“Can I help you?” Stiles asked.

“Mr Stilinski? I’m Audrey Whitefoot. I’ve been assigned to coordinate between the school board and the werewolves.”

So not trying to sue him then.

“OK,” said Stiles. “So why aren’t you going to the pack to talk to the alpha then?”

He already knew the answer, but it was fun watching her squirm. She was scared to approach the pack directly. She didn’t know if she’d end up mauled if she stepped across the boundary line. She wanted Stiles to act as messenger for her.

“I’m hoping you can pass this on to the pack,” Ms Whitefoot said. She held out the cardboard folder.
“We need to gather details of the students that are to be enrolled. We also need to test their educational level to see which grade they should be placed in.”

So they weren’t going to necessarily be placed with kids of their own age. Stiles supposed that made sense as the kids might be behind in their education in certain areas. He just hoped that wouldn’t make it even more difficult for them to make friends and fit in with the other students. Having had one day of being a pariah, Stiles hoped that the kids wouldn’t experience that regularly.

He took the folder and opened it, flipping through the contents. There were the student detail forms and a stack of test booklets with separate answer sheets, as well as instructions for administering the test.

“Do you need someone to officially observe the test to make sure the kids follow the rules?” Stiles asked.

“I think that won’t be necessary,” she said. “As long as someone watches them and makes sure they don’t cheat.”

In other words, she was supposed to observe the test but really, really didn’t want to. Stiles partly wanted to watch her squirm, but he also felt the need to show her that werewolves weren’t vicious monsters. Part of the point of this whole exercise was to demonstrate that werewolves were people. He could change opinion one person at a time.

“You really should talk to Peter about this,” Stiles said. “You’ll be safe. You’ll be coming to the territory as a messenger and so the werewolves will respect that. You’ll only be in danger if you attack one of the pack. You’re not planning on doing that, are you?”

“Of course not,” she said.

“Then you’ve got nothing to worry about. Do you want a lift or will you follow me in your own car?” He didn’t give her an option to say no. He just acted as though she’d already agreed to come to the pack.

“I’ll follow,” she said.

Stiles got into his car and waited for her to get into a sleek, silver number a few spaces away. He pulled out slowly and took care that she was behind him before he drove out of the parking lot. She followed close behind as Stiles headed to the preserve. He hoped he hadn’t overstepped his authority here now. He’d handed his bit of wood back to Peter so he wasn’t speaking on behalf of the pack anymore. He wasn’t sure Peter would be OK with Stiles just casually inviting people into the territory, but at least she was genuinely a messenger and here about the kids.

Stiles parked and Ms Whitefoot parked behind him. As she climbed out of her car, she looked with distaste at the edge of the road. She’d pulled off the road a little and now the wheels of her shiny, silver number were in the dirt. She didn’t say anything though, just walked over to Stiles, who had his schoolbag over one shoulder and the folder in the other hand. He started walking towards the boundary line and let her follow.

It was slow progress, and not just because the heels of her shoes kept sinking into the earth. She clearly didn’t want to be here. She paused by the warning signs.

“That’s not even the real boundary,” Stiles said. He pointed, “That’s the real boundary.”

Ms Whitefoot walked past the warning signs but she didn’t seem any less nervous. Each step seemed to be a little slower as she approached the trees with their carved marks. She was pale and suddenly
seeing her squirm didn’t seem nearly as much fun anymore.

“You really don’t have to worry,” Stiles said. “You’re here to help their kids get an education. Why would they want to hurt you?”

“You hear stories about how they lose control and attack people.”

“Well I’ve been here weeks now and the only people who’ve attacked me have been humans. I promise, you’ll be safe. As long as you’re not trying to hurt them.”

Ms Whitefoot stepped carefully between the carved trees. She looked about her, as though she expected werewolves to leap out of the trees and tear her apart from this act. Stiles remembered his first journey across the boundary line and how certain he’d been that he was going to die. Now he didn’t even think about it. He gave Ms Whitefoot an encouraging smile and started walking towards the house.

They’d made it a few hundred yards when Boyd stepped out of the trees. Ms Whitefoot gave a yelp of fear. Stiles wished someone less intimidating had been on patrol today, but he doubted anyone could have put her at ease.

“She’s here about the school places for the little ones,” Stiles explained.

Boyd nodded and told Ms Whitefoot, “Peter will want to talk to you.”

He left Stiles to show the way and he melted into the trees. Ms Whitefoot looked nervously over her shoulder for a little bit, but she carried on walking alongside Stiles. They reached the house and she blinked in surprise at the garden and the werewolves tending it. Stiles remembered how strange it had struck him as the home for a pack of werewolves. The werewolves looked at her with suspicion, but no one made a move to attack her.

Stiles let her into the house. Peter was already there, waiting near the door to the study. Stiles wondered if Peter had been able to smell the approach of another human. He looked at her now with distrust.

“Ms Whitefoot,” Stiles said, “this is Peter Hale, alpha of this pack. Peter, this is Ms Audrey Whitefoot, here to discuss the arrangements for the children’s education. Apparently there are forms to be filled out and tests that the kids need to take so that they can be placed in the right class for their learning level.”

Stiles handed over the folder. Peter took it without taking his eyes of Ms Whitefoot.

“Do you need to meet the children?” he asked.

“It’s not necessary, but I will need the personal details of each of them so that their school records can be created.” Her voice was surprisingly clear considering how terrified she looked. Peter nodded.

“Come. I will look over these materials. Stiles, I’m sure you have homework to be getting on with.”

There could be no mistaking that dismissal. Stiles left Peter to it, confident that Ms Whitefoot would be left intact when this was all over. He went into the living room and wrestled his laptop back from Alfie, who’d been reading about pandas.

“Is that another human in with Peter?” he asked in an excited whisper.

“Yep. She’s here to talk about you starting school.”
“Is school awesome?”

Stiles considered the question carefully. “It can be. It depends on the teachers and the other kids. Some teachers are fantastic, some are boring, some are mean. My chemistry teacher, Mr Harris, is absolutely evil. If you get a good teacher, it can be a really good experience. And if you make friends with the other kids, then you can have lots of fun during recess and group projects. But sometimes the other kids can be mean. You won’t know until it starts, but if you go in there being nice to the other kids and well behaved to the teachers, then there’s a good chance they’ll like you and then it will be great.”

He didn’t want to oversell things because he was realistic about the sort of prejudice the kids were likely to face, but there was no need to scare him, because sometimes kids could be the most understanding people in the world. It was a bit of a roulette right now.

Alfie looked like he was going to ask more questions, but Stiles explained that he had work to finish up for his school. Alfie nodded and left him to it. He was halfway through a sociology paper when the door opened and Millie bounded in, claiming the space next to Stiles. Ted and Alfie came in soon after, the other kids drifting in behind them. Stiles managed two more words of his paper before giving his concentration up for lost.

“How was your school?” Millie asked. “Do you have any more videos of the shouty man?”

Stiles wasn’t sure he was up to trying to explain Coach's use of economics jargon to a roomful of kids.

“I think we’d better spend more time on the basics of economics before I show you more of Coach’s videos. Those lessons are intended for people my age. But I’ll keep them safe for when you’re ready.”

Stiles was almost grateful when the door opened again. This time it was Peter who came in, Ms Whitefoot following behind him. She still looked nervous, but not quite as terrified as before. She stood beside Peter, the kids looking up at her with awed confusion.

“This is Ms Whitefoot,” Peter said. “She has a test for you to take. This is a test to find out how much you know so that when you go to school, you’ll be with other children who know the same sort of things. It’s important that you do your test quietly and not try to help each other out or use the computer. If you don’t know something, the school needs to know so that they know the right things to teach you. Ms Whitefoot is going to give each of you a test and then you have to sit quietly for an hour and fill it out. If you don’t know an answer, there’s nothing wrong with that, just skip that question and do the next one.”

She handed out the test booklets. The children looked excited. Stiles couldn’t remember ever seeing anyone excited by a surprise test.

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Stiles finished his sociology assignment during the test and then rewarded the kids for their good behaviour by letting them watch two illegally downloaded episodes of Steven Universe before dinner. He didn’t buy it for a second when Isaac came in to ‘supervise the kids’ during the show.

The following day, after another stretch of being ignored by most of the staff and students, Stiles wondered if people lurking by his jeep was going to turn into a disturbing pattern. This time, it was Dr Deaton who stood waiting for him, a large wooden box at his feet. Stiles walked over to him, wondering what the hell the vet would be doing waiting here for him. Unless this had something to
do with the boundary. Stiles still didn’t know how Deaton was involved in the setting up of the boundary between the town and the pack, and he was burning with curiosity about it.

“Stiles,” Deaton said.

“Deaton. Did you just come here to tell me my name?”

“I came to give you this,” he gestured at the box, “and a message, since Peter will not speak to me himself.”

“What is it?” Stiles asked, crouching down to get a better look at the box. It was a little over a foot long each side, made of heavy wood, with a triple spiral engraved into the middle of the lid, exactly the same as the mark Peter had carved into the token of authority. The lid was attached with iron hinges and sealed shut with a heavy iron lock. There were iron handles on two sides so that it could be carried. Stiles tried to open the lid but it was locked.

“Peter has a key,” Deaton said. A key, Stiles noted, not the key.

“What’s in there?”

“Peter will know.”

That was worryingly evasive.

“This isn’t going to explode or something is it?”

“No.”

Stiles looked at Deaton with suspicion.

“No, Stiles, it’s not a bomb. Peter will know what it means. Give the box to him and tell him that it doesn’t seem right for me to keep it since it appears he’s chosen a replacement. He will know what I’m referring to.”
Derek wondered if there was a way to paint the ceiling that didn’t result in aching arms from the position and getting paint all over his hair. The roller, which made the paintwork quicker and more even, had the nasty side effect of sending fine droplets of paint down on him while he worked. The new building was almost finished now. A few final touches of paint and then they could start moving the furniture over from the workshop. Hopefully Stiles would be able to order actual mattresses for the beds, because the early experiments with rope-strung frames and straw mattresses had not ended well.

And then Stiles would get a real bed. He needed to remind himself that this was a good thing. Stiles was probably getting backache from sleeping on an air mattress for so long. It was better for everyone if Stiles could get a bed of his own, and Derek would no longer need to share with Isaac.

And it was probably also a good thing if his room stopped smelling so thoroughly of Stiles. They weren’t an item. Stiles had only come here because he’d made a deal to save his dad. It wasn’t like he actually wanted to be with Derek. Stiles had made it perfectly clear that he’d be out of here in an instant if he were given the chance. It wasn’t decent behaviour for Derek to want Stiles’ scent around his bed. It was creepy. And if he told himself that a thousand more times, he might stop being disappointed that Stiles was going to get a real bed soon.

He finished painting the ceiling in the last of the bedrooms. At least, he’d finished the first coat of paint. Given that there were only two cans of paint left, second coats were out of the question unless Peter decided it was worth sending Stiles to buy more. At least the walls weren’t bare plaster anymore. It wasn’t like the lighting in here was good enough for people to scrutinise the paintwork too closely.

Derek declared victory and went to clean the roller under the outside tap. Then he went to clean himself. He wasn’t due for a shower for another two days, so he ran water into the sink and dunked his head under it, trying to rinse out the paint before it dried too much. He ended up looking like a drowned animal, with his hair sticking out at all angles, but at least it no longer looked like he was going prematurely grey.

He decided it was good enough and checked his watch. Stiles should be getting back from school soon. Actually, Stiles should be getting back from school right about now, but Derek refused to be worried about a minute’s delay. He might be hanging out with Scott, or he might have gotten detention again. There might have been bad traffic. It wasn’t like he timed his arrival to the exact second.

But Derek decided it wouldn’t hurt to walk out towards the boundary to meet Stiles as he got home.

He started out between the trees, getting about halfway towards the boundary when the huffing breaths became noticeable. Someone was coming towards him with obvious effort. He slowed down, curious and concerned, but it was Stiles’ scent that came on the breeze and Derek relaxed a little. He went to the source of the huffing and saw Stiles limping along, a large box held in front of him.

“What the hell’s that?” Derek asked.

Stiles lowered the box to the ground and puffed a little. That was when Derek saw the mark on the lid, the triskele engraved in the wood.
“It’s from Deaton. He promised me that it won’t blow up but didn’t tell me anything about what it is. I’m supposed to give it to Peter.”

Derek approached slowly, cautiously. Peter seemed convinced now that Deaton was an enemy, but Derek didn’t think he’d send Stiles with a weapon, especially not one marked with the pack’s symbol. The most obvious explanation for this box was that it was some remnant from his emissary days, but that didn’t explain why he would give it back to Peter now.

“Are you going to help me carry this thing?” Stiles asked. “Or are you just going to stand there staring at it like it’s full of live snakes. Holy crap, it’s not full of live snakes, is it?”

“I don’t hear hissing,” Derek said. He wasn’t sure what Deaton might have in there. Books? Artefacts? Derek remembered the triskele symbol carved on a piece of wood, an old amulet that Peter had used to try and teach him control before acknowledging that it was a placebo. Deaton might have had actual objects of power.

Derek took hold of the handles, feeling the trace of warmth Stiles’ hands had left on them, and lifted the box up. He carried it back towards the house. Stiles adjusted his schoolbag and followed.

“Why do you have paint on the back of your head?” Stiles asked, after a minute. Derek sighed.

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In the house, Derek carried the box to Peter’s study. He set the box down in the middle of the desk. Peter stared at it, shock and anger showing on his face. He looked up sharply at Derek.

“Where did you get this?” he demanded. Derek looked to Stiles.

“Deaton gave it to me to give to you,” Stiles said. “He said it didn’t seem right for him to keep it since you seem to have picked a replacement. Didn’t tell me what the hell that means or what’s inside it, but he said you’d have a key.”

Peter stood over the box, running his hands over the wood to the lock, a finger tracing over the keyhole. So this was something to do with Deaton having been the pack’s emissary. And now he thought that Peter had picked someone else for the role. Derek looked across at Stiles.

“So what’s in the box?” Stiles asked.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Peter snapped.

Derek frowned, puzzled, “But if he’s...”

“It’s nothing to do with Stiles!” Peter snarled. He glared at Stiles, “You’ve done what you were told to do now get out of here. Make yourself useful somewhere.”

Stiles took a nervous step back and asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

“Just get out!” Peter continued to glare as Stiles quickly let himself out of the study, shutting the door with more force than was necessary. Derek was still confused. He wanted to hurry after Stiles and make sure he hadn’t been too upset, but he didn’t to understand more.

“Deaton thinks you’ve chosen Stiles to be the new emissary.”

“Stiles is a child,” Peter said.

“He did well negotiating with the Argents.”
Peter’s hand was now on the lid of the box, tracing the lines of the spirals. Derek had thought Peter liked Stiles. He didn’t understand why Peter would be so opposed to Stiles being involved in the pack. Unless the fact that Peter liked him was the reason he was so opposed.

“He doesn’t understand any of this,” Peter said. “He’s a child who’s been sheltered from the truth his entire life and now he thinks he knows everything because he’s glimpsed one or two secrets. He’s no emissary.”

“Peter, you can bluff him, but you can’t bluff me. Why don’t you want Stiles as emissary? Really?”

Peter glared at Derek.

“He’s a child. This world is dangerous. He jumps in without thinking. If I offer him this, he’ll jump in head first without knowing what it really means. Without knowing the risks.”

“You’re afraid,” Derek said, whispering the words so that they wouldn’t escape this room.

“There are dangerous people out there. Right now, he’s our prisoner. As far as the hunters are concerned, he’s a victim to be saved, helping us because he doesn’t have a choice. If he makes this choice, he’ll be siding with us and that will get him killed. No. I won’t make him the emissary.”

Derek wasn’t used to Peter speaking in this protective way about anyone who wasn’t family. He was trying to shield Stiles. Derek knew that Peter would never admit this to anyone except him, but Peter actually cared about protecting Stiles. Only naturally his way of doing so was to yell at Stiles and send him away, to prove to the world that Stiles was just a prisoner and Peter didn’t give a damn.

“He’s already sided with us, as far as the hunters are concerned.” Derek said. “He publicly spoke out against the way things are. Maybe you could explain what this means. Talk to him about being an emissary. Teach him. Let him make an informed decision instead of deciding no without asking him. Maybe this would give him weapons to use against our enemies.”

Peter’s hand froze for a moment in its trailing across the box. He clenched that hand around one of the handles.

“We don’t even know if he can be taught.” Peter said. “There are skills beyond arguing on behalf of the pack and carrying messages. I don’t know if Stiles has the capacity to learn those skills and even if he does, I’m not going to send him to Deaton to learn.”

“Maybe there’s someone else who could teach him.”

Peter dismissed that idea with a shake of his head, “Most of the emissaries are dead or in hiding.”

“It doesn’t have to be an emissary,” Derek said. “There are some werewolves who’ve been around a long while and who’ve picked up skills from working with druids and others.”

“And by some werewolves, you mean Satomi.”

“She can at least help us find out if Stiles can learn the emissary’s skills.”

Peter sank into his chair, staring at the box.

Derek was certain Satomi would be able to help them. She’d probably put a heavy price on her assistance though; she was a shrewd negotiator. Still, she could be trusted. Their packs had been friends and allies since before the war and the segregation. They’d traded resources in the scarce times. It had been Satomi who’d introduced them to the kitsune woman who’d helped them trade
outside the packs for the solar panels and the water filters, and so many other things that had made their survival possible in the early years.

“I don’t want Stiles to know what this is about,” Peter said. “Not at first at least. Not until we know whether or not he can even be trained.”

“You want Satomi to test whether he can learn the old skills without Stiles even knowing what’s being tested? How would that even work?”

“I will consider the options.”

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Stiles still had no idea what had been in the mystery box. No one mentioned it. When Stiles tried to ask Derek about it, Derek had told him to just forget it. Peter glared at Stiles over dinner and then summoned him to his study. Stiles was starting to feel like he’d committed some terrible crime in bringing the box in.

He walked into the study and looked around. The box was gone. There was no sign that it had even been there. Stiles sat down in front of the desk, wondering if Peter was going to growl and snarl at him this time, or skip straight to the death threats. He walked round to his seat and sat down, resting his elbows on the desk and casually linking his fingers in front of him.

“I notice,” Peter said, “that I offered you some amendments to our arrangement and you haven’t taken advantage of either of them. You could have invited your friend over.”

“I did actually, but he had to work.”

Peter nodded. “I would have expected you to have rejoiced at a chance to spend the night at your father’s house though.”

“I thought I could do that on Friday,” Stiles said. His plan had been to go to his dad’s after school on Friday, have dinner with his dad, stay the night, and then spend a bit of time with him in the morning. Peter’s mouth narrowed into a hard line.

“Friday is not a good day,” Peter said.

“Why not?”

“I have plans for you.”

“Is it possible for you to make that sound any more ominous?” Stiles asked.

“I am sending Derek to trade with another pack. I had planned for you to accompany him. It seems rumours of having a human with us have spread. We wish to capitalise on your ability to cross the boundary and it will be easier to prove that you are... cooperative if you’re with him.”

“So basically you want me to go along with Derek to prove that you actually do have a pet human who can run errands for you?”

“Exactly. You don’t have to do anything except be there. You won’t even need to take part in the negotiations; Derek will handle that.”

“How do I know they’re not human-haters who’ll take this opportunity to get revenge for every horrible thing humans have ever done to them?”
Peter looked at Stiles steadily, their eyes meeting across the surface of the desk. When he spoke, it was in a calm and considered way.

“Stiles,” he said, “I wouldn’t send you if I weren’t sure you’d be safe.”

And strangely, Stiles had no trouble believing him.
Stiles had an evening with his dad. It was pleasant in a subdued way. Stiles went back to his house and did homework until his dad came home from work. They ate dinner together about talked about school, about the pack, about the preparations the kids were making for the following week.

“They’re all so excited,” Stiles said. “I can’t help feel like they’ll get some crappy teacher or some mean classmates and they’ll be disillusioned by lunchtime.”

“It really matters to you what happens to these kids, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. I mean, they’re kids. They didn’t fight in the war, they haven’t hurt anyone, but they’re paying the price for all the shit that went down when they were tiny.”

“Language,” his dad muttered.

“Sorry. My point is that they shouldn’t be cut off from education, and food, and steady supply of fresh water because of things that their parents did. And if Peter can be believed, a lot of what happened wasn’t really the parents’ fault either. They were persecuted and vilified because of one killer.”

“Do you believe Peter?”

Stiles considered the question. He thought about everything Peter had said. He thought about all the things he’d taken for granted and the way his expectations had been turned on their head since he’d gone out to the pack. He thought about everything Derek had told him about Peter’s decision to make him pet, and the way Peter had gone after the guys who’d attacked him.

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “I believe Peter. I mean, he’s secretive and he’s been known to threaten me and I still have no clue what’s in that box and it’s driving me crazy, but I believe him. When he talks about the way the war started, it just makes sense.”

“Tell me,” his dad said.

So Stiles repeated the story Peter had told him about the Argents and the start of the war. His dad listened. At the end, he was quiet for a minute.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “It does make sense. It fits with what I saw at the protests.”

“I’m going to keep fighting for those kids,” Stiles said. “They deserve better than they’ve got.”

“You’re painting a target on your back if you keep fighting for werewolf rights.”

“Funny, you’d think I’d notice something like that while I was being nearly hospitalised in the school parking lot.”

“Stiles, I’m serious. Those kids are school were bad enough, but there are a lot of people out there who don’t like werewolves. Some people think they should all be put down. Their words, not mine. If you continue trying to help werewolves as publically as you’ve been doing, someone’s going to come after you. It might not be kids with fists next time.”

“I know. I’m going to do it anyway.”

His dad sighed, “Don’t suppose I could talk you out of it?”
“You tried locking me in a cell and you couldn’t stop me. What do you think you can do?”

“Just tell me before you do anything stupid. So I can be there to protect you.”

***

A night in his own bed had given Stiles the best night’s sleep since... well, since the night he’d slept in Derek’s bed. Real mattresses beat air mattresses any night. But then it was back to the reality that was his life now. At school, everyone was still acting like he had the plague, keeping well clear of him to the point where he could go half the day without exchanging words with anyone but Scott.

That didn’t stop him hearing things though. He caught fragments of whispered conversations that were rapidly cut short when he approached. Everyone was talking about the werewolf kids coming to school. Everyone was acting like this was a sign of the impending apocalypse. They were afraid the kids would walk into town and then everyone would end up ripped in little pieces and eaten by rampaging monsters. Stiles wanted to get up on the roof and scream at them all to shut up. These were innocent kids they were talking about, but all they saw were potential claws.

The kids at school were bad enough, but they weren’t the only ones. Friday afternoon found yet another person lurking by his car at the end of the school day, waiting for him.

“This is getting old,” Stiles muttered.

“I need to talk to you,” Chris Argent said.

“Too bad, because Peter’s expecting me back with the pack.”

“You can’t let this ridiculous plan go ahead.”

“You mean the plan to let children go to school? Doesn’t strike me as that ridiculous.”

“Peter is trying to restart the war. You have to see that.”

“Do I?”

“Someone gets upset about those kids being in town and tries to send them back to the woods, Peter gets to play the retribution angle again, and the next thing you know we’re back to all-out war.”

“So don’t attack the kids,” Stiles said.

“I don’t control every person in town. All it takes is for one guy to lash out and Peter will bring the whole pack down on us and every man, woman and child in Beacon Hills will suffer for it.”

Stiles knew the risks they were taking with this plan. Having heard Peter talk to the kids about not fighting back if they were attacked, he knew that Peter expected people to go after the kids. They would have police protection, which should stop any real threats from getting close, but there were still risks. There was still the possibility of some bigot with a gun taking pot shots from a distance. They just had to hope the risk was worth it.

“It’s not going to be like that,” Stiles said. “Peter wants to prove to the world that werewolves aren’t violent monsters.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

“How do you know what I believe?”
“Because you’re a smart guy, Stiles. If this was really all about peace and building connections and making people see werewolves as the good guys, do you think he’d still be holding you hostage?”

Stiles looked away. That thought had occurred to him he just preferred to push it out of mind. He knew Peter was keeping him around because he was useful. Peter wanted what was best for the pack. Stiles was just a tool to help him get it.

And now Chris was probably seeing every one of those thoughts on Stiles’ face. He really did need to work on the whole poker face thing.

“Do everyone a favour, Stiles,” Chris said. “Keep those kids out of the town.”

***

Derek was waiting by the boundary line when Stiles parked his jeep and headed into the woods.

“I’m two minutes late,” Stiles said. “Do you really need to lurk?”

“Peter wants us to head off as soon as possible,” Derek said. He picked up a bag that was resting between the roots of an old tree. “Come on.”

Derek started walking. Stiles trailed along after him. Their mission to go visit another pack was clearly a big deal to Derek. Around his neck, he had the little bit of wood carved with the triple spiral, Stiles noticed. It looked like the one Stiles had worn to meet with the hunters, but he guessed this one was marked with Derek’s blood. He would be speaking as Peter’s representative through these trade negotiations.

“So,” said Stiles, “what are we bartering for?”

Derek stared straight ahead, increasing his pace. Stiles sped up to keep from being left behind.

“The usual,” Derek said. “Supplies, food, favours.”

“What sort of favours?” Stiles asked.

“It depends. Information, connections to people willing to trade across the boundaries, advice on how to set up a windmill to provide electricity.”

“Yeah, but you’ve got the windmill working. What kind of information is Peter asking for you to get this time?”

“I’m going to see what she’s willing to offer,” Derek said. He was still walking fast, like he was trying to escape Stiles, even though he had been waiting deliberately for Stiles. He was being evasive. Stiles wasn’t the only one who needed to work on his poker face.

“Derek, what’s going on? Peter was pretty insistent I be here with you on this and now you won’t even tell me what the meeting’s about?”

“It’s just pack stuff,” Derek said.

Stiles adjusted his bag so it settled better on his back as he hurried to keep up with Derek. His leg was beginning to throb from the pace. More than the physical discomfort, the secrecy was frustrating, especially in the wake of Argent’s comments earlier. He’d reminded Stiles of his place here, a prisoner and not a pack member, and now Derek’s evasiveness was another reminder.

“I guess you don’t have to explain things,” Stiles said. “I mean, people don’t always explain their
motivations to their *pets*.” He let his distaste fill that word. Derek slowed a little, letting Stiles catch up.

“It’s not like that,” Derek said.

“Then what is it like?”

Derek didn’t answer. Stiles let the silence drag for a little bit, in case Derek was just figuring out how to say what needed to be said. But when the silence continued, it was clear that Derek had no intention of actually answering the question.

“I had an interesting conversation today,” Stiles said. “Chris Argent was waiting for me outside school.”

Derek stopped short, turning to face Stiles.

“What happened? Are you hurt?”

“I said we had a conversation. Do conversations usually involve physical injuries in your world?” Stiles asked.

“The ones with an Argent do. What did he want?”

“He accused Peter of trying to restart the war. He said Peter agreed to send the kids to school knowing it would cause trouble so that he’d have an excuse to restart the fighting.”

Derek was quiet for a moment. Then he turned and started walking again. This time it didn’t have the same rapid pace, like he was trying to escape something. This time it was a steady stroll that Stiles could easily keep up with, walking beside Derek when the undergrowth allowed, or tucking immediately behind him when their path narrowed.

“Peter doesn’t want war. He just wants us to have what was stolen from us. He will fight, if that’s the only way to get that, but he won’t want to.”

Stiles nodded. It was easy enough to believe that.

“He also said,” Stiles went on, “that if you guys were serious about wanting to prove you are all civilised and stuff, you wouldn’t still be holding me hostage.”

“Not... hostage.”

“Somehow I don’t think he’d consider ‘pet’ a step up.”

“Stiles, you know it’s not like that.”

“Do I? I’m useful to Peter. I record classes for the older kids, I can buy supplies, I’ve negotiated to get the younger kids into school. I’m useful, so he’s nice to me. It doesn’t mean he considers me any better than a tool.”

“You’re not a tool, Stiles,” Derek said.

“It feels like it sometimes. Yeah, OK, I’m not chained up in your creepy basement prison, but I’m still at Peter’s beck and call. Go buy this, go get that, go accompany Derek. I’m just a piece of property he can deploy on demand.”

“Peter doesn’t think of you as property.”
Stiles gave a little, derisive huff of air. Derek might not think of him as property, but it would take a lot to convince Stiles that Peter didn’t.

“This probably isn’t the place to talk about this,” Derek said. They had reached a river. The river had dried to a thin trickle over the summer, the steep banks showing where he used to climb to before the drought. There was no bridge, but a tree rested from bank to bank and the upper side was marked and worn by numerous feet over the years. Derek climbed up onto the trunk and held out a hand to help Stiles scramble between the splayed out branches that held the dead tree in its place. Stiles took the offered hand, Derek’s strong fingers warm around his.

Derek didn’t let go as they edged along the top of the old tree, above the thin trail of water below that would do little to soften a fall. Stiles reminded himself that Derek was only holding on to him to prevent injury. This wasn’t the time to start thinking about those warm hands touching him elsewhere.

Sure enough, Derek let go as soon as they jumped down onto the earth on the other side of the river.

“We’re in Satomi’s territory now,” Derek said.

“And that means, what? That I shouldn’t piss against any of the trees?”

“It means be polite, idiot. We’re guests here.”

Derek shifted the bag onto his other shoulder and started walking again. Stiles followed. To him, there was no difference between one side of the river and the other. The trees were the same. The dry earth beneath his feet was the same. The undergrowth and bushes were the same. But Derek wasn’t. He was more tense, looking about him as he walked, as though he expected someone to leap out at him and attack.

After about half a minute, Derek stopped, waiting.

“What is it?”

“Someone’s coming,” Derek said. “We should wait until we’re invited to go further.”

Derek’s tension was making Stiles nervous. He’d thought this was a simple thing, just a discussion of trade that had happened between the packs many times. But Derek looked poised for a fight and now Stiles wondered if he should have tried to stay behind.

A guy emerged from the trees, a teenager of Stiles’ age or maybe a year or two younger. He greeted them with a smile.

“Hey, Derek.”

“Liam.”

“Hi, I’m Stiles,” Stiles added, when it seemed the two werewolves were just going to keep staring at each other. Liam gave him a nod.

“I’m here as a messenger from the Hale pack,” Derek said. “I am here to speak to your alpha.”

“Of course.”

Stiles had assumed they’d be going further afield. Peter’s insistence that they leave straight after school had given him the impression that they were heading off to a distant pack and that it would
take a while to get there. He hadn’t expected to be going to the pack next door. Unless maybe they were heading through Satomi’s territory to get to someone else and this was a politeness pit stop so that they weren’t trampling through someone else’s land without permission.

Either way, Liam led the way along a route where the undergrowth had been trampled down by the passing of feet to make a rough path. Soon the woods grew thin and they came out into a small patch of farmland. They passed through a gate and into a grassy field populated by a herd of bored-looking sheep that observed them with disinterest or wandered off if they walked too close. On the other side of a fence, there were rows of wheat stalks growing golden and about ready for harvest.

Beyond the fields was a sprawling farm, with a large house and some rambling out-buildings. As they drew closer, Stiles saw the evidence of conversion. A former barn now had some mismatched windows in its walls, the curtains beyond clearly not for the benefit of animals. Most of the roofs were covered in solar panels. A group of girls were playing with a skipping rope in the middle of the paved yard, but they stopped and stared at Stiles in curiosity as they approached.

An older Japanese woman walked out of the main farmhouse, which was a huge building that seemed to have grown up over the years, with additions and extensions build in slightly different shades of brick. She greeted Derek with a smile and they exchanged the ritual words, with Derek announcing his role as messenger and Satomi granting all due rights. Only then did she give a smile in Stiles’ direction.

“Come in,” she said.

There were plenty of people about. Stiles had seem some in the fields and farmyard, but this pack didn’t seem quite as crowded in as the Hale pack. Perhaps just because they weren’t all trying to fit inside the main house. Maybe it would be different at dinner time.

“Derek and I have much to discuss in my study,” Satomi said. “Liam, please be hospitable to our other guest.”

“She means I should give you tea,” Liam said, once Satomi had led Derek further into the house. Liam took Stiles into a large kitchen that was oppressive with heat from a wood-burning oven that took up most of one wall. There were a few people in the kitchen, working on the next pack meal. None of them seemed surprised to see Stiles.

Liam filled up a kettle and set it on the stove to boil and then showed Stiles a cupboard full of tea. A lot of the packets looked very, very familiar, but there was no sign of the mysterious jar the tea seller had warned him against drinking. Liam gestured at the shelves, with their packets of leaf tea and tea bags, black teas, green teas, herbal teas and Stiles didn’t know what else.

“I don’t normally drink tea,” Stiles said.

Liam shrugged and decided for him. He grabbed a box and pulled out a couple of tea bags. He stuck them in mugs while they waited for the water to boil.

“Do you know what these negotiations are about?” Stiles asked.

“Not sure. It’s probably just the usual trade of foodstuffs. You guys have the bees and goats, which we don’t, so we usually trade some of your milk and honey for things like our wheat. We gave you guys a load of wool last winter and you guys didn’t have anything good to trade, but then Peter sent the tea, so the debt should be paid now.”

“You shouldn’t be speculating with him,” said an old man who was shelling peas. Liam went quiet.
Stiles supposed it made sense; if there were trade negotiations going on both packs would be trying to get the best deal, so they didn’t want people giving away details of their supply situation.

The kettle started whistling and Liam poured the water into the mugs.

Liam took him through to a small den. There were some cosy chairs around an empty fireplace and whole walls lined with bookshelves. Stiles went over to the shelves, clutching his mug with now real desire to drink.

“Quite a collection of books,” Stiles said.

“Half of them are Japanese and the other half are boring as hell,” Liam said. He sat down in one of the armchairs, sipping his tea. Stiles looked along the row of titles. Sure enough, a lot had Japanese characters giving titles Stiles didn’t have a hope in hell of understanding. The others were handbooks on growing a great vegetable garden, or spinning and weaving the traditional way, even a beginners guide to plumbing. Satomi’s pack had gathered a large number of books on subjects to help them survive out here, but none of them looked like enthralling reading.

Stiles gave up on the books and took one of the other armchairs. It felt ridiculous that Peter had insisted he come here only for him to be completely excluded from the trade meeting. Stiles sipped at his tea, which tasted a little bitter and had flowery hints to it that made him feel like he was drinking perfume.

“What do you do for fun around here?” Stiles asked.

“We have enough people for a killer game of lacrosse,” Liam said.

“Lacrosse?”

“Yeah, and with werewolf strength and speed it gets incredible.”

They spent several minutes discussing the sport, with Stiles talking about playing, or at least bench-warming, for his high school team. Apparently Liam had played for his school back before the bite. He talked about the difference between humans playing and werewolves playing. If nothing else, it seemed that werewolves who could heal rapidly were a lot less concerned about injuries so the games could get brutal. Stiles decided he’d stick to human play.

He wanted to ask Liam about how he’d ended up out here, since he’d admitted that he’d once been human. But he decided not to. It was probably a highly personal question. After all, he knew from Isaac and Erica that the decision to leave behind home and family forever wasn’t one to be made lightly.

So Stiles stuck to wondering how long it would take before Derek and Satomi were done. Stiles’ mostly full mug of tea was getting cold now.

“It depends what they’re negotiating for,” Liam said, “and we’re not supposed to speculate.”

Stiles still wasn’t sure why Peter had insisted that he needed to be here. Surely the presence of that cupboard full of tea would be proof that the Hale pack could get supplies from the town. It shouldn’t matter that Stiles physically come here just to demonstrate his existence.

Just when Stiles’ thoughts were getting stuck down that path again, the door opened and Satomi walked in, Derek behind her. Stiles stood up, expecting this meant the meetings were over. The bag Derek had brought with him had vanished somewhere. Stiles started to move towards the door, but then he realised that the others had just stopped. Satomi was staring at Stiles, looking him up and
down appraisingly, like someone inspecting a used car before purchase. Stiles felt suddenly nervous about this whole proceeding. Especially because Derek was doing his very best to not look at Stiles.

Satomi turned back to Derek and said, “Tell your alpha I agree to his terms.” She held out a hand and Derek shook. Derek still wasn’t looking at Stiles.

“What terms?” Stiles asked. Derek carefully studied his feet.

“You will be staying here with us,” Satomi said.

“What?” Stiles glared at Derek. “Did you just sell me?”

“It’s not like that,” Derek muttered. This was why he’d been so evasive all the way here. He’d been planning this.

“I agreed to serve the Hale pack. I didn’t agree to this. You can just toss me to someone else when you decide you’re done with me.”

“You agreed to serve the Hale pack and now the Hales think you’ll best serve them here,” Satomi said. “The deal is done.”

“So much for not being property,” Stiles said, still glaring at Derek. He couldn’t believe Derek had done this. Especially, he couldn’t believe Derek had done this without even talking to him about it. All this time, Derek had treated him like a person instead of a pet. Stiles had almost thought they were friends. And now Derek would just hand him off to another pack for a trade deal. The fact that Derek looked guilty as hell about this didn’t make Stiles any less inclined to kick him in the nuts.

“I hope you got a good price for me,” Stiles snapped.

Derek said nothing.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I may give you horrible cliffhangers, but at least I don't leave you with them for long. :)

Satomi’s study was cosier than Peter’s. The walls were painted in pastel tones, a little faded on the wall across from the big windows. There were comfortable chairs in front of the desk. There was even a vase of flowers on a side table to give a spot of cheerfulness. What made it less pleasant were the two guys flanking Stiles as he sat in front of the desk. They stood on either side of him, looming, equal parts muscle and intimidation. Satomi sat calmly behind her desk and Stiles squirmed in his seat, waiting to find out what this meant for him.

He still couldn’t believe Derek had done this to him. He’d talked about how Stiles wasn’t property even while bringing him to be sold. No wonder he hadn’t wanted to talk about the purpose of this trade.

“Stiles,” Satomi said, smiling in a way that reminded Stiles of Peter, “you can be very useful to us, and not just because you can get us supplies from town. You can give us information.”

“I do a mean lecture on the fundamentals of capitalism,” Stiles said.

“Not quite what I had in mind. What can you tell me about the defences around the Hale pack?”

“What?” Stiles had considered many things this could be about, but this hadn’t made the list. She was going to use him to attack the Hales?

“Why should you look so offended?” Satomi asked. “It’s not like they care about you. They’ve just proved that. There’s no reason for you to keep their secrets.”

To his shame, Stiles did actually think about it, but only for about two seconds. Sure, he’d love to see Peter get sliced up for some of the things he’d done, but most of the pack didn’t deserve anything bad happening to them. If Satomi’s pack attacked Peter’s, it would be the betas who got hurt or killed. Stiles was not going to be a part of that.

“Not a chance,” Stiles said.

“Think carefully now, Stiles. Your life here could be very pleasant or very... unpleasant.” Satomi stared at one of her hands, watching the nails slowly extend into claws. “I’d much rather we be friends here, but that all depends on whether you give the right answer.”

Stiles stared at those claws, imagining what it would feel like when she sliced him open. He wondered if Peter would feel bad for sending him here once Stiles got tortured on his behalf. He wondered if Derek would miss him.

“Go to hell,” Stiles said. He clutched his sweaty hands into fists, ready to fight, for whatever good it would do him. His heart pounded in his chest, waiting for the pain and death that was surely coming.

“That,” said Satomi, “was the right answer.”
She smiled, claws shrinking down to ordinary nails again.

“What?” Stiles asked. He felt like his brain needed to do a double take over this sudden change of tone. “Was this a test?”

“Peter might trust you but I wanted to see for myself.”

Stiles tried to get his racing heart under control again, fury replacing fear.

“God, you and Peter should form a club,” he said. “At least you didn’t threaten to rape me, I guess.”

“Derek made it clear that he would personally declare war against this pack if we took this test too far, and he included psychological torture on his list of things not to do to you.”

“Derek had a list?” Stiles asked. He knew he should probably be worrying about other things right now, but it was hard to think about anything now he knew that Derek had threatened to go to war over him. Derek had promised to attack Satomi if she tortured him.

A thought occurred and Stiles asked, “Does this mean Derek knew you’d ask me to reveal the secrets of his pack?”

“I doubt you could have told me anything I don’t already know,” Satomi said. “Derek tried to convince me that the test was unnecessary, but I prefer to be sure. What Peter is asking for could do a lot of damage in the wrong hands.”

“What is Peter asking for?” Stiles asked. Satomi’s eyes flickered up to the two werewolves on either side of Stiles.

“Later,” she said. Then to her betas, “Take Stiles up to his room.”

Stiles didn’t try to fight. Even without werewolf strength, these guys were twice the size of him. He stood and let himself be led up a flight of stairs, then another, up to narrow corridor that ran the length of the house up by the roof. One of the guys opened a door and gave Stiles a gentle push into a tiny bedroom. It was built up near the eaves, with a sloping roof that made about half of the room unusable. That roof had a large skylight in it though, so at least the room wasn’t gloomy. There wasn’t much furniture, but then there wasn’t much room for any. There was a narrow bed that took up most of the space and a small set of drawers. There was a shelf set into the wall by the door, with a couple of old books lying on it. As the door shut behind him, Stiles heard the unmistakable click of a key in the lock.

So it wasn’t a creepy, torture basement, but it was definitely a cell. Stiles went to the door and listened, hearing the sounds of retreating footsteps. Then he tried the door. Definitely not going to get that open without a key and attempting to break it down would have every werewolf coming to see what the noise was about.

Stiles stood on the bed and tried the skylight. It was also locked firmly shut and there was no sign of a key. He could try throwing a drawer at it to break the glass, but then he’d have to deal with broken glass as well as figuring out a way to climb down off the roof, and, like with the door, there would be no way to do it without the werewolves hearing.

He tried opening the drawers, just in case there was something useful inside. He froze. There, in the top drawer, was the bag Derek had been carrying. Next to it, folded neatly, were a couple of clean t-shirts, two changes of underwear, and two pairs of socks, along with the sweats and loose t-shirt Stiles wore to bed. There was even the prescription jar containing his medication. They were Stiles’ things, but not all of Stiles’ things. Derek had brought enough clothes for Stiles to have clean things
to wear for two days. He could easily have brought the rest of Stiles’ clothes but he hadn’t. Derek didn’t expect Stiles to be here very long.

That fit, in a way, with Peter’s insistence on leaving straight after school. It was the weekend. This way, Stiles could be here for a couple of days and then still be back to go to school like expected, and help get the little ones ready for their first day of school. That still left the question of what he was doing here, but at least Stiles could feel comfortable that he wasn’t going to be a prisoner here forever.

Stiles had accused Derek of selling him and Derek had insisted it wasn’t like that. Just like he’d insisted Stiles wasn’t property on the walk over here. Had that been some hidden message? Or was that just wishful thinking? Stiles dug through the stuff in the drawer, in case there was some secret message, but there was nothing else.

The other drawer was empty, so Stiles checked the shelf by the door. The books were old and a little tattered but it wasn’t clear whether they’d been left up here deliberately or just evicted from the shelves downstairs because no one could be bothered to read them. One was an encyclopaedia of herbs, the other a history of Irish magic.

Stiles didn’t have anything else to do in here. He couldn’t even get started on his homework because his schoolbag was downstairs somewhere, so he picked up the books and made himself comfortable on the bed.

The history book was tedious. It started with a long, rambling prologue about how a lot of the written records came from medieval Christian sources who adapted the local legends and folklores to fit within their own theology, so a lot of the early tales were distorted. The author spent about five pages saying that he was trying to fit the pieces together but that it was entirely possible that the truth was nothing like what was actually recorded by later scholars. Finally it got into the history itself but Stiles was finding it hard to focus and kept losing track of all the names. He was into the second chapter and realised he had no idea what was going on, having completely failed to follow the narrative in the muddle of names: Lug and Lugus; Dagda, Dana, Donn, and the Tuatha De Dannan.

Stiles put the book aside and tried the other one. This one didn’t even try to hold together a narrative structure. Each page detailed a different herb. The book was a beautiful piece of work, with illustrations of leaves and plants, but the text was a dreary list of properties, habitat and lifecycle.

He put that book aside and flopped, bored, back onto the mattress. He lay there for a minute, wondering if the books were meant to be a clue or if they’d been just left here to keep him from going out of his mind from boredom, to avoid accusations of psychological torture. If that was the case, they really could have done with a better selection.

He went over to the door and knocked on it.

“Hey!” he called. “Could someone bring me my school stuff so I can do my homework?”

There was no answer. Even in a house full of werewolves, he couldn’t be sure he’d been heard. He couldn’t hear a thing from the rest of the house, so he guessed they went in for sound proofing in a big way. He went back over to the bed and picked up the history book again, hoping some of it would sink in this time.

He was relieved a couple of minutes later when he heard something outside the door. He put the book aside as the lock clicked open. Satomi walked in. She had Stiles’ backpack over one shoulder and a plate of food in her hand. She made a point of closing the door before setting the food down on the top of the set of drawers and placing Stiles’ bag on the bed. Stiles stared at the plate.
“I’m not sharing meals with the pack,” Stiles said. “So you’re letting me get food, but you don’t want to make it seem like you’re trying to make me part of your pack.”

“You’re Peter’s,” Satomi said. “He wouldn’t appreciate it if we interfered with that.”

“Are you going to tell me what this is really about?” Stiles asked. He picked up the plate and started eating. He was surprised to realise how hungry he was; he guessed the hike through the woods followed by the terror of torture threats helped build up an appetite.

“Peter has asked me to teach you. I said I would try, but I don’t know yet if you even can be taught.”

“I’m pretty smart,” Stiles said, around a mouthful of chicken. Then his eyes fell on the books. He swallowed down the food. “You’re going to teach me magic?”

“Peter asked me to teach you the old knowledge,” Satomi said.

Stiles almost forgot to be angry with Peter. Magic. He could learn magic. That was something he’d dreamt about for most of his life, waving a stick around as a magic wand in his games when he was little. The idea of learning real magic was something beyond his wildest dreams.

But his excitement was diminished slightly by the serious expression on Satomi’s face. She was still talking.

“A lot of the old knowledge was herb lore, primitive medicine and other skills which have been overtaken by modern science. In ancient times, knowing the properties of plants could mean the difference between life and death, but now it’s not much value knowing that you can make a painkiller from the bark of a willow tree when you could just swallow an aspirin, which contains the same active ingredient in a concentrated, refined, and dose-controlled pill. That said, some of that knowledge is still valuable, particularly for those of us who can’t access modern medicine. I can teach you that, but there are other skills, less easily defined, which require more than knowledge.”

“Meaning?”

“I could teach you enough about plants and herb lore that you would have made a very practical witch a few centuries ago, but that still wouldn’t tell me if you would have the capacity to learn the true craft, what you would consider real magic. That takes more than the application of knowledge. It takes a certain spark.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” said Stiles. “How can you tell if I have this spark?”

“There are ways, some slower than others. I could try teaching you to perform magic. If, a few weeks from now, you have made no progress, it would be a sign that you don’t have the spark. Of course, it could also be a sign that you are a slow learner. We would only know for sure if you actually achieve a magical effect.”

“What could take weeks?” His initial excitement was rapidly fading.

“There is another option,” Satomi said. “There is a way I could find out, within the next few hours, whether you have the spark.”

“I take it you don’t just say a magic word and find out?” Stiles asked.

“The test involves a ritual in which we would explore your mind.”

“That sounds... creepily invasive.”
“We would explore your mind together, experiencing aspects of your memory and personality, seeing your desires and fears and the things which drive you. In the heart of it all, I will be able to see whether you possess the capacity to learn magic.”

Stiles shifted uncomfortably on the bed. He wasn’t sure he wanted a stranger experiencing his desires and fears and memories and all that stuff. “I’m still sticking with invasive as a description.”

“In theory, you could keep me away from anything deeply personal.”

“Which would be great, apart from the fact that you prefaced that with ‘in theory’ which is usually code for ‘not a chance in hell’.”

“The experience is something like a dream, but one in which you have more awareness and control than in a real dream. If you start experiencing something unpleasant or which you don’t want to share, you can leave by simply concentrating on something else. The challenge is that deeply personal elements can often be overwhelming, but I will be there to keep you from getting lost in your own dark thoughts.”

“So those are my choices? Spend weeks trying to do magic without ever knowing if it will work? Or let a stranger trample around in my brain?”

“Or decide you don’t want to learn. I can arrange for one of my betas to take you back to Peter’s territory if neither option appeals to you.”

Stiles didn’t want to go back to Peter. Sure, he might have looked for escape routes earlier, but that was before he knew that magic lessons were on the cards. He wanted to learn magic. Every part of him was excited by the mere idea of it. But there was no appeal in the idea of trying for weeks without knowing if he could ever be successful. It wasn’t like he had much patience at the best of times.

“Why didn’t Peter just explain all this to me?” Stiles asked. “Why all this farce of making me think he was selling me? Why does he want me to learn anyway?”

“I don’t know precisely why he wants you to learn. He thought it better not to tell you about the plan to teach you until we knew whether or not you can be taught, but I won’t trick you into the ritual. You have to choose it.”

“But why not tell me this earlier? Why let me think Derek had sold me?”

“As I said, I wanted to see if you could be trusted with this knowledge. I wanted to know if you would remain loyal to your pack even when you believed the alpha had betrayed you. You should know, Derek argued vehemently against the test. Don’t be too angry with him.”

Stiles remembered what she had said about Derek having a list of things Satomi couldn’t do to Stiles. This wasn’t Derek’s territory and Satomi outranked him. There was probably only so far he could safely go against her. He was still mad, but he would save most of his anger for Peter and for Satomi.

“You and Peter with your sick tests,” Stiles muttered.

“We have to be cautious,” Satomi told him. “When my kind have put too much trust in humans, we have ended up paying the price. All of us listened to Gerard Argent when he proposed a peace summit and all of us suffered for it. There have been other betrayals. Hunters come claiming friendship and slaughter children. I don’t know what you’ve done to win Peter’s trust but I don’t put my pack at risk until I’ve seen for myself. I’m sorry for the suffering I put you through, but I must put the safety of my pack above the comfort of a stranger.”
It was hard to argue with that. He’d seen the graveyard on the Hale territory. He suspected that Satomi probably had a graveyard of her own, with bodies killed by human hands. Still, he hated all the secrets and lies and manipulations. He hated being tested like this. But did he hate it enough to refuse to learn what it was Satomi was offering to teach him? After all, he’d passed her test. She was willing to give him magic. That had to be worth something.

He looked at Satomi, “This ritual you were talking about... anything you see in my mind stays between us, right?”

“I swear on the blood of my pack that I will not reveal anything I may witness while we perform the ritual.”

“OK. Let’s do it then.”
Satomi took Stiles downstairs to the kitchen. She had him wash up his plate while she prepared what was needed for the ritual. Stiles could hear other people elsewhere in the house, as indecipherable voices muffled by the walls, but no one was paying attention to him. If he were still thinking about running away, now would be the perfect time. But then he’d never find out if he was capable of learning magic. That question kept him bound here more tightly than any locks or keys.

Satomi returned to the kitchen and set the kettle on the stove to heat up some water before she started moving furniture aside. Stiles had just set his plate down to drain and wondered if he should offer to help, but Satomi seemed to be having no difficulty moving the table and chairs over to the side of the room. Then she started arranging things on the expanse of floor she’d just cleared, including a candle, a bundle of herbs and, for some strange reason, a pillow.

“Do I need to do anything?” Stiles asked.

“Not yet,” Satomi answered. She was bringing out a clay teapot from a cupboard and a couple of small cups of the same red clay. They were Japanese style tea cups, without handles, just smooth bowls for drinking from. She set these down on the floor with everything else and went into the tea cupboard. Stiles recognised the jar she brought out.

“I was told that’s really dangerous for humans,” Stiles said.

“It can be, when used by people who don’t know what they’re doing, or who don’t have a guide. If you were to drink this on your own, without the proper preparation, you could easily get lost in your own mind and never wake up from the dreaming. Worse, you might leave your body open and vulnerable, and something else might slip inside you while you slept.”

“Something else?”

“Demons, spirits, ghosts. You don’t need to worry though. I will put up a protective circle before we begin the ritual.”

Stiles was beginning to wonder if this was a good idea. Up until now, he’d been mostly worried about having his secret thoughts laid bare to this woman. Now he had to worry about demon possession and never waking up.

“You have done this before, right?” he asked.

“Of course. Only twice with a human but enough that I’m confident you will be safe.”

Assuming he could trust her. Stiles had only her word that Peter had sent him here for this, to learn this. He couldn’t know for sure if anything she said was truth or lie. He felt like he was back in the bluffing game except that he didn’t have the ability to hear heartbeats or smell fear or anything that would give him an edge. He was risking his life, his soul even, over the possibility of magic. Was it
really worth it?

He watched Satomi measure out a careful spoonful of the tea into the teapot. He had no way to know if she was telling him the truth, if the tea was safe, if he had the ability to perform magic. But the only way he could know for sure was if he went through with this. If he tried. This might be the stupidest thing he’d done since he stepped across the boundary line and offered his life for his dad’s, but it was still something he had to try or he’d spend his entire life wondering about what might have been.

“OK,” Stiles said. “Let’s do this.”

Satomi had him sit on the floor in the middle of the kitchen while she poured the water into the teapot and set it down beside him. Then she took out a piece of chalk and drew a circle around the two of them, taking up most of the kitchen floor. It was a circle wide enough that Stiles could have laid down inside it. Once the line was drawn, she walked round it again, drawing symbols on the tiles with the chalk. They were Japanese characters, marking out five points around the edge of the circle, but Stiles hadn’t the faintest idea what they meant and he suspected that interrupting someone with questions was probably a bad idea when they were in the middle of putting up a protective circle.

Satomi used a lighter to light the candle, and then she lit the bunch of herbs from the candle. A sweet-smelling smoke wafted up from the smouldering herbs and Satomi walked around her circle one more time, muttering words in Japanese over each of the runes as she held the herbs and candle in either hand.

She extinguished the herbs by dropping them in a waiting bowl of water, but she set the candle down between them, still burning. Then she sat down across from Stiles. She poured the tea into two cups. “The candle will be the light that draws us back,” she said. “We must return before the candle burns out.”

“You couldn’t have got a bigger candle?” Stiles asked. She ignored him and held out the cup of tea. “Drink,” she said, “and then lie down. It will take only a few seconds for the dreaming to come over you.”

Stiles stared at the cup, afraid again. This was the last chance he had to stop this, to escape.

“Bottoms up,” he muttered, and downed the tea, his mouth burning with the heat of it.

He set the cup down and quickly lay, resting his head on the waiting pillow. He closed his eyes and wondered what would happen next.

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The pillow was soft beneath Stiles’ head as he waited with his eyes closed. A hand ran up Stiles’ side. Not his hand. It slid down again, finding the hem of his t-shirt. Beneath him, there was a shifting, like the way a mattress moved when someone else adjusted their position on it. He felt the warmth of another person pressing close against him, the heat of someone else’s breath against the side of his face, before lips ghosted over his cheek in the faintest of kisses.

“Too many clothes between us,” a voice murmured in his ear, “whatever shall I do?”

“Derek,” Stiles murmured. He opened his eyes and saw Derek sitting beside him, smiling a little as he worked a hand under Stiles’ shirt, running his fingers up his skin. The other hand worked downwards, sliding under the waistband of Stiles’ pants. Derek’s torso was bare, his muscles gleaming slightly with a faint sheen of sweat. Stiles reached out, touched as he’d wanted to do for so
long, feeling those abs and running his fingers up to Derek’s shoulders, to bring him down.

Derek bent forward at Stiles’ invitation, pressing their lips together. Stiles closed his eyes again, losing himself in the heat of the kiss. Then Derek moved his head, pressing kisses into the side of Stiles’ throat, while his hand worked down, reaching for the stirring at Stiles’ groin.

“Ah-hem,” someone cleared their throat.

Stiles opened his eyes. Satomi was standing next to the bed and the knowledge of what was happening came crashing back in. Stiles was dreaming. He’d drunk the magic tea and was now inside his own thoughts. None of this was real. Derek wasn’t real.

Stiles sat up, pushing Derek off him. The fact that Derek moved without complaint was probably proof enough this wasn’t real. Although really, the fact that Derek had had a hand down the front of his pants was proof this wasn’t real. Stiles looked around and saw that he was in his bedroom back in his dad’s house. He was on his bed, with a naked Derek who didn’t seem at all concerned with the fact that Satomi was there. She looked faintly amused.

“You might want to keep the sexual fantasies to a minimum while I’m here,” she said.

“Please don’t tell Derek about this,” Stiles said. “Ever.”

The dream Derek moved in close again, wrapping arms around Stiles from behind and pressing kisses against his neck from behind. Stiles shoved him away with an elbow and Derek moved back just a little, one hand still running down Stiles’ back towards his ass. Satomi was definitely amused.

“I promised I wouldn’t reveal anything I saw here,” she said. “But you may want to tell Derek yourself.”

Stiles looked at the dream Derek, who sat meek and silent on the bed, casually fondling and waiting for Stiles to return to the fantasy. Stiles knew that this in no way reflected reality. He didn’t expect to ever have the real Derek in such a position and he knew Derek wouldn’t act like this if it somehow did happen.

“I’d rather keep my limbs attached,” Stiles said. Derek’s hand worked round Stiles’ hip towards his groin again. “Um... how do I make him go away?”

“We leave,” Satomi said. “We are here to explore your mind. If we come across thoughts you wish to avoid, we can simply walk away.”

She held out a hand. Stiles stood and took it. They walked together to the bedroom door. Satomi was the one who opened the door and led him through, out into the hallway of the house. Stiles glanced back once, but the bedroom was empty. His fantasy Derek was gone.

They walked downstairs and Stiles heard a clattering of dishes coming from the kitchen. He followed the noise and stepped inside, seeing a woman standing at the stove, cooking. Everything seemed distorted, somehow larger. Or maybe he was smaller, looking up at everything. But despite the strangeness of the angle, this sight was familiar.

“Mom?” Stiles asked. His mom turned from the stove to look at him. She gave a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Hey, honey,” she said, “I’m making pancakes. The special kind.”

“But it’s not my birthday,” he said, as though a reading a script, the words leaving his mouth without
passing through his brain. He was saying them because they were the words that fit in this scene. Then it hit him why this seemed so familiar. He started to shake.

“No,” he said. “No, I can’t live through this twice.”

This was the morning his mom told him the doctors couldn’t fix what was wrong with her. This was the morning she’d told him she was dying.

“No,” he said again. He turned away and ran out of the kitchen door... stepping into the middle of a graveyard.

The house was gone. When he looked back, Satomi was there, but the kitchen and his mom weren’t. There were gravestones instead, some marked with flowers and neatly kept, others old and overgrown. Some were marked with statues and angels, others were just simple slabs. Here and there, trees grew, trying to make this site of death a rebirth of life.

“A bad memory?” Satomi asked.

“The worst,” Stiles answered. He looked down. There was the gravestone, marked with a name. He stood over Claudia Stilinski’s final resting place.

“I’m sorry,” Satomi said. Stiles shrugged.

“Guess it doesn’t say anything good about the state of my brain,” Stiles said. “Sexual fantasies and thoughts of death.”

“That says you’re a teenager.”

“This is your fault, you know,” a harsh voice cut across the graveyard. Stiles turned and saw his dad walking between the stones. He was dressed in a black suit as if for a funeral, a half-empty bottle of whiskey in one hand.

“This is your fault,” he said again. “You stupid, impossible kid. I always said you were enough to drive anyone mad. You drove her to this!”

His voice was slurred a little from the booze, but his anger was unmistakeable. He jabbed a hand towards Stiles to emphasize his point and then swallowed down another mouthful of whiskey.

“Stiles, this is your fear talking,” Satomi said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t listen to him.”

But how could Stiles not listen? His dad was yelling for the whole world to hear, telling everyone what he really thought of his son.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with you now?” his dad asked. “You’ve got no focus, no follow through. You think you can learn magic when you can’t even get a decent grade in chemistry? You can’t do anything right.”

“Stiles, walk away,” Satomi said. Her hands were on his shoulders, guiding him. Stiles walked between the gravestones but his dad was still there behind them, yelling. Stiles couldn’t help hearing what he said.

“About the only decent thing you’ve ever done was handing yourself over to the wolves,” his dad said. “At least now I don’t have to look at you every day. But even they don’t want you. Derek threw you aside the first chance he got.”
“Stiles, focus on something good. Find a good memory. A happy memory. Think about that.”

Stiles tried to think of something. Some happy moment in his life, something that could let him ignore the words his phantom dad was yelling. He found one and tried to focus on it, as the gravestones faded around him. He looked down at the grass under his feet and when he looked up again, he was walking past a swing and a climbing frame. Around him, children ran, shrieking and playing. He walked past them too, to the sandbox where a little boy with dark hair was digging with a plastic spade.

The boy looked up at Stiles and smiled.

“What do you want to play with me?” he asked.

Stiles climbed into the sandbox and sat down, seeing the mound of sand that the boy was building.

“I’m making a castle,” the boy said.

“A castle needs a moat,” Stiles said. He started digging, moving the rough sand with his bare hands, adding it to the pile in the middle.

“We’ll make a deep moat,” the boy agreed. “Deep enough to keep the bad guys out.”

“Who are the bad guys?”

“Everybody mean. We can be inside the castle where it’s safe and all the mean people will be outside where they can’t hurt us and it will be you and me forever.”

“I may hold you to that,” Stiles said. Scott didn’t answer. He didn’t have a reply in the memory because Stiles had just deviated from the script. So Scott just smiled, and carried out digging the moat, piling dirt into the mound of his castle.

Satomi reached out and placed a hand on Stiles’ shoulder. He looked up at her.

“You can’t stay here forever,” she warned him gently.

“But I like this memory. And if I stay here, we can’t accidentally wander into my fears or sexual fantasies again.”

“But if you get trapped in a happy memory, you’ll never be able to make new ones. We have to keep moving. Remember the candle is still burning.”

Little Scott stood. As he stood, he grew taller, seeming to age a couple of years in that simple motion. He smiled and held a hand out to Stiles.

“Come play with me,” he said. Stiles stood, holding Scott’s hand as they ran out of the sandbox and across the grass to a wall of dark trees. Scott was racing ahead, growing taller as they ran between the trees. As he grew older, it ought to have been easier for Scott to outpace Stiles, what with the longer legs and everything. But the closer Scott grew to their real ages, the slower he ran until Stiles was passing him. Their hands slipped apart as trees faded to walls and suddenly Stiles was running along one of the hallways at school.

The bell sounded deafeningly loud above him, screaming that he was late for class, and he rushed into a waiting door and into the classroom. Mr Harris stood at the front. At the benches of the chemistry lab, everyone was staring at him. Marty and his jerkwad friends were there, Jackson and Lydia and some of the others who shared his classes. But the kids from the pack were also there,
sitting quiet and attentive behind the benches as if they belonged there.

“They’re going to talk about failed experiments,” Mr Harris said. “We’re going to talk about Stilinski’s experiment with integrating werewolf and human education. Does anyone want to give me an example of this failure?”

Everyone in the classroom raised their hands. Werewolf kids and human kids were waiting to speak. Harris called on Alfie.

“Bullying,” he said. A purple bruise shone on his face and then faded away to nothing under the power of werewolf healing.

“Correct,” said Harris. “Anyone else? You.”

He called on Ted.

“Stress and disillusionment caused by forcing children with no experience of structured education into a world of standardised testing and enforced curriculum.” The words were too old to be coming out of his mouth, but he spoke them fluently and calmly.

“Anyone else?” asked Harris. “We’re missing a big one.”

“Hunters,” said Millie.

The glass in the windows burst inwards in a hail of bullet fire. The kids screamed, bodies being jerked from their seats as gunshots tore through their bodies. Blood sprayed across the room. Showers of red decorated the walls and floor, pouring out. Stiles was frozen in place as countless wounds gushed in crimson streams that turned into rivers. The water puddled around the bodies and kept building, more and more blood flowing forth until it covered the entire floor of the classroom. And still it was growing, up to his ankles now.

Only one person hadn’t fallen. Mr Harris stood at the front of the classroom, suit pristine even as he waded in the growing pool of blood. He looked calmly at Stiles and asked, “What did you think was going to happen?”

Stiles finally managed to move. He spun around and bolted through the classroom door and he was back in the woods again, racing through trees and bushes. Branches caught at him, hooking into his clothes to slow him down. Roots came out of nowhere to trip him. The whole forest seemed determined to trap him. He shoved through it, snapping branches, trying to escape from his own thoughts. He heard voices behind him, whispering and indistinct, their words lost in an overall sense of menace.

Stiles broke through the undergrowth into a clearing centred on a massive tree stump. Stiles turned back. There was no sign of whoever had been whispering behind him. For this moment, all was silent. The moment couldn’t last.

There were trees all around him, tall and dark, blotting out the sun. He could still see the clearing and the huge stump, low to the ground and wide enough that he could probably lie down on top of it, but everything outside the clearing was growing midnight black. But something rustled and stirred in the blackness. Things were moving in those shadows.

Stiles’ heart was racing and he didn’t think it was from all the running. What was lurking in the dark corners of his mind? He’d already seen enough terrors conjured up by his subconscious. He wasn’t sure he could face anything else.
Then Satomi stepped into the clearing. Stiles had never been so pleased to see anyone. He really didn’t want to end up lost and alone inside his own brain.

“There you are,” she said.

“How much more of this have we got to do?” Stiles asked. “I’d really like to wake up now.”

“OK. We need to make a bridge between the dream and the candle.”

“A bridge?”

Satomi walked over to the huge tree stump. She didn’t seem to care about the faint movement in the shadows around them, which made it easier for Stiles to ignore them too.

“You should light a fire,” she said. “Then we can use the flame as a link back to the candle flame.”

“A fire. Right.”

There was plenty of wood around. Dead twigs and branches littered the ground. Stiles gathered some together, picking smaller pieces that would more easily light. There was no clear piece of ground, so Stiles climbed up onto the tree trunk and sat down on it, building his little mound of twigs the way he remembered his dad showing him on a camping trip once, a long time ago. He left gaps for the air to get through but there was still a problem.

“Do you have that lighter?” Stiles asked.

“Not here,” Satomi answered.

“I don’t have anything to light it with.”

“We’re in your mind. Your thoughts have made everything else we’ve seen here. All you need to do is make a little spark to get the fire going.”

He supposed that made sense. Everything was imaginary here, so why shouldn’t he imagine the fire catching and just expect it to work? He bent down close to his little twig pile and thought about sparks. He thought about sparklers. He thought about the fire flare of a match. He thought about the burst of sparked made by running a thumb over the wheel of a lighter. He thought about the bright flare of burning magnesium in chemistry class.

The wood pile burst into a brilliant blaze of white.

Stiles scrambling backwards from the heat and glare. He’d nearly taken his eyebrows off. What would happen to him if he set fire to himself in his own imagination? The fire was burning so brightly that he was surprised the whole tree stump hadn’t caught alight.

“That,” said Satomi, “was no small spark.”

“I guess I have a vivid imagination.”

She came and sat next to him, taking his hand again.

“Look at the fire, Stiles. Look at the flame.”

Stiles looked. His saw the bright blaze of his campfire, burning strongly enough to drive away the shadows and the scuffling noises in the dark. Then he blinked and the fire was just the single flame of a candle. And in another blink, he was lying on the floor of Satomi’s kitchen.
Chapter 30

Stiles lay on the bed in that small room, almost afraid to fall asleep. His unconscious mind was clearly not a pretty place. Not all of it had been bad, he had to admit. The parts with Derek he probably would have thoroughly enjoyed if Satomi hadn’t been there, and that memory of playing with Scott was a nice moment. But the rest of it was terrible. His mom’s death, fears that his dad hated him, those nameless terrors in the darkness; he didn’t want to fall asleep and face all those again in his dreams.

He tried to focus on the good in this: Satomi was sure he had the capacity to learn magic. Stiles wasn’t entirely sure what in the dream had convinced her, but she had promised him that tomorrow they would begin the lessons. He was supposed to be getting a good night’s sleep to prepare him.

He rolled onto his side and tried to get comfortable.

He hoped Satomi would keep her word about not telling anyone what she saw inside his head. The fears were not as bad as they could have been but he could only imagine what Derek would do if he knew that Stiles’ first thought in the dreaming had been him. Naked.

Stiles tried to push the thought out of his mind. It was bad enough he’d imagined Derek like that while under the influence of magic tea. He didn’t need a repeat performance when he didn’t have any hallucinogens to blame it on. It would be incredibly creepy for Stiles to fantasise about Derek and he definitely wasn’t going to do it here in someone else’s bed, with a house full of werewolves who’d be able to smell anything he tried.

He just needed to put the thought out of his mind with something else. He turned on the light and picked up the book of herbs. He would read this for a bit. Either it would bore him to the point where falling asleep was inevitable, or he’d know a hell of a lot about herbs by the time morning arrived.

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Derek hadn’t slept well. He couldn’t stop thinking about Stiles and the way he’d looked at him. The expression on his face had been full of hurt and anger. He’d looked utterly betrayed. The worst thing was, Derek couldn’t blame him.

Damn Peter and his ridiculous plans. He thought it was better to keep Stiles in the dark about the potential of becoming an emissary, and of course Satomi had wanted to check whether Stiles could be trusted. All of this added up to Stiles being led to believe he’d been abandoned by the pack. This was an utterly stupid plan. Derek spent most of the night thinking that this might be the end of all of it. Why the hell would Stiles want to work with the pack as their emissary if this was the way Peter treated him? If this was the way Derek treated him.

Stiles probably hated him for this. He would probably continue to hate him over this. Any hope Derek might have had that Stiles could come to care for him just withered up and died.

When morning came, Derek wanted to hide away from the world. He wanted to stay in bed, bury his head under the covers and just pretend that nothing existed until Stiles came home.

“Come on, big guy,” Isaac said, tugging the covers off him. “You can’t mope in here forever.”

“I’m not moping,” Derek complained.

“OK, OK. If you insist, you’re not moping. You’re pining.”
Derek glared up at Isaac. Isaac just gave a grin and went to breakfast.

After breakfast, work consisted of moving furniture into the new building. There was a whole load waiting and ready in the workshop, some complete and some needing final assembly from prepared pieces. Derek played his part in carrying bedframes and cupboards into the new rooms. Each room had a bed, a set of storage cupboards, and a trio of shelves. They would be able to add to it over time, but that was at least a start. Not that the beds would be particularly comfortable as they currently were, with just hard wooden slats held between the sides of the frames. But it seemed Peter had prepared for this. He’d placed an order to a company in Beacon Hills, using the bank details Stiles had shared with him, and offered a substantial tip on top of their usual delivery fee to convince them to bring the mattresses out to the werewolf territory. Derek didn’t ask how substantial it was; he was fairly certain he wouldn’t like the answer. He knew from trying to get the building materials that people charged extortionate amounts to werewolves knowing that they couldn’t easily shop around.

Derek, Boyd, Isaac and Erica all went to the boundary to wait for the delivery truck. The truck when it arrived was loaded with a pile of mattresses wrapped in sealed plastic. The delivery staff stood on one side of the boundary and held the mattresses across until the werewolves could grab hold and pull them the rest of the way. They didn’t ever cross the boundary until the moment when Derek needed to hand over the envelope of cash that formed their tip.

Derek held it just on the inside of the boundary and one of the men, shaking slightly, held out a hand across the line. Derek, bitter at the fear and mistrust, wanted to grab the guy’s hand and pull him across the boundary just to scare him, and to make a fool of him for being so scared. But Peter expected the little ones to behave. He probably wouldn’t be happy if Derek was childish and frightened these men to no real purpose. So Derek placed the envelope in the man’s hand and forced a smile, even as the guy withdrew his hand like he’d been stung.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” Derek growled.

“What do werewolves need with mattresses anyway?” asked the other guy, the one further from the boundary and, consequently, closer to his escape vehicle.

“We still sleep,” Derek said.

“Yeah,” added Isaac, “and not all of us are as happy about sharing a bed as these two.” He jerked a thumb towards Boyd and Erica.

That was it for the transaction. The delivery guys set off back towards town and the werewolves began the task of lugging mattresses through the woods and into the new building. When they were done, Derek looked around one of the little rooms, ready for an occupant now with the furniture in place. It seemed depressing, more like a cell than a bedroom. The bed didn’t even have sheets on it. He knew they could remedy that particular issue but it still didn’t seem right to banish Stiles to this windowless room when there would be a space for him, ready and waiting, in Derek’s bed. Derek hated the thought of sending him away, but to send him to a place like this was unbearable.

Derek walked back into the main house and up to his bedroom, opening one of the drawers until he found Stiles’ phone. It took a minute for the phone to start up, but then it was easy enough to find the right number in the phone’s memory.

“Hey, Stiles,” Scott answered cheerfully.

“Actually, it’s Derek.”

“Is Stiles OK?” The voice went from cheerful to afraid in moments.
“He’s fine. He’s doing something for Peter right now and I want to prepare something for him while he’s not here. A surprise. But I’m going to need your help.”

“What kind of surprise?” Scott asked.

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Stiles shifted a little, trying to keep his ass from going dead. How did people do this for a long time? He knew that mystic masters were supposed to be able to sit and meditate for hours. How did they manage to avoid numb butt? He shifted again.

Maybe there was some technique of moving muscles. Maybe he could tense and relax muscles to give them something to do while the rest of him was sitting still. Or maybe he wasn’t doing this right. Maybe there was some position he could find and suddenly it would be comfortable.

He shifted again, adjusting his back. There was no backrest. At least he couldn’t easily slouch, which was probably good for his posture, but this wasn’t particularly easy either.

“This is supposed to be an exercise in stillness and calm,” Satomi said, “and emptying your mind.”

Stiles opened his eyes and looked up at her.

“Sorry,” he said. He shifted one last time, trying to find a position he could stay still in. He closed his eyes and focused on emptying his mind.

But really, how did someone empty their mind? It wasn’t like he could stop the thoughts coming. It wasn’t like he could just turn a faucet and stop the random thoughts that came flowing into his brain. That would be cool if he could though. If he could control something like that it would be good for the nights he couldn’t sleep. There were always times when his brain seemed to want to race right at the time he should be settling down.

Although there was a danger if he could somehow do that now that he’d fall asleep. He hadn’t slept well last night and emptying his mind of conscious thought was probably going to make staying awake now a challenge.

He stifled a yawn. He adjusted his posture, straightening his back because it would be hard to fall asleep if he was sitting up straight. His ass would probably keep him awake anyway. Why couldn’t people meditate in chairs?

“I think it’s safe to say that meditation isn’t going to come naturally to you,” Satomi said.

Stiles opened his eyes again. He put his hands down on the ground beside him and stretched a little.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m just not good at the whole sitting still thing. Or the emptying my mind thing. Though my dad would probably have some comments on the last one.”

“Come on. Let’s try something different.”

Stiles got eagerly to his feet, stretching and shaking out his legs.

“Thank god. I’m not sure I could sit like that for much longer.”

“Stiles, you were trying to meditate for less than ten minutes.”

***
Scott still smelled of fear, but he walked into the woods, crossing the boundary line without hesitation. He had a bag on his back and was carrying a cardboard box filled with random stuff, including a couple of rolled up posters that poked out of the top. Derek offered to carry the box and then he showed Scott the way through the woods.

“So where is Stiles?” Scott asked.

“Helping Peter out with an allied pack.”

“Doing what?” There was no denying the worry in his voice.

“Just pack relation stuff. They’re not going to hurt him. We’ve made it clear that if they try anything, it will mean a war between the packs and none of us can afford that.”

“You’d go to war over Stiles?”

Derek realised that he was definitely going against Peter’s plan to protect Stiles by convincing the hunters and the bigots that Stiles was really just a prisoner here. It wasn’t that he expected Scott to suddenly pull a gun out and start shooting Stiles for associating with werewolves, but he really did need to be more careful.

“He’s ours,” Derek said, and quickened his pace so that he wouldn’t have to meet Scott’s eyes. Scott hurried to keep up but it took only moments for there to be strange wheezing noises.

“Hey,” Scott gasped, struggling for air. Derek stopped and turned back. Scott had stopped walking and pulled an inhaler out of his pocket. He sucked in a mouthful of medication, holding his breath. Derek waited until Scott had his breath again.

“Can we go a bit slower?” Scott asked.

Derek started walking, more slowly this time. Scott walked along beside him, the inhaler still in his hand, like he expected to need it again any minute.

“This happens a lot?” Derek asked.

“Every damn day.”

Derek didn’t know what to say to that. He wasn’t used to dealing with human frailties and human illnesses. So he walked in silence, but didn’t race this time. He didn’t want to set off another asthma attack.

They reached the new building, which was ugly enough on the outside, just a low structure with the shining solar panels covering the roof. Inside it was even worse, with the bare floors and the uneven painting on the walls. Derek showed Scott into the small room that had been set aside for Stiles.

“I see what you mean,” Scott commented. “I think we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Derek put the box down on the bed and took one of the posters, unrolling it. He almost didn’t care what the poster showed; anything would be better than the bare walls in here.

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It wasn’t tai chi. Satomi had been quite clear about that. Apparently tai chi was a Chinese martial art form, and it seemed that distinction was very important to a Japanese woman. But, she’d acknowledged, there were similarities to the exercise she’d set for Stiles. He was working in the yard
of her farm, running through a series of slow movements.

He bent his legs and reached down with his hands. Then he straightened his legs and drew his hands up in front of him, circling them round as though he held an invisible ball between his palms. Then he pushed his hands out in front of him. Then he drew them in and started the whole cycle over again. Each movement was linked to a breath. In and out, in and out. Over and over again. And all the while he was supposed to visualise the flow of energy through his body.

He wondered how long he was supposed to keep going with this. It was better than the meditation but it was still boring as hell after what felt like the hundredth repetition.

He also wasn’t entirely sure what this was supposed to accomplish. Satomi had talked about the importance of energy flow in magic. He needed to use his body as a channel for the mystic forces. This exercise was supposed to get him used to controlling that flow. It had been fun for the first two minutes to imagine himself as an airbender channelling the forces of the elements. Right now he was a little preoccupied with the fact that he wasn’t feeling much of anything. He definitely wasn’t feeling energetic, especially now that his legs were starting to ache.

He wondered what would happen if he stopped this exercise. Enough windows overlooked the yard that Stiles was certain someone would see. The question was, what would happen then? Would someone go running to Satomi and tell her that he wasn’t following orders? He knew that Derek had basically threatened her against hurting him, but he wasn’t sure what the consequences would be of disobedience. At the very least, she might decide he wasn’t worth teaching if he didn’t follow instructions.

On the other hand, his legs were tired and he wouldn’t find out what the penalty for stopping was unless he tried it. His curiosity had got him so far. He stopped the flowing movements, shook out his limbs, and went to sit down on the steps up to the front door.

After about a minute, the front door opened and Satomi emerged.

“Giving up already?” she asked.

“My legs needed a break. It wasn’t like it was doing anything anyway.”

“Stiles, do you know what the most important thing is when performing magic?”

“A sparkly fairy wand?”

“Belief. You have to believe the magic will work to make it work.”

“You couldn’t just give me a magic feather and tell me that will make me fly?” Stiles asked.

“Peter likes his secrets and manipulations. I prefer the truth,” Satomi said.

“Except when you were threatening to torture me.” Stiles didn’t plan on letting that go any time soon.

“An exception. When it comes to the magic, I would rather you know what you’re getting into. You can’t just wave your hand and watch a magical effect happen. You have to practice. Most magic is subtle and if you don’t channel the right energies into it, you will see nothing.”

“You’re definitely missing your calling as a motivational speaker,” Stiles said, bitterly. He stared out across the yard.
“Stiles, I’m not trying to discourage you. Far from it. I know you have the capability to perform magic.”

“Because you saw something when you were in my head?” Stiles didn’t know what she could have seen. All he’d seen was a mess of insecurities and depressing memories. Oh, and not to forget the highly embarrassing moment where he’d been dreaming of a naked Derek willing to pleasure him sexually.

“Come inside,” Satomi said. Stiles stood and brushed dust off his pants, following her into the house. He waited while she boiled water for tea. Did she think that everything should involve tea?

“This isn’t going to give me whacky dreams of my worst fears, is it?” Stiles asked.

“No. This is just tea.”

She poured the water into the teapot and carried a tray through to her study. She sat calmly behind her desk and swished the tea around in the pot while Stiles fidgeted and waited for her to get to some sort of point.

“There was once a tree in the woods of the Hale territory,” Satomi said.

Stiles stared at her in confused disbelief, “You’re going to start talking about some once-upon-a-time story about a tree? Now? And people say I go off on tangents.”

“This is relevant to the point I’m trying to make.” She poured the tea out into two cups. “Magic, life and belief are all tightly linked. Sometimes a thing is old enough that people believe it’s special. That belief and the long life of the thing are enough to grant it magic. That magic fuels its life and inspires further belief. It’s a cycle that builds until what is formed is something powerful, something that alters the flow of power all around it. There was once a tree in the Hale territory that was once such item, a focal point for mystical energy that became a beacon for the supernatural, the very beacon for which your town got its name.”

“Still waiting on the relevance.”

“The tree was cut down but a stump remains with an echo of its former power.”

Stiles shook his head and raised his eyebrows so as to silently ask, ‘so what?’

“That tree stump was in your vision,” Satomi said.

“That big ass tree stump in the clearing? That was just a tree stump.”

“No. That was the Nematon. I have no doubt whatsoever. You are already connected to the powers of Beacon Hills, however weak that connection may be right now.”

“So you think I can do magic because there was a dead tree in my dream?”

Satomi pushed Stiles’ cup towards him. She picked up her own and sniffed it like a connoisseur at a wine tasting. She sipped delicately. Stiles fidgeted impatiently, waiting for her to get to the point.

“That and the fire,” she said.

“The fire we used for the bridge?”

“I told you to create a spark. That was the test. The spark of magic would allow you to create the spark in the dreaming. You didn’t make a spark: you made a blaze. That’s why I believe you have
the capacity to do great things with magic. You just need to believe it yourself.”

“Suddenly I feel like I’m in an afterschool special.”

“Believe in your abilities,” Satomi said, “and practice the exercises I give you.”

“The exercises are kinda boring, and I have a problem with focusing on a single task, particularly when I get bored.”

“Then I will give you multiple exercises so you can switch between them. But the payoff is that if you can’t perform any of them for long, you must practice them often.”

“OK,” Stiles agreed. He guessed it was like building muscles and he was going to do lots of small sets rather than one long set of reps. Not that he knew enough about weight lifting to really use that as an analogy. He’d think of a better one later. Right now, Satomi was talking again.

“Your next exercise,” she said, “is to stir the tea without physical contact.”
Stiles was to be packed off back to the Hale pack after lunch on Sunday. He’d eaten alone in Satomi’s study while her pack ate together. Then he was given his parting gifts of a few books, some calming tea that was supposed to help him with his meditation, and his own belongings. Of course, he also had his schoolbag with his barely-touched homework.

Satomi walked him back to the boundary, taking the time to explain that he should probably keep these lessons secret.

“A lot of hunters consider magic users to be as much their enemy as werewolves,” she told him. “Others will either believe you are delusional or try to manipulate you. And those are just the human threats. Some werewolves hate the human magic workers because they cooperated with the humans to build the boundaries. Even within packs, human allies with magic are generally kept secret. You don’t know enough yet to defend yourself.”

“So how am I supposed to explain what you’ve been teaching me?”

“I have been teaching you about the history of the supernatural so that you can better understand us.”

“But your pack know differently.”

Satomi gave a faint, amused smile.

“Right?” Stiles asked.

“They know I’m teaching you about magic. They don’t know that I’m teaching you to do magic. There’s an important distinction. I think Peter will probably prefer it if you keep that same distinction in mind around his pack.”

“Like I care what Peter would prefer.”

“Stiles, whatever you may think about Peter’s secrets, know this, he wouldn’t have asked for this for you if he didn’t trust you.”

“I’ll believe that when he tells me himself.”

They reached the fallen tree that spanned the river. Derek was waiting on the other side. He looked tense but he made no move to approach.

“Remember,” Satomi told Stiles, “what I told you and practice often. I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye,” Stiles said. He climbed up onto the fallen tree. Derek started towards him and then stopped. Stiles wondered if he’d planned on helping Stiles across like the first time and then changed his mind. Stiles stared straight in front of him and walked across the river, trying not to think about the drop below and how a fall like that could break his limbs.

He climbed down on the other side of the river and there was Derek, right in front of him.

“I’m sor-,” Derek started.

Stiles swung a punch. He actually expected Derek to block the punch or catch his hand or something but he didn’t. A moment later, as his fist struck Derek in the jaw and pain flared in his hand, he wished Derek had blocked it.
“Ow! Damn it!” Stiles yelled. He rubbed at his hand while Derek barely seemed to have noticed the punch at all.

“Here,” Derek said. He took hold of Stiles’ hand.

“What are you...” Stiles started to ask. Then he felt the hurt leeching away under the soothing warmth of Derek’s touch. Stiles stood there, his hand in Derek’s, while taken drew away his pain.

“Don’t think this makes it up to me,” Stiles said.

“I know,” Derek said. “If you’ve not got any protection for your hands, you really shouldn’t hit the face with a closed fist. There are too many parts that are bony and hard and you could actually injure yourself.”

“Noticed that thanks.”

“You should aim for a part of the body that has more soft tissue. That way you’ll hurt the person you’re hitting and not yourself.”

“So you’re telling me I should I punch you somewhere soft? Like your groin?”

“That’s soft right now,” Derek said. Stiles glared. He tugged his hand out of Derek’s grip.

“You can’t just make boner jokes at me and expect me to forgive you,” Stiles said. “You lied to me. You made me think you were treating me as property even when we’d talked about it and knew how that made me feel. You could have just told me what was going on but, no, you had to be all secretive about it.”

“Peter wanted-.”

“I don’t give a damn what Peter wants. You should have told me something.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Stiles let Derek finish the apology that time but he wasn’t ready to let this go. He’d felt so utterly betrayed when he’d been left with Satomi. It would take more than a simple sorry before he was ready to let this go.

“I’m still mad at you,” Stiles said.

“OK,” said Derek.

Derek took the bag of books and stuff from Stiles and slung it over one shoulder. He started walking back towards the house and Stiles walked along beside him. The silence was beyond uncomfortable. Stiles wanted to continue berating Derek for the pain he’d gone through over the last few days, but it was less satisfying to do so when Derek was just nodding and agreeing. Derek accepted Stiles’ right to be angry and that in itself was infuriating because it made it much harder to maintain the appropriate levels of anger.

“So,” Stiles said after a few minutes, “Peter told you to take me to Satomi and dump me there?”

“He told me to take you to Satomi and negotiate a trade for her to train you. He told me not to tell you why because he didn’t want you to know what it was about until we knew whether she’d agree and whether or not you could be trained.”

“And you couldn’t even tell me that it was just for a couple of days?”
“Satomi wanted to see how you would react if you thought this pack had abandoned you. She wanted to make sure you weren’t the sort of person who would turn round and use this knowledge against the pack if Peter did something you don’t like.”

“I think you meant when there, not if,” Stiles said.

“It was Satomi’s idea to let you believe that we’d traded you to them.”

“You guys and your stupid tests. I had to endure Peter’s idea of a loyalty test and now I get Satomi’s. Is this going to keep happening? Is every werewolf I meet going to decide that I need to experience threats and deception to prove I’m not a monster?”

Derek didn’t answer at once. They walked on beneath the trees. A couple of times Stiles glanced over at Derek, but he was clearly deep in thought, working out what he should say.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said. “I can’t promise that no one will ever decide to test you, but I promise that I won’t participate in any tests. I won’t do this to you again.”

“I guess that’s a start.”

They walked on. Stiles wasn’t sure what to say. He wasn’t ready to just let this incident pass. He was sick of being jerked around and treated like he was less than a person. Just because the world had done something similar to the entire werewolf population didn’t balance it out. But on the other hand, Derek seemed genuinely remorseful. That had to count for something.

“So Satomi thinks you can learn?” Derek asked.

“Yeah. She’s pretty confident. I’m however getting absolutely no progress with her exercises.”

“These things take time.”

“Said from your many years’ experience of magical training?”

“Every skill worth having takes practice. And you probably shouldn’t be quite so direct when talking about this. Sharp ears all around.”

“Well everyone knows I can’t bluff so direct is all I’ve got.”

“Just try. There are people who could be very dangerous to you if they know you’re learning this.”

When they drew close to the house, Derek turned off the expected path. Stiles hesitated for a moment.

“Aren’t we going back to the house?”

“Not right away. There’s something you need to see first.”

“A mysterious something?” Stiles asked. “It better be a good something because one of these days I’m going to stop just following you into these woods.”

But he did follow. Given how contrite Derek appeared, he doubted this was anything bad or dangerous. It didn’t take him long to realise their destination. They were heading to the new building. Stiles hadn’t seen it in a few days and the differences were obvious, with the solar panels installed fully over the roof. Inside, the walls were painted and the lights were running. Derek took him to a door.
There was a piece of paper stuck on the door with Stiles’ name written in bubbly letters carefully coloured in. There could be no doubt who’d drawn the sign because there were a couple of characters on it. The growly werewolf was on one side of the sign with a speech bubble saying, *Grr. Keep out.* The squishy human was rolling his eyes and going, *Really?*

Stiles couldn’t help a smile.

“How did you get all this?” Stiles asked.

“I asked Scott to help me. The room was just... really empty.”

Derek looked thoroughly awkward, standing there just outside the doorway of Stiles’ new room. It was sweet in a way that he’d cared about giving Stiles his own space and it was touching that he’d wanted to put a flare of Stiles in it instead of just letting him make do with the practicalities of the room.

“Thanks, man,” Stiles said. He dropped his schoolbag on the bed and then went to give Derek a hug. The hug lasted all of half a second because Derek stood there frozen, as though a hug was a strange and terrifying thing. Stiles quickly backed off.

“But don’t think I’ve forgiven you yet,” Stiles said. “This is nice but it doesn’t mean I’m over what you did. It’s going to take a lot more than a few pictures for you to get back in my good books.”

“OK,” Derek said.

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Stiles sat in the living room, working through his homework. Millie sat on the floor nearby, sewing buttons onto duvet covers for the new beds to go in the new building. Neither of them said much as they worked but he’d thanked her for the drawings and she’d hugged him.

The door opened. Stiles kept his head bent over his work. He had another page of algebra problems to finish before tomorrow.

“Stiles, could you come into my study please,” Peter said.

Stiles kept going, trying not to lose his train of thought. He scribbled the next line of his solution, rearranging an equation into something simpler so he could deduce the answer.

“Stiles,” Peter said. Stiles stared at the page, trying to focus on the letters and numbers he was supposed to untangle.

“Stiles?” said Millie. He looked up at her with a smile.
“Yes?” he asked.

“Peter wants you,” she said.

“Oh, I heard. I may not have werewolf hearing but that doesn’t mean I’m deaf.”

He tapped his pen against his notepad, looking back at his homework.

“Stiles, are you really going to play these childish games?” Peter asked.

Stiles looked at his problem. He could use brackets to split the equation into two parts but there was a cube in there. How could he get rid of that?

“I want to talk to you about the children’s school arrangements for tomorrow,” Peter said. “This is important.”

Stiles was getting nowhere with his algebra problem. Maybe he should try and solve the others and just come back to this one.

“Stiles,” said Millie, “why are you mad at Peter?”

“Because he lied to me and tricked me and treated me like a thing rather than a person. Something I think he’d know better than to try since he doesn’t like it when werewolves aren’t treated like real people.”

“Do you want me to apologise, Stiles? Is that it?”

Stiles looked at the next equation and wrote it down on his notepad to try and solve.

“Fine,” said Peter, “I’m sorry your feelings were hurt.”

Stiles couldn’t let that one slide. He looked up at Peter. “That is a hideous apology. That puts all the blame on me. That says the only thing you’re sorry for is that I feel bad, not that you did something for which I have every right in the world to be angry about. Maybe you should apologise for what you did not how it made me feel.”

Stiles turned back to his homework.

“Stiles, I want to talk to you about the children. This is important.”

Stiles stuck the end of his pen in his mouth and chewed on it, pretending to be mulling over his math problem, even though he was no longer paying it the slightest bit of attention.

“This involves their safety,” Peter continued. “I thought that would matter to you.”

Stiles took the pen out of his mouth and tapped it against his leg. Millie was watching. He hoped she would understand that he did care about her safety, he just couldn’t take this sort of thing from Peter anymore.

“Are you really going to let your stubbornness put them at risk?” Peter asked.

“Are you?” Stiles asked in return.

He wasn’t looking at Peter but he would be willing to put money on the expression on his face. He was certain Peter was glaring at him.
“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth about why I was sending you to Satomi.”

“And?” Stiles prompted.

“And what?”

“This is the point where you acknowledge you were in the wrong and promise not to do anything like this again in the future.”

“You want me to promise not to use my discretion to decide what valuable information should be kept private?”

Stiles turned round again to glare up at Peter, “I want you to promise not to lie to me and use me like a pawn in your games without giving me a shred of information about what’s going on. Satomi thinks you trust me. She thinks that asking her to give me this knowledge is a big important thing. So prove it. Promise me that if you want something from me in the future you won’t try and manipulate me into it. Just ask.”

“If I ask there’s a possibility that you’ll say no.”

“If you don’t, there’s a possibility I will do everything in my power to make your life miserable. Now, I may not be able to sprout claws and defeat you in a head-to-head match but don’t underestimate me. I know a lot about pranks.”

“Pranks?”

“You can have mature and responsible adult Stiles who you trust and talk to as a person worth respecting,” Stiles said, “or you can treat me like an ignorant child unworthy of being taken into your confidence, and you will see how childish I can be. Your call.”

Peter was still glaring.

“Attempting to threaten an alpha is a dangerous business.”

“Bring it.”

There was a long pause. Peter and Stiles stared at each other. Stiles almost wondered if he should try not blinking.

“You’ve got courage,” Peter said, “I’ll give you that.”

“I’m still not hearing a promise.”

“Very well. In future, if I want your help, I will be up front about it. Now can we talk about tomorrow and the kids?”

“Of course. But I’m only doing this because the kids are important. This doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten what you did.” Peter didn’t say anything in reply and Stiles knew he’d won this round. Stiles allowed himself a smug grin as he stood up and followed Peter into his office. He wasn’t ready to forgive Peter, and he was still trying to figure out a prank that would annoy Peter but not result in evisceration, but the kids’ first day of school was important. He was willing to hear Peter out about the arrangements.
It felt like half of Beacon Hills had appeared for the werewolves’ first day of school. The hunters were there, of course, deployed along the boundary line to make sure that no one snuck across while the alarms were registering the crossing of the children. Stiles’ dad was there along with a large number of deputies. Stiles suspected the entire department was on duty today. Then there were the protesters. They were being held back from the boundary by the deputies and by their own fear, but there were a number of signs and banners which clearly expressed displeasure. Signs demanded that the werewolves stay in the woods, or stated that they didn’t want werewolves around their children. There was even one demanding that werewolves should be put down.

There were reporters as well, waiting with cameras to record this historic day. They were allowed to stand closer than the protesters were, but they’d all be triple checked for weapons. That didn’t make Stiles much more comfortable because the hunters were armed to the teeth. Ostensibly they were under Argent’s command and would only attack people if one of the werewolves acted violent, but Stiles didn’t trust them at all. It would only take one of them fanatical enough not to care about getting arrested and all the kids could get shot with poisoned bullets. The nightmare images from the dreaming kept coming back to him.

Stiles had crossed the boundary line to make everything was ready but now Parrish had double-checked the specially assigned school bus to make sure that there were no explosives or wolfsbane weapons on board. He nodded to Stiles, who headed back up into the woods to where the pack were waiting. Almost all of them were there. Peter and Derek and the adults were here to help in case anything went wrong.

“They’re ready,” Stiles said. Peter nodded. He took a moment to stand and face the children.

“Remember what I told you. The world will be looking at you so you have to show how good and kind you can be, even if people aren’t good or kind to you. If anyone tries to hurt you, go to Stiles’ father or one of his deputies, or get someone at the school to call Stiles. This is an important day. You’re going to make me proud.”

Stiles took Millie by the hand and added some words of his own.

“There are people filming down there so you should all try to look as sweet and innocent as possible so all the people watching will feel bad for keeping you out of school.”

Millie nodded and smiled. Stiles led the way out of the woods, with the girl at his side. As they crossed the boundary, the symbols glowed, registering the crossing. The hunters would be communicating with the town right now, killing the alarms to stop this causing a panic. Stiles led his little train of children down onto the road and into the focus of the cameras.

The protesters were yelling now, screaming that the dogs shouldn’t be allowed near real children. One woman screamed that they were monsters and Millie pressed close against Stiles’ side.

“Remember,” Stiles said, “you know better than they do. You shouldn’t let it hurt you because you know they’re wrong.”

He said it, but still he wanted to go over there and force-feed that woman her own picket sign. He walked over to the bus and stopped by the door.

“I’ll be right behind you guys,” he promised. The kids climbed on board and took their seats, Stiles’
“So,” Parrish said cheerfully, “are you guys excited about going to school?”

He said it like this was a fun adventure, like the protesters and the armed hunters didn’t matter. He was trying to keep the kids calm and Stiles could have hugged him for that. Instead, he left the bus and went over to his jeep. As he pulled away, he fell into convoy behind the bus, with cop cars in front and behind them. He saw something fly out of the crowd of protesters and his heart raced in sudden terror, but the something just struck the side of the bus and bounced away harmlessly.

Stiles spent the entire drive with his hands clenched tightly around the steering wheel, waiting for something terrible to happen. But the drive towards the elementary school was calm and surprisingly quiet. Either traffic was keen to avoid the police cars, or everyone was trying to stay out of the streets today if they had a choice about it.

When they reached the school though, the calmness ended. There were more protesters here, being kept back from the school grounds by more armed deputies. There were more reporters and film crews. And there were the parents taking their children to school, though they seemed to be vastly outnumbered by the others. Stiles wondered how many parents would be keeping their kids out of school for the next few days, just to be safe.

The bus pulled into a parking spot in front of the school and Stiles pulled his jeep over at the side of the road. He watched as the kids climbed out, herded by the deputies over to the school entrance. Millie looked back once as she reached the door. She waved at Stiles. He waved back.

A moment later, protesters were moving towards the jeep. They must have seen the wave and worked out who he was. He fought to put his jeep into gear but his car decided not to cooperate with his nervously shaking hands. He tried again, but then there were people around him, yelling so much that he could barely make out more than a few isolated words. The meaning was clear enough. They thought the kids were monsters and they hated him for bringing him here.

Something slammed into the side of the jeep and the whole vehicle shook. Someone shoved their protest sign up against the windshield, blocking his view. Stiles had been so worried about the kids that he hadn’t predicted this. Now he wondered if they were going to set his jeep alight with him in it, or pelt him with stones, or just crush him right here.

“Hey! Hey, back off!” One of the deputies came running over. She waved the protesters back, clearing a path. Stiles finally had his jeep in gear and he pulled away, glad to leave the whole scene behind. His hands were shaking but he made sure to drive around a few corners before he slowed to a halt and gave himself a minute to recover himself.

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Everyone was nervous. Tempers were frayed. Miranda had snapped at Anthony for putting his breakfast plate down without enough care, nearly yelling at him that plates didn’t grow on trees. She was normally one of the calmest people in the pack. Damian had been rude to the older kids when he summoned them for their schooling, and Erica had snapped back that she didn’t see the point of studying when they weren’t going to get anything real out of it.

Derek felt as worried. He went for a run to try and burn off some energy, circling the boundaries twice and smelling the human scent of hunters drifting up from the road as he passed. That just made him feel worse. He needed something to do. He needed to keep occupied or he would spend the entire day doing nothing but worry. He headed towards the workshop, mulling over the other thing that had been weighing on his mind.
He found Carlos inside, sanding down a set of wooden rods that were probably going to be chair legs, judging by the seat that was lying ready nearby. Across the empty space, Joanna and Hal were putting together another set of storage cupboards for the new bedrooms.

“Can I help you with something?” Carlos asked.

“I want to make something for Stiles,” Derek said.

“A wooing gift?” Carlos asked. Across the room, Hal gave a wolf whistle. Derek silenced him with a glare.

“No. An apology.” He’d been thinking about it since the day before. Stiles had said that the decorated bedroom wasn’t enough to earn forgiveness, but it wasn’t like Derek could buy Stiles something to make things right. The only thing Derek had out here that was of value was his time. He could use his time to build something for Stiles as an apology, so show that he really meant to make things up to him.

“That’s a little different then,” said Carlos. “For an apology gift, I’d suggest something useful, something practical, something that will help him or make his life easier in some way.”

“OK,” said Derek, trying to think of something that Stiles would find useful. “Just out of curiosity, if I were trying to make a gift to... the other thing... how would that be different?”

“A courtship gift should be something he’ll see every day to serve as a reminder that you care.”

So Derek needed to think of something practical, something Stiles could use, something he’d see regularly, and something which he actually stood a chance of making.

“Any ideas?” he asked.

“Nope,” said Carlos. “I’m not helping you. If you want to win this kid, it should be because you know what he wants.”

Derek looked towards the other two, hoping for some help from that corner. Hal shook his head and went back to screwing the hinges onto the cupboard door.

Joanna said, “You could try filling his room with flowers. That should give him the hint that you like him.”

Derek didn’t want to go down that route. He wanted something that would be easier to deny if it turned out Stiles wasn’t interested in being wooed. The last thing he wanted was for Stiles to feel pressured. He was still a prisoner here. There was a chance he might be obligated if Derek started showing his desires. Following Carlos’ advice and making a practical gift would allow Derek to back off if Stiles felt uncomfortable.

But what would Stiles find useful?

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Stiles’ concentration was worse than it had ever been. He kept thinking about the kids at their new school, wishing he could stop by and check on them. He had his phone on him in case he was needed for an emergency, so he kept checking the news for updates or announcements, in case there was anything breaking. The fact that there wasn’t should have helped him stay calm, but he couldn’t keep his fears in check.
The second time Miss Finch saw him checking his phone in her class, she threatened to confiscate it. After that, Stiles tried to restrain himself to checking in the breaks between classes. Plenty of people were protesting outside the school but any violence so far was obviously minor enough not to have been considered newsworthy.

Stiles wondered what would happen if he snuck out of school to go and check on them. Probably nothing good. He’d been the one who’d spoken up in favour of the kids’ education. It wouldn’t reflect well if he got caught on the news for truancy. He needed to set a good example and just hope that everything was going OK.

Lunch time finally came and Stiles went to grab something to eat. He sat at the table, scrolling through twitter comments on his phone until it got too depressing. For every comment saying something supportive about the kids being in school, there were at least a couple of hundred ranting and raving, spewing hate across the internet. Stiles opened up a text and asked his dad how it was all going. He wanted his dad to reassure him that everything was fine and that the hate was confined to people hiding behind anonymous user names. The actual texts back were less encouraging.

*Nearly had a riot when we asked an armed man to leave. People said he had a right to be there to protect the kids from violence. Parrish talked them down and we got the guy to leave. Feels like we’re sitting on a powder keg.*

Scott came and sat across from him with his own tray of food.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Tense.”

“You should think about something else,” Scott said. “Take your mind off things.”

“Like what?”

“How about you tell me what’s going on with Derek?”

“What do you mean?” Stiles asked. He prodded at his lunch with his fork.

“What’s going on there?” Scott asked. Stiles gave him a confused look. “The thing at the weekend? The surprise room decoration. What’s all that about?”

“Oh that. Derek did something he knew I was mad about so the room was his way of apologising.”

“And that’s all?”

“Yeah,” said Stiles. “I know Derek can seem gruff and grumpy and stuff, but he’s really a marshmallow and he knew he’d upset me so he was just trying to make it right.”

Scott was just looking at Stiles, a scrutinising expression on his face.

“What?” Stiles asked.

“If that’s all, what’s with the grin?”

“What grin?”

“When you were talking about him being a marshmallow, you had the same grin that you used to get when you talked about Lydia.”
“That’s... I’m not grinning,” Stiles insisted. Scott stared at him, so Stiles dropped his eyes to look at his lunch tray. He dug into his food, shovelling stuff into his mouth so as to cut off this conversation.

“Stiles, come on,” Scott said. “You know you can talk to me about this stuff.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Stiles. “Even if there were a grin, which there absolutely was not, then it wouldn’t mean anything because he’s not interested in me.”

“I dunno.”

“And there’s the whole thing where I’m his pet and he could lock me in the creepy basement if he wanted to. Not that I think Derek ever would. Peter might, but Derek wouldn’t. But even so, he has all the power here so if we tried something and it fell apart, he’d still basically own me. That’s not the foundation of a healthy relationship.”

“I guess.”

Stiles returned to focusing on his food because thinking about the situation with Derek was just depressing. He liked Derek and Derek could be surprisingly sweet, but that didn’t mean there was anything real there. Stiles could hardly deny that he found Derek incredibly hot, particularly after the dreaming, but there was a difference between finding someone hot and wanting to start a relationship or something with them. Derek held all the power and that wasn’t going to just go away. The fact that Derek could drag Stiles over to another pack and leave him there was proof of that. Even if Derek somehow took leave of his senses and found Stiles attractive, anything between them would be coloured by their relative positions. Stiles didn’t want that.

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Stiles’ distraction continued through his afternoon classes. In history, he decided that since he clearly wasn’t registering anything Mr Yukimura was saying, he should try and focus on something else. He was supposed to be practicing the exercises Satomi had given him. He couldn’t practice the not tai chi in class but there were others.

There was one exercise which was somewhere between breathing exercise and meditation. He took in long breaths and then let them out, all the while visualisation the flow of energy. He imagined that each breath in brought with it energy from the outside. He also imagined that his own body was filled with a different sort of energy. He pictured the outside energy as soft yellow light and his own energy as a blue glow that filled him. Each breath in brought the yellow light inside him and he imagined it mingling with his own energy in his torso. He pictured it growing there as a bubble of green light. Each breath made it shine a little brighter.

Once he had his imaginary ball of light glowing strongly, he stared at the pot of pens on the teacher’s desk. He started imagining the green light flowing out with each exhale. He could almost see it, like tendrils of green floating across the classroom. Each breath pushed them further out, reaching for the pot of pens. He sent out another long breath as the green light reached the pot. He still held that bubble of energy in his chest. He let out a quick huff of air and sent that energy streaming down his visualised lines to smack into the pot of pens.

The pens rattled in the pot.

Mr Yukimura paused for a moment, looking at the pot in confusion. Stiles resisted the urge to punch the air. But then the bell rang and Mr Yukimura appeared to forget all about the pens, telling them about their homework assignment as everyone rushed to put their things away.
Stiles fought down a grin as he put his stuff in his bag. He’d made the pens wobble. He was fairly certain of it. Admittedly, it was a tiny movement and it had taken him almost the entire history class to make it work, but he was pretty certain he’d just performed magic. That was awesome. That was so completely amazing that he almost forgot to worry about the kids. He could do magic!

“Stiles, could you wait a moment,” Mr Yukimura said. Stiles had a moment of terror, wondering if he somehow knew that the pen rattling had been him. What if he knew Stiles was performing magic in class?

But that was a stupid worry. He was probably more concerned about the fact that Stiles hadn’t been paying the slight bit of attention to the lesson and hadn’t written a single word in his notes all class.

“Sorry if I’m a bit distracted today,” Stiles said. Everyone else had filed out of the classroom now and it was just Stiles left with the teacher.

“It’s an important day for you. I’ll excuse you your lack of concentration if you perform some additional reading.”

“Extra credit?”

“More like extracurricular. I have some books that I think you might find useful.” Mr Yukimura pulled some texts out of his briefcase and offered them to Stiles one at a time, explaining what they were about as he handed each over. “The forced migration of indigenous people in North America, the internment of Japanese after the bombing of Pearl Harbour, and an analysis of racial segregation. I’ve bookmarked some areas I think you’ll find particularly relevant.”

“Why are you giving me these?” Stiles asked. It was because of the werewolves, he had no doubt. The parallels were undeniable, but that didn’t explain why his history teacher would present him with a pile of books.

“You’re going to need to build up sympathy,” Mr Yukimura said, “and the best place to start will be with people who sympathise, with people who recognise what’s happening to the werewolves because it’s happened before.”

Stiles slid the books into his bag, thinking about the camera that was tucked in there, and said, “Mr Yukimura, how would you feel about doing some additional teaching?”
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. A busy spell at work and preparing for an upcoming book launch conspired to eat into my fanfic time.

Stiles drove over to the elementary school, which got out a little after the high school. He arrived as the werewolf kids were being herded from the building by the deputies, to much yelling from the crowd of protesters. There were more protesters than there had been that morning, nearly blocking the road and causing chaos for the school buses and the parents trying to get into the parking lot to pick up their children. In less stressful circumstances, Stiles might have been amused at the irony of the protesters making it harder for the werewolves to leave in their enthusiasm to complain about them being there.

Stiles couldn’t get close to the school because of people and cars blocking the street, so he stayed in his jeep, looking out across the crowd as the deputies tried to clear a path through the angry people. There were other cars between him and the protest, many with drivers like him trying to get a look but wanting to stay apart from the madness. The school bus crept forward. As it passed through the gates, Stiles saw something fly through the air and hit the bus window. Something else followed. The clangs and cracks were audible even over the angry shouts of the protesters.

Stiles couldn’t get close. He couldn’t get in there and protect the kids. All he could do was pull his phone out of his pocket and start it recording. He opened the door of his jeep and stood up out of it to try and get a clearer view. He filmed the screaming crowd that surged around the bus or threw trash and stones at the bus with the werewolf kids in.

Someone actually threw a picket sign. The wooden post hit a window with a resounding crack and a fracture line crossed the glass. Someone was screaming. Not the angry screams of the mob but a sharp, high scream of terror that went on and on. Stiles couldn’t tell whether it was coming from inside or outside of the bus.

More things were flying. Bottles and cans, stones, things that Stiles couldn’t get a good look at that sailed through the air and smacked into the side of the bus. The bus crept on. Deputies tried to push back the crowd, but the crowd pushed forward. There were more protesters than there were deputies. Stiles saw one woman in uniform pressed against the side of the bus, pinned by the mass of people.

Another sound cut through the air, followed by a sudden shocked silence. The air was split by a crack louder than the breaking glass. A gunshot.

Stiles clung to the side of his jeep, his hand shaking a little as he tried to keep his phone’s camera aimed at the scene. More people were screaming now, the back of the crowd dissolving as some of the protesters turned and ran. The crowd became a stampede as people turned to run. Others resumed their attack on the bus with more vigour, beating the sides of the vehicle as though it were some living thing they wanted to kill.

He saw someone fall, their head disappearing downwards into the middle of the crowd and not reappearing.
He had no idea who’d fired the gun or who they’d been aiming at. A warning shot to try and clear the protesters? A hunter targeting the school bus? All he saw was the madness. People ran through the streets between the cars, some passing close by Stiles’ jeep.

There was enough of a gap in front of the bus now for it to pull away. The deputies kept cars back as the bus found a path between them and finally managed to drive away from the school. Stiles should probably start his jeep up again and try to follow, but his hands were shaking too much. He just watched as the bus drove passed, with cracks in its windows, dents in its sides, smears of egg and vegetable matter on its sides and a spray of graffiti on the back. He didn’t see a sign of the children inside. He could only hope that they were huddled away from the windows as a safety measure and not lying bleeding on the bus’s floor.

A few protesters ran after the bus, still yelling and waving signs, but they were a ragged bunch now. A large number of them had fled when the gun fired. Others were sitting or standing around the school, all fight gone out of them. Some lay on the ground, hurt.

Stiles could have followed the bus, but he couldn’t do much to help there. Instead, he climbed out of his jeep and pocketed the phone. He was aware that this was probably not the most sensible thing to do, since these people probably hated him still, but there was a woman less than ten yards from his jeep, lying in the road, blood on her face. Soon the cars would start moving again and he couldn’t just leave her there. He didn’t know if she’d been one of the protesters or just someone caught in the middle of the chaos. Either way, he couldn’t do nothing.

He hurried over, relieved to see that she was moving. She brought her hand up to her forehead and then looked at them in a dazed confusion, as though she couldn’t work out why her fingers were now red.

“Can you move?” Stiles asked. “You should probably get out of the road.”

He knew that the usual rule was not to move injured people in case of making things worse, but leaving the woman where she was could result in her getting run over when the traffic started moving again. He hooked an arm around her and helped her up. She still seemed dazed, but she staggered over to the sidewalk easily enough, so he suspected the gash on her head was the only real injury. He helped her sit down again and then looked around, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do now.

He spotted Tara, one of his dad’s deputies, trying to get some of the remaining protesters to disperse. She saw him and she became louder in her attempts to clear out the angry people.

Stiles had a shirt on over his t-shirt and he pulled it off now, balling it up and pressing it against the gash on the woman’s head. That was about the only thing he knew about bleeding injuries: keep pressure on to stop the bleeding. She reacted in pain but Stiles held the shirt there, worried by the sheer volume of red that seemed to have run down the woman’s face and splashed onto her clothes.

She looked at Stiles in confusion and murmured, “I know you.”

“Don’t think so, ma’am. We need to keep the pressure on so you don’t bleed too much. Sorry if it hurts.”

Tara hurried over. She crouched beside Stiles and put her hand on the shirt, holding it in place so Stiles could let go.

“Medics are on their way,” she told him, “you should get out of here.”
“I know you,” the injured woman said.

Tara glared at Stiles, worry in her eyes, and insisted, “Get out of here.”

Stiles looked back towards the other protesters. Some were drifting away now that the school bus and the werewolves had gone, but there were still far too many people around with the remnants of signs and banners. If the woman, in her state of confusion, managed to recognise Stiles from the TV then it wouldn’t take much for the others to work out who he was. Stiles did what he was told and hurried back to his jeep, turning it around in the road to the honking of a few other cars.

He passed a number of cars full of scared-looking people, no doubt parents trying to get to their own children. He left them all behind and headed up to the werewolf territories.

There weren’t any protesters up by the woods, but there were some reporters and a few cop cars, parked around the battered bus. One deputy looked like he was about to stop Stiles approaching, but then he must have realised who it was because he waved Stiles through. Stiles pulled up behind the school bus and parked, climbing out and looking at the damage.

It didn’t look like anything had broken through. There were dents and of course the cracked windows he’d spotted earlier, but he doubted anything had made it through into the bus. That had to be a good thing. But there was no sign of the kids, which might have something to do with the hunters that still guarded the edge of the territory. Stiles spotted Argent talking to one of the deputies. Unfortunately, Argent had spotted Stiles too. He came over.

Stiles pretended not to have seen him and started walking into the woods.

“Is this what you wanted, Stiles?” Argent asked. The sensible part of him was telling him to walk away. Unfortunately, the sensible part of him rarely got to call the shots. Stiles turned back to Argent and gave him a look.

“Did I want a bunch of people to throw things at a bus full of innocent children? Let me think. No.”

“You had to know something like this would happen.”

“Yeah, that’s why the kids had police protection. If you’re upset about the near riot that just happened, maybe you should be lecturing the people who were hurling stuff and whoever it was that fired the gun.”

“This is only going to get worse if you insist on continuing this,” Argent said.

“Or maybe people will realise that the werewolves weren’t the violent ones and then things will get better for everyone.”

Stiles started walking again, moving past Argent towards the woods. Argent grabbed Stiles arm to keep him from leaving.

“Werewolves are animals,” he said. “It’s not their fault but it’s in their nature.”

Stiles spun back to Argent, fist balling up as he moved. He planted his fist straight into Argent’s stomach. Argent gave a little grunt of pain and surprise and let go of Stiles’ arm.

“Never, ever touch me again,” Stiles said. He walked into the woods and away from the road. He wondered if any of his dad’s deputies had seen that. He hoped not. He didn’t really want word to get back to his dad that he’d punched the leader of the hunters.
Derek was waiting near the boundary line, looking worried.

“Blood,” he said. It took Stiles a moment to work out what he meant. He must have smelled the woman’s blood on him; he had a few splashes on his hands and t-shirt.

“It’s not mine,” Stiles said. “There was a near-riot and this woman was hurt. It doesn’t matter. Are the kids OK?”

“They’re a bit shaken but alright. They’re back at the house.”

Derek started walking and Stiles fell into step beside him.

“So you were just lurking around, waiting for me to come back?” Stiles asked.

“There are a lot of angry people out there.”

“Yeah, one more now. Turns out you were right about hitting people in the soft parts.”

“Who did you hit?” Derek asked. He sounded mildly amused.

“Chris Argent.”

“Stiles!” Derek stopped walking and looked at him in shock. “Are you out of your mind? Argent’s a killer.”

“His whole reason for living is supposed to be about protecting humans from you guys. I have no doubt he’d murder you in a heartbeat but I seriously doubt he’ll go after me.”

“Don’t take the chance, Stiles. The Argents are dangerous and I...” Derek stopped. He looked at Stiles for a long moment and then turned back to the path, walking towards the house.

“You what?” Stiles asked, hurrying after him. Derek walked faster. Stiles wasn’t going to let a little breathlessness get the better of him and said, “Dude, you’ve got to finish that sentence.”

“I won’t be able to protect you out there.”

Stiles was caught between two reactions. One was around how utterly sweet Derek was being wanting to protect him. The other was indignation that Derek thought he needed someone to protect him.

“It’s not your job to protect me,” Stiles said.

“I... I guess you’re right.” Derek actually looked hurt. So much so that it caught Stiles off guard. Derek stared straight ahead, not looking towards Stiles at all.

“Is this a pack thing?” Stiles asked. “Do you feel like you need to protect me because I’m part of the pack?”

“I... something like that.”

“While that’s sweet and everything, you’ve got to know that there’s a whole infrastructure out there built around keeping me safe and my dad is in charge of the local chunk of it. I’ll be fine. You don’t need to be my bodyguard.”

Derek didn’t say anything. He just kept walking. Stiles couldn’t help feeling that he’d said something wrong but he wasn’t quite sure how to make it right. So he stayed quiet too and they walked the rest
of the way back to the house like that. This wasn’t the first time that Stiles had felt like talking to Derek needed a handbook or something. Had he just stepped on some werewolf etiquette?

They reached the house and found Peter in the living room with the kids, cataloguing their experiences of the day. He was writing a list of every incident where a teacher had been condescending over their lack of understanding, every child that had announced that they’d been told not to play with the werewolves, every cruel word or ignorant insult. Stiles wasn’t sure if Peter was taking the list so he’d know who to murder, or if he wanted records in case things became worse in the future.

Stiles stood by the door and listened for a bit as the kids recounted their days. It seemed mostly things had been OK once they were in the school. Most of the teachers had been polite if a little cold. A lot of human kids had apparently been warned by their parents to keep away from the werewolves but there had been no other outright cruelty. The only major problem had been the terror on the bus when the protesters had started throwing things.

“So,” Peter said, when they were done, “do you want to go back tomorrow?”

Stiles tried not to feel bitter that Peter cared about giving them a choice but didn’t bother giving him the same courtesy.

“They have a whole room for art,” Millie said. “There was paint and coloured paper and modelling clay and all sorts of stuff.”

“Glad to see you’ve worked out your priorities,” Stiles muttered with a smile. She flashed a grin at him.

Peter ignored Stiles. He looked round at the group of kids. No one was pulling out it seemed.

“I’m very, very proud of you for doing this,” Peter told them.
“Hi, Stiles,” Danny said, dropping into the seat across from Stiles at the lunch table. Stiles looked at him in surprise.

“Hi?” Stiles said cautiously. Danny might be a lot nicer than most of the guys in the school, but still it was unexpected for him to break the wall of silence around Stiles. No one had been talking to him lately, especially since everyone seemed to hold him personally responsible for the near riot earlier in the week. Stiles found it hard to believe Danny would be capable of something malicious, but still he was going to be careful.

“For my computing skills class we’ve got to make a website,” Danny said. “Most of the guys are just going to put up a few pages of flat html about their favourite band or something, but I want to try something more ambitious.”

“I’m sure you’ll do great,” Stiles said. He’d snuck a peak at Danny’s criminal record once while hanging out in his dad’s office, so he knew that Danny was good with computers. What he didn’t know was why Danny would talk to him now.

“I was thinking about putting together something that could actually be useful and something with interactive elements. What do you think about a website of educational resources for werewolves?”

“What?”

“I know you’ve been recording classes ‘cause the werewolves our age still can’t come to school. We could host the videos and let people comment on them, and have links out to home-schooling websites, and maybe even let people register to upload their own content. If I have time, I was thinking there could be an option for adults to build curriculums with a structure of videos kids should watch in a certain order. What do you think?”

Stiles was a little dazed. The first time a student other than Scott had approached him for a conversation and it was something like this. Stiles almost wanted to reach across the table and hug Danny. But he didn’t.

“Most werewolves don’t have internet access,” Stiles said. “The government froze their bank accounts and then the phone companies and people cut them off. So your site would have a target audience of approximately zero.”

“Oh,” Danny deflated. “That sucks.” Stiles wasn’t sure if he was talking about the fact his project idea was a no-starter or what happened to the werewolves.

“Yeah,” Stiles muttered. He ate his lunch for a bit. Danny just looked at him, thoughtful.

“I didn’t know that about werewolves,” he said. “I also didn’t know until this school thing that the younger ones couldn’t transform.”

“There’s a lot people don’t know.”

“Maybe that’s where I should start my website,” Danny said. “We could post content telling the truth about werewolves and pack life and stuff, maybe get people to post questions and debunk myths.”

“What’s this we?”
“Well, I’ll be the one making the site because that’s the whole point of the assignment, but I’ll need you to get me some content to put on it. Are you in?”

Stiles wanted to leap on this, to grab hold of someone willing to make a point for understanding werewolves. But he was getting more cynical by the day. The protesters hadn’t given up, even though nearly a week had passed without a single violent act from the kids in the elementary school. Stiles couldn’t help wondering if this was a trick, if this was some way to ruin things and get the kids exiled again.

But it was Danny. Danny might hang out with jerks like Jackson, but he didn’t have a mean bone in his body.

“Just tell me one thing,” Stiles said, “why?”

“Because I pay attention,” Danny said, looking almost offended. “You being a prisoner of the pack but coming to school, the werewolves going after Marty when you got hurt, now the kids attending school. None of it adds up with what people generally believe about werewolves.”

“And just like that you’re willing to help them?”

“I want to get top marks on my computer studies assignment. And if I learn more about werewolves in the process, that’s a bonus.”

Stiles considered things, but only for a few moments. The opportunity was too good to pass up, even if he doubted that Danny would get many supportive hits on his website.

“I have to talk to Peter,” Stiles said. “He’ll need to agree. And if we do this, I want you to put ads or something on the site with revenue going back to the pack.”

Danny didn’t argue that point.

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Peter was quite happy to go along with Danny’s idea. He was happy to do anything that helped push the message that werewolves weren’t evil, violent monsters, particularly since the protesters didn’t seem to be going anywhere. Not all of them were content with banners and picket signs and hurling bits of trash at a bus. Stiles’ dad had arrested a guy who’d shown up at the school with a freaking chainsaw and tried to break in, yet the news channels were still obsessively talking about the danger of having werewolves among human children. Even the incidents of violence were being described as though the werewolves were to blame instead of innocent victims. The more Stiles trawled the news sites on his computers, the more depressed he became.

That was why, on Friday after the kids’ first week at school, Stiles walked back through the woods towards the edge of the territory. Most of the news crews had packed up since the kids were back inside the werewolf territory and all but the most persistent protesters had called it a night, but there were a couple still stowing equipment in their vans and readying for the end of their workday. Stiles walked over to a van with the Beacon Hills News logo on the side.

“Hi,” he announced, “you’re going to get an exclusive.”

“What are you...” the reporter started, then she frowned at Stiles. “You’re the human the pack are holding prisoner, aren’t you?”

“I generally go by Stiles.”
“You’re going to give us an exclusive interview?”

“No, but I’m inviting you to come into the werewolf territory to interview some of the kids who’ve been going to school this past week.”

“Into the werewolf territory?” the reporter asked. She looked nervously over at the camera guy who’d been packing away equipment inside the van.

“The alpha is granting you permission to come into the pack territory, interview the kids, and then, you know, leave again unharmed. It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity to get an exclusive interview with werewolves about a situation that’s generating national interest.”

“But will they...” the reporter trailed off. She looked over at her camera guy again.

“Eat us?” he finished.

“Werewolves aren’t cannibals,” Stiles said. “And you’ve got an invite. You’ve been invited in to take the pack’s message to the world, they’re not going to mess with that. As long as you don’t call the kids monsters or try to kill anyone, you’ll be fine.”

The two of them continued to hesitate, so Stiles looked across to one of the other vans where the packing up for the day activity had paused, presumably since they’d recognised Stiles. Stiles shrugged at the two he was talking to and said, “If you don’t the exclusive, no problem.”

He started to walk away but had barely taken the first step when the reporter stopped him and accepted the offer. They unpacked the equipment they needed, bringing a camera, lapel mikes and a case of something electronic. Stiles was given a sturdy carry case which was surprisingly light, presumably mostly full of protective foam for whatever sensitive equipment lay inside. He hoped he didn’t drop it.

The other two followed him up to the boundary and then hesitated about crossing it. Stiles wanted to whack them both around the head for being so worried, but that wouldn’t do much to drive home the message that no one here was really violent. Once they’d finally crossed the boundary, Stiles led the way to the big house.

“You might want to get some establishing footage of the house and stuff,” Stiles suggested. “Most people have no idea what the werewolves’ home really looks like.”

“We don’t want to take up too much time,” the reporter said. Then Stiles led them out of the trees and they got their first good look at the house with its vegetable gardens. “This is where the werewolves live?”

“They can’t go into town to buy supplies. They have to live off the land. They’ve got a lot of people to feed.”

The camera guy was already setting things down so he could heft the heavy camera to his shoulder and film the house. A couple of the pack were in the garden, working in the dirt and looking perfectly peaceful. Stiles wondered if Peter had picked people who were going to look the least threatening. Probably.

The camera guy filmed steadily for about a minute and then did a panning shot that moved from trees to gardens to trees again. Then they all headed inside. Peter was waiting in the hallway, smiling in a pleasant way that appeared almost genuine.

“The children are ready for you,” he said. “Please remember that they’re only young. Treat them
courteously."

“Of course,” the reporter said. Peter showed the way through to the living room, where half a dozen of the kids were waiting. Ted, Alfie and Millie were perched on the couch, with three others, including the five year old Suzie, sitting on the floor in front of it.

It took a surprising amount of faff to get everything set up. The kids were squirming with impatience by the time the lights were positioned and the camera set up and the lapel mikes attached to shirts. The reporter crouched in front of the couch to be on a level with the kids, checking on a monitor that the position was good, that her face was in frame, that the camera would capture everything. Only then did the camera guy nod her in and the interview began.

“I’m here with some of the werewolf children who’ve been the talk of Beacon Hills,” she said, her glittering smile nearly masking her terror. “These children have been attending the elementary school with human children. Tell me, what do you think of the school?”

It was Suzie who spoke first, “The people outside the school are scary. They shout and throw stuff at us and call us monsters.”

Stiles wondered if Peter had coached her to say that. It was so sweet and sad that it should tug on the heartstrings of anyone with a working soul.

“The protesters are scary,” Alfie agreed, “but it’s better inside. No one shouts. Most of them don’t even talk to us.”

“Why don’t they talk?” prompted the reporter. She addressed the question to Alfie, but it was Ted who answered.

“The other kids were told not to talk to us, not to play with us. And the teachers don’t want us there. Our teacher said we were ignorant dogs because we didn’t know the State capitals but we’ve never left the pack territory before, so how are we supposed to know?”

“It’s not all mean people not talking to us or calling us monsters though,” Millie said. “There’s stuff at the school we don’t have here. There’s an art room and I got to paint pictures. I’ve never had paint before and it’s so much more fun than drawing with a pencil.”

The questions went on, with the reporter quietly prompting and the kids talking about the school. There were general comments about how they had lots to learn and that they were excited to find out about everything they could possibly find out about. And there were discussions about the petty meanness of staff or students, descriptions of names called or insults dealt. They talked about the exciting things the school had that they didn’t have here, like the globe and the class hamster and, of course, the amazing school lunches. Alfie raved about the library, saying that he didn’t know so many books could exist. It all painted a very clear picture of just how deprived of educational resources these kids had been.

“We know people don’t want us there,” Ted said, “but don’t want to stop going to school. There’s so much out there we never got to see before. I want to know everything.”

The reporter declared that the perfect moment to end on. The kids were de-miked and Peter herded them off towards dinner.

“Would you like to have some dinner?” Peter asked. The reporter and camera guy hesitated, exchanging glances, but their fear seemed to have faded significantly during the interview.

“We’d love to,” the reporter said. She was probably still thinking of the story and how she’d have the
chance to tell about this ordeal. They left their equipment in the living room and walked past the door
to the overfull dining room, where the table was currently filled with kids, the rest of the pack
waiting their turn around the edge. Peter took them into the kitchen, where Miranda was serving out
a very watery stew. It was the worst meal Stiles had witnessed with the werewolf pack, but he said
nothing as Miranda offered small helpings to the two guests, and equally small helpings to Stiles and
Peter.

“We have guests,” Peter said, “I think this occasion calls for something special. Perhaps some
bread?”

Miranda went to a bread bin and pulled out half a loaf, cutting slices as thin as she could manage.
Each of them was given a slice to accompany their pathetic stew.

“We should return to the living room,” Peter said. “There’s not much room in the dining room and
besides, we don’t want people to start asking why we’re giving bread away to humans.”

The human guests didn’t argue. They sat together on the couch, Stiles and Peter taking other chairs.
They ate with obvious lack of enjoyment, mopping up the stew with the stale sliver of bread. They
would go back into Beacon Hills to talk about how the pack were barely managing to hold off
starvation, struggling to the point where school lunches seemed like the height of luxury and stale
bread was offered as a special treat. It was all part of the act, but beautifully executed and not too far
from being true.

Once the meagre dinner was devoured, Stiles led the way back through the woods from the
boundary.

“They were just like real kids,” the reporter commented.

“They are real kids,” Stiles countered. “Being forced to live in the wilderness cut off from human
society doesn’t stop them being people.”

The reporter nodded. Stiles allowed himself to smile a little. They were changing the world one mind
at a time. Hopefully he interview would change a few more or at least open them to the possibility of
change. Then Danny’s site could help reach yet more. It would be slow, but every person who
started believing that the kids were real kids was a person who wouldn’t be throwing stones at their
school bus. It was a start.
Stiles had a few errands to run on Saturday, starting with picking up some disposable cell phones for the kids, just in case they got in trouble, and another for Peter so that Stiles would be able to get in touch with the pack when he was at school. The guy in the shop stared at Stiles for about three minutes then said, “You’re the werewolf dude.”

“Technically, I’m the human dude,” Stiles said.

“But you’re the guy who’s been sneaking werewolves into town.”

“It’s hardly sneaking. They’ve got a police escort because people keep throwing rocks at them and trying to attack them with a chainsaw and stuff. Can I just buy the phones?”

“I... let me... I’m not sure if we’ve got a store policy about selling stuff to werewolves.”

Stiles reminded himself that force-feeding this guy a cell phone would not be a good idea.

“But you’re not selling them to werewolves. You're selling them to me and I’m human.”

“Erm...” The guy backed off a little. There were a couple of other customers in the store. Stiles really ought to stay polite, but his anger was growing by the second.

“Look,” Stiles snapped, “This week, there has been a near riot, a shooting, a guy with a frigging chainsaw and at least a hundred people throwing stuff at a group of kids. I want to make sure the kids have some way to call for help the next time someone tries to murder them while they’re in school. So you can shut up and take my cash because I’m buying these phones.”

The guy stammered a little and hurried over to the counter. He processed Stiles’ transaction and then handed him the bag without another word.

“Thank you,” Stiles said, with sarcastic emphasis. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

He stocked up with stationery that the kids were missing, getting geometry sets and calculators, new pens and other bits to help them get through school. The woman at the register looked at him, puzzled.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” she asked.

“It’ll come back to you.” He paid quickly and got the hell out of there before anyone else decided that they didn’t want to sell things that would go to werewolves. He’d never thought that shopping could be so depressing.

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It was probably unsurprising that his calming exercises that afternoon had no effect. He couldn’t calm his mind. He was agitated and angry and any attempts to reach some mystical zen state so that he could work magic was proving futile. He gave up and moved on to his other homework. He was still agitated and distracted, but at least no one expected him to empty his mind to write his economics paper. In fact, the opposite was the issue. He stared at a blank screen and tried to remember anything they’d covered in class over the last couple of weeks.

He was sitting in the living room, some of the little ones working on their own homework around
him, typing a few words only to delete them five minutes later.

“When will you be finished?” Alfie asked. “I want to watch the fractions video again.”

Stiles stared at his feeble attempt at an essay. He hit save, closed down the word processor, and handed the laptop over.

“Here,” he said. He stood up and stretched, even though he hadn’t been working long enough to get stiff. He headed for Peter’s study, thinking to ask about getting a couple of second-hand laptops for the kids so they didn’t have to wait so long to use his. Peter was in there with Miranda and some of those who often helped out in the kitchen, so he asked Stiles to give him fifteen minutes. Stiles wandered out again.

He wandered into the garden. He should probably help weed something but he wasn’t sure where to start. He ought to practice his exercises from Satomi but he really wasn’t feeling in the right frame of mind. So he just started walking through the garden. He wandered over to the chickens, not because he wanted to see them or anything, but just to give himself a destination to walk to.

“Hey,” a voice said from behind him, not unkindly. Stiles turned and saw Derek standing there, shirt off and chest smeared with dirt and sweat. That was a really good look for him. Stiles shut his mouth and tried to look like he hadn’t been about to start drooling.

“Hi,” Stiles said.

“What are you doing?” Derek asked. Stiles supposed this was a precursor to being told off for not properly contributing to the pack. Standing around in the gardens when everyone was working was probably against pack etiquette.

“Taking a break from homework. The kids wanted the computer.”

Derek frowned a little. Stiles braced himself for criticism or being given some new job to do.

“Are you alright?” Derek asked instead.

“I’m fine,” Stiles said automatically. Derek tilted his head, expressing his doubt with an eloquent eyebrow.

“It’s nothing really,” Stiles said. Derek just looked at him, obviously expecting elaboration. He could be surprisingly communicative without a single word spoken. Stiles felt a little uncomfortable in this conversation, worried it would seem like he was complaining over nothing, but it was clear that Derek wasn’t going to let this go. So Stiles tried to think of a way to express his current state.

“I’m being pecked to death by chickens,” Stiles said.

The look of confusion on Derek’s face was priceless. He looked towards the chicken enclosure and then back at Stiles with a simple, “Huh?”

“It’s a metaphor, dude,” Stiles said. “It’s like there’s no real problem but there are a million little irritations and they’re all adding up and mixing together until I want to scream.”

Stiles thought he might have lost Derek again, or that Derek would dismiss this as no issue since Stiles had admitted that he didn’t have a real problem right now.

“Come with me,” Derek said.
“Take fifty of Derek gives an ominous order and expects Stiles to follow him into the woods.”

Derek shot him a glare and then walked away. Stiles followed.

“Most people, when they communicate, use these things called words. You might want to try them sometime.”

“I can think of some words for you,” Derek said.

They were heading towards the workshop. It was a place Stiles rarely went because most of the work in there tended to be done by a few werewolves who’d been practicing their carpentry skills since the segregation had begun. No one objected though as Derek took Stiles over to a battered workbench with a pile of wooden bits on and around it. Derek picked up length of wood a little over a foot long and about an inch wide each side. A line had been marked across it near one end. Derek handed the bit of wood to Stiles and then went to retrieve a small handsaw from a rack of tools.

“What do you expect me to do?” Stiles asked.

“I thought you were supposed to be smart,” Derek said. He held the saw out towards Stiles.

“I should warn you that I’ve never done wood shop.”

“Try not to saw off your thumb.”

“Helpful.”

Derek took back the block of wood and held it down on the top of the workbench, with the marked end extending over the edge. Stiles took the saw and carefully, positioned the blade over the inked line.

Stiles took hold of the wood along with Derek, trying to ignore the fact that the bit of wood wasn’t that big and so their fingers were brushing a little. He pushed the saw away and then slid it back towards him, the blade jerking and jolting over the wood. The saw stuck a moment and then seemed to jump out of its place and away from the line.

“Don’t press to hard,” Derek said. “Focus on the rhythm.”

“Like you should be giving anyone lessons,” commented one of the others from across the workshop, where he was watching Stiles with way more amusement than was really justified. It wasn’t like Stiles was that bad.

“Gentle strokes back and forth,” Derek said. He held up a hand and made gestures with an imaginary saw that he almost certainly didn’t intend to look as obscene as they did. Stiles sniggered. Derek looked down at his hand and seemed to realise why Stiles was laughing. He glared and quickly resumed holding the wood still.

“Yeah, you just hold my wood,” Stiles said. Derek’s lips were pressed tightly together. Stiles wasn’t sure if Derek was trying not to laugh or not to growl.

Stiles rested the saw against the wood and tried again. Once he got the rhythm going, it was surprisingly therapeutic. He could imagine that the bit of wood was Argent’s face, or Marty’s. He could imagine sawing through all the people with their stupid insults and judgemental comments. He worked the saw back and forth, slicing through his frustrations. All too soon, the saw made the final cuts and the end of the block fell with a clatter onto the workshop floor.
Derek looked at the almost-straight cut and then picked up another bit of wood that looked identical to the one Stiles had finished slicing, complete with identically marked line. He placed this on the workbench and waiting for Stiles to begin again.

By the time Stiles was done, the two bits of wood were almost identical, although the cut had been a little wobbly on the first one. Derek inspected them both and then added them to a pile.

“So, what are we making anyway?” Stiles asked.

“It’s a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“The kind that’s meant to be surprising.”

Derek put the saw away and started walking out of the workshop. Apparently he didn’t want to risk Stiles’ sawing abilities on anything else. Stiles was grateful for what Derek had given him to do. Maybe it was the repetitive motion, or the physical activity, or just the fact that he’d got to split something into pieces, but he was feeling a lot better than he had been earlier.

“Who’s the surprise for?” Stiles asked.

Derek looked at him like he was a moron, “You, dumbass.”

“You’re making me a surprise?”

“You said the decorations weren’t enough for you to forgive me.”

Stiles stopped short, a sudden, overwhelming sense of guilt washing through him. He hadn’t exactly been lying about not wanting to let the issue go after the thing with Satomi, but he hadn’t expected Derek to act like this. He hadn’t expected that Derek would feel the need to perform acts of atonement. Derek was going to huge lengths to try and make things right and Stiles hated that he’d made Derek feel like this was necessary.

“You don’t have to do this,” Stiles said. “I was pissed that you lied to me about Satomi but you don’t have to...” He gestured back towards the workshop.

“What if I want to do something nice for you?” Derek asked. He’d stopped when Stiles had and now they stood together beneath the trees. It all hit Stiles at once: the sweet way Derek wanted to do nice things for him, the way he’d known that Stiles was feeling down and done something about it, the way the muscles of his bare chest moved under his skin. The next thing Stiles knew, he’d closed the distance between them and pressed his lips against Derek’s.

Derek froze. His lips were still, his body motionless, and it took Stiles about a second to realise what an utterly stupid idea this was. He stepped backwards, avoiding looking at Derek.

“I’m sorry,” Stiles said. “I shouldn’t... I’ll just...” He waved vaguely towards the trees and turned away as though to leave.

“No... I...”

Derek caught Stiles by the wrist and tugged him back. This time it was Derek who pressed their lips together, mouths opening to the kiss. Derek’s other hand cupped Stiles’ head, lacing fingers through his hair, as though trying to hold him there forever. Stiles put a hand on Derek’s arm, stroking the firm muscle he’d longed to touch for so long.
After a moment, they broke the kiss and stood there, breathless and dazed.

“Erm...” said Stiles. “We should probably talk about this.”

“Probably,” Derek agreed. But their eyes kept straying to each other’s lips. The next kiss was all but inevitable. They spent the next little while using their tongues considerably, but there was very little talking done.
They were interrupted in the woods by Peter walking up and pointing out that Stiles had wanted to see him earlier. Stiles had had his hand on Derek’s ass at the point when Peter arrived, so there was no chance he could have missed the fact they’d just been making out, but he didn’t say anything. Derek disappeared very quickly. So Stiles was left to follow Peter back to his study and try to have a conversation while feeling unable to look him in the eye.

He talked about getting a couple of spare computers for the kids and Peter agreed, even suggesting that they get a printer for the house so that Stiles wouldn’t have to use the one in the school library. Peter was entirely focused on business, to the point where it was freaking Stiles out more than if Peter had interrogated him about his intentions towards his nephew.

“You’re not going to say something about Derek?” Stiles asked.

“What needs to be said?”

“You know, about me and Derek...”

“If you require instruction on how to proceed, I’m sure the internet will be happy to oblige. Just remember to delete your browser history before giving the computer back to the children.”

Stiles was pretty certain he was flushing scarlet at the fact that Peter was advising him to look at porn. That really wasn’t the direction he’d expected the conversation to take.

“That really wasn’t what I meant,” he said.

“My nephew is a grown man,” Peter said. “I am his alpha but he is still free to make his own decisions regarding his feelings.”

“Feelings,” Stiles said, quietly, feeling the taste of that word in his mouth. It wasn’t like either of them had said what this was about. For all Stiles’ intentions about talking through potential issues, they’d been too busy kissing, which Stiles felt at least sixty percent of the blame for went to Derek’s bare chest. Stiles didn’t know if there were real feelings, or just feelings of lust. He wasn’t sure he wanted to ask Peter which he thought it was. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Was it better to imagine real feelings when it was just temporary attraction or know the truth and know that this was a passing thing rather than fretting about it?

“To be honest,” Peter said, “I’m surprised he didn’t make his move after the first full moon.”

“That... the first full moon?”

“He was reluctant because he was afraid you’d feel pressured to reciprocate regardless of your true feelings.”

That was comforting to hear. It wasn’t just that Derek was a nice guy and didn’t want to inadvertently rape him, it was that Derek had seriously thought about the dynamics of their situation and considered the potential difficulties they would face. All Stiles’ fears had vanished in the heat of making out with Derek, but they were rushing back now. The screwed up nature of his position here was screaming in the back of his mind.

Another thought forced its way through.
“You offered me the bite right after the first full moon,” Stiles said.

Peter smiled a little, “I did.”

Peter clearly wasn’t going to make this easy for Stiles.

“Was there any connection?” Stiles asked.

“I thought he would be more willing to make you his mate if you were one of us and that you would feel less fear in accepting.”

Stiles wasn’t sure if he should feel hurt that Peter had offered to make him a werewolf because of Derek. But one thing he was certain of: Peter approved of the idea of him and Derek being together. And he must have thought Derek was serious about this to make an offer like that. He thought the feelings were real feelings. Stiles excused himself from the study and hunted around for Derek.

Derek was nowhere to be found though. That probably wasn’t a good sign.

Stiles went back to his homework and stared at the blank screen where his economics paper should be while he fretted what this might mean. Was Derek regretting making out with him? Was he upset? Was he afraid Stiles was regretting it? Was he worried about what Peter might have said to Stiles?

Derek didn’t reappear until dinner time. By then Stiles had got a half-hearted attempt at a paper written and was mostly done with his biology, but he wasn’t any clearer in his mind about what was going on between him and Derek. Dinner wasn’t exactly the easiest opportunity to have a conversation and there was a crowd of people between them. Stiles wondered if this was more of Derek trying to avoid him. That couldn’t be a good thing. All Stiles could do was stand and fret, staring across the dining room at Derek, while Derek ignored everyone and stared at the floor. His face was a blank mask that revealed nothing of his feelings, which in itself was revealing of how much turmoil he must be feeling.

“Did you two have a fight or something?” Isaac asked. Everyone in the room appeared to be paying attention to him, except for Derek, who was still staring at the floor.

“No,” Stiles said.

“Then why are you being so weird?”

Stiles didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. Peter was sitting down at the table with his portion of dinner. He calmly commented, “This may have something to do with the fact they were kissing earlier.”

The silence that followed was broken by Erica loudly going, “Damn it!”

Stiles stared at her, wondering what this meant. Was she homophobic? Why would she be so upset?

“You couldn’t have waited two days?” she demanded of Stiles.

“What?” he asked.

“I believe Damian is the winner,” Peter said.

“What are you talking about?” Derek snarled at his uncle.

“What are you saying?” Derek asked

“Of course. There was a certain amount of speculation as to when you two would admit your feelings. We decided to make it more formal.”
Stiles stared about in indignation that people would be betting on his love life. On the other hand, Derek looked equally indignant, so at least they had something in common.

***

They sat in Stiles’ room after dinner, perched on Stiles’ bed because it was the only place to sit, even though this had implications which made everything considerably more awkward. There was a careful distance between them.

“Your uncle seems to think you’ve been attracted to me for a while,” Stiles said carefully.

“It’s hard to hide things from Peter.”

“You never said anything.”

“When you got here, you were scared of us. I didn’t want you to feel you had to do anything you didn’t want. Especially after Peter...” Derek trailed off.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, knowing exactly what he was alluding to.

“If we’re to do this, I don’t want it to be because you’re my pet or property.”

They sat in silence for a minute, the gap between them like an invisible wall. Stiles wanted to reach across and touch Derek but the moment he did that, he might lose control of himself. There were things they needed to discuss first.

“I’m still trapped here,” Stiles said. “I keep thinking about what might happen if this goes wrong. What if we fight? What if we break up? What if we decide after a few days that we can’t stand each other? What if we break each other’s hearts and we can’t stand being around each other?”

“What if an asteroid falls from the sky and hits the house while we’re having dinner?” Derek said.

Stiles glared, “They’re sensible questions. It’s not like I can just avoid you if something goes wrong. What if we have a messy break up and you’re hurt and your uncle decides to take it out on me?”

“That wouldn’t happen. Peter likes you.”

“He might decide to ship me off to Satomi’s permanently. I’m the one with most to lose here.”

“Does that mean you don’t want to try?” Derek asked.

Stiles considered the question. “No. No, but I just needed to get all that out there.”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” Derek said. “Maybe we’ll work out. Maybe we won’t. I like you, Stiles. I want to try this. And if it all goes horribly wrong, I swear on my life that I won’t let Peter or anyone else hurt you or sell you or anything you don’t agree to. Even I end up hating you for breaking my heart, I won’t let that happen.”

That was what Stiles needed to hear and he knew that Derek meant every word he uttered. Stiles leaned in, closing the gap to wrap his arms around Derek in a tight embrace. He felt Derek’s warmth, his strength, his power. Derek’s arms came around him too, pulling him closer until they were pressed together, content to just hold each other. This wasn’t the rush of desire that had fuelled them in the woods. This was something deeper, something stronger.

***
Stiles walked into school on Monday with his laptop in his bag and a grin on his face. He met up with Danny in the library prior to the start of school. He loaded up his laptop to transfer over everything he’d gathered so far.

“I’ve split the videos into different folders,” Stiles said, while the files copied. “There are some of the older werewolves talking about the war and the segregation and what they remember happening, the violence against them by humans and stuff. Then there’s a bunch of people talking about life before the war, about their jobs and hobbies and how they lived before the world knew about werewolves. Then the final folder is about how they live now, they talk about the work they have to do to keep the pack alive. Plus I’ve stuck in some of Millie’s drawings.”

“Millie?” Danny asked.

“She’s one of the kids at the elementary school.”

The files finished copying and Danny opened up the folders on his laptop to check that they’d copied fully. He opened up one of Millie’s drawings. This was the most recent picture, drawn the day before. It showed squishy human and the Derek werewolf staring at each other inside a heart-shaped border made of little love hearts.

“Cute,” Danny said. Stiles was sure he was blushing. “Anything you want to tell me?”

“I might have a hot, werewolf boyfriend now,” Stiles said.

“I didn’t know you were into guys. You certainly ogled Lydia plenty.”

“I may have been strictly Lydia-sexual for many years, but I’ve always been open and now, with Derek, it’s just... I like him.”

“And the whole hostage thing doesn’t bother you?”

“A bit but we talked it all through and, well, we’ve decide to go for it anyway.”

Danny looked serious. Stiles wasn’t sure if he was averse to the idea of a werewolf and a human being an item, or if he was concerned that Stiles might be getting taken advantage of. He hoped it was the latter. If it was, it was surprisingly nice of Danny to care.

“How’s the website coming?” Stiles asked.

“I’ve got the video hosting set up using a cloud provider that offers that as a service and I’ve got the basic information architecture, but I’ve still got to do the design work and configure the interactive elements.”

Stiles paused, then said, “I’m going to assume you just said it’s coming along nicely.”

Danny grinned, “It’s coming along nicely.”

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Classes proceeded as always, and Stiles handed in his assignments, knowing that they probably weren’t up to his usual standard. After his inability to focus on Saturday, he’d then spent much of Sunday being somewhat distracted by Derek. They hadn’t gone further than making out, since they’d both agreed that they needed to take things slowly. They were both acutely aware of how badly things could go if they screwed this up.
Now he was at school and attempting to concentrate on his classes when he would rather think about things like how slow was slow. It was possible that Derek would want to wait for anything sexual until Stiles was legal of age, and that was a lot slower than Stiles would want. On the other hand, it wouldn’t do the werewolf cause any favours if people realised what was happening and pronounced Derek a rapist and paedophile.

He got yelled at by Harris for not paying attention, but otherwise made it through unscathed until history. Mr Yukimura called on him to answer questions and Stiles managed to bluff his way through responses, but he was still asked to linger at the end of class.

“Is this about what I suggested?” Stiles asked. “About you doing a lecture on the parallels between what’s happening with the werewolves and historical oppression?”

He was hopeful about that idea, particularly thinking about how it could link to Danny’s website and the news report and everything else. If he could record Mr Yukimura doing a lecture like that and push it out onto the web, it might be another way to grow the support for the werewolves.

Mr Yukimura shook his head sadly, “I’ve been thinking about what you asked and I can’t do the lecture.”

“I know it’s extra work but...”

“That’s not it,” Mr Yukimura said. “I can’t afford to have my name attached to something like this.”

“Are you worried about your professional reputation if you speak up for werewolves?” Stiles asked. He tried to control the rising swell of anger. He knew that speaking up for werewolves would be unpopular but so few people were willing to do it that the idea of yet another person backing away from the chance was frustrating.

“It’s not like that,” Mr Yukimura said. “I don’t want to talk about it here but I have reasons why I can’t be active in something like this.” He scribbled something down on a bit of paper and then held it out to Stiles. It was an address. “Come round after school and we’ll explain.”

“We?” Stiles asked.

“Later.”
Stiles sent Peter a message to explain why he would be late, grateful that they now had more than one phone between them, and headed to the address he’d been given. It was for a nice house in the suburbs, nicer than could be expected from a teacher’s salary. He guessed there must be a Mrs Yukimura with a decent income. Stiles parked his jeep and headed up to the front door, ringing the bell and wondering what the hell Mr Yukimura could have to say that he couldn’t say at school.

He hoped he wasn’t being lured into a trap. It said a lot about the state of his life that an invitation to talk in private could stir up these fears, but he couldn’t imagine that Mr Yukimura would be in league with hunters or fanatics or anyone like that.

The front door opened and a dark-haired girl stood there, wearing casual exercise clothes and holding a sword loosely in one hand. Stiles found himself staring at it.

“Hi?” the girl asked, as though it were perfectly normal to answer the door while holding a frigging sword.

“Sword,” Stiles managed to say. Every other thought had apparently vanished from his brain.

“Oh,” she looked down. “Right. It’s a katana. You caught me in the middle of practice.”

She said it so casually, as though it were perfectly normal to practice using a sword, but she didn’t seem inclined to threaten him with it. Given that Stiles spent his spare time practicing magic, he probably shouldn’t judge anyone else for their weird practices. If nothing else, practicing using a sword was just awesome.

“I’m here to see Mr Yukimura. He told me to come.”

“He’s not back from work yet. You can wait.”

She stepped aside to let Stiles in.

“I’m Kira.”

“Stiles. I’ve not seen you at school?” She looked about the same age as him, so it seemed strange that she wasn’t at the school her father taught at.

“I’m home-schooled. I think my mom’s scared that I’ll take one step inside a public school and start smoking and doing drugs and stuff.” She dismissed that with a laugh and a shake of her head, but there was tension behind the joke. Stiles didn’t feel right prying, since he was a stranger here.

“But they let you have a katana?” he asked instead.

Kira shrugged, “My mom’s fine with me being able to defend myself. More than fine, actually.”

They stood awkwardly in the hallway of the house, neither quite sure what to do. Stiles wanted to tell her to go back to her practice, but she clearly didn’t want to leave him alone in her house. They were saved by a door opening and a woman, presumably Kira’s mother, emerging from another room. She gave a welcoming smile.

“You must be Stiles,” she said.

“So I must.”
“Noshiko Yukimura,” she offered a hand and Stiles shook it. She looked like she’d been expecting it.

“We should wait for my husband,” she continued. “Can I offer you anything? Tea, perhaps?”

“My last experience with tea wasn’t exactly pleasant,” Stiles said.

“I don’t plan on offering you any of the Ijunst varieties.”

Stiles froze. That had been part of the name of the tea Satomi had given him, the tea that had caused the dreaming and his wandering through his fears and dark memories. How the hell had Noshiko known about that? She smiled knowingly at him, clearly reading his confusion in his face.

“I thought so,” she said. “Are you studying with Satomi or with the Hale emissary?”

Stiles opened his mouth to answer and then hesitated, still overwhelmed with confusion. He said, “I was told not to talk about it.”

Noshiko nodded and said, “I understand.”

“I don’t,” Kira said. She’d been watching the exchange and appeared as confused as Stiles was. Stiles wondered if Mr Yukimura had realised that the wobbling pen pot had been caused by magic and had told his wife. But how would she know about Satomi?

Noshiko showed Stiles through to a small sitting room. It was nicely appointed, with traces of Asia in the decorations, including a beautiful scroll of calligraphy on one wall. Stiles took a seat, while Noshiko sat across from him. She looked up at Kira, who’d trailed them into the room.

“Tea for our guest?” she said, gently but clearly more of an instruction than a suggestion. Kira nodded, but she rolled her eyes at Stiles as soon as her mom looked away.

“How do you know of Satomi?” Stiles asked, trying to make the question sound casual. Even to his own ears, it sounded awkward, a little too forced, not quite phrased in the right way.

“I’m older than I look. I knew her before the war, this war. We didn’t always get on and we disagreed more often than we agreed, but I always respected her. Before the barriers went up, we would often take tea together and play go.”

“Did you know about her being a werewolf?”

She nodded.

“But you were still friends?”

She laughed, a little sadly, and said, “I’m not sure we were ever friends. But knowing what she was did nothing but increase my respect for her, for the control she had even in times of great stress.”

“Couldn’t you still cross over the barrier and play go?” Stiles asked. “Just because she can’t come into town doesn’t mean you can’t go see her.”

Noshiko shook her head, “I can’t cross the barrier.” She looked at him seriously and dropped her voice to something barely above a whisper and added, “For the same reason that my family can’t be actively engaged in speaking out for the werewolves.”

Stiles stared, pieces slotting together in his brain. He dropped his voice to equally quiet levels and asked, “Are you a werewolf?”
She shook her head again, “I believe it was Shakespeare who said, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy’.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. We only did Romeo and Juliet.” But Stiles’ mind was still working. Not a werewolf, but something else, something that would trigger the boundary magic in the same way. He thought of all the old myths and legends. How many others might be there, hidden away, afraid that what happened to the werewolves might happen to them?

Kira came into the room. She’d traded her katana for a tray with teapot and cups. Noshiko turned and gave her a quick smile, thanking her in normal volume. In that one instant, Stiles knew something important. He knew that Kira didn’t know the things that Noshiko was hinting at. Noshiko wasn’t human, and she hadn’t told Kira.

“What’s this about?” Kira asked, pouring the tea.

“Your dad lent me some books that he thought might be helpful to me for drawing parallels between what’s happening now with the werewolves and historical incidents of oppression. I was hoping he might have some more stuff I could read.” Stiles didn’t say anything about wanting Mr Yukimura to help out with spreading the message. He wasn’t going to make that request again. Much as he’d like all the help he could get speaking out, he could only imagine how the world would react to more supernatural creatures and he was sure it wouldn’t be good.

“You’re the human who’s part of the Hale werewolf pack, right?” Kira asked. Stiles was so used to being asked if he was the pack’s hostage that this way of phrasing the situation caught him off guard. She recognised that he was part of the pack.

“Yes,” Stiles said, simply.

“What are they like?”

“People. Some I like, some I don’t. There’s this girl Millie, she’s one of the kids coming to school in town, who loves drawing, absolutely loves it, but she was always told not to waste paper because they didn’t have much to spare, so drawing’s been this precious, scarce thing for her and now she’s fallen in love with the school art room.”

Kira smiled at his babble, as did Noshiko. Stiles talked a little more about the pack, about how everyone played their part and helped out the community, about the sense of responsibility everyone had for everyone else, even about Peter fighting to get what was right for his people. He was still talking when the front door opened and Mr Yukimura hurried in, quickly apologising that he’d been held up at the school.

“It’s fine,” said Stiles. “I was just hoping you might have some more books that would be useful to me.”

Mr Yukimura exchanged a look with his wife. Understanding passed between them.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll just go get them.”

He walked out as quickly as he’d come. Stiles was left sitting with the others. He took a sip of his tea, more for the sake of politeness than any desire to drink it. He really hoped this cup wouldn’t result in horrifying nightmares.

“Maybe we could organise sit-ins or something to protest the segregation,” Kira said.

“No,” her mom said, almost before Kira had finished speaking.
“It’s the right thing to do.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Everything’s too dangerous to you,” Kira snapped.

“We’re not discussing this now,” Noshiko said.

“We never discuss it!”

“Kira!”

Stiles had the uncomfortable feeling of intrusion at being a witness to this argument. He squirmed a little in his seat, sipping his tea to avoid meeting anyone’s gaze. Mr Yukimura came back into the room, holding a small pile of books. Stiles stood up quickly and took the books, grateful for an excuse of a subject change.

“This is awesome,” Stiles said. “Thanks.”

His eyes strayed to his wife and daughter then he said, “I’m sorry I can’t do more.”

“It’s OK. I understand.”

“I don’t,” put in Kira.

“I should get back to the pack,” Stiles said.

“I’ll show you out,” Noshiko said. “There are some things I would like to discuss with you regarding your other studies.”

She took him to the front door and outside. They stood there, away from anyone who could overhear, with Stiles clutching the pile of history books to his chest. He still wasn’t comfortable talking about his magic training after everyone had stressed this importance of keeping it a secret. After all, he only had Noshiko’s word that she knew Satomi.

“I take it,” she said, “that Satomi has been teaching you about energy flows?”

Stiles hesitated about answering, then nodded, “That and emptying my mind, which I can only seem to manage when your husband calls on me to answer a question in class.”

“Here are a few extra points to remember: there are many forms of energy. Heat and light, destruction and creation, belief, your own self, as well as currents that flow through the world. You can draw on any of these energy sources for magic but beware of using your own energy; it’s easy to use too much and not realise the harm you’re doing to your body. Also remember, like yields like. If you wish to do a spell of creation, you’ll get best results using a creative energy source, and so on.”

Stiles nodded. That all seemed to make sense.

“You should also remember to look for the path of least resistance,” Noshiko said. Stiles bit down a question about whether she meant doing nothing while werewolves were persecuted.

“Not all magic requires a lot of energy to achieve a useful result,” she continued. “Think of it like martial arts. If I were to come at you with a sword, it would take a lot of energy to stop my blow because you would have to counter all the energy of my movement. It would take comparatively little energy to nudge my blow aside and cause me to miss. It’s why deflection is such a key component in most martial art forms; take the energy used against you and turn it to your advantage.”
When using the old skills, use the same principle, look for the approach that uses the least energy. Technique matters more than power.”

Stiles nodded, “I’ll try and remember that.”

Stiles started to leave, but then he turned back, “I know you probably don’t think this is any of my business, but you should probably explain things to Kira.”

“I am protecting my daughter.”

“Yeah, I get that, but she’s just going to get angry if she doesn’t think there’s a good reason for what you’re doing. Speaking as someone who’s been lied to and manipulated, it’s not a nice feeling even when there’s a good reason for it. You should tell her the truth.”

“Goodbye, Stiles.”

There could be no clearer dismissal, so Stiles headed back to his jeep with the books.

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Stiles sat on the floor of his bedroom, trying to keep his mind clear, with two candles in front of him. One was burning cheerfully, the other resolutely was not. Stiles had been thinking about what Noshiko had said about like yielding like, and so he was trying to use a candle’s fire energy to light the other candle. The fact that the lit candle was half-burned already showed how little success he was having.

There was a soft knock on the bedroom door.

“Yeah?” Stiles asked. He leaned back, rubbing a hand over his face to relieve his tiredness. It was strangely exhausting sitting here watching a candle fail to light.

The door opened and Derek walked in. He closed the door behind him.

“What are you up to?” Derek asked.

“Trying to light a candle.”

Derek looked at the set up and said, “I assume you’re not using matches.”

“Nope.”

“Can I watch?”

“It will be the most boring display ever. I’ve not got it to work.”

“Yet,” Derek said. Stiles shrugged. He stared at the candles. Maybe he needed to think about things a different way. After all, a definitely of insanity was doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results. He remembered what Noshiko had said about nudging verses stopping.

While Derek came into the room and sat on the bed, Stiles rearranged his candles. He put the unlit candle behind the lit one. He’d been trying the techniques of drawing and directing energy, but maybe he should think about focusing it instead. The candle was pouring out energy in all directions in the form of light and heat. Maybe he could take the energy that was going it roughly the direction of the other candle and nudge it a little, focusing it like using a magnifying glass to focus the sun’s light and start a fire.
He concentrated on visualising the energy of the lit candle, imagining it as a billion straight lines shoot out in every way. He slowed his breaths and with each outgoing breath, he nudged the lines towards the wick of the second candle. He breathed in and made the connection to the lit candle. He breathed out and gave a little push.

He tried to keep his mind clear of all other thoughts. He tried not to worry about whether he might accidentally set fire to the wrong thing. He tried not to wonder whether Derek was getting bored. He tried not to wonder if Derek had come in here expecting to do something different and now he was feeling upset because Stiles was basically ignoring him. Stiles didn’t want to just admit defeat on this so he kept pushing those stray thoughts out of his head as he pushed the energy of the candle.

He drew another breath in, felt the warmth of the energy, he let the breath out. Was that smoke? Was that a little wisp of smoke on the wick of the candle? He tried not to lose focus. He didn’t want to lose it after coming this far.

Another breath in. Another breath out.

A little, yellow flame burst into life on the wick of the candle.

“Yes!”

Stiles nearly knocked both candles over as he leapt to his feet, punching the air in excitement. He turned to Derek in triumph, grinning.

“I did it! I did magic. Admittedly it was only lighting a candle and it took forever and I had to have the other candle there for it to work and...”

Derek reached out and pressed a finger over Stiles’ lips. Stiles fell silent.

“You did magic,” Derek said, smiling. Stiles grinned, laughing a little in his excitement.

“I did magic.”
Stiles spent a night with his dad, planning on enjoying a night in his old bed and a little bit extra sleep since he didn’t have to get up quite so stupidly early as when he was travelling from the woods to go to school. He also knew that he had to have a certain conversation with his dad, whether he wanted to or not.

They sat at the table, eating Chinese take-out because Stiles was really missing this sort of food, and because he could at least order things with lots of vegetables for his dad so it was better than pizza. Stiles ate heartily, and tried to think of a way to explain things that wouldn’t result in his dad charging into the woods with a wolfsbane gun.

“What’s wrong?” his dad asked, after several minutes.

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Stiles...”

“Nothing’s wrong. There’s just something that you probably should be aware of and you might take it the wrong way so I want to be absolutely clear before I go any further that there is absolutely nothing whatsoever wrong in any way. Right?”

“If you’re trying to make me less worried, this isn’t the way to go about it.”

Stiles took a breath and dove straight in, “Derek and I are an item.”

The expression on his dad’s face was everything he feared, concern and anger mingling with confusion.

“When you say ‘item’,,” he said, “do you mean that he...” he waved a hand vaguely, “with you?”

“No! No. There’s been a bit of kissing but we’re taking things slow.”

“He kissed you?”

“Technically, I kissed him the first time. After that, it was more, you know, mutual.”

Stiles’ dad dragged a hand across his face.

“There are so many things wrong with this, I don’t even know where to start,” he said.

“Do you want me to start?” asked Stiles. “He’s several years older than me. He’s a werewolf. He’s technically my captor. His uncle could shred me to ribbons if Derek and I have a messy breakup. I’ll be trapped with the pack even if Derek breaks my heart and I can’t stand to be around him. This could damage the werewolf rights cause if everyone thinks he’s abusing me. He’s a guy, so I could get all the homophobic assholes protesting as well as the anti-werewolf bunch. Technically, he’s a high school drop-out because of the whole segregation thing so he would never be a doctor or a lawyer or any high-flying member of society. Have I missed anything?”

He’d been ticking things off on his fingers and now he was running out of fingers.

“You’re sixteen,” his dad said.

“But that’ll only be an issue when we start having sex.”
“When?”

Not for the first time, Stiles wished he had the ability think before he spoke. He cringed a little.

“What I meant is that nothing like that has happened,” Stiles said.

There was a silence that quickly became painful. Stiles wanted to shrink down under the table and avoid his dad’s eyes. He knew that this conversation needed to happen but he’d really rather be anywhere than here right now. He wished he could just transport himself into the future where this discussion was over and done with so he’d never need to think about it again.

“Have you considered,” his dad asked, “that he might be manipulating you?”

“Not Derek,” Stiles said quickly. His dad’s expression remained the same look of serious concern. “Not Derek. If we were talking about Peter, fine, throw in all the accusations of manipulation you want, but Derek’s not like that.”

“He could be trying to make you think that.”

“Dad, seriously, no. I know you haven’t exactly met Derek under the best circumstances, what with him dragging me out of that jail cell and everything, but he’s a nice guy. He’s sweet and he worries about me and he told me that he didn’t make a move because he didn’t want me to feel pressured because he knows our situation is messed up. We’ve talked about the issues. This isn’t something we’ve just jumped into without thinking. I like this guy, Dad.”

His dad rested an elbow on the table and dropped his forehead into the palm of his hand, but the hand kept moving, rubbing against his forehead, fingers waving a little as though they could pull some perfect answer out of the air.

“He’s several years older than you. Nice guy or not, that should bother you. An adult going after someone so many years younger than them is never a good sign, even when they’re not doing something illegal.”

“But it’s not like Derek is lurking around high schools looking to pick up teenagers,” Stiles said. “He didn’t go out looking for minors to attract, I just happened to be there.” The implications behind Stiles’ words sank in even as he said them. Derek didn’t have a social circle to speak of. He had his pack, but he thought of them as family. He didn’t have opportunities to interact with people outside of that. He’d latched onto Stiles because Stiles was literally the only option for him.

Stiles didn’t believe that Derek would lie to him or lead him on, not deliberately anyway, but there was a possibility that the only reason Derek was into him was because Derek didn’t know any better. He was so unused to interacting with people that on some level he latched on to Stiles as a potential romantic interest because his life was so devoid of everyone else. It was understandable and somewhat pitiable. It was also terrifying. It was possible, maybe even probable, that if by some miracle the segregation laws were changed, Derek would meet someone else and realise what he could have been having all along. He would pass Stiles up for a better offer as soon as he saw the whole wealth of options available to him.

Stiles wanted to believe that Derek wouldn’t do that. But he knew what he was compared to someone like Derek. He meant everything he said about manipulation. Derek wouldn’t do something like that on purpose, but it was possible Derek was being manipulated by his own inexperience.

“Stiles?” his dad said.

Stiles shook his head. He wasn’t going to think about it. After all, the likelihood of the rules suddenly
changing and Derek getting to go out on the town hunting for dates was so slim as to be laughable. As they’d said when they’d talked, neither of them knew what was going to happen in the future. It didn’t mean it wasn’t worth trying.

“I like Derek,” Stiles said.

“You’re going to ignore anything I say against this, aren’t you?”

“No... ignore... exactly.”

“Look, Stiles, I think this is a terrible idea. I don’t know if he’s deliberately manipulating you, or if this is a crush that will blow over, or if you’re going to get in way too deep with a guy who isn’t right for you...”

“Dad, I know all this. So does Derek. We’ve had conversations about all the ways this is messed up. But I like Derek and he likes me and so we’ve decided to try this.”

“Meaning you’re going to do this no matter what I say,” his dad said.

“Dad, Derek’s a nice guy. He cares about me.”

“Stiles, I want you to talk to me. Whatever he does, whatever you do, I want to know about it.”

“What?” Stiles asked, imagining the ways that conversations could get seriously icky seriously fast.

“I mean it. I want to know what’s going on between the two of you. I don’t think this is healthy so I want to know what’s happening so that you’ll have an outside perspective. If you ever decide to listen to it.”

“You really want to know everything?” Stiles asked. So he started talking. He told his dad about Peter threatening him to see if he’d run, though he didn’t go into details about the threats, and how Derek had comforted him afterwards. He talked about Derek worrying when he was hurt and fussing around him trying to find any way to help. He talked about Derek spotting he was upset and figuring out that woodwork might help calm him. He talked about the way checked to make sure he was OK, the way they bickered in a teasing, sarcastic way. He talked about the way Derek had decorated his bedroom and how he was now making some surprise present for him. He talked about the way Derek’s face lit up when he smiled. He talked about wanting to make that happen more because Derek didn’t smile nearly enough.

He didn’t quite tell his dad everything, but it was something close to it. His dad listened but didn’t seem comforted. In fact, he seemed to get more serious the more examples Stiles gave of how Derek was actually one of the good guys.

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Someone had egged his jeep. It had been parked in front of his house, in front of the sheriff’s house, and someone had still come in the night and thrown eggs at it. Stiles cleaned away the worse of the smears and made sure that the windscreen was clear before he headed for school. At least it was just eggs. No one had thrown a picket sign or worse at him. They hadn’t done any actual damage to the jeep. No one had slashed his tires or smashed his windows or anything that would cost money to fix.

It was a depressing fact about his life that his car only getting egged counted as a bright side.

Stiles parked up in front of the school and hoped his jeep would get through the day without any
further incident. It didn’t deserve this sort of treatment.

Protesters weren’t bothering with the high school because the werewolves were all at the elementary school. Only other high school students had ever bothered him about it here and most of them were still ignoring him after the Marty incident. He couldn’t help worrying though that if someone was willing to egg his jeep in front of the sheriff’s house, they might be getting bolder. They might be frustrated that their protests weren’t driving the pack away and upping the stakes.

He tried not to think about it as he chatted with Scott and went to his classes. He talked to Scott about Derek and did his best to ignore the knowing grin on Scott’s face. He caught up with Danny about the website. Apparently there would be something to show Stiles in a day or two, so Stiles could give feedback on it. The project was due on Monday, so it would be going live on the internet over the weekend. Then he just had to hope someone would watch the videos.

He also talked to Danny about writing a few bits on the parallels to the stuff in Mr Yukimura’s books. He wasn’t exactly a noted historian, but he could write a few posts and put them on a blog on the site and then point people towards the books to get more information. He even spent some time over lunch jotting down ideas for the things he could talk about. It felt good to be actually doing something, however pessimistic he might be about its likelihood of changing the world.

The day was going well, despite the fact that he had chemistry with Harris to deal with. Of course it would happen that the moment he let himself relax was the moment everything came crashing down around him. They were setting up for lab work when his phone rang.

“You know the policy on cell phones in this class, Stilinski,” Harris called out.

“Sorry,” Stiles said. He pulled his phone out to cancel the call. But then he saw Millie’s name on the screen and his blood turned to ice. He couldn’t imagine any good reason she would call and he could think of about a million bad ones. He answered.

“Stilinski!” Harris snapped.

“Millie?” Stiles asked. He ignored Harris’ anger.

“There are men,” Millie said. Her voice was a terrified whisper. “They’re in the school.”

“I’m on my way,” Stiles said. “And the police should be there. Stay calm. It will be OK.”

He gave calming words even though he didn’t feel remotely calm. He ran from the classroom, ignoring Harris’ threats of punishment if he left now. He ran down the hallway, the phone pressed against his ear. For a few moments, all he heard was Millie’s terrified, uneven breathing. Then he heard a man’s voice saying, “Hey!”

The call went dead.

Stiles pulled up his dad’s number and called, running out to his jeep with the phone pressed to his ear. Stiles fumbled his keys, shifting his phone to his other ear so he could open up his jeep without dropping the call.

“Not a good time, Stiles,” his dad said.

“Millie called me. She says there’s men in the school.”

There was the briefest of pauses then, “Yeah.” He already knew.
“I’m on my way to you.” Stiles was in the jeep by now and he started up the engine. He knew all the rules about being on the phone while driving, but there were times when rules could be ignored. The kids were in trouble. People were in the school and he needed to get there.

“No, Stiles, we’ll handle this.”

“Millie might call me again. You might need me there so you can talk to the kids inside.”

“Stiles, it’s too dangerous.”

“Dad, I’m not saying I’ll go charging in but I should be close.”

There was another of those miniscule pauses then his dad said, “It’s too dangerous for you to be near this school. They say they’ve got a bomb.”
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See end notes for trigger warnings

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stiles ignored his dad’s instructions to stay away because how the hell was he supposed to stay away when someone was threatening to blow up his kids? He powered out of the school parking lot to the best of his jeep’s ability, already pulling up Peter’s number on his phone.

“Stiles? What’s wrong?” No time for pleasantries.

“There are people in the school. The police are there and I’m heading there now but...”

“Don’t do anything reckless,” Peter said. Then he hung up.

Stiles was already heading to the elementary school, which probably counted as something reckless. Peter was hardly in a position to judge though. Stiles would be willing to bet his jeep on the fact that Peter was even now heading into town to do something even more reckless. The kids were in danger. How could he do anything else?

The whole drive, Stiles kept thinking about what might be happening. People in the school. A threat of a bomb. He remembered the images from his dream, of the bullets and the blood. He’d brought the kids here. He’d got them into the school. If they died now, it would be his fault.

Stiles’ driving probably counted as reckless. He was barely paying attention to the other road users, except when to perform manoeuvres of dubious legality, overtaking at dangerous moments to try and shave a few seconds off his journey time. He just hoped the cops would all be too busy worrying about the bomb in an elementary school to pull him over and give him a ticket.

His hands were shaking as he changed gears. He was sure he would be in the middle of a panic attack right now if it weren’t for the overriding need to just get to the school. He cut through a light just as it turned red and was rewarded by someone blasting their horn. He ignored the noise and kept going. He turned into the road with the school and slammed on the brakes before he drove right into the police barrier. A couple of deputies blocked the road and beyond them, Stiles saw a number of sheriff’s department cruisers and a couple of ambulances. He hoped to god that the ambulances were a precaution and not there because someone was currently bleeding to death.

He scrambled out of his jeep and was met by one of the deputies blocking his way.

“I got a call from one of the kids inside the school,” Stiles said. “I need to talk to my dad.”

The deputies exchanged a look, then one of them nodded Stiles through. He hurried past them before they could change their minds. There were no protesters in sight but the space around the school was still busy with people including, he was terrified to recognise, the bomb squad standing around beside it.

There were news vans, of course, with reporters and camera crews being held back by the deputies. They were filming the school and the deputies and, of course, the sheriff, who’d turned away from
his discussions with the bomb squad to see Stiles.

“I told you to stay away!” his dad yelled above the noise, hurrying over to Stiles.

“Millie called me,” Stiles said.

“Give me your phone in case someone calls again and get out of here.”

“Dad, I got those kids accepted into that school. I can’t just leave. I need to be here. I need to know what’s going on.”

His dad glared at him for several seconds, then snapped, “Parrish! Take Stiles out beyond the barrier and make sure he stayed there.”

Stiles let Parrish grab him by the arm and tow him away, because he could at least ask Parrish what was happening.

“We think there are four men,” Parrish said. “They broke into the school during an assembly and there were shots fired. We think that there’s an officer down because Deputy Graeme was in there with the kids and we’ve not got a response from her since this started. A few minutes after they broke in, the men sent out all the teachers and most of the kids and they were all babbling about how one of the men had a bomb strapped to his chest.”

“They sent people out?” Stiles asked.

“The ones they knew were human,” Parrish said. “There are still twenty seven children inside.”

“Including all the werewolves?”

Parrish nodded. It made a twisted sort of sense. The men inside the school would be happy to blow the werewolves to smithereens, but they were trying to avoid the collateral damage of killing human children, whether because they didn’t want to lose sympathy or because they genuinely thought there was a difference between the murder of werewolves and humans.

“Are we sure the bomb’s real?” Stiles asked.

“We have to assume so. They’ve threatened to blow the school if anyone goes near the building.”

And if they’d already killed a deputy, they probably wouldn’t hesitate. Stiles couldn’t help thinking about Tara Graeme. She’d been with the sheriff’s department for years, since Stiles had been a kid too young to be left alone and too disruptive for his dad to get regular babysitters. There had been any number of afternoons when he’d been younger, sitting in the station while Tara kept an eye on him or even helped him with his homework. He didn’t not to think about what her silence might mean. There was no sense worrying about it without knowledge.

Alarms started blaring. Stiles nearly jumped out of his skin, looking up to the speakers on a nearby lamppost, screaming out the warning that someone had crossed the boundary. He ought to be worried. He ought to be scared for Derek and the others, but right now he was just glad they were on their way to help.

The alarms cut off after less than a minute. There was no need to warn the citizens of Beacon Hills because everyone knew where the werewolves would be heading. Another layer of fear wrapped around Stiles. The hunters would come here, expecting the werewolves. The hunters might kill Derek while he was just trying to help.
Stiles’ phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket, hands shaking so much he nearly dropped it. Millie’s name was on the screen.

“Millie?” he asked.

“’Fraid not. You’re the traitor, aren’t you?” It was a man’s voice, gruff with anger.

“I’m Stiles.”

“You outside the school?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. Parrish was leaning close to Stiles so he could overhear, and Stiles tilted the phone a little to make it easier. Even as he listened, Parrish beckoned Stiles’ dad over.

“You’re going to come inside and help us,” the man said.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because of the kiddies. Not all of the kids here are werewolves and you know which they are. You can help us separate them out or we’ll have to just shoot them all.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Stiles said. By now Stiles’ dad was at his side and Parrish moved back to let him hear what was being said.

“Come into the school, alone and unarmed, or we’ll start shooting the ones we know are werewolves. We’ll start with that sweet little thing who owns this phone and then move on to the ones who showed their faces on Beacon Hills News. Clock’s ticking.”

The call ended. Stiles started moving as soon as the man hung up, but his dad caught his arm.

“You’re not seriously going in there,” he said.

“They’re going to start shooting the kids. Millie and... Suzie’s only five years old.” They knew she was a werewolf because she’d been interviewed and the recording had played on the news. They knew she was a werewolf because Stiles had arranged that. He’d shown the world her face and now they were going to murder her.

“If you go in, they just get one more hostage.”

“They’re going to start shooting people, Dad!”

“They’re not going to start with you.”

Stiles twisted his arm out of his dad’s hold, pulling away, starting towards the school no matter what anyone might say. His dad caught hold of him again.

“You’re taking a bullet-proof vest,” he said. “And a radio so we know what’s going on in there.”

It seemed to take far too long to find those things and Stiles was worried that at any minute he’d hear the ring of bullets inside and know that an innocent kid was dead. But he pulled on the vest, lighter than he expected but awkward and bulky. He took the radio and set it to keep transmitting so that his dad would be able to hear everything that went on inside. Then he walked alone across the empty playground towards the front door of the school.

Everything was quiet. The noises outside fell away as soon as the door closed behind him. His feet seemed to echo as he walked along the empty hallway. Then he saw her, a deputy in uniform, a pool
of red still spreading out around her, the familiar eyes staring up towards the ceiling, unblinking. He lifted the radio up to his mouth and tried to get his shaking breath to gather into words.

“I see Tara,” he said. “She’s dead. I think she’s dead.” He added the latter out of hope rather than belief that he might be wrong. He couldn’t go over there and check. He couldn’t bear the thought of reaching for a pulse point and feeling only dead flesh.

He kept walking, skirting round the puddle of blood. He stepped round a corner and saw the muzzle of an assault rifle aimed at his face. He held his hands up, nearly dropping the radio as he tried to show it to prove it wasn’t a gun.

“I’m unarmed,” he said. “Don’t shoot. It’s just a radio.”

“Drop it,” the man said. Stiles did as he was told, the radio slipping through his fingers and striking the floor, bouncing a little and landing with a faint splash in Tara’s blood. Now Stiles could focus on something other than the gun, he saw the man holding it. He was tall, bulky with muscle and padded with armour that seemed to fit him better than the borrowed vest Stiles wore. He had a ski mask covering his face. Just an anonymous figure behind a weapon.

“Into the auditorium,” the man said, jerking his head towards a pair of double doors. The gun never wavered. Stiles was shaking but the gun aimed at him remained perfectly steady. It was aimed at his head. The vest wouldn’t do much good if he got shot in the head.

He walked slowly, hands still raised, trying to show that he wasn’t about to try anything. He didn’t want to twitch and get killed for it. He reached the doors and pushed them open. The school auditorium was filled with chairs, empty except for a little cluster near the stage at the front.

A man stood on the stage. His rifle was slung over his back, but he had bulky packages taped to his torso and his hand was clenched in a tight fist around what looked like a switch. Two other men stood below the stage, aiming guns at the huddle press of frightened children.

“Come closer,” the man on the stage called. His was the gruff voice Stiles had heard on the phone. Stiles walked through the auditorium, past the rows of empty chairs, until he passed the group of kids. He turned to look at them, seeing the terrified eyes staring at him. Some of the kids were crying, but they were all quiet, too scared to even make a noise. Ted had Suzie pulled up against him, holding her in a hug. There were others Stiles didn’t recognise, looking just as pale and scared.

“Let them go,” Stiles said.

“We’ll let the humans go,” the man said. “You’re going to help us identify the werewolves.”

“If you can’t tell the difference, maybe that’s a sign that you shouldn’t kill any of them.”

“Werewolves are dangerous. They need to be stopped.”

Stiles looked at the man in front of him, his hand clenched around the trigger for a bomb, then he looked towards the children. He could recognise something the men couldn’t, because he knew which were human and which were werewolves. He could see an older girl trying to shush a young boy and he knew that only one of them was a werewolf. The children were huddling together in terror but they weren’t afraid of each other.

“You’re the ones who’ve killed an officer of the law,” Stiles said.

“That traitor tried to protect the animals.”
“She tried to save the lives of innocent children.” He thought about Tara, about how she’d been a teacher before she’d been a deputy, about the ways she’d helped him when he was younger. Of course she’d want to help children. She’d probably volunteered for this duty, wanting to ensure that the pack kids got a real education. She’d ended up murdered for it.

“They’ve got you brainwashed, kid,” the man said. “Tell us which ones are the monsters and we’ll let the others go.”

“OK,” said Stiles. He heard a gasping sob from the kids. “That one’s a monster.”

He raised a hand and pointed at one of the men. The leader gave a shout of anger and jumped down from the stage. He swung his empty hand around and the back of his fist caught Stiles’ cheek. Stiles stumbled backwards, reeling from the blow.

There was a roar of fury. A small figure leapt out of the chairs, straight at the leader. Millie’s eyes showed a faint hint of yellow as she reached out her hands to claw at the man with human nails. A gunshot rang through the air and Millie staggered, just short of touching him.

Stiles caught her as she fell. His hands felt the warm dampness of blood gushing out of her side from the wound. Hate poured into him just as the blood poured out of the girl in his arms. He turned on the leader, fury and rage pulsing through him and he wished he could turn that hate into something solid and tear the man to pieces for this crime.

The man staggered back, as though hit by an invisible blow. His back struck the stage edge and, from the surprise or the impact, his hand unclenched from around the bomb switch.

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Derek ran, feet pounding beneath him and his heart pounding in his chest. He ran, terror pulsing round his veins with his blood. He ran, right on Peter’s ankles, with Isaac, Boyd and Erica right behind him. He ran, the town rushing past, as he raced to get to the children who were being threatened. Every instinct of pack was screaming at him to be faster, to get to those in danger, to protect.

They rounded a corner and Derek saw all the people. Way too many people and far too many of them armed. The sheriff was there with a whole army of deputies, and he saw Argent’s familiar face among a cluster of hunters. But Derek couldn’t care about that. The children were inside the school. The children were in danger.

Derek tried to reach out with his senses, tried to listen for what might be going on inside. He heard the sharp burst of a gunshot. A moment later, that sound was drowned by an explosion that shook the whole area. Glass shattered out from the school windows and glittered across the playground. For a moment, there was just the echo of the noise, then the school seemed to crumple in on itself. Walls crumbled. A piece of the roof fell inwards and a whole chunk of building hung for a moment and then slid sideways into the gap that was left, pulling another piece of wall down into a spray of bricks.

The initial blast had done enough damage inside that now other areas were falling in a domino slide of wreckage. And all Derek could do was stand there and watch, hoping desperately that no one he loved had been inside there.

Then, over the noise of falling bricks, he heard the sheriff fighting to free himself from a deputy’s hold, screaming Stiles’ name.
Chapter End Notes

Warnings for violence, threats of violence, death, and use of hate language (i.e. referring to children as "monsters").
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

It will be a few days before I can post the next chapter, but at least I didn't leave you with that cliffhanger for long. I'm only 50% evil. :)

Derek felt frozen. Stiles had been in the school. There had just been an explosion inside the school and now the building was falling to a heap of rubble. And the kids. If Stiles had been inside, then the kids must have been too. Now they were buried under a mass of brick and tile. Derek wanted to scream. He wanted to tear his own legs off for not running faster, for not getting here soon enough to help. He wanted... he wanted this to not be real.

“Listen,” Peter said.

Derek turned, snarl already forming behind his lips. What the hell could be worth listening to now? They were dead!

Then he heard it. Muffled beneath fallen stones, there was a wail of fear and pain. Human or werewolf, he couldn’t tell, all he heard was the sound of a child crying out for help.

Peter was the first to move towards the school but Derek was right behind him. A group of hunters started to bar their way, raising weapons, but Peter snarled at Argent, “There’s someone alive in there!”

Then they were past. Presumably Argent stopped his men from shooting but all Derek could think about was that voice calling out from beneath the rubble. He scrambled up over half a wall, grabbing loose bricks and stones, tossing them aside to try and clear a way to what lay beneath. The other werewolves were there beside him, digging away, tearing at the ruins of the school with their bare hands.

The sheriff came up beside them.

“Stiles?” he asked.

“I can’t tell,” Derek said. He was fairly certain it wasn’t Stiles’ voice that was crying, but if someone had survived then Stiles might have done too. He wouldn’t stop until he knew for sure. He tore into the mess, scraping his hands against the broken bricks and not caring at the pain, digging until he there was a hole. He looked into the darkness beneath and saw eyes gleaming up at him. The wordless cry stilled into sobs and a boy’s voice begged, “Help me.”

There was a wooden beam across the hole, blocking the way. Derek grabbed hold of it, while Peter took a grip further along.

“Wait,” Isaac said. He pointed to a mess of rubble on the other end of the beam. “If you move it, you’ll dislodge that.”

He went with Erica and Boyd to move the rubble. Derek knew they were right. If there was a hole inside the cave-in, they didn’t want to dislodge anything that might crush those inside. Still, he hated having to wait even a few seconds.
As soon as they could, they lifted the beam up. Peter and the others moved it aside while Derek scrambled down into the hole and found the boy, sobbing and bleeding. He was human by his smell, but he reached out to Derek anyway. Derek moved aside a few more bits of brick and wood that had fallen on the boy’s leg, and then he lifted him up, carrying him out of the hole.

There were ambulance workers there, waiting and ready. Derek handed the boy over and then hurried back into the mess. Down in the growing hole, he listened, straining to hear beneath the noise of vehicles and voices and moving wreckage. He heard breathing and frantic racing heartbeats, and more frightened voices calling out for rescue.

He dug away until he found a hand groping towards him.

“Derek?” Alfie’s voice.

“We’re going to get you out.”

Peter shifted into his alpha form, moving huge chunks of masonry, flinging aside beams, digging down into the chaos while Derek hunted for the children. They were scraped and bruised, bloody in places, but surprisingly OK. They had been hit by falling rubble, but seemed to have been spared the worst of the explosion.

Derek lifted the children out of the wreckage. Human and werewolf alike, he handed over to the paramedics for treatment of their injuries. Then he leapt back in.

Most of the children were out when the stench of charred flesh hit him. He saw the man, skin and clothes burned away until only blackened remains were left, pinned beneath a metal girder. Derek left the body and focused on finding the ones who were still living, listening for some sign. He found the heartbeats, faint and fading. Boyd helped him lift clear a wooden board to reveal Stiles and Millie. The two were unconscious and soaked in blood. Stiles was wrapped around Millie, arms clenched around Millie as though he would never let go.

Derek reached out and lay a hand on Stiles’ cheek, feeling the skin clammy and cold beneath the layer of dirt.

“Sheriff!” he yelled.

The sheriff scrambled down into the hole, a paramedic right behind him.

“Oh god, Stiles! Is he?”

“He’s alive.”

Derek moved back so that the paramedic could get to them. She shouted instructions at her colleagues. The only words that sank into Derek’s mind were ‘unconscious’ and ‘gun-shot wound’. He knew that these people were professionals and that they knew a hell of a lot more about healing humans than he did, but Stiles was so still. And there was so much blood.

Derek’s hands were shaking. There might still be people buried in the rubble but his arms felt too weak to even attempt to dig anymore. He’d reverted to his human form, werewolf strength slipping away. He could only stand there, staring uselessly while humans brought down stretchers to lift Stiles out. Humans had been the ones to do this to Stiles. Why should he trust them to help him?

A hand fell on his shoulder. His first instinct was to fight it, to turn and fling away the person who was holding him. But it was the sheriff, staring at Stiles with face so ashen it was astonishing no one was trying to put him on a stretcher.
“I was so sure...” the sheriff said. “When the bomb went off, I was so sure. This...”

The paramedics lifted the stretcher up out of the rubble and Derek scrambled to follow.

“Is he?” Derek started.

“We’re taking care of him,” she said.

Others were still working on Millie where she lay, trying to stop the bleeding from the wound in her side. Derek climbed out of the shadows of the rubble and he saw the other children. The pack’s children were there, gathered around Peter. Some were being treated by the medics but every one of them was alive, hearts beating fiercely beneath the grime and bruises. The human children were there as well, a little separated but looking just the same, dirty and battered.

“We need to get the children home,” Peter said. He was eyeing Argent and his hunters suspiciously. They’d just stood there, holding their weapons, while the children were being dug out of the dirt.

“I’m not leaving Stiles,” Derek said.

“And what about Millie?” Isaac asked. “She needs a hospital.”

“She needs pack!”

The paramedics had her loaded on a stretched now. A pair of them were lifting her over towards an ambulance. Peter burst away from the rest to snarl at those medics, eyes blazing red. Hunter guns were aimed in his direction but he didn’t seem to notice.

“You can’t take her!” he snarled.

“She has a bullet in her abdomen and one of her lungs is punctured,” the medic said. “She needs surgery.”

Then the sheriff was there, stepping between them.

“We’ll take care of her,” he promised. “I’ll see she gets the best care, as good care as Stiles.”

“If she dies...” Peter growled.

“If she doesn’t get to a hospital, she will die,” the medic said, matching Peter glare for glare. He subsided, and let them move her to the ambulance.

Derek moved to the other ambulance, where Stiles was being strapped into the back. There was still blood all over him, but Derek couldn’t see where it was coming from. Maybe it was all Millie’s.

There was a click of a safety coming off. Derek turned to see Argent there, aiming a handgun at him.

“I’m not leaving Stiles,” Derek growled.

“Argent,” the sheriff snapped, coming up beside him, “look around you. Those kids over there are alive because of Derek. For once in your life, cut him some slack. He can stay with Stiles.”

“And Isaac stays with Millie,” Peter said. “I don’t trust these child-murderers.” He glowered at Argent. Argent looked around, at the chaos and the children, at the news crews and at his hunters, at the cameras pointed right at him. He lowered his gun and stepped aside.

Derek climbed into the back of the ambulance, glowered at the paramedics in case they tried to say
anything against it, and then took hold of Stiles’ hand.

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Derek hated the smell of the hospital. It stank of chemicals and cleaners. It stank of pain and blood and death. It felt wrong in a way that seemed to creep up his nostrils and sink into his soul. It felt of suffering. Derek wanted to be anywhere but here. He wanted to gather Stiles in his arms and run from this place, carrying Stiles back to the pack, to home.

But he stayed here, because Stiles was hurt and because he was human and that meant he need human doctors. Derek stayed despite the doctors who looked at him like someone had let a rabid tiger into the room with their patient. He stayed, even after the doctors had smiled and said that Stiles was out of the woods. He stayed, even after the sheriff had shed some relieved tears and gone to deal with some arrangements that he’d been incapable of dealing with while Stiles’ fate had been uncertain, but which needed dealing with nonetheless.

Derek stayed, sitting beside the bed, holding Stiles’ hand, and trying to separate Stiles’ scent from the antiseptic stink.

All he could do was sit there and think. All he could think about was how close he’d come to losing Stiles forever. The kids too. He could have lost them all. They were still alive, somehow. But Derek couldn’t figure that out.

Four men had been pulled from the wreckage, not counting the deputy who’d been dead before the bomb had gone off, the four gunmen who’d threatened the kids. One of them had been crushed but the other three had been burned first, charred and killed in the blast of the explosion. They’d been found close to the children, which meant that the children had been right next to the explosion when it had happened. Yet not a one of them had shown a mark from the blast. All their injuries had come afterwards, when the building had fallen around them. Even that should have been enough to kill them. Yet every single one of them was alive.

It was an impossible miracle. But Derek didn’t believe in miracles. A worrying thought kept working at him. What if this wasn’t real? What if Stiles’ hand, warm in his own, was just a delusion caused by shock? What if he was imagining Stiles alive and the children safe because he couldn’t cope with the reality?

He leaned over the bed and brought Stiles’ hand up to his mouth. He pressed a kiss to that hand, feeling the skin and flesh solid to his lips. He breathed in the scent, the reality of it, and tried to tell himself that this was real. Stiles was safe.

Stiles was safe.

Derek heard voices on the other side of the door and forced himself to listen. There were deputies guarding Stiles’ room in case the gunmen had allies. A woman was outside, asking permission to come in and see Stiles. When she was told that Stiles was asleep, she asked to see Derek. There was something familiar about her voice.

Derek stood and walked away from the bed. He opened the door to the little hospital room. A Japanese woman stood outside. He’d only ever seen her across the boundary line, but he knew her at once, by the faint trace of scent that his practiced senses told him wasn’t quite human.

“You’re Noshiko?” he said. She nodded. Derek looked at the deputies and told them, “She won’t hurt Stiles.”
“Sheriff’s orders,” the deputy said. He firmly stood between Noshiko and the door.

“May I speak to you then?” she asked Derek. Derek hesitated. He really didn’t want to leave Stiles, even with men the sheriff trusted guarding the door.

Derek walked a few metres down the corridor, but stayed close enough that he could listen out for any sound of movement from inside the room. Noshiko came and stood beside him.

“I brought this,” she said, voice quiet enough that the human deputies wouldn’t be able to overhear. She held out a small, foil package. Derek took it and sniffed at it suspiciously. There was something organic but he wasn’t sure what.

“It’s tea,” she said. “It will help him recover his strength in areas that ordinary doctors won’t know need healing. They can help his physical body. This will help the rest.”

She was talking about magic, as though Stiles had taken some injury to that. Or as though he’d strained himself somehow.

“You think he did magic,” Derek said.

“It’s the only explanation that will make sense of this. I heard about what happened. He must have shielded them.”

“But he doesn’t have that kind of power. He could only just light a candle.”

“All of us can go to extremes in extreme circumstances,” Noshiko said. “And there’s another explanation for the source of his power in this case. I heard there was a werewolf with a bullet wound?” Derek nodded. “Like fuels like, and blood is at the heart of the oldest magic. If she sacrificed herself in an act of protection, then that sacrifice might have given Stiles the power he needed to protect the others.”

“But Millie didn’t sacrifice herself. She’s not dead.” Derek said that firmly, louder than he’d intended, partly to drown out the voice of his own doubt. He wasn’t sure. Millie was on a different floor of the hospital, still in surgery the last he’d heard. She might have died and he wouldn’t know. The guilt of that thought made him want to throw up.

“With magic, often the intent is enough. If she’d been willing to sacrifice herself to protect Stiles, that could be enough to fuel his magic. Wherever he drew his power from, an act of this magnitude, with his limited training, will have strained him. He needs rest more than anything, but the tea will help.”

“Thank you,” Derek said. Noshiko nodded. She walked away and Derek returned to the room, and Stiles’ silent bedside.
Chapter 41

There were voices. They were drifting the darkness, unclear, coming and going so that any sense was lost. Eventually, they came together, fragments of meaning coalescing. They were talking about martial arts. Someone was arguing cheerfully about how kung fu and karate shouldn’t be used as interchangeable terms. Even though the words and sentences were starting to have meaning, Stiles couldn’t work out what sense they made here and now.

He tried to open his eyes, but an aching tiredness made even that act seem like a great strain. He was alive. Some part of his brain woke up enough to be surprised at that. He’d seen the man’s hand release the trigger on the bomb. He’d seen the first blaze of fire and he’d known they were all going to die, that his accidental use of magic had killed them all. But now he was here. Alive. He hoped he was alive. He didn’t think his body would ache like this in the afterlife.

The voices were still talking. A boy’s voice was suggesting that the other person demonstrated something sometime. Stiles knew that voice. Scott wouldn’t be here if this was the afterlife.

He needed to find out what was going on, even if that involved the effort of moving. He managed to get his eyelids to lift. He saw a small room. He saw Scott and Kira sanding near where he lay, talking cheerfully with each other. Scott was all grins as Kira talked about giving him a lesson in martial arts but insisted he’d have to be dedicated. He’d have to spend a lot of time with her.

“That won’t be a problem,” Scott said. The grin was sickeningly sappy. Stiles didn’t know whether to be proud of his bro for successfully flirting his way into a martial arts date, or offended because Scott had failed to recognise that Stiles was now awake.

Stiles felt his hand being lifted. He felt a press of lips soft against his skin. He managed to shift his head a little and saw Derek sitting beside the bed. Derek had seen him wake up and was smiling down at him like he was made of sunshine. But that didn’t make sense. This place wasn’t in the werewolf territory. In fact, it looked like a hospital, so how the hell was Derek here? It didn’t make sense at all.

Derek looked towards Scott and then rolled his eyes at Stiles. Stiles managed to roll his eyes back. It was about as much activity as he could manage right now.

He opened his mouth a little, trying to find words, but only swallowed. His throat felt parched and dry, words refusing to bloom in that desert. Derek seemed to understand. He reached for a jug at the bedside and poured a glass of water. It was only when Derek was lifting Stiles’ head up a little to help him drink that Scott realised what was going on.

“Oh. Hey! You’re awake.”

Stiles swallowed down mouthfuls of soothing water and then flopped back onto the pillow as soon as Derek released his head.

“Was wondering when you’d notice,” Stiles managed. His voice still croaked a little. Each word required about as much effort as a marathon, so he regretted such a long sentence already. Maybe had died and gone to hell if he couldn’t manage talking.

“How are you feeling?” Scott asked.

Stiles considered the question, then just said, “Ugh.”
“I’ve got some tea that’s supposed to help you,” Derek said. “Could someone get some hot water?”

“I’ll get it,” Kira said.


“Noshiko sent it,” Derek told him. “She says it will help you recover.”

Recovery sounded good, but Stiles was sick of drinking mysterious tea. He just hoped that this one wouldn’t give him horrific dreams. His real life seemed bad enough right now. His thoughts drifted back to what had happened, trying to make sense of how he’d ended up here. The bomb had gone off. He ought to be dead. The only explanation that made any sense was that he’d been horrifically injured but he was too pumped full of pain killers to feel the agony he should be.

He remembered the way the man had stumbled backwards, a reaction to Stiles lashing out with his magic, however unintentionally. He remembered that hand unclenching and the deadman’s switch inside. Stiles had blown up the kids.

“The kids?” he asked.

“Most of them are back at the house with Peter,” Derek said. “Millie’s here in the hospital.”

“Is she...” Stiles couldn’t ask the question. He thought of Millie, of the way she’d leapt to his defence, of her blood all over his hands. He looked down at his hands now, almost expecting to see them stained red. They’d been washed clean. Derek was holding one of them again, like he might never let it go.

“She’s out of surgery,” Scott said, “and Mom says that her werewolf healing seems to have kicked in. She’s young, but she’s doing better than any human would and the bullet didn’t have any wolfsbane. She’s expected to make a full recovery.”

“The others?”

“They’re safe. They’re all safe,” Derek insisted.

Stiles managed a weak shake of his head, “No. Bomb.”

“There was a bomb but the kids are all alright.”

“Lying,” Stiles said. Derek had to be lying because there was no way that a bomb could go off at such close range and still leave everyone alright. All of them should be dead.

“Stiles,” said Derek, “the bomb went off but the only people it killed were the men who attacked the school. There are some scrapes and minor injuries, a couple of the human kids have broken bones from the building collapsing, but the only person seriously hurt was Millie and that was from the gunshot wound.”

“The press are calling it the Miracle Escape,” Scott added.

“How?” Stiles asked.

“We were hoping you could tell us,” said Derek. There was something in his expression that Stiles was sure he was meant to read, but his thoughts still weren’t cooperating properly.

The door to the hospital room opened. Stiles caught a glimpse of the uniformed deputies standing outside. Kira came in, holding a Styrofoam cup. She set it on the bedside and Derek fished out a foil
package. Stiles made a face but that didn’t stop Derek pulling a few dried leaves out of the package and dropping it into the water.

“Do you know how long we need to let it stew for?” Derek asked Kira.

She shrugged, “A couple of minutes, usually, but that’s one of the teas my mom won’t let me drink.”

Stiles wanted to just fall asleep again, but Scott sat down on the bed beside him, lifting Stiles’ torso up from the mattress and propping him up with pillows so that Derek could help him drink the tea. There were so many things Stiles still didn’t understand, questions he wanted answers to, but he felt too tired to figure out how to ask them. He just let Derek lift the cup to his mouth and tip in the bitter liquid a sip at a time.

They didn’t have a tea strainer or anything to separate out the leaves, so Derek had to help ensure Stiles didn’t swallow them while trying to drink. Stiles really didn’t want to drink this tea. It was bitter and unpleasant, and the tiny sips Derek was feeding him made it feel like the cup would never be empty. The very act of sitting vaguely upright to drink was exhausting, even with Scott holding him up. He wanted to just lie back and sleep.

The minute the cup was empty, he did just that.

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Stiles was asleep again. Derek tried not to be so worried this time. He’d woken up. He’d drunk the restorative tea. The hand clutched in Derek’s own felt warmer. Scott left with Kira and said something about wanting to talk to his mom. Derek didn’t really pay much attention. He just sat there and watched Stiles sleep.

After a little while, the door opened again and the sheriff came in. He’d changed out of his rubble-covered uniform and no longer looked like a figure of authority, just a tired father worried about his son.

“How old are you, Derek?”

“Twenty one.”
“Five years. That’s nearly a third of his life.”

“I can do the math,” Derek said quietly. He opened up his hand and let Stiles’ fingers slip out. He lowered his hand to his lap and closed it around nothing.

“Stiles says he likes you, but he’s a mass of hormones without even the usual teenage levels of common sense who stopped taking anyone’s advice the minute he learned to speak for himself, so I can’t be sure how much of that liking is rational and thought-out, and how much is driven by the fact he wants to get in your pants.”

Derek wished he could deny what the sheriff was saying. But Stiles was young, and Derek had smelled his arousal more than once. It was entirely possible that what Stiles was feeling was just temporary lust that he’d come to regret later. He might think it was real, but Stiles had admitted that he’d never had a relationship before. How could he be certain he knew the difference? Derek didn’t believe Stiles would lead him on, or pretend to feel something real when he didn’t. Stiles wouldn’t do that to a person, but he might be fooling himself. This might be a teenage crush that would fizzle and die as soon as Stiles latched on to someone else attractive.

Stiles’ father didn’t think this was real. Stiles’ father must know Stiles better than anyone and he didn’t believe that Stiles could be in love with someone like Derek. Not really.

“I understand,” Derek said.

“I hoped you would,” the sheriff went on, “because Stiles also told me that you’re a good man.” There was an emphasis on the word man. “We both know I can’t threaten you into doing the right thing. If I hurt you, your alpha would take it out on Stiles. But I’m hoping I can persuade you.”

Derek didn’t think Peter would take it out on Stiles; he liked Stiles. But telling the sheriff that Peter liked his teenaged son could easily be interpreted in the wrong way and this conversation was difficult enough.

“I care about Stiles,” Derek said. “I’m not trying to use him or pressure him.”

“I don’t you’d need to pressure him. That’s the problem. He’s young and his brain is not always in control of his actions. But I want you to know that if you have sex with my son, I will consider it rape. I don’t care if he says yes. I don’t care if he gets on his knees and begs you to sleep with him, if you have sex with my sixteen year old son, I will consider it rape. And so will California law. There may not be much I can do about it now, but if someday you win the rights to be treated as citizens again, the very first thing I will do, before you’ve even finished celebrating, is to come out to that house and arrest you for rape. Do we understand each other?”

The words couldn’t be denied, nor could the implications behind them. The sheriff was practically accusing Derek of child abuse. Derek had been so certain, back when he’d felt the first stirrings of attraction for Stiles, that he wasn’t going to force him, coerce him, or manipulate him in any way. He’d been so certain he wouldn’t make it rape. But the sheriff was right. Stiles was a child in the eyes of the law. If Derek did anything, he would be taking advantage.

He closed his eyes a little, gathering himself, and shifted his chair just a little further from the bed.

“You’re right,” he said.

“I’m glad you see it my way,” said the sheriff.

“I just... I care about Stiles. I don’t want to be something he regrets.”
“He’s at a transition stage of his life and Stiles always rushes into things without thinking them through. Always. I know this isn’t necessarily going to be easy, but you have to be the responsible one. You have to be the one to tell him no.”

Derek nodded, “I understand.”

“Stiles was right about you,” the sheriff said softly. Derek looked up at him, confused, so he continued, “You are a good man.”
“These men were terrorists and not associated with any hunter organisation.”

“Of course you wouldn’t want to officially endorse them.”

“There’s no endorsement official or unofficial. Look at their weapons. Look at the bullets that were found. Not a single wolfsbane bullet between them. These people had no connection to the hunters and I resent the implication that we would work with anyone who’d blow up children. The hunters are here to protect lives.”

“Then how is it that all the footage from the school show werewolves to be the ones protecting the children?”

“We were protecting the bystanders from the werewolves. One of the werewolves attacked a paramedic just for trying to attend to the werewolf girl.”

The voices were quiet, despite the fact they seemed to be shouting at each other in anger. Stiles thought one of the voices was familiar. The more aware he became, the more certain he was that he knew one of the speakers. Why the hell were they arguing near him?

“My point stands, Mr Argent. If the werewolves are such a danger, why were they helping human children out of the wreckage?”

Argent. Stiles knew he knew that voice. But why was Argent near him? Derek had been near him before. Suddenly fear rose up. If Argent was near him and Derek was near him, that meant that Argent was near Derek.

Stiles forced his eyes open and looked around. He saw Derek sitting beside his bed and a TV on the other side of the room. Argent was on the screen, arguing with a woman in a suit, while a talk show host tried to keep order.

“Hey,” said Derek. “Sorry. Did the noise wake you?”

“They’re arguing about the school.”

“People said that the hunters had given weapons to the bombers at the school. Argent’s saying he didn’t.” On the screen, Argent was arguing exactly that, loudly, despite the low volume on the TV. Derek grabbed the remote and hit the mute button.

“Do you think they did?” Stiles asked.

“The hunters aren’t that incompetent,” Derek said. So he was willing to believe that Argent would blow up children but didn’t believe he’d be so inept at it.

“How are you feeling?” Derek asked.

Stiles considered. It was a serious question.

“Sleepy,” he said. “Achy. My brain’s kind of...” He raised a hand towards his head and waved it vaguely.

“I’ve got more of the tea for you.” There was a large thermos on the bedside table. Derek ignored Stiles’ face of disgust, pouring out a portion of tea into the cup of the lid.
“People keep giving me tea,” Stiles complained.

“Noshiko said you needed this. She said you would have strained yourself doing magic.”

“I did magic,” Stiles said. They knew. They knew what he’d done. He remembered the flash of anger and the way the man had fallen back, and how he’d released the trigger.

“Yeah,” Derek said, smiling. “You did magic.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles said.

“Why are you apologising?” Derek reached out to help Stiles sit up so he could drink. Stiles let him, just because he didn’t have the strength to fight.

“It’s my fault.”

“What are you talking about?”

So Stiles explained about his accidental use of magic. Between sips of the lukewarm tea, he told Derek what had happened inside the school, about Tara and about Millie trying to defend him, about how he’d lashed out with his magic and how that had made the guy drop the trigger to the bomb.

“But what happened after that?” Derek asked.

“The bomb went off.”

“You didn’t do anything after that?”

He held the cup to Stiles’ mouth again and helped him drink another mouthful. Stiles thought about the school and everything that had happened. He shook his head.

“Noshiko thinks you must have done. She thinks you used what Millie did to shield the kids.”

Stiles shook his head again, “I wouldn’t even know how.”

“Subconsciously, maybe?”

“It wasn’t me.”

Derek went silent, focusing on helping Stiles drink the tea. It was worse than last time, over-stewed and bitter, as well as being only lukewarm instead of properly hot. But Stiles drank it anyway. He swallowed down slow mouthfuls and then lay back on the bed. He stared towards the TV, where the host was now talking directly to camera, while Argent and the other guest were politely glaring at each other.

“What are people saying?” Stiles asked. Derek looked at the TV and then back at Stiles.

“You want me to turn the volume back on?”

Stiles shook his head. He didn’t need to know what Argent was saying; he could imagine that well enough from the little he’d witnessed. “In general. About the school.”

“The hunters are washing their hands of the attack saying it had nothing to do with them. They’re mostly concerned with protecting their reputations and not being painted as child-murdering terrorists. The anti-werewolf groups are saying that it’s a shame the bomb didn’t kill any werewolves. Of course, they don’t condone the attack on human children but you’ve got to
understand why they did it.” Derek spoke with bitter sarcasm. “The pro-werewolf people...”

Stiles cut him off, “There are pro-werewolf people?”

Derek smiled a little then and said, “More by the day.”

He leaned forward a little. For a moment, Stiles thought he might be leaning in for a kiss. But then Derek caught himself and sat back. Stiles looked up at him. He looked down at his empty hand. Before, when he’d woken up, Derek had been holding his hand and kissing it. Stiles reached out his hand toward Derek.

“What’s wrong?” Derek asked. “Do you want more of the tea?”

Stiles made a face. He was feeling a bit better but he was only willing to give the tea credit for the fact he wasn’t dehydrated. He certainly wasn’t going to seek out more of the stuff. He waggled his fingers towards Derek, looking at his hands. Derek finally seemed to understand, but he clenched his hands into fists on his lap.

“I talked to your dad,” Derek said. Stiles lowered his hand down onto the bed again.

“Don’t tell me the big, tough werewolf is scared of my dad?”

“He’s right,” Derek said.

Stiles made another face.

“The age difference, the situation,” Derek said, “it’s not right. We shouldn’t...”

“Screw my dad,” Stiles said.

“I don’t think that would help my case.”

Stiles glared because Derek was sitting too far away for him to hit him for that joke. Derek looked down at his hands.

“When I’m back at full strength, we’re going to have an argument about this,” Stiles promised.

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“To this day, I’m still not sure how he got up there. His teacher was bawling her eyes out, thinking he was going to fall and die and it would be her fault for not watching closely enough. We were all there making plans for how to get him down and trying to figure out if we could get a fire truck or a cherry picker close enough to rescue him, when Scott just looked at the teacher and yelled, ‘You’re upsetting people.’ Five minutes later, Stiles had climbed down by himself and was asking what was for dinner like nothing in the world was wrong.”

The words drifted into Stiles’ ears, registering faintly on his brain. He was aware of someone holding his hand, but it wasn’t Derek’s fingers. It was his dad’s rough, callused hand. He blinked his eyes open and his dad saw. His dad smiled.

“Hey, kiddo.” His dad leant over the bed and pressed a kiss onto Stiles’ forehead. “You had me really scared for a while there.”

“’M’not a kid,” Stiles murmured.

“Of course,” his dad said, smiling in that annoyingly indulgent way that suggested he didn’t actually
believe it. His dad still thought of Stiles like a little baby. The tales of his childhood exploits with Scott probably weren’t helping the case. Stiles just hoped that his dad hadn’t shared the story about him and Scott at camp. That wouldn’t help Derek see Stiles as an adult. Stiles’ memories of his last waking came back.

“’M still mad at you,” Stiles said.

His dad looked up over the bed, to where Derek was sitting in the other chair. He was keeping a cautious distance away from the bed, like there was an invisible wall between them.

“Yeah,” his dad said. “I know. I’m just trying to protect you. I haven’t been doing a good job of that lately.”

“You don’t need to protect me from Derek.”

“Maybe I’m protecting you from you.” His dad smiled like it was a joke. Stiles glared up at him. It was probably the most ineffectual glare in the history of glaring. He still felt ridiculously tired, like he could slip back into sleep at a moment’s notice. This wasn’t going to be a short argument and he didn’t have the energy to fight it right now.

He was rescued by the door opening and one of the orderlies coming in with a lunch tray. Derek helped set up a table that stretched across the bed so Stiles could get the food, while Stiles’ dad used the controls to raise up the bed a bit so Stiles could sit up. Stiles looked at the chicken and peas, thinking of all the carefully prepared meals back with the pack.

“Don’t make that face,” his dad said. “You need to get your strength back.”

He started to cut up the chicken for him. Stiles glared again.

“I’m not a baby,” Stiles complained. But when he tried to use the knife and fork himself, his hands were shaking too much to get the food to his mouth. He sat there helplessly and glared at the universe while his dad spooned peas and chicken into his mouth for him. This was probably not helping him make his case that he was old enough that he didn’t need his dad to decide who he was allowed to spend time with.

He chewed and swallowed what was put in his mouth, and was exhausted to the point of sleep before the plate was even empty.

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Stiles lost all sense of time. He would wake briefly and then sleep again. When he woke, they would make him drink the tea or give him food. On a couple of occasions, he was helped to the bathroom, once by his dad and once by Derek. Derek was by his side every time he woke but he didn’t reach out to him. His dad and Scott came and went. Danny was there once when Stiles woke, talking about the website to Derek. Stiles drifted to sleep again while they were still talking.

Gradually, his periods awake got longer and he was more able to move around. He was able to focus on the world around him again. He was soon recovered enough to feel frustrated and fidgety at being confined to bed. Scott brought his laptop from the pack, along with a report from Peter. Apparently the kids there were fully recovered from their ordeal. Peter was ready to talk to the relevant authorities about resuming their education, and what precautions would be taken to prevent this happening again.

At one point, Millie came into the room, accompanied by Isaac and guarded by Parrish. She was fully recovered from her injuries, jumping onto the bed and hugging Stiles tightly. Someone had
given her paper and coloured pencils to occupy herself, so she presented Stiles with drawings of colourful birds and another couple of squishy human comics. This time, Stiles was the one who wanted the earth to open up and swallow him and his embarrassment whole. The first comic showed him apparently engaging in a fist fight with half a dozen armed gunmen. The second showed gunmen shooting children and then Stiles jumping between them and calling them monsters.

“That’s not really what happened,” Stiles said.

“Artistic license,” she said, and kissed his cheek, bouncing a little on the bed beside him.

“We’re going back to the pack,” Isaac said, “before Peter decides she’s been kidnapped, but she wanted to see you first.”

She stayed and talked for a few minutes and thanked Stiles for saving them back at the school.

“But I didn’t,” Stiles started. She hugged him before he could finish arguing. Then Stiles’ dad was there, saying it was time for them to get back; the escort was waiting to see that Millie and Isaac reached the pack territory safely. Stiles watched her go. He then lay back on the bed and glared at Derek.

“Stop telling people I magically shielded them,” Stiles said, when it was just the two of them in the room again.

“But you did.”

“No, I didn’t! I don’t even know how to do that. I certainly wouldn’t have been able to do it on the spur of the moment without knowing that I was doing it.”

“Do you know how the doctors are referring to your symptoms?” Derek asked. Stiles shrugged. “Unexplained fatigue. They can’t figure out why you’re so exhausted, because it doesn’t fit with being caught in a bomb blast. Do you know what it does fit with? Straining yourself doing enormous amounts of powerful magic. Maybe it was instinctive and you didn’t know what you were doing, but you did it.”

Stiles gave up arguing, at least while he still felt his unexplained fatigue. He didn’t believe that he’d saved the kids but it was clear that fact wasn’t going to mean a thing to Derek. He went back to idly procrastinating with his laptop, skimming through posts about the school bombing without really reading any of them. He paused at a photo.

“I need this on my wall,” he said. Derek leaned in to look. It was a photo of Derek, in his werewolf form, climbing out of the rubble and cradling a boy in his arms. Derek had been literally pulling children out of rubble with his bare hands, and everyone kept acting like Stiles was some big hero. It was infuriating.

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Stiles wasn’t sure how long he’d been in the hospital but his reaction to being discharged was, “Thank god! It’s about damn time!”

He thought he’d been here for about a week, with Derek staying by his side constantly. Derek now looked like he needed to be in hospital, because those chairs were not made for sleeping comfortably and he’d completely ignored Stiles’ suggestions that they share the bed. He hadn’t even responded to it as a joke, which Stiles blamed on his dad. Stiles was saving the argument with his dad for when he could have it in private. He was worried what his dad might say about Derek and Derek didn’t deserve to hear it. Besides, he wanted to get his strength back first.
Stiles was helped into a wheelchair. He wasn’t sure if this was hospital policy or if his dad wasn’t sure he could walk as far as the parking lot. Stiles’ strength was coming back to him, but he still felt shaky and weak if he tried to exert himself. His dad pushed the chair while Derek walked beside him, a small escort of deputies surrounding him through the hospital and out into the parking lot.

When Stiles saw the protesters, he flinched a little, expecting them to start throwing stuff or yelling, or just charge at them and try to beat them to a pulp. Then he heard the ragged cheers and looked closer. He saw banners demanding an end to segregation now, signs calling for education for werewolves, and even blown up photos from the school, showing Derek and Peter carrying injured children away from danger.

Kira stood near the front of the crowd. She waved. Stiles waved back.

Stiles’ dad made to keep pushing the wheelchair down the ramp and over to the waiting car, but Derek said, “One minute,” and walked over to the protesters. He stood in front of them, a few metres away, and looked across the crowd.

“Thank you,” he said, loudly, so that he could be heard over the noise. Then he walked back to Stiles.
Chapter 43

Peter was waiting at the boundary. Stiles had expected that. What Stiles hadn’t expected was for Peter to hug him. Once Stiles had walked into the pack territory, Peter stepped up to Stiles and put his arms around him, holding him gently. Stiles stood there, awkward and uncomfortable. He was relieved when Peter backed off a second later.

“Thank you,” Peter said.

“I didn’t really do anything,” Stiles protested, but it seemed Peter wasn’t listening to him anymore than Derek was. Peter turned to Stiles’ dad.

“Are you staying for lunch?” Peter asked. Stiles doubted his dad understood the full implications of that invitation. If he did, it didn’t show in his tone when he replied.

“No, I’ve been letting my duties slide over the past few days and there’s a lot that needs dealing with. But I’ll be stopping by to see how Stiles is getting along. I assume I’m still allowed to visit my son?”

Peter nodded. Stiles’ dad gave Stiles one last, long hug, before heading off. Then Stiles started the slow walk back towards the house. Peter and Derek were both close by him on either side, ready to catch him if he should stumble, but neither of them reached out to touch him. Stiles had expected Derek to let Stiles lean on him like a crutch, but it never happened. Stiles wanted to fix this, to put things back to the way they’d been before, but he wasn’t sure where to start. They just walked together back towards the house.

“I don’t know what people have told you,” Stiles told Peter, “but I didn’t do any magical shielding. I don’t even know how to do magical shielding. I just thought I should put that out there.”

“You were the only magic worker there, Stiles,” Peter said, “and only magic could have saved them like that.”

Stiles didn’t know why it bothered him so much that everyone assumed he’d protected the kids. After all, most people would have loved to be hailed as a hero. Maybe it was because he felt he didn’t deserve all this praise and gratitude, because he knew he’d been the reason the bomb had gone off. Maybe it was because he was afraid. The pack might assume he could do powerful magic like this and expect it of him in the future. Someone might get hurt because they believed Stiles could protect them.

When they reached the house, Stiles felt utterly exhausted, like he’d run a marathon, but there was still that gap between him and Derek. Stiles wanted to reach out and lean on Derek’s shoulder, but he didn’t dare try because he was afraid that Derek would just flinch away. He didn’t want to experience that.

He was taken aback by the reaction that greeted him at the house. Half the pack wanted to hug him, even people Stiles didn’t think even liked him, like Kendra. Everyone kept thanking him, even while Stiles tried to insist that he was pretty sure he hadn’t done anything to protect the kids. He got called modest. In the end, he decided he was too tired to argue about it anymore. Derek noticed him flagging and quickly cleared a path so that Stiles could sit down at the dining table and be fed a generous portion, by the pack’s standards, of lunch.

After lunch, Stiles couldn’t make it all the way to his room, so he ended up taking a nap on the couch. He woke up mid-afternoon, embarrassed about sleeping and finding that everyone was
perfectly accepting of it because of the injuries he’d sustained in saving all the children. Stiles wanted to scream. But screaming would take too much energy.

Peter came to find him almost as soon as Stiles was awake and asked, “Are you strong enough to take a walk with me?”

“A walk where?”

“Far enough from the house that we can talk in private.”

Stiles considered. He was feeling better for the nap and moving around seemed like a good way to get his legs used to bearing his weight again, so he agreed. Peter immediately disappeared into his study and returned carrying the mysterious box Stiles had been given by Deaton. Stiles wouldn’t have hesitated about going if he’d known he might learn the truth about the mystery box.

Peter led the way out into the woods. Stiles followed, walking slowly. It was strange that Stiles didn’t feel the slightest bit concerned about this. A couple of months ago, he would have been terrified at the idea of walking into a wood with the alpha of a werewolf pack, particularly since Peter had expressly told him that he didn’t want anyone to overhear. He wondered when he’d stopped being afraid of Peter? Even when he’d been arguing with Peter, there’d always been a trace of fear, the knowledge that Peter held the power of his life and death in his hands.

“Tell me if you need to rest,” Peter prompted once as they walked.

“I’m fine.”

Peter looked over at him, as though studying Stiles for a lie. They only walked a little further before Peter decided they’d gone far enough. Stiles sat down against one of the trees, grateful that Peter had stopped, even though he’d never admit that out loud. Peter set down the box on the ground and stood beside it, looking down at Stiles.

“So what’s this all about?” Stiles asked. “Are you going to show me the mystery box?”

“What was the deal we made when you came here?” Peter asked.

“Forgotten already? I guess memory isn’t on the list of werewolf superpowers.”

“Humour me.”

“I promised I’d stay here and serve the pack if you let my dad go.”

“Your life for his,” Peter said. “A life for a life. Only things have changed now, haven’t they?”

“What do you mean?”

“A life was owed in exchange for your father’s, but you’ve repaid that debt several times over by saving the children.”

“I keep telling you I didn’t...” Stiles stopped. The true impact of Peter’s meaning hit him. “Are you saying what it sounds like you’re saying?”

“As of right now, the agreement between us is concluded. You are no longer bound to serve me or this pack. You are free.”

Those words echoed around Stiles’ ears for a minute. He ought to be happy about this. He’d wanted this. He’d dreamt of this. He had imagined finding some way to earn his freedom and get his life
back. He could go home to his dad. He could go back to takeout meals and lazy weekends and having privacy again. This was a good thing. He could have a future again, with college degrees and jobs and wild drunken nights with Scott. He could be normal. This was definitely a good thing. His dad wouldn’t have to worry about him anymore. It was over.

“Will I be able to come back and visit?” Stiles asked. The thought of leaving the pack hit him with the realisation of how much he’d miss this place, and these people. He didn’t want to leave and never see them again, Millie and Isaac, even Erica and Boyd, and all the rest. Leaving Derek might be a good thing, since Derek was clearly resolved to never touch Stiles again, and it would be a whole lot easier to get over him if they weren’t together every day. Even knowing that, Stiles knew he’d miss him.

“You have a place here,” Peter said. “You will have your room and a place at the table as often as you choose to use them.”

“That’s great.” Stiles couldn’t help noticing that Peter could have had this conversation when he’d first got back from the hospital. He hadn’t announced this in front of Stiles’ dad, or even Derek. It would be entirely up to Stiles whether he stayed here or went home, without anyone else needing to know that he’d had a decision to make.

“And your services would be helpful, since you can still cross the boundary where we can’t. But it would be something we’d ask of you, instead of an order you’d have to follow.”

“Yeah, I’ll be happy to help. It’s not a problem if you need supplies or whatever. Or if you need someone to speak on your behalf about getting the kids back into school.”

Peter smiled with surprising warmth. It was strange that he managed to make that expression look creepy, but that was probably more to do with Stiles not being used to seeing one like it on Peter’s face.

“That’s exactly what I hoped you’d offer,” Peter said.

“We need to work on deominousifying your statements.”

“We need to work on translating your statements into English,” Peter shot back. Stiles shrugged an acknowledgement of the hit.

Peter lowered himself down, sitting on the ground across from Stiles. The box sat between them. Stiles’ eyes kept drifting towards it. He couldn’t imagine that Peter would have lugged the thing out here without a reason. Stiles itched to open it up and see what might lie inside.

“Before the war,” Peter said, “there was a special role that a human could play with a pack. Each pack had a single person associated with them, but not part of the pack in the traditional sense. This human could cross boundaries and pack territories without inciting conflict, but speak on behalf of the pack and make deals with the alpha’s authority, similar to what you did when you arranged for the children to go to school, but on a more long-term basis.”

Stiles thought back to the various conversations he’d had, to the way Derek had told him to be careful how he described himself, and to the words Argent had used. He remembered Noshiko, and how she’d asked who his teacher was. She’d asked if he was learning from the Hale’s emissary.


“The emissary was more than just a messenger,” Peter said. “They would have other skills, other knowledge, other abilities.”
“Magic.”

Peter nodded again. Stiles’ mind was working rapidly. He looked at the box beside Peter.

“Deaton was your emissary.”

“He was Talia’s emissary. After she died, he revealed his identity to me.”

“You didn’t know?”

“Most of the pack never know the identity of the emissary. Only the alpha and a few trusted others. It’s a matter of safety. Whatever abilities the emissaries might have, they are still human, with all the frailty that implies. No pack would ever attack the emissary of another pack, any more than a pack would harm someone claiming the rights of messenger, but there are other threats. Hunters were known to target emissaries, and there are other threats out there. So now emissaries act in secret. It also allows alphas to send their emissary on missions without alerting the world.”

“Then how do you know if someone’s telling the truth about being an emissary?” Stiles asked.

Peter hesitated, then said, “You’re not ready to know that yet.”

Everything clicked. Stiles stared at Peter as the pieces came together and he understood what this conversation was really about. He wondered how it could have taken this long for him to spot it, though maybe he could blame that on his unexplained fatigue. The training with Satomi, Deaton’s comment about Peter having chosen a replacement, it all fit.

“You want me to be the new emissary,” Stiles said.

“No,” Peter said, quickly and sharply. Stiles looked at him in surprise. He’d been so certain that was the direction this talk was going and it was a little hurtful how quickly Peter had denied it.

“I don’t want you to decide anything,” Peter went on. “You have a track record for jumping into dangerous situations without knowing the full consequences. I don’t want you to agree to this. Not until you know more.”

“This is why you were so mysterious about the magic lessons with Satomi?”

“I wanted to know whether you would have the capacity to learn the skills of the emissaries, but I didn’t want to excite you about the possibility without having more information.”

“So why are you telling me now?”

“Because you clearly have talent. Whether or not you become my emissary in the future, you should learn to use that talent.”

“Is that what’s in the mystery box? Secret emissary training stuff?”

“This box,” Peter said, “contains the tools and learnings of the pack’s emissary. Normally, an apprentice wouldn’t get full access to this until they were ready to bind yourself to the pack as emissary. But to do things the traditional way, you’d have to train with Deaton and that’s not going to happen. So I will give you the key to the box to learn what you can from what lies within. I also expect you to learn everything you can about the role of emissary, so that when you decide, it won’t be an impulsive act.”

Stiles wanted to reach out grabby hands for the key and dive into the box and its magical contents,
but he hesitated, thoughts caught on the subject Peter had raised.

“What happened between you and Deaton?” Stiles asked. When Peter hesitated, Stiles continued, “If you expect me to learn all I can, you’re going to have to tell me stuff.”

“I suppose you’re right. Deaton was my sister’s emissary. After she died with the others in the Argents’ attack, we took our revenge on the hunters and then others fought against us when they saw humans dying. At the height of the bloodshed, Deaton approached me and revealed who and what he was. He told me he had a plan to negotiate peace with the authorities. He convinced me to pull back my pack, and to convince Satomi and the other local packs to do the same, while he arranged for a temporary truce with the hunters. The plan was to then bypass the hunters and go into talks directly with the local government, who we hoped would be more reasonable. Instead of arranging the peace talks, Deaton raised the barriers and trapped us in our territories. He’d persuaded me to get all the werewolves out of town, so that he could betray us and give the hunters a way to know if we ever crossed out of the woods.”

“Why did he do it?”

Peter shrugged, “Why does anyone betray anyone else?”

“But things have been more peaceful since the barriers went up. Maybe he thought he was doing the right thing,” Stiles suggested.

“Things have been peaceful at the expense of our rights and freedoms. Deaton is human. He sided with the humans and he betrayed us.”

Stiles couldn’t really say anything to that, so he changed the subject, “Is this when you give me the key to the box?”

Peter reached into a pocket and pulled out a small, iron key. Stiles pushed himself out of his sitting position, and crawled over to the box, not bothering with the effort of standing for those couple of steps. He took the key and fitted it into the lock. Filled with a nervous excitement, he turned the key and heard its click. He swallowed and then lifted up the heavy lid.

Lying at the top of the box were books. Stiles might have hoped for ancient, mystic tomes. It was rather disappointing to see a series of perfectly ordinary notebooks. He lifted the first one up and flipped through it, seeing page after page of small, neat handwriting, complete with diagrams and drawings. The next couple of books showed the same handwriting, detailing properties of plants or mapping currents of energy through the town. He set them aside to read later.

The rest of the box was filled with boxes and jars. Preserved herbs were carefully sealed away in glass containers, sometimes as leaves and sometimes as crushed powders, while wooden boxes held stones carved with runes, or pieces of colourful crystal. Stiles picked up a stone with a hole through it and stuck it over his pinky finger like it was an oversized ring, then he went back to investigating the contents of the box. There were rods of different metals, wrapped in velvet cloth. Most of the items were completely unlabelled, except for runes carved into the tops of some of the herb containers. Stiles hoped one of the notebooks contained a detailed inventory, otherwise this would be next to useless to him.

“What does all this stuff do?” Stiles asked.

Peter smiled and said, “That’s for you to learn.”
The first part of any emissary’s training is to create his own copy of the teachings of his pack. This book you now hold was copied by your teacher at the start of his training and added to over the course of his service as emissary. He copied this from his teacher, who copied it from his teacher, back to the first emissary of the pack. When the time comes, you will keep this copy for yourself and hand your copy on to your student, to study from and copy in his turn.

You are to copy the contents of this book in precise detail, partly as an aid to your study and partly to ensure the survival of this knowledge. Though any single volume might be destroyed by time, accident, or enemy action, each emissary will be able to return to his teacher and his teacher’s texts, to reclaim that which is lost.

If you would be emissary, this is your first test, to reproduce without any loss all the wisdom contained herein.

Stiles lay on his bed in the pack territory, reading the books he’d taken from the box. He was feeling too tired to do anything physical, but he had the energy to read. He’d skimmed through the books to get a feel for them and decided that generations of emissaries copying books and then adding new information at the end was not the way to get a cohesive whole. There were pages on mystical creatures muddled in with sections on herb lore. There were maps of current flows shoved between pages on the history of the pack. Magical rituals and descriptions of principles of power were randomly scattered between explanations of werewolf custom. In a few places, past emissaries had carefully noted that they’d moved sections of text from the book they were copying, trying to bring together related passages, but the end result was still a chaos of information with no content menu or index to help him navigate through. If he ever wanted to find a specific bit of information, he would have to check through page by page until he found it.

There had to be a better way. This was the twenty-first century. Mindlessly copying out the book in all its disorganised glory would just give him another disorganised mess. Besides, it struck him as the most boring way to learn magic, even compared to some of the exercises Satomi had given him. He could put this on a computer. He could type up the text and scan the drawings and probably add to them with photos of things like the herbs. He could categorise the information and link related topics and tag keywords that he could use to filter and find information later. And he could make it all searchable so that he could just type in a word and look for references to it if he needed to find something in a hurry. He might need Danny’s help on the technical side, but he could bring the art of emissarying into the twenty first century.

There was a knock at his door.

“Yeah,” Stiles said, setting the books aside. Isaac peeked in.

“It’s dinner time. Do you want to come eat with the pack or should we bring something here?”

“I’m sick of lying in bed.”

Besides, getting up and moving around, even a little bit, was bound to help keep his muscles from completely withering up from lack of use. Isaac came over to the bed and held out a hand to help Stiles up.

“I’m surprised Derek isn’t on fetching duties,” Isaac commented. “Be a good excuse to get all close and cuddly.”
“My dad... scared him off.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Stiles didn’t need to lean on Isaac as they walked outside to cross to the main house, but Isaac stayed close.

“Yeah. I’m not sure if it was the ‘if you touch my son, I’ll arrest you’ talk or the anecdotes about the time I set the cabin on fire, but Derek’s barely looking at me right now.”

“Sheucks.”

“Yeah.”

They crossed the garden to the house and Stiles went silent. The situation with Derek could never be a secret round here. The fact that everyone bet on when they’d get together was proof of that, but still Stiles didn’t want to say much more than the bare basics where everyone could overhear. They walked into the house and the pack, gathered inside as usual, quickly made a path for Stiles to the table. No one objected to him staying sitting and taking up a space even after he’d finished eating.

He still felt that uncomfortable sense that he was being rewarded for something he was sure he hadn’t done. Everyone was giving him special treatment because they were sure he’d saved the kids. Stiles was glad when Peter suggested Stiles follow him into the study and leave the rest of the pack to their meal.

Stiles sat down in front of the desk while Peter closed the door and then went to sit himself. Stiles wondered what this was about. It couldn’t be about the emissary stuff because Peter had been so keen on keeping that secret.

“Ms Whitefoot came back while you were in the hospital,” Peter said.

“Are the kids going back to school?” Stiles asked.

“So it would seem. The authorities are arranging for temporary buildings for the elementary school students, and our kids will be among them.”

“That’s good news. As long as there aren’t any more bombs, of course.”

“I’ve been assured that there will be increased security measures. Apparently our situation has drawn a lot of attention for central government who are now weighing in, and we all know how incorruptible they are.” This last part was said with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

“Government attention? Does that mean they might change the laws?”

“It means Beacon Hills is now an experiment. There are certain people arguing that all children deserve an education, human or werewolf. Enough people on both sides are willing to give it a try. The hunters and their ilk think that this will prove us for the monsters we are. The others think this will prove the opposite. Either way, it’s been agreed that all minors in the pack will be allowed to attend school.”

“Even ones like Isaac and the others who’re able to transform?”

Peter nodded, “You will be having some new students in your school.”

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Stiles would be staying with his dad for a few days. Partly this was because getting up and going to school was exhausting enough at the best of time. Right now, still feeling the lingering effects of his hurt at the school, he couldn’t face the thought of travelling to and from the pack every day. The other factor in this decision was his dad. Stiles was left with little doubt after their exchanges in the hospital about how much his dad had missed him, and been afraid for him. Stiles hoped that by spending a bit more time together, he could ease his dad’s mind and from there convince his dad that Derek wasn’t someone to be feared.

He hadn’t explained to his dad yet that Peter had ended their agreement. He knew that if he did, his dad would expect him to leave the pack for good. Spending a block of his time with dad was a nice compromise in Stiles’ mind, and helped him not feel quite so guilty about hiding such a big secret.

He headed back home on Sunday afternoon, stared at the stack of catch up work Scott had brought for him from school, and then decided to take a nap instead. He spent the latter part of the afternoon on the couch with his dad, watching old movies. Stiles wasn’t paying a great deal of attention to what was happening on the screen, but then he suspected his dad wasn’t either.

“I know I’m not your favourite person right now,” his dad said, while on screen the hero was undergoing a training montage that Stiles felt exhausted just looking at.

“Derek was pulling people out of the rubble of a blown up school and you were threatening him if he looked at me the wrong way.”

“I didn’t threaten. Well, maybe I did, but only a little.”

Stiles gave a derisive snort.

“I pointed out that sleeping with you would be a crime.”

“You convinced him that he shouldn’t be with me ever.” Stiles turned away from the screen to glare.

“If he was that easy to scare away, maybe it’s a sign he wasn’t that serious about it,” Stiles’ dad said.

“Or it’s a sign that he’s spent his life being hunted by humans and he knows that the entire rest of the universe will take your side if you announce that he’s corrupted your innocent baby boy.”

“Only you would think you were innocent.”

“Not my point.”

“Stiles, you’re sixteen.”

“Exactly. I’m sixteen not six. You can’t make my choices for me.”

“Because you have such a good track record of making choices by yourself,” his dad said. Stiles thought of the anecdotes his dad had been sharing with Derek back at the hospital.

“I may have made a few mistakes when I was younger,” Stiles said, “but that doesn’t mean-“

“When you were younger? Two months ago you sold yourself to a pack of werewolves!”

“And that was probably the best decision of my life!”

Those words left Stiles’ mouth at almost a yell. They utterly silenced his dad. For long moments, they just stared at each other, the silence between them made more noticeable by the noises from the TV, where the hero was in the middle of serious exposition. All those words flowing over them and
“Dad,” Stiles said, trying to be calmer, “I know this has been tough for you, but look at what’s happening. There’s support for werewolf rights for the first time in years, kids who’ve been shut away from the world are getting an education, I’m getting lessons in frigging magic, and I’ve found a stupidly hot guy who happens to find me attractive. Suicide bombers aside, a whole lot of good has come out of that decision. Not to mention the fact that you’re here and OK and not bleeding out in the woods as an example to all humans.”

“Think about what you’ve just said, Stiles. I was nearly killed because I went into those woods after Jackson. Think what that might mean for you.”

Stiles hadn’t thought about his dad’s experiences at the start of all this, because it was a subject that was uncomfortable for them all. It showed the werewolf pack in their worst possible light, while Stiles had seen them at their best. But clearly his dad couldn’t escape so easily from thinking about it. In Stiles’ first days with the pack, that must have been all his dad had thought about. Even later, after the attempt to stop him going back to the pack, Peter had sent a message by implying Stiles’ imprisonment and torture. Peter had wanted to give a message of violence to keep his pack safe, but now Stiles’ dad had difficulty seeing beyond that message to the truth behind the lies.

The anger Stiles had initially felt faded a little.

“They won’t hurt me,” Stiles said. “Even Peter... Peter likes me and he thinks I saved the kids. He’s not going to do anything to me.”

“Peter’s dangerous.”

“Oh, I know that. He’s a manipulative asshole and I know he’s murdered people who hurt his pack, but that’s the thing, I’m not trying to hurt his pack.”

“What if he decides you’re trying to hurt Derek?”

“Then Derek will keep Peter from hurting me. Whatever bad things you can say about Peter, Derek isn’t like that.”

“But he is a man five years older than you in a position of authority. I literally watched Peter give you to Derek as a pet!”

Stiles squirmed a little, thinking of the big secret pressing inside him. “If the pet thing stopped being part of the issue, would you stop objecting?”

“I know Derek cares about you, I know he saved your life when the bomb went off, but he has power over you. That’s not going to go away just because he’s nice to you.”

Stiles fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. He could tell his dad about Peter’s decision and then his dad would know that there was no imbalance of power anymore. But if he did that, would his dad insist on not letting him go back to the pack? The pack were his friends now, and Stiles wasn’t going to give up on the idea of becoming the emissary. If his dad found out that the arrangement was over, Stiles might never get any new magic lessons with Satomi and he really did need to learn magic because he wanted to find out what really happened back at the school.

“I’m not giving up on Derek,” Stiles said. “The age thing is a problem? Fine. We’ll wait. No sex for Stiles.”

“It’s not just about sex, Stiles.”
“But it is. Do you have any problem with me talking to Derek or liking him or being amused when he makes sarcastic comments? No, you object to me having underage sex with him.”

“I object to you being in relationship with someone who is so much older than you. Five years is a huge difference in experience levels.”

“Is it really? Think about it, Derek has spent most of his life trapped out there in the werewolf territories. He’s experienced a whole lot of life that I haven’t, like having his family murdered and his rights taken away, but that’s not about his age. He hasn’t experienced college or living on his own or... or graduating high school. Really, in terms of normal life experience, we’re on a level.”

“You can’t really believe that.”

“Derek isn’t some old creep who likes to take advantage of naïve teenagers.”

“No, he just likes to take them prisoner.”

“That isn’t fair to Derek. Peter was the one who made the agreement. Derek never took advantage.”

“Yet.”

“Ugh! You’re saying he’s a sexual predator waiting to happen? Why can’t you have a bit of respect for me and assume I wouldn’t hang out with someone like that?”

“Because people like that can be exceedingly manipulative and it’s very difficult to see from the inside.”

“People like that?” Stiles asked. His tone was filled with his disgust. “Do you mean werewolves?”

“I mean abusers!”

Stiles glared at his dad, for once unable to come up with the words to respond.

“I’ve seen it a hundred times, Stiles. A suave, older guy sweeps into someone’s life, acts nice and charming, and works to separate the victim from their support structure, from their friends. Their family. The abuser makes the victim care about him, makes them depend on him. Only then does he show his true colours and take advantage, once he’s already lured you in.”

“Derek’s not like that!”

“Do you want to know how many times I’ve heard that?” Stiles’ dad asked. “Derek was nice to you when you were alone and vulnerable in a scary place. Physical attributes aside, it’s natural you’d be drawn to him.”

“That’s not... that’s not the way things happened. Derek never tried anything. He never manipulated me. I was the one who kissed him first because he deliberately didn’t want to take advantage!”

“Maybe you’re right. Having spent some time talking to him while you were in hospital, it certainly seems that he does care about you. The fact that he backed off when I told him to is a good sign.”

“That seems like a catch 22 situation. If he ignores you and stays with me, he’s an evil predator. If he backs off, he’s a good guy but I’ve lost my boyfriend.”

“I wasn’t going to take the risk with your safety,” his dad insisted.

“What if I told you he’d backed off and then we kept on seeing each other on the sly?”
“I’m a detective and you’re not good at subtlety.”

Stiles sulked beside his dad, staring at the TV. This would be easier if he didn’t understand his dad’s point. His dad, playing the worried father, wanted to keep his baby boy safe from the evil predators of the world. If Stiles had been under the thumb of some manipulative creep, he’d probably be grateful. He just wished his dad would trust his judgement that Derek wasn’t like that. The really frustrating thing about this whole situation was that Stiles got more trust from Peter.

Peter didn’t want Stiles to make some impulsive decision about becoming an emissary, because he’d witnessed Stiles rushing into situations without thinking. But instead of refusing to listen to his point of view, he’d given him a stack of books and told him to learn everything he could before deciding. Stiles’ dad wasn’t telling him to learn more about Derek, or research predatory relationships to see if anything applied to him. He was just assuming the worst and flat out telling him no.

“I get more respect from Peter,” Stiles muttered. He hadn’t meant to voice that thought out loud. It was only when he saw the look of utter hurt on his dad’s face that he realised he’d even said it. Now he wished he could pull those words back inside.

“Peter took you prisoner and is using you to build up sympathy for his cause.”

“I know all that. I just meant... Peter listens to my opinions. You won’t listen to me no matter how many times I tell you Derek’s a good guy. I wouldn’t like him if he wasn’t.”

“Maybe. As I said, that fact that he was willing to back off is a good sign. We’ll see how he acts from now on.”

“Meaning you want to test him and see if he acts like a predatory monster moving forwards?” Stiles couldn’t help thinking about the time Peter had decided to test whether Stiles could be trusted. He thought about the way Peter would deliver a harsh message to protect the people he cared about. Stiles remembered a conversation he’d once had with Derek, and how he’d vehemently denied the point Derek had been trying to make.

“I see it now,” Stiles said.

“See what?”

“Oh, nothing, just something Derek said to me once.” He decided it was safer not to elaborate. His dad would take it as an insult if Stiles said that he and Peter were a lot alike.
Stiles really didn’t want to go to school, but he was behind enough already. He hadn’t even touched the catch up work Scott had left for him, so his classes were going to be hell. He knew he couldn’t miss today though. Today, the werewolves were coming back to school.

He got to school to find his dad at the entrance with a police roadblock, checking the IDs of everyone trying to get into the parking lot. His dad made a point of checking his ID despite knowing exactly who he was.

“Should I be offended you don’t recognise me?” Stiles asked.

“I caught one of the deputies letting in someone he knew without checking the ID and I chewed his ass about it. Gotta set an example. Well, this seems to be in order.”

“See you tonight,” Stiles said.

“See you all day. I’m not leaving this to anyone else.”

There weren’t any protesters around the school. Stiles wasn’t sure if that was because the sheriff’s department had cleared them out, or if no one wanted to get caught in another explosion. Either way, he was grateful not to have to deal with yelling and abuse and stuff being thrown.

Stiles was heading into the building when the bus parked up in front of the school and some familiar faces climbed out. He’d been expecting Isaac, Erica and Boyd, but there were others as well, including Liam, the guy he’d met on his visit to Satomi’s pack. Stiles hadn’t realised that the agreement to open up schools to werewolves would apply to all the local packs. They were herded towards the building as a unit, with armed deputies forming a barrier between them and the other kids, marking them out as separate from the other students. As well as the police escort, there were the badges.

Every single one of them had a large, silver W pinned to their chest.

That had been part of the agreement, a measure to reassure the people who were terrified about werewolves walking through the town unrecognisable, like furry time bombs ready to explode. They’d wanted a way to easily recognise who would be dangerous. Stiles wondered why they hadn’t gone the whole way and just pinned target signs on everyone’s backs.

“Hey, Stiles,” Erica greeted him, acting as though it was the most natural thing in the world to walk into school with an escort and an identifying badge.

“Hey, Erica.”

She’d dressed for the occasion in a ridiculously short, leather skirt and a top so tight it was obscene. She’d even found some make-up somewhere and she smiled at the drooling hordes with crimson
lips. Stiles had always thought of Erica as fading into the background, trying to make herself invisible. He wondered how long she’d been dreaming of walking down these halls again and making this splash.

“Hi, Stiles,” said a quieter voice. Liam gave him a nervous smile. He wasn’t the only one who seemed scared to be here. Stiles wasn’t sure if they were afraid of bombs, or protesters, or losing control, or if they just hadn’t been to school for so long that they weren’t sure they could cope with being back at it.

“I thought I was done with school,” one boy complained, glaring sulkily at Stiles. A girl who looked very much like him whacked him on the arm. Stiles guessed they were siblings.

“Careful,” Isaac said. “You don’t want to give people the impression we’re violent.”

“Like we care what some stinking monkeys think,” the boy said. He was still glowering towards Stiles. Stiles guessed that this guy calling him a monkey was the same sort of idea as all the people who called werewolves dogs.

“With diplomatic skills like that, it’s a wonder you’re not in Washington petitioning Congress for a law change,” Stiles said. The werewolf showed fangs.

“Stop it!” hissed his sister. “Are you trying to get us shot?”

She gave the deputies a terrified look. The nearest deputy was a guy called Grogan, who’d been a deputy in Beacon Hills since before Stiles started hanging out with his dad in the station. He gave the girl a grin and told her, “If I could snarl at Stiles and grow fangs, I’d have ripped out his voice box a long time ago.”

“Mean,” Stiles said. “No Christmas cookies for you this year.”

Grogan shook his head, “Get out of here, kid. We’ve got to get these guys to the office.”

Stiles headed off for his locker and then got ready for his first class.

***

“Lahey!” Coach yelled. Isaac jumped in surprise or fear, sending a tumble of textbooks onto the floor.

“Yes?” he asked, voice squeaking in alarm as he bent to retrieve his books.

“You got all that enhanced speed and reflex wolf stuff?”

“Yes?” Isaac looked like he wanted to bolt. Stiles had noticed that Deputy Grogan, standing on duty by the classroom door, was looking considerably more alert than he had been earlier.

“You’re trying out for first line next semester,” Coach said.

“Um... I’m not sure if we’re allowed to play sports.”

“I don’t give a damn what you’re allowed to do, Lahey. I’m not having another losing season so you damn well better be on the team next semester and put those wolfy reflexes to good use. You understand me?”

“Yes, Coach,” Isaac said.
“Good. If we don’t get some better players this year, I’ll have to let Stilinski play.”

“Hey!” Stiles complained.

“Or, God forbid, Greenberg!”

A moment later, Coach was storming to the front of the classroom and powering into the lesson with all his usual enthusiasm. Stiles glanced sideways and shared a grin with Isaac. It didn’t seem Coach would have any problems teaching werewolves. Stiles wondered if he should mention that Liam also played, along with several of Satomi’s pack.

When faced with the prospect of a winning lacrosse team, Coach could be guaranteed to back reintegration completely.

***

Harris took great delight in handing out the test papers at the start of chemistry. Stiles groaned and dropped his forehead down onto the lab table.

“No wait be that bad,” Harris said, “assuming you’ve done the work that was assigned to you during your convalescence.”

He looked positively gleeful. Stiles wanted to curl up under the table and take a nap. Instead, he took the test paper, knowing Harris would be asking questions Stiles wouldn’t have a hope of knowing the answers to.

“What about us?” Erica asked. “We haven’t set foot in a school in forever.”

“No my problem,” Harris said. “Now remember that this test will be worth twenty percent of your grade.” He handed her a test. At times like this, Stiles could see the benefits of ripping people’s throats out.

***

The werewolves clustered together at lunch. The Hale pack trio were at one end of a long table, the others spread along the length. Stiles thought they were each grouped with others in their pack but he didn’t know the others well enough to be sure. He supposed he’d find out. Stiles took his tray over and sat down beside Isaac.

He’d barely pulled his chair into the table when he noticed the glaring guy from this morning was back to glaring.

“Think it makes you cool to sit with us, you fucking monkey?” the guy asked.

“I’m just eating lunch with my friends,” Stiles answered, he waved a hand in a gesture that took in Isaac, Erica and Boyd.

“Well what if we don’t want to eat with monkeys?”

“Don’t call him that,” Isaac said.

“Why shouldn’t I? All the stuff they call us?”

“Is your brother always such an asshole?” Erica asked the girl.

“Just because I’m not sitting back and smiling at this creep just because he said a few words that
mean we have to go to school. Why the hell is this a good thing? All it means is that we’re away from the pack so that the hunters can attack us.”

“Doug, be quiet,” the girl said.

The boy, Doug, wasn’t listening, “He’s probably in league with the hunters. He’s sucking up and getting close to us so he can plant a bomb or something. That’s the only way he could have survived that other attack, if he was working with the hunters. He’s waiting his chance and then he’s going to murder us all.”

Doug was leaning over the table towards him, glaring at Stiles. Stiles swallowed nervously.

“OK,” he said. “I’m just gonna-“

He started to stand up to leave, but Boyd reached across the table, grabbed his arm, and pulled him back. Stiles fell back into his seat with a thump. An instant later, the eyes of every werewolf on the table shifted sideways, worry on their faces. Stiles turned to see what they were looking at. One of the deputy escorts stood a few metres away, his hand on his sidearm.

Boyd’s fingers unclasped from around Stiles’ arm. The tension was almost painful. Every single one of those werewolves were looking at the deputy as though they expected to get shot at any minute. Even Doug didn’t look quite so angry now. He looked scared. He was built along the same lines as Boyd, tall and muscled, and could probably have pummelled Stiles into paste even without werewolf superstrength. But he was the one afraid right now.

“This isn’t a trap,” Stiles said quietly. “This is an opportunity. This is your chance to prove the hunters wrong about werewolves. But by all means, carry on being an asshole. There are plenty of assholes out here; you’ll fit right in.”

Doug looked like he wanted to throttle Stiles but he restricted himself to glaring. Eyes were still flicking back and forth between Stiles and the deputy with the gun. Stiles tried to project an air of calm, as though no one here wanted to murder him and everything was completely under control.

“You’re only so brave because of them,” Doug said. He jerked his head towards the watching deputies. “You wouldn’t have such a big mouth if it was just us.”

Erica snorted with laughter, “Please. Stiles hasn’t called you anything he hasn’t called Peter a hundred times and Peter’s actually scary.”

Doug kept on glaring, saying, “I just don’t get why we’ve all got to act like this ape’s some sort of hero.”

Stiles had wanted people to stop thinking of him as a hero over the stuff at the school, but this wasn’t quite what he’d had in mind. He was feeling more uncomfortable by the moment at this table, but at the same time he didn’t want to be seen being chased away from the werewolf table since the whole point of this damn exercise was to show humans and werewolves interacting peacefully. Well, part of the point anyway.

“His name’s Stiles,” Boyd said. “I know it’s a stupid name, but it’s still his name.”

Stiles hated that he needed these guys to fight his battles for him. This conversation was getting more exhausting by the minute. He tucked into his food, bending over the tray and trying to ignore Doug and the others who looked at him with suspicion. If he ate quickly, he might be able to sneak to a dark corner at the back of the library and have a quick nap before the next class.
The nap turned out to be a huge mistake. He’d set the alarm on his phone to wake him up, so he made it to the afternoon class, but he was more tired than before he’d tried to sleep. He stumbled into the classroom, barely conscious, and tried unsuccessfully to wake himself up. He’d just about regained awareness in time for the last lesson of the day, with Mr Yukimura. That class turned out to be worth being awake for.

They were still on World War Two at the moment, but Mr Yukimura decided to have a discussion about some of the discrimination prior to the war and in the invaded countries, talking a lot about the Jews but not exclusively. He talked about boycotts and stripping of passports and rights, bans the prevented groups of people from entering certain schools or businesses, and then the declarations that people weren’t citizens because of their religious heritage or parentage.

No one would have been able to say a word of criticism against him for this class. He was sticking to the curriculum. Not a word about werewolves or parallels ever left his lips. But when he brought up some photos on the projector, showing Jews wearing the ‘badge of shame’, the Star of David symbol that Jews in many Nazi-occupied countries were forced to wear to show their status, every eye in the room glanced towards the werewolves in their midst, and the silver W badge they wore to show what they were.

Mr Yukimura had said he couldn’t help, said he couldn’t publically speak out about the werewolf rights and Stiles knew that was because of his own fears of discovery for his wife, but he was a teacher in charge of instilling ideas into teenage minds. And here he was comparing the treatment of werewolves to a situation that the vast majority of people in the world would consider an atrocity. Stiles looked at the photos and decided that Mr Y might be his favourite teacher.

“How was school?” his dad asked over dinner. Stiles shrugged.

“Exhausting.” He had homework to do. Way too much homework, and all the catch up work that the teachers expected him to turn in now that he was back at school. The thought of doing any of it just made him want to groan and crawl into bed.

“I meant with the werewolves. I hear there was some kind of altercation in the lunch room?”

“Altercation? A guy called me a monkey so I called him an asshole. No big deal.”

His dad looked worried, asking, “Are you sure it was a good idea to antagonise him?”

Stiles shrugged, “The whole point of this situation is to treat werewolves like people and prove that’s what they are. Anyone else had acted like that, I’d have called them an asshole, ergo, I called this guy an asshole.”

“But what if he’d become angry and violent?”

Stiles snorted around a mouthful of macaroni and cheese. “Please,” he said, mouth full. He swallowed when his dad looked reproachfully at him. He continued, “There were a bunch of deputies ready to shoot them if they blinked the wrong way.”

“Didn’t stop one of them grabbing you.”

“Doug never tou-.” Stiles stopped, his confusion vanishing. His dad wasn’t talking about Doug now. He was talking about Boyd. Because Boyd had actually grabbed him.
His dad must have been given a blow by blow account of every detail by one of the deputies. They’d been too far away to hear the conversation clearly so all they’d witnessed was the glaring and, of course, Boyd stopping him from leaving.

“That was just Boyd,” Stiles said. His dad’s worried expression got worse.

“You shouldn’t be so casual about someone pushing you around. If he grabs you like that—“

Stiles didn’t let his dad finish. He just dropped his head down to the table with a thump. Unfortunately he misjudged the angle. He tried to lean to the side to avoid his plate but he managed to catch the edge of it, flicking it up. There was a splat of hot macaroni cheese against the side of his head.

“Damn it,” Stiles muttered against the table.

“Stiles? Are you OK?”

Stiles raise a hand and pressed finger and thumb together in the OK symbol but didn’t attempt to raise his head. He sat there, forehead against the wood, cheese sauce dripping over his ear, wondering how the hell he could convince his dad he wasn’t some abuse victim so caught up in the situation he couldn’t recognise it and that his dad’s fears were utterly unjustified. There had to be some way, some perfect argument he could make, that would convince his dad of the truth, but right now his thoughts flowed with all the swiftness of the sauce currently dribbling in stagnant gloops down through his hair.
Stiles somehow managed to survive his week back at school. Getting torn apart by angry werewolves was much less a concern than just dropping dead of exhaustion. His symptoms of unexplained fatigue was disappearing and being replaced by the similar but much more familiar symptoms of too much homework and not enough time to do it in. With the catch up work as well, he barely had any time to look at the emissary books. He did however manage to catch up with Danny to talk databases. Danny was happy to talk with him because apparently he’d received top marks for his website project.

“The site’s getting a lot of hits,” Danny said, “but I’ve had to turn off the comments. Even with the automatic filters, a lot of hate was getting through.”

It was disappointing that the interactive part of the website had to be shut down, but when Stiles expressed that disappointment, Danny showed him a sample of the comments threads. Swearing, death threats, comparisons to animals, disgusting descriptions of what the writers would love to do with any werewolves they got their hands on, and abusive declarations of the material on the website as propaganda, all coming one after the other. Some comments were barely altered copies posted one after the other at such speeds that it meant someone had programmed a bot to just spew hatred into the feed in the hopes that some would make it past the filter.

Stiles stopped saying anything about it. No one should have to read that stuff. So the interactive comments were quietly buried and the site remained active to present the truth about werewolves to the world and it seemed people were looking. Some social media sites were embedding the videos Danny had posted and not all of the comments there were filled with vitriolic rage. Just the majority.

“I hate people,” Stiles said, reading a bunch of Tumblr responses to Peter explaining the history of the segregation. He waited for Danny to tell him it wasn’t so bad or to say something reassuring, but he was reading the comments over Stiles’ shoulder and just nodded his agreement.

He discussed database possibilities with Danny but didn’t say exactly what it was for. He just said it was some information about werewolves and pack history and stuff, but that he wanted it to be easy for him to add information and create new tables and categories for the data. Half a free period and a crash course in hosted databases later, and Stiles had the starting point for his emissary knowledge. Now he just needed to find the time to go through the books and start inputting everything. He was under no illusion that it would be quick work but if he went at it slowly and carefully, he might get some of the knowledge to stick in his brain while he did it.

He spent a week having dinners with his dad and sleeping in his old bed. Even when his dad was working late, he would come home for a break so they could eat together. It was over dinner on Thursday that Stiles announced he would be going back to the pack after school the following day.

“It’s surprised they’ve let you stay away as long as they have,” his dad said. Stiles bit down on the guilt that accompanied knowing the deal was over. He could stay here for the rest of his life and his dad would never need to worry about it again. Instead of saying any of that, Stiles just shrugged.

“They know I’ll be going back,” he said.

“That’s a surprising amount of trust.”
“Peter trusts me. It’s just you that doesn’t.” That last part slipped out, edged in bitterness. Stiles wished the words could be recalled, because his dad looked so hurt at the accusation, but Stiles couldn’t pretend he hadn’t thought all this.

“Stiles, I trust you, but it’s just...”

“I’m sure I read somewhere that anything said before the but doesn’t count,” Stiles said. “Or maybe I saw it on a TV show.” He shrugged.

His dad paused. He looked almost constipated, lips pressed together tightly as he tried to force his thoughts into reasonable words.

“Stiles,” he tried again, “all I’ve ever tried to do was protect you. God knows, I haven’t always got it right, but that’s always been my goal. Trying to keep you away from the pack failed spectacularly and I’m sorry for anything you might have gone through in punishment for that.”

“Dad,” Stiles cut him off, “I told you, I’ve told you a hundred times, there was no punishment. Peter wanted to scare you to make the pack seem strong, but he never hurt me. He let me out of the creepy basement as soon as you were gone.”

“Really?”

Stiles resisted the urge to face-plant into his dinner this time and just said, “Really!”

“None of them ever hurt you?”

“Never. Not a bruise. Not a scratch. The worst injury I got was a paper cut.” Stiles held up his finger as though to demonstrate, which was fairly pointless because the skin didn’t show a mark now. Or maybe that was the point. “I’ve told you all this.”

“I know but...”

“But you didn’t trust me to tell the truth.”

There was that hurt/constipated look again.

“I thought you were trying to protect me,” his dad said.

“So basically, you were determined to worry no matter how many times I told you that you didn’t need to?”

“Basically.”

“Well believe me now, none of the werewolves have hurt me. None of them are going to hurt me. This is not some evil conspiracy to manipulate me or use me.”

“But Peter has been using you to get support for the pack.”

“Consensual using though. Wait,” Stiles added, “that sounds really bad. Forget I said that. What I meant was it wasn’t really being used because I agreed to it. And with it.”

The conversation felt old and recycled, like he trodden this ground with his dad a hundred times, but Stiles still kept pushing at it. Maybe his points were getting through. Maybe his dad was ready to listen to Stiles saying that he was making these choices freely and that he was happy about them.

“I’m going to be seeing Derek over the weekend,” Stiles said, “and I’m going to talk to him about,
you know, seeing him. I’m OK with waiting before anything physical happens because, hey, we’ve only known each other a couple of months, but I’m not going to just give up on this. I really like him, Dad.”

“You’re going to be with him no matter what I say, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to try, but some reassurance that you won’t show up with a shotgun loaded with wolfsbane would probably go a long way to convincing Derek he’s allowed to come within three feet of me.”

“He’s still too old for you.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe we’ll date or whatever for a few weeks and he’ll decide I’m too immature for him and we’ll break up. Maybe I’ll decide he’s too old and boring, or we’ll find that we’re incompatible if we spend too much time together. But I want to try. I talked all this over with Derek, before you decided to play over-protective sitcom dad and break us up.”

“Sitcom dad?” his dad asked.

“You know, the old trope where the dad makes threats to any boy that gets near the teenaged daughter. You,” Stiles folded his arms and glared across the table, “are a cliché.”

His dad turned his hurt look into a joking smile and said, “That’s the most hurtful thing you’ve ever called me.”

Stiles opened his mouth to say, “To your face,” but he stopped himself just in time, because it was possible his dad would take it seriously and not realise it was meant as a joke. Things had been strained enough between them lately that he didn’t want to risk it.

“Dad,” Stiles said, “I want you to trust me.”

His dad stared at him for a long time. Their food lay between them, gently cooling and almost forgotten. He dragged a hand up over his face and through his hair. He stared at Stiles some more.

“OK,” he said, like those syllables hurt him as they passed his lips. “OK. I’ll back off. You two can try this and I won’t stop you, but there will be a few ground rules.”

“Let me guess,” said Stiles, “no sex?”

“No sex. Clothes are to remain on at all times.”

Stiles nodded. That rule was only to be expected.

“And I want you to be open about whatever happens. I want to know what’s going on between you two, the good and the bad, all the details. I want to know everything, even the stuff you’ll know I won’t like.”

Stiles knew that if he tried to be discrete about anything with Derek, his dad would just assume the worst, but he wasn’t sure he would ever want to talk to his dad about things like the sex fantasies and the way Derek looked when he took his shirt off to work in the woods. And his dad didn’t have the greatest track record of believing the things Stiles told him.

“Will you actually listen?” Stiles asked.

“Of course I’ll listen.”
“Yeah, but will you listen and believe me or will you listen and assume that everything is a lie or me being deluded and too young and ignorant to realise it?” Stiles’ tone was bitter. His dad had the decency to look ashamed.

“I’m sorry I haven’t always listened,” he said.

“Then listen now. Peter is not evil. He’s a leader in a difficult situation making difficult choices. He’ll fight to defend his pack and when an armed intruder is caught trespassing in his territory he’ll assume the worst because those woods are full of graves. I’m not saying he was right to beat you up, but he’s lost his entire family except for Derek, including a daughter. His experience of people with guns crossing into pack territory is usually that they’re trying to kill everyone he loves, so he attacked you. He couldn’t take the chance of someone getting hurt. Putting my dad in hospital isn’t something I’d normally forgive, but you’ve got to see his side of things, right?” Stiles gave his dad a hopeful smile. His dad nodded a little, not in complete and obvious sympathy, but just a faint sign that he could at least understand what Stiles was getting at.

“You saw the supplies I bought when they first let me into town,” Stiles continued. “Shampoo and toilet paper and stuff. They have food out there, enough to survive on anyway, but no way of getting manufactured goods. They took me prisoner out of desperation because they had no way to get what they really, really needed. They couldn’t even call into town and get people to deliver stuff to the boundary because their phone services were cut off. Taking me prisoner wasn’t about hurting me, it was about trying to make things better for the entire pack, including the kids who were suffering despite never having hurt anyone.”

“There had to have been a way to arrange that with you that didn’t involve holding you prisoner,” his dad said.

“Yeah, but that would have involved trusting me. In the past, when Peter’s trusted humans, they’ve murdered his family or left his pack prisoners in the wilderness. As a social group, humans don’t have much credibility with Peter.”

“So you’re condoning everything Peter did?” his dad asked.

Stiles considered, thinking of the test, of the terror he’d felt standing in Peter’s bedroom expecting to be raped. “Not... everything... but I understand why he did it all. Even tricking you into thinking he was torturing me, he did to make sure you and everyone else would be afraid of the pack, so you wouldn’t attack and, you know, slaughter everyone. I was furious at him for that, still am a bit, but I get it. Peter’s not a nice person, but that doesn’t mean he’s bad.”

“And Derek?”

“Derek is nice. He tries to hide it, but he’s all fluff and marshmallow. Right from the start, when he was stopping me from accidentally breaking the pack’s rules, he’s been looking out for me. And that’s not to manipulate me or anything. Peter told me afterwards that Derek’s been into me since the first full moon but I didn’t know. Derek didn’t let it show because he didn’t want me to feel pressured into doing anything I didn’t want to do. Derek really is one of the good guys. I just wish you’d believe me.”

His dad reached across the table and caught Stiles’ hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“I’m sorry,” his dad said. “I just... It’s like you said about Peter not wanting to risk people he cared about getting hurt. I don’t want to risk you getting hurt. If I could wrap you in bubblewrap and keep you safe in your room forever, I would.”
“I wouldn’t have much of a life like that.”

“I know. I guess I just have to get used to the idea that you’re growing up. I love you, Stiles.”

“Love you too.”

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Derek was in Stiles’ room, putting the final touches on Stiles’ surprise, when Damian came to find him and told him that the sheriff was at their borders. Derek dropped the tools and ran, fear pulsing through him. Stiles’ father was at the boundary, which meant this had to be important. Something must have gone wrong at the school. Derek pounded through the trees, his imagination flooding with all the things that might have happened. More hunters, one of the deputies mistaking a movement for a threat and killing one of the pack’s kids, another bomb. There were so many possible disasters.

He reached the boundary, heart racing and mind filled with the memory of Stiles unconscious beneath the rubble of the elementary school.

“What happened?” Derek asked. “Is Stiles OK?”

The sheriff, standing on the other side of the boundary, looked taken aback.

“He’s fine,” the sheriff said. “I just wanted to talk to you. I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

Derek forced down the fear and tried to reclaim some sort of control over himself. He took a deep breath, clenching his fists to keep them from shaking.

“He’s really OK?” Derek asked.

“Yeah. Sorry. I really didn’t mean to make you worry.”

Derek wanted to hit something to get rid of the rush of emotion that the departing fear had left him filled with. Instead, he forced a politely blank face and asked, “So what can I help you with?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Stiles. Specifically about you and Stiles.”

Derek had thought things had improved with the sheriff during Stiles’ convalesce at the hospital. They’d talked and Stiles’ father had shared stories about Stiles’ childhood as though he thought of Derek as a person. That he would come here again to warn him off after Derek had already agreed to end the fledgling relationship with Stiles was infuriating. It was yet another proof of how little faith the sheriff had in him, but Derek tried not to show that on his face.

“I don’t plan on taking advantage of Stiles,” Derek said.

“I know, but I wanted to talk to you because Stiles still wants to have a relationship with you.”

The sheriff had made it clear what he thought about that, and that he would hold Derek responsible for any choices Stiles might make on this subject. Derek held himself calm by force of will.

“I won’t let anything happen,” Derek said. He had spent his life controlling his violent instincts under the full moon. He could control his desire for Stiles as well.

“That’s not why I’m here. Stiles trusts you. He’s made that abundantly clear and he’s made the point that I ought to trust him and trust his judgement of people.”

Derek stayed silent. He thought he could see the direction this was heading in but he didn’t dare say
it out loud because putting voice to his hope made it something more easily shattered.

“I still think you’re too old for him,” the sheriff continued, “and Stiles is still under eighteen, so sex would be a crime and I will not condone you two doing... that, but for the rest, I’m going to let Stiles decide who he wants to be with.”

“You’re going to allow us to be together?”

“It seems Stiles is determined no matter what I say, so I might as well trust him to make this decision. So, I give you my blessing.”

From his tone, it seemed an exceedingly begrudging blessing, but Derek would take it. Not long ago, he would have thought the idea of any human in authority giving any kind of blessing to a relationship between his son and a werewolf to be a complete impossibility. Begrudging, angry blessing was a step in the right direction.

“Thank you,” Derek said, trying to sound a little less begrudging than the sheriff.

“Just prove Stiles right.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The sheriff nodded and turned to leave. Then he stopped. He turned back to Derek with a little frown on his face.

“It occurs to me I never really thanked you,” he said.

“Thanked me?”

“For saving Stiles’ life back at the school.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Derek said. “Of course I helped Stiles.”

The sheriff gave a little smile, “It’s things like this that make me wonder if I’m wrong. I’ll see you around, Derek.”

With that, he walked away.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who are interested, I will be talking about my upcoming book over on Tumblr. I am also doing a giveaway of one of my other books.
Chapter 47

Stiles felt utterly exhausted as he returned to the pack territory on Friday. He drove behind the werewolf bus and its armed police escort and parked up while Isaac, Erica and Boyd climbed out. The bus and the escort cars drove off to take the other werewolves home. Stiles noted the flash from the symbols of the boundary when the werewolves crossed the line, but he also noticed that there were no longer hunters watching every inch of the boundary in case of unauthorised crossings.

He wondered if the boundary alerted people to the direction of crossing. It might be possible for werewolves to leave the pack territory at the time everyone was expecting the younger ones to be returning from school. He’d have to check Deaton’s books about that and see if there was any description of the boundary spells in them.

Not that it would be a very good idea. Sneaking werewolves across the boundary would probably just anger the hunters and make the anti-werewolf people more vocal in their opposition. But it would be useful to know if it was possible.

Boyd carried Stiles’ backpack for him. Stiles wasn’t so weak anymore that it was necessary, but still it was nice. The backpack was stuffed full of his school books and the books from the mystery box that he’d taken home to study and hadn’t had much chance to. He kept telling himself that he had a lifetime to study magic so right now he’d focused on digging himself out from under the mountain of catch up work. Stiles took his stuff back when they reached the low building under the trees and he walked into his bedroom.

He stopped, dropping his stuff on his bed, and stared at the corner of the room beside his storage. There was a chair, tucked into the corner so it wouldn’t get in the way in the small room. There was also a large rectangle of wood fixed to the wall that Stiles couldn’t work out. He went over to it, seeing the hinges that fixed it to the wall. He lifted it up, and saw the two other bits of wood hanging beneath it, on hinges of their own. Stiles could swing them up until their free ends rested against the wall, held in place by other bits of wood that were fixed there. When Stiles let go, the rectangle of wood stayed horizontal, a surface for him to work on. When he was done, all he had to do was flick the wooden struts out from their holds and the whole thing would swing down, out of the way. It was a neat contraption, a way to have a desk without losing too much space in the already small room.

“Do you like it?”

Stiles jumped, spinning to face Derek, who lurked in the doorway.

“Jeez! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Sorry it took so long,” Derek said. “I had problems getting the chair legs the right length. It kept wobbling.”

This was the surprise Derek had been working on, his apology for misleading him about Satomi. Derek had given him more than just the wood and the effort involved in putting this together, he’d given Stiles space, a private place to work and study where he wouldn’t be interrupted every five minutes by the kids.

“I love it,” Stiles said. Derek’s nervous awkwardness shifted into a smile.

“Really?”
“Yeah. And you could try a three legged chair next time, because the tripod structure is much more stable. Even if the lengths aren’t quite right, it never wobbles. Not that I’m saying you need to make me another one. This is great. More than great. This is... you really didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

“I wanted to."

There was that warm flush of affection in Stiles’ stomach, the fluttering of nervous butterflies at the thought that Derek would do all this for him. Stiles felt nervous around Derek again, afraid that this precious feeling might shatter if he tried too hard to hold on to it.

“I’ve been talking to my dad,” Stiles said. “Trying to talk some sense into him.”

“I know. He came to see me.”

Of course he had. Stiles had thought it too good to be true.

“Let me guess, he’s threatened to shoot you if you abuse me?”

“Actually, he’s given us his blessing. As long as we don’t have sex.”

“His blessing?” Stiles asked. He almost wanted to laugh. It sounded so old fashioned and formal, like something out of one of the old novels they studied for English.

“I think it hurt him to give it, but he did.”

“So what happens now?” Stiles asked. If Derek were human, he’d suggest going for coffee or a meal, having something that was easily recognisable as a date, rather than just hanging out and talking. As it was, their only options were the house, the forest, or one of their bedrooms. Given the embargo on sex, hanging out in each other’s bedrooms would get awkward quickly.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” Derek asked. “If you’re up for it. Are you still tired?”

“If you try and feed me tea, I will pour it down your throat until you choke on it,” Stiles said. “I’m doing much better now.”

So they went for a walk, not heading anywhere in particular but just weaving their way between the trees. There was a long stretch when neither of them knew what to say. Stiles wondered if this whole thing was going to crash and burn before it even got started.

“I know Peter gave you the box,” Derek said after a while. “Has he asked you...” He let the question trail off. Stiles wasn’t sure if Derek didn’t want to say anything in case he was wrong, or in case other people were listening in. Stiles remembered Peter’s comments about secrecy.

“I’m supposed to study up and make my decision later,” Stiles answered. Derek nodded.

“How is the studying?”

“Haven’t had much chance what with the work I missed at school, but there’s interesting stuff in there. It’s a mess though.”

So Stiles talked about the chaos of the books, about how each emissary copied the previous emissary’s book and stuck their own learnings in afterwards, and how the whole thing ended up chaotic. He explained his plan to computerise it all, making it easier to structure and search.

“Copying books by hand was the height of technological advancement in the dark ages,” Stiles said,
“but it’s like generations of these guys have passed and no one’s noticed that the world’s changed.”

“These things are referred to as the old knowledge,” Derek said. “Maybe they think that automatically means old is better than new.”

Stiles went off into a little rant about the stupidity of that sentiment, including a detour into the renaissance and how people had romanticised the past so much they’d ignored the horrible bits. He stopped when he realised Derek was just staring at him.

“Sorry,” Stiles said. “Didn’t mean to bore you.”

“No, it’s... I like listening to you.”

The butterflies fluttered again in his stomach.

“Well, feel free to tell me to shut up if I do start boring you.”

They were still walking, taking aimless circuits through the woods, sometimes coming close to the gardens, sometimes looping round towards the windmill or the river. There was no destination, just a chance to talk, to spend time together. They reached a rocky area, the ground uneven. They could have skirted around it, but Derek kept on, offering a hand to Stiles to help him over the difficult bits. When they reached the smooth path on the other side, Derek didn’t let go. They walked on together, hands linked.

***

Stiles needed to enter the information from the books into his new database. The sensible thing to do would be to start at the beginning of the first book and just work his way through methodically, to make sure that everything was included. But he had another priority right now. He skimmed through the books until he found anything to do with shielding spells, and then he would type those passages into the basic data-entry form Danny had provided him with. He labelled the categories of magic spells and the subcategories of shielding or energy flow, tagging with other relevant keywords, then he started typing in the long passages of text, or photographing the carefully drawn diagrams. He sat at his new desk and worked his way through the books.

It was possible he was missing some information, buried in obscure remarks in the other pages. No prior author of these books had ever been particularly good at sticking to the point. Stiles was building up tags and references to other areas he hadn’t yet built, seeing the first strands of a web of information that was currently empty and waiting for his input.

What he was learning so far was interesting, but raised more questions than it answered. There were ways of shielding against supernatural energies or even supernatural creatures. It was possible to create a barrier that would keep out werewolves or others. Such barriers were apparently imperfect, capable of being broken if enough power was applied, but suitable for protection against most ordinary threats. A previous emissary had explained that these barriers were indiscriminate; they couldn’t differentiate between a werewolf of the pack who was an ally, and one of a rival pack who was a threat. That author had advised caution when deploying mountain ash or similar because a defensive shield could easily become a trap.

There were other shields, the most basic of which was the defensive circle which could be used to prevent interference with a spell in progress. The spell described in the book wasn’t quite the same as the one Satomi had performed before the dreaming, but it was similar, and the emissary who’d written this page admitted that there were many variants. Stiles typed up the information and added his own note explaining what he remembered of Satomi’s version.
All these circles involved marking a barrier. Even Satomi’s simple circle had been made of chalk. There were other spells that involved building a physical shield and then enforcing it with magic. Stiles skimmed through the books, searching for a reference to shields made without any physical representation, since there’d been nothing to act as a shield back at the school. The first reference he found spent half a page explaining how difficult it was, talking in depth about energy differentials. It was almost like math, with sections talking about exponential energy requirement growth relative to the force of the object or energy being stopped. There were also equations on the size of the shield, which basically boiled down to small shields being possible but difficult, and large shields taking so much energy as to be virtually impossible. Stiles typed it into his database, trying to interpret it as he went, and coming to the conclusion that a shield capable of stopping an explosion on the scale needed at the school was something that simply couldn’t happen. Even the most powerful emissaries who’d written these books would have had a nightmare of a time.

Stiles remembered the utter exhaustion that had left him in the hospital for days, but even that didn’t add up. He could never have created enough energy to make a shield that could hold back the force of an explosion from all those kids.

But maybe there was another way. He remembered the conversation he’d had with Noshiko. She’d talked about the difference between blocking a blow and deflecting it. He’d tried the idea himself and made it work, sort of. Maybe that was the answer. Maybe it was possible to bend energy, directing it around the area to be protected, not stopping the force of the explosion but simply making it effect somewhere else.

Stiles skimmed back through the notebooks, keeping an eye out for words like deflect and divert. He found a passage on channelling energy. The book talked about it in the context of channelling energy into spells, but the principle could apply to channelling energy away from an area.

Stiles decided to practice. The question was, with what? There was no way in hell he was going to try stopping an explosion. Peter and Derek assumed he’d done just that back in the school, but Stiles still wasn’t confident about that, so he wasn’t going to risk his life. He was going to start smaller. All he really needed was something to shield, and something to shield it from.

He headed into the house and asked for a candle and a book of matches. No one even asked him what he wanted them for. He found Derek cleaning the downstairs bathroom.

“How much longer do you think you’ll be?” Stiles asked.

“There’s another bathroom upstairs,” Derek said, scrubbing away inside the toilet.

“No, I was going to ask you to help with something but I don’t want to interrupt.”

Derek looked down at the toilet, then up at Stiles, “You think I mind being interrupted?” But Derek was part of a pack, used to playing his part, so he wasn’t going to abandon a duty, even an unpleasant one, to the others, so he said, “Give me half an hour?”

Stiles went back to his room and skimmed through the books again, looking for anything that might be relevant then, when he didn’t find anything, he took a few minutes to type up his earlier experiment with lighting a candle because if any previous emissary had done that, they hadn’t thought it important enough to write down. It felt nice to be able to add something of his own to the store of knowledge and Stiles felt that he might actually be able to be a real emissary, a real magic worker someday.

When Derek joined him, Stiles moved everything off his new desk and set up the candle on it. He lit the candle with the matches instead of magic because he didn’t want to be here for hours.
“What do you want me to do?” Derek asked.

“I want you to blow out the candle.”

Derek questioned this with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m going to practice shielding,” Stiles said, not wanting to go into detail about the fact that he wasn’t technical shielding anything. “You blow out the candle and I try to stop it.”

Stiles sat to one side of the desk. Derek crouched on the other side. Really, Stiles should have thought about this and got Derek a chair of his own. At Stiles’ nod, Derek started blowing gently at the candle flame. Stiles tried to visualise the breath, to take that energy of moving air and shift it to the sides, to move the breeze around the candle flame instead.

By the time he’d started the visualisation, the candle had already flickered out. Stiles struck a match and lit the candle again. This time, he tried to previsualise what would happen, so he’d be ready when it started. He nodded to Derek. Derek blew. The candle went out.

Stiles got another match and tried again. Over and over he tried. He lit the candle, Derek blew, the candle went out. After the first few attempts, Stiles thought he was getting it. He thought he could feel something happening. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he held on to that feeling anyway, holding it as a sign that there was magic going on.

After a while, it seemed that the candle was taking longer to go out. It would flicker and dance in the breeze of Derek’s breath but it didn’t die straight away. Stiles told himself this was progress, because otherwise he’d be frustrated enough to throw the candle at the wall and declare the experiment a failure.

Stiles’ eyes were blurring from staring at the candle and trying to magically alter something he could only see in his mind. His head was starting to ache from concentrating but he didn’t want to give up quite yet. Stopping would mean admitting he was beaten by a candle. He could do this. He had to do this.

The candle was burned down to a stub when they tried yet again. Derek breathed, Stiles visualised moving the breeze in curving arcs that avoided the flame. The flame flickered just a little, and stayed lit.

“You did it,” Derek said. He sounded surprised, which made sense given that he’d just spent god knows how long watching Stiles fail.

“Let’s keep going,” Stiles said, grinning a little despite the throbbing in his temples. He wanted to prove that this wasn’t just a fluke.

Derek blew harder next time, Stiles held his visualisation in his mind, and the candle stayed lit. Derek took deep breaths and huffed them out until his cheeks started to get red from the puffing. Stiles grinned, feeling the triumph of that little candle flame, staying resolutely lit in the face of adversity. After a few minutes of this, the candle was down to almost nothing in its holder, and it was Stiles who blew it out.

Stiles stood up to stretch.

His legs gave out beneath him.

Derek caught him before he whacked his head on the desk, and then helped him over to the bed. Stiles collapsed onto the mattress, sudden exhaustion filling him.
“Stiles, are you OK?” Derek asked.

“Tired,” Stiles said. “That was... harder than I realised.”

He felt the aching exhaustion he’d felt in the hospital, as though even lifting his limbs was too much hard work. The symptoms were the same. Stiles had used too much of his energy to make the magic work. He’d felt like this after the school, but surely that was proof. He’d worn himself out just trying to shield a candle from a breeze over a small area and that had taken time and practice and preparation. He wouldn’t have been able to shield the kids in the same way, not from something as powerful as an explosion, and not with so little notice. With practice to build up his endurance, Stiles might one day have that much power, but he didn’t right now. For all Satomi’s comments about him having no small spark, he was still just that, a spark. He was untrained, unpractised. He was like a scrawny kid walking into a gym and trying to lift a weight for the first time; he had a long way to go before he would be ready to lift with the champions.

“Here, drink,” Derek’s voice came. Stiles forced himself to open his eyes and his mouth, as Derek tilted his head up and poured a hot liquid into his mouth. It was Noshiko’s tea. Why did everyone keep giving him tea?

Stiles hadn’t even noticed that Derek had gone to make it. He must have fallen asleep for a minute there.

Stiles drank, his mind still working. Something had happened at the school, there was no doubt about that, something involving his magic, but Stiles knew with absolute certainty that he had neither the skill nor the power to shield the kids himself.
Chapter 48

Derek was still convinced that Stiles had shielded the kids back at the school. He’d explained the fact Stiles had struggled with the candle by saying that Stiles obviously hadn’t fully recovered from the events at the school, talked about Noshiko’s theory about the sacrifice, and used the fact that the effects had lasted longer last time as evidence that Stiles’ magic must have been larger at the school. He’d also talked about adrenaline giving him a boost. No matter what Stiles said, Derek refused to accept that Stiles was anything but a hero. When the argument continued, Derek had pointed out, as Peter had, that Stiles had been the only person there capable of doing magic.

Which is why Stiles was pouring over the footage from the attack, looking at every image he could find. Given that there had been multiple news crews and a lot of interested bystanders, there was a lot to go through. Most of it was focused on the aftermath, with pictures and videos of the werewolves working to pull children out of the rubble, but Stiles was more interested in what he could find from before the bomb went off.

He wasn’t sure exactly what he was looking for. It wasn’t like he expected to see someone standing there in star-covered wizard robes and a pointed hat, but he just knew he had to look. He was looking because he’d found something in the magic books about group spells. There was a section in one that talked about how groups of magic workers could come together to pool their energy into a greater spell than any could achieve alone. He’d also found a section towards the end of the last book, probably added by Deaton or whoever taught him, that talked about a specific type of group spell, where other magic workers could channel their own skills and power through an individual. One person could perform the spell, but draw on the power of the group. More difficult still, according to the book, was the possibility of one magic worker using another as a conduit for his own skill.

So Stiles was looking through images, trying to find out who else had been there.

He knew what he was looking for as soon as he spotted a figure, half-turned away from the camera, standing among the bystanders. Of course. He should have worked it out sooner. Who else would it be?

Stiles gathered up his laptop, with the image still open on it, and the last notebook. He hurried out of his room and towards his jeep, grateful that he didn’t need to check in with Peter anymore about leaving. But maybe he should check in with Peter, because the only reason Peter had ended their arrangement was because Peter thought Stiles had performed the spell that had saved the children. Now Stiles knew otherwise.

Stiles didn’t let himself doubt his decision. He reached the edge of the territory and hurried across the boundary towards his jeep. He felt angry, like he’d been tricked or used, like he was a puppet dangling on someone else’s strings.

He drove into town, not letting go of that feeling of anger, which was probably not the best state to be driving in. He kept going though until he reached the animal clinic. He parked up and stormed inside, ignoring the closed sign on the front door, because he knew that Deaton had to go in every day to feed and care for the animals, even on a Sunday.

“It was you!” Stiles said, storming into the back room.

“I really do need to get a bigger closed sign,” Deaton said calmly. He continued pouring feed into a rabbit’s bowl, as though Stiles wasn’t even there.
“It was you!” Stiles said again.

“Is that so?”

“Don’t pretend!”

“Stiles, it would help if you explained what you’re accusing me of.”

“At the school! You’re the one who did the spell that shielded the kids.” He waved the notebook at Deaton as though this was evidence.

“And you’re angry about this?” Deaton asked. He seemed almost amused. He moved on to another cage, where some small rodent was curled up in a nest of sawdust and newspaper shredding. Deaton unclipped an empty water bottle and replaced it with a full one.

“I...” Stiles stopped himself. “Of course I’m not angry that you saved the kids. But you tricked everyone. Peter thinks that I did it.”

“So you’re angry that you look like a hero?”

“Yes!”

“You’re angry that Peter is grateful to you for saving those children.”

“I didn’t do it. Everyone thinks I did some amazing thing, but I didn’t. All I did was put those children in danger.”

“No,” Deaton said. “You saved them. Just not in the way Peter thinks.”

Stiles paused. His anger was beginning to dissipate now. It was hard to stay furious in the face of Deaton’s quiet calm.

“What do you mean?” Stiles asked.

“Stiles, did you read that book fully?” Deaton asked.

“I... may have skimmed bits.”

“If you pay attention, you’ll notice that a group spell uses the skills and energy of all its participants. I may have guided the spell, but it was as much your magic as mine that fuelled it. And the only reason I was able create a shield that powerful, was by drawing on an act of sacrifice. That girl, the one with the bullet wound, her actions created an energy I could manipulate and she performed that act for you. So really, the two of you deserve equal credit for saving the others.”

“You’re saying if Millie hadn’t tried to save me, you wouldn’t have been able to save the others?”

“I’m saying exactly that. And the only reason I could use you to perform the spell at all, was because you were right there in the heart of it all. If you hadn’t been brave enough to walk into that danger, there would have been nothing I could have done. You saved those children. It might not be in the precise way Peter thinks, but you did save them, Stiles.

Stiles considered what Deaton was saying. Stiles had gone into the school, it was true, but it was hardly the same as being the lone hero that Peter thought him. There was also the problem of what happened next time the pack needed a miracle?

“You didn’t let anyone know that you helped,” Stiles said. “You could have come to the hospital and
told me or Derek or someone. Were you ever planning on letting anyone know?"

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because Peter would immediately start looking for an ulterior motive. It was simpler to just keep my part in the matter hidden. He already trusts you, which is no small feat, so he was more likely to accept this from you.”

None of this made sense. That Deaton had the ability to protect the kids, Stiles could accept. But why would he save them after having betrayed them? And why hide it, when showing Peter that he’d saved the kids might let him win Peter’s trust back, at least a little? Unless this was a bluff. Maybe he’d wanted Stiles to figure it out, so that Stiles would tell Peter, and then Deaton would look even more like a hero because he hadn’t even wanted credit.

“Why did you save the kids?” Stiles asked.

“Because it was the right thing to do,” Deaton answered. “I don’t know what Peter has told you about me, but I’m not a monster.”

“He told me you betrayed the pack. He told me you tricked him into falling back so you could trap them all with the barrier.”

Stiles waited, almost hoping Deaton would tell him that Peter was mistaken. It might make this all make sense if there had been some miscommunication somewhere. If Deaton hadn’t really made the barrier, then he might still want to help the pack. But Deaton just nodded, accepting Peter’s accusations as truth.

Maybe it was residual effects of magical energy drain, but Stiles couldn’t wrap his brain around this.

“Why did you trick Peter?” Stiles asked. He avoided the word betray because it was a word that might make Deaton angry and he would be less likely to explain if he was angry.

“It wasn’t a trick,” Deaton said.

“You told him to take all the werewolves out of town and then you put up the boundary spell.”

“I suppose you’ve heard the saying about hell and good intentions? There was chaos at the time, violence and death everywhere. Fear is often the greatest threat to peace and there was a great deal of fear on the human side. I thought that by reducing that fear, I could induce the necessary people into having a real conversation with the werewolf packs.”

“You raised the boundary to stop people being so afraid?”

“It was only meant as a temporary measure. I thought that when people stopped worrying that they would be slaughtered in their sleep, they would be willing to come to a negotiating table and things could proceed peacefully from there. But those in charge on this side of the barrier preferred to keep the boundary in place. I was wrong.”

Those three words at the end lay between them, heavy with history.

“You could have taken the boundary down,” Stiles said.

“What good would it have done?” Deaton asked. “Without a real agreement, taking the boundary
down would just result in more violence, more death. At least this way, no one else needs to die.”

“And you’re OK with the werewolves being trapped out there?”

“It’s better than them being dead.”

Stiles wanted to slap Deaton for making decisions like that without taking the feelings of the pack into consideration. He’d made the decision that the pack were safer this way, and he was sticking to it, even if it meant suffering for the werewolves. There might have been a kernel of a point in what Deaton said, but that was all that Stiles was willing to admit. Just because the pack were alive right now didn’t make any of this right. And maybe if Deaton had taken the barrier down, the humans in charge in Beacon Hills would have been forced to negotiate, instead of deciding they liked this new status quo.

They could have been building a peaceful arrangement for years but right now humans were OK with the situation, so they didn’t see the need to try. Taking down the barrier and making the threat of werewolf attack real again, and they might be more willing to talk about it. Stiles was willing to side with Peter on this issue; Deaton’s actions had put a halt to anything that would have really improved werewolf rights.

“Get rid of the boundary and maybe Peter will forgive you,” Stiles said.

“If we get rid of the boundary,” Deaton said, “the hunters will declare the werewolves an immediate threat and launch an attack. You didn’t see the result of the last one.”

“I saw the graves,” Stiles said.

“If I take down the boundary spells, it will be a disaster. There needs to be negotiation first. There needs to be agreement that the pack will be safe.”

Stiles might be willing to consider Deaton’s arguments, he might be willing to acknowledge the truth of what he was saying, except that Deaton had been living in town, quietly comfortable, while the pack had struggled for survival out in the woods.

“So why haven’t you been campaigning vigorously for werewolf rights?” Stiles asked. “Why haven’t you been trying to bring the local authorities back to the table?”

“I can’t move openly,” Deaton said.

Stiles glared. He thought of the history class. He thought of Mr Yukimura, pointing out parallels without ever speaking directly on the issue, and giving him books to serve as weapons for his own campaigns. Mr Yukimura couldn’t move openly, but he played his part in secret. Deaton couldn’t move openly, so he did nothing.

“You’ve had plenty of time to do something,” Stiles said. He wasn’t going to be convinced. Deaton didn’t seem to want to convince him. He turned away from Stiles and took the empty water bottles over to a sink to rinse them out.

Stiles decided to discuss the other things that were bothering him, “This group spell thing, does it mean you can take over my magic whenever you want? Could anyone do it?”

“Not anyone,” Deaton said. “We’re connected through the Nematon and through the Hale pack. No one else would be able to join with you in this way unless you perform a ritual that creates a connection.”
That was comforting at least. It was nice to know that random magic workers couldn’t jump inside him and use his power for their own purposes, leaving him drained in the process. It still didn’t help with the rest of it though. Stiles didn’t trust Deaton not to abuse this ability.

“Could you do it?” Stiles asked.

“Only under exceptional circumstances,” Deaton said.

“So what the hell was so exceptional about the school?”

“Firstly, that we were physically close. Joint workings aren’t possible over distance without preparation and tools. Secondly, the fact that our goals were aligned. You wanted to save the children, you just didn’t have the power or experience to do it by yourself. Your desire allowed me to attach my magic to yours and drive the spell. I guided the magic, but it was made possible by your will. A group spell is simply impossible if any person in the group is opposed to it.”

“So you wouldn’t be able to make me do a spell if I didn’t want to do it?”

“Never. Magic is at its heart controlled by your will. There are spirits out there that can control a person’s body or even mind, but there is not a thing in creation that can control your magic unless you want it.”

“It’s not like I consented to you taking over my magic back at the school,” Stiles pointed out.

“Not on a conscious level. On an unconscious level, I did exactly what you wanted done and together we saved the children.”

“It still freaks me out that you could do that and I couldn’t tell.”

Deaton shrugged, “You’re simply inexperienced. With practice, you’ll learn the feel of your own magic and you’ll be able to instantly recognise any magic not your own.”

Stiles went quiet. He wasn’t sure if he should tell Peter about this. He decided he would. If nothing else, he could stop worrying about being asked to perform miracles when he could barely light candles. He could let Peter decide what this meant in relation to Deaton’s earlier betrayal of the pack. Stiles still felt used, like he was simply Deaton’s puppet in some hidden game, but at least he had reassurance that this wouldn’t happen again for spells he didn’t want. Assuming, of course, that Deaton could be trusted.

Stiles took the book, his book now, and headed back for his jeep.

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Stiles sat on a fallen log. Peter paced a little in front of him. Stiles wasn’t sure when he’d last seen Peter so agitated. Stiles had decided to come clean about everything, explaining what he’d found and repeating everything Deaton had told him. He’d expected Peter to be angry, but he wasn’t raving and snarling. He was just pacing a little, jaw clenched with tension.

“Deaton must have known you’d work it out,” Peter said after a painful silence.

“That possibility did occur to me,” Stiles said. They were away from the house, where they could talk without being overheard by the rest of the pack. Stiles was starting to feel like the pack needed a soundproof bunker for having secret conversations.

“He’s trying to win his way back into my trust,” Peter continued. “It’s not going to work.”
“OK.”

Peter looked at Stiles, eyes narrowing. Stiles wasn’t sure if something had given him away in his tone or his heartbeat.

“Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?” Peter asked.

“Am I... the agreement.... You cancelled the agreement when you thought I saved the kids.”

“You did save the children.”

“Yeah, but not alone. Now we know about Deaton...” Stiles trailed off. He stared down at his hands, aware of Peter watching him. Peter was studying him. The silence dragged on again and Stiles squirmed under the weight of Peter’s stare. Stiles waited for Peter to tell him that the arrangement was back as it had been before, that Stiles was bound to the pack and could only leave when it served Peter. He waited for the words that pronounced his doom and his thoughts must have been written all over his face.

“You told me all this,” Peter said, “even though you were worried I might rescind your freedom when I learned the truth?”

“You needed the truth.”

Peter moved closer. Stiles tensed. A moment later a hand rested on his shoulder.

“Stiles,” Peter said, “you are part of this pack, but you are not a prisoner. Not anymore. Never again.”

Stiles looked up and saw Peter smiling at him.
There were more new students at school on Monday. The first was Kira, walking in with a grin too broad to belong in school on a Monday morning. She spotted Stiles and greeted him cheerfully, announcing that her parents had decided that with the situation changing, she could try public school. She wanted to be a part of convincing people that supernatural creatures weren’t a threat, and she’d apparently argued that she could best be a part of that if she were an example.

It seemed that the Yukimuras had finally come clean to her about the reasons for keeping her hidden away from the world. Kira talked to Stiles about it at the start of school, thanking him for his part in convincing her parents.

There was another new student, but the significance wasn’t instantly apparent. Stiles didn’t realise at first because she wasn’t in the same class as him, but Isaac mentioned that there was a new student in his French class, one who apparently spoke the language excellently because her family had French roots and she used to speak in French with her grandfather before he died. Stiles found out more than he wanted to about her because Isaac apparently found her talking in French to be the sexiest thing he’d ever heard.

Stiles faced this on all sides because Scott was busy rambling on about Kira’s many charms. Stiles was tempted to retaliate by composing odes to Derek’s muscles. He felt suddenly grateful for the fact that Erica and Boyd were fairly discrete about their relationship and didn’t go around drooling over each other in public.

It was only at lunch time when things exploded, figuratively this time. Stiles was at the table with Isaac, Liam, and Boyd. Some of the werewolves from other packs were scattered at other tables, no longer feeling the need to clump together at all times for protection. Scott came in, talking cheerfully to an unfamiliar brunette girl. Stiles had no doubt who she was because Isaac instantly started staring at her with a slightly goofy expression.

Scott started to lead her over to their table. The girl stopped and took in the sight of them, eyes falling to the silver badges the werewolves wore. The smile changed to a look of disgust.

“Those are your friends?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Scott, trying to keep up his cheerful expression, “this is Stiles, and this is Isaac, and-“

“They’re werewolves.”

“So what?” Boyd asked. He didn’t even try to hide his anger.

“Goodbye,” she said to Scott, and walked off.

“Allison,” Scott called after her.

“Well that was rude,” Stiles said. Scott was cheered up a little when Kira came over to join them without any prompting whatsoever, but Isaac just stared across the room towards Allison, looking miserable. Boyd looked close to murder.

“I take it you didn’t hear her last name,” Erica said, once she arrived and the situation was explained to her.

“What do you mean?” Isaac asked. Until then, he’d been busy staring at the corner where Allison
was sitting between Lydia and Danny at the cool table.

“Allison Argent,” Erica explained.

Stiles whipped out his phone and did a quick social media search. It took all of two minutes to find out that Allison Argent’s parents were Chris and Victoria Argent. So the grandfather she used to speak French with must have been Gerard Argent, the man whose death and kicked off the whole conflict.

So that answered the question of why Allison had reacted with disgust at the prospect of sitting at a table with a group of werewolves. It didn’t answer what the hell she was doing here. Her Facebook profile wasn’t very private, so Stiles could find out that she’d transferred from a girl’s boarding school over towards the coast, well clear of any werewolf territories. For some reason, her parents had decided to pull her out of school mid-semester and stick her in the public high school that was currently being invaded by the local packs. Stiles didn’t believe this was a coincidence.

Were her parents sending her here to spy on them? No, that didn’t fit with the way she’d run off at the mere thought of being in their presence. Maybe she was supposed to attack them. The sheriff’s department still had the whole school cordoned off. No one could get in without being staff or student, and everyone got checked coming in. Getting a student transferred in to a public school was bound to be easier than getting a hunter put on the staff list.

“We need to tell Peter about this,” Stiles said.

“Do you practice stating the obvious, Stilinski?” Boyd asked.

“Why are you guys freaking out so much?” Scott asked. “It’s not like she can bring weapons into school, can she?”

Stiles thought back to that morning. He’d shown in his ID at the gate and then been waved through with no further checks. Sometimes the deputies peered inside people’s cars, but they didn’t so much as pop the trunks, let alone do a full search. If Allison drove to school, she could have an entire arsenal with her.

“I’ve got to warn my pack,” Liam said. He slipped away from their table and went to find Brett, one of the other werewolves in Satomi’s pack.

Sometime during all this, Stiles managed to eat his lunch, but he wasn’t sure he remembered tasting any of it. By the end of it, Stiles had agreed to head back to the pack that evening, despite his plans to spend the night with his dad. He texted his dad and said that plans had changed, but didn’t explain why. His dad didn’t need to know that Stiles was worrying about a hunter’s kid sneaking weapons into school, at least not until they’d come up with a real plan.

Stiles could only hope that Allison wasn’t the suicide bomber type. She didn’t look like it, but he supposed it wasn’t always easy to tell. He could keep his fingers metaphorically crossed and hope that she wasn’t going to risk her own life, and probably wouldn’t want to start something in clear view of the deputies assigned to watch over the wolves when they were at school.

Stiles spent his afternoon classes wishing he’d spent more time on the parts of the emissary books that talked about poisons affecting werewolves. It was possible that Allison had some sort of weapon that could kill the werewolves but leave humans untouched. Stiles had skimmed over those passages, looking for shielding information and assuming he wouldn’t ever need to know how to kill a werewolf. Could there be a gas bomb? Or something in the water supply? Or the food? Would Allison be able to set something like that up without getting caught?
The more time passed, the less likely it seemed that today was going to end in brutal, horrible death, but Stiles didn’t want to relax too much. When the last bell rang, the werewolves all but fled, heading out towards the buses. Stiles was more cautious, heading towards his jeep. He watched Allison leave the school building, chatting with Jackson and Lydia, and the first hints of a plan started to form.

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Stiles didn’t follow the bus back to the werewolf territory. Instead, he followed a porsche out of the school parking lot. He planned on following Jackson all the way back to his house, but Jackson noticed his stalker before long. He pulled over at the side of the road and leapt out of his car, storming over to where Stiles was parking the jeep.

“What the hell do you want?” Jackson demanded.

“To talk. Do you still want the bite?”

“What happened to ‘he’s never going to bite you’?”

Stiles shrugged, “I’m not making any promises. I can’t speak for Peter. Let’s just say that I have a little more sway now than the last time I asked him. Do you still want it?”

Stiles expected Jackson to say no. Any sane person who’d witnessed the events of the last few weeks should run screaming from the situation. But Jackson glared at Stiles, jaw tight with tension. He wanted to say yes but he didn’t want to have to ask someone like Stiles.

“What do you want in exchange?” Jackson asked.

“That new girl you and Lydia were hanging with, Allison?”

“What about her?”

“Her dad’s Chris Argent. The guy in charge of the hunters round here. We think he’s sent Allison to our school as part of a plot against the wolves.”

“What kind of plot?” Jackson asked.

“That’s exactly where you come in. You need to find out. Hang out with her, talk to her about her dad’s job, say a few things about how werewolves shouldn’t be allowed in town, all the usual.”

“If you want me to spy on her, just say so, Stilinski.”

“Fine. I want you to spy on her.”

“And then what? I find some information and Peter gives me the bite?”

“I can’t make promises, but if you give Peter information that saves some of his pack, then Peter will owe you. That’s got to be worth something.” Stiles gave a little smile. He didn’t know if Peter would want to bite Jackson; he’d been pretty firm against it back when Stiles had asked the first time, but times were changing. And Stiles already knew that Peter would do almost anything to protect his pack. If bribing Jackson with a bite was necessary, he would do it.

“Alright,” said Jackson. “Just remember, Stilinski, I’m not doing this for your stupid campaign to change the world. I’m doing this for me.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”
Derek was waiting at the boundary when Stiles got back. Given that Stiles had been planning on going back to his dad’s house, that presumably meant that the others had told Derek about the changed situation at the school. Derek had probably been worrying about Stiles’ delay while he was chasing down Jackson. Butterflies fluttered in Stiles’ stomach as he greeted Derek with a quick kiss.

It had to be a quick one, because he needed to talk to Peter.

“Are you OK?” Derek asked.

“Fine,” Stiles said. Derek took Stiles’ backpack and they walked together back towards the big house.

“So. An Argent at the school.”

“Yeah.”

“This is going to end badly.”

“Probably.”

Stiles summed up what he’d seen at the school, particularly the way Allison had looked at the thought of sitting down at a table with them, and the way she’d abandoned Scott the second she realised he was friends with the werewolves.

“But we don’t know for sure that she’s planning murder,” Stiles said. “I mean, Chris Argent seemed pretty opposed to the murder of humans and I doubt he’ll want to kill his own daughter, so the odds are that she's not going to turn up at the school with a bomb.”

“There are other weapons.”

“Yeah, but if she cares about not hurting humans, then they won’t be as destructive. Unless she dumps poison in the lunchroom food, but frankly I’m not sure anyone would be able to tell the difference,” Stiles turned to grin at Derek, but Derek’s expression was grave. Apparently jokes about the quality of his school lunches weren’t appropriate for when a group of people faced the possibility of death.

“Can you talk to your father about keeping her out of the school?” Derek asked.

“Not legally,” Stiles answered. “She’s a minor entitled to a public education. Until Allison does something wrong, she can’t be kept out of a public high school.”

“Even though she’s a hunter.”

“Her dad’s a hunter.”

“That whole family raise their kids to be killers. It’s what they do.”

“Hey, I saw the way she reacted to Isaac and the others; you don’t need to convince me that she’s prejudiced, but the sheriff can’t arrest someone because they might possibly commit a crime. It’s called profiling and it’s generally frowned upon. If Allison tries something, then we can call my dad in.”

“It might be too late by then. We should stop her now.”
“Are you suggesting we just attack her?” Stiles asked.

“You didn’t see what Kate did.”

“Maybe not, but you’ve got to think about this. What if this is exactly what Argent wants? What if he wants you to freak out about Allison and try to attack her, giving him proof that werewolves are violent monsters? You can’t make the first move!”

“I can’t let them kill my pack again!” Derek snarled.

“I’m not saying that. I’m saying we use caution. I’m saying we don’t give Argent any more ammunition to make people hate you.”

“I won’t sit here and do nothing while an Argent gets close to the others.”

“Derek, just be sensible!” Stiles was struggling to keep from yelling. “If you go charging into town to defend your pack, people will interpret it as an unprovoked attack and that could destroy everything we’re working for. You can’t play into Argent’s hands.”

“Stiles is right,” Peter’s voice cut in. During their discussion, Stiles and Derek had been getting closer and closer to the house. Now they stood near the edge of the gardens and Peter had come out to join them, no doubt hearing every word they’d said to each other. He stood between the trees at the edge of the clearing, still and quiet, but anything but calm.

“We need to plan our next actions carefully,” Peter said.
Chapter 50

Siles fingered the wooden token that hung around his neck, marked with the Hale sigil and the blood that bound this marker to him. He was representing the pack again, but still not officially as an emissary. Peter had actually said when he’d made the token that it was better if people underestimated Stiles’ connection to the pack, though he admitted that Argent was unlikely to underestimate him after the bomb at the elementary school. Argent probably suspected that Stiles had some ability with magic. They’d discussed for a while whether to try and downplay that angle or exaggerate it. Stiles really hadn’t liked the idea of trying to bluff someone that he was more powerful than he was, because Argent was the sort of guy to call that bluff. But if they didn’t know what he was capable of, they might be cautious.

Stiles returned his hand to the steering wheel of the jeep, drumming his fingers nervously against it while he drove. He’d faced the Argents across a conference table before but this was massively different. This was walking into the lion’s den.

The sun had set by the time Stiles reached the large house in the suburbs. It was a nice place; clearing hunting must bring in more money than Stiles had thought. Maybe Chris got paid for all those interviews he did after the school explosion. Stiles took a moment to pull out his phone and call Peter, letting him know he’d arrived. He hung up a second later, but made sure that Peter’s number was easily accessible so he could redial with the minimum amount of effort if things went wrong. He started up the audio recording app, which was one of those designed to automatically upload to a cloud storage site in case the phone was confiscated or destroyed, so that there would be evidence if the Argents did anything to him. That done, he walked up to the front door.

He rang the doorbell like he was any other visitor, and tried not to look terrified. He wiped his hands on his pants in case one of them wanted to shake hands; he didn’t need them to know how badly he was sweating.

Victoria Argent opened the front door and looked at Stiles with a mixture of confusion and disgust, like someone had left a bag of something steaming on her doorstep.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. It was something of a relief that she made no move to invite him inside.

“I wanted to ask you and your husband why you are threatening innocent lives,” Stiles said. He sounded almost confident. Maybe he should join drama club after all this if he had these sort of acting skills.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Victoria said.

“So you didn’t send a hunter into Beacon Hills High School in the hope of inciting violence?”

“Hunters aren’t allowed near any of the schools with werewolves in attendance, despite our
vehement protests about the danger that poses to the children inside.”

“You got a hunter inside the high school. Or are you pretending you don’t know Allison?”

“Allison is a seventeen year old girl attending high school to get her education. She’s not a hunter. No one can join the hunters until they’re eighteen.”

“So it’s entirely a coincidence that she happened to join the one high school in the country that currently has werewolves as students?”

“It’s the local school.”

“Still doesn’t explain why you’d pull her out of an expensive boarding school mid-semester. I would have thought you’d try to keep her as far as possible from werewolves, not move her between schools and put her right in with them.”

“We had personal reasons for changing Allison’s school situation but I don’t see how they’re anything to do with you.”

“I go to that school too. When she attacks the pack and everything goes to hell, I’ll be caught up in the middle of it again.”

“I’m not sure I like your implications,” Victoria said.

“Trust me, I don’t like them either. That’s why I decided to come in person and talk about what you’re planning.”

“You decided?” She looked pointedly at the wooden token hanging around Stiles’ neck. Stiles reached up and fingered it a little, before realising that probably betrayed his nerves. He lowered his hand to his side again.

“I can still make decisions of my own,” Stiles said.

“Even though you’re a slave of the werewolves. I would have thought you’d be asking us to help you escape. We can help you, you know.”

“Help with what?” Stiles did his best to look innocent. Bluffing lessons with Peter were probably helping him do better at it than when he used to try sneaking back into his house long after curfew and found himself confronted by his dad.

“You shouldn’t have to live as a prisoner of the werewolves,” Victoria said. She was probably aiming for a sympathetic expression, but it ended up looking slightly creepy. “We can help protect you from them.”

“I don’t need protection from them. I need protection from bullies who think hanging around with werewolves makes me a viable target. I need protection from radical extremist who are happy to murder a building full of innocent children, with me in the way. I need protection from whatever scheme you have cooked up with your daughter. Can you protect me from them?”

“There is no scheme.”

Stiles let the silence sit for longer than he normally would. He counted to ten in his head to make sure he didn’t speak too soon. Then he reached into his pocket, not the one with his phone in of course, and pulled out the small stone with the hole in it. Stiles had found a mention of the stone in one of the books, and apparently it was very powerful, useful in all manner of rituals from preventing
nightmares to allowing people to see through spells of illusion by looking through the hole. There had been three pages of possible spells and rituals. Truth spell hadn’t been on there anywhere, but he was hoping that Victoria Argent wouldn’t know that. He just hoped she recognised the stone as an artefact of power.

Stiles held the stone out in the middle of his palm, stared at it and muttered under his breath, quietly enough that he could be certain that Victoria wouldn’t realise he was muttering the first line of one of the songs from Wicked. Then he looked her in the eye and smiled, hoping to channel something of Peter into his expression.

“I need you to touch the stone,” Stiles said, “and promise that Allison isn’t part of any plot to attack the werewolves at the school.”

He saw Victoria hesitate. Stiles let his smile grow wider.

“That’s what I thought,” he said. He pocketed the stone. “Thank you for your time.”

He walked away. He half-expected someone to ambush him as he walked back to the jeep, but nothing happened. He heard the sound of the door closing behind him. He got into the jeep, started the engine, and drove a few hundred yards down the road before calling Peter and letting him know he was heading home. He could hear the relief in Peter’s voice when he acknowledged that.

***

Stiles wore the pack token into school. He was pretty certain that most people there wouldn’t have the faintest idea what it meant, but it was possible that Allison would. It was Peter’s way of officially declaring Stiles to be under the protection of the pack. If beating up bullies and pulling him out from under an exploded building hadn’t been enough for that.

The pack teenagers were under strict orders to stay away from Allison Argent at all times. They brought their own food and drink, even Stiles, in case she tried to tamper with anything in the school kitchens. They’d been lectured by Peter, twice, about not touching, sniffing or even looking too hard at anything that seemed suspicious. They were to keep close to the guard deputies as much as possible and stay in groups as much as possible. They were to give the other werewolves similar warnings on the bus.

Stiles took the jeep to school and then waited for the werewolf bus to pull in behind him. Parrish climbed down out of it, as one of the escorts assigned to the wolves. His face was darkly serious; presumably he’d heard all the warnings the werewolves were giving each other.

Right now, the plan was to wait. Peter didn’t want his pack to be seen as the instigators or any violence. The others had tried to convince the other packs to do the same. Hopefully it had worked. It was possible that the Argents hoped that the packs would go nuts at the mere presence of an Argent in their midst, so that the hunters could kick them out without any public backlash. If that was the case, they should have a few days before it became clear that plan wasn’t working. Hopefully.

The Argents were planning something. Stiles had absolutely no doubts whatsoever about that, particularly given his bluff with the holey holy stone. He just hated not knowing what the plan was. At the best of times, he hated not knowing something, and it was much, much worse when not knowing something could be a matter of life or death. He just had to hope that Jackson would hold up his end of the bargain.

He couldn’t go and ask Jackson how things were going, not without blowing the plan. So Stiles had to sit through lessons and pretend that everything was normal, all the while waiting for something to
explore. He spent his time fidgety and distracted, worried that he might give himself a heart attack from stress just waiting for something to happen. Maybe that was the Argents’ secret plan.

They reached the lunch period and so far no one had died. The werewolves gathered together, much as they had on the first day here. Scott, Kira and Stiles sat with the packs, and eyes kept flicking over to the other side of the room, where Allison was chatting cheerfully to Lydia while Jackson sat beside them. Stiles hoped Jackson was getting something useful out of her. As he watched, Danny went over and sat down beside Jackson, apparently joining in the conversation.

Stiles resisted the urge to glare. After all Danny had done to help the werewolf cause, why would he want to hang out with Allison? Stiles wanted to storm over there and demand an explanation for this betrayal, but that wouldn’t do any good.

***

Stiles followed Jackson out of the school parking lot after a day that had been astonishingly stressful given that nothing had really happened. Jackson drove away from the school and then parked up on the side of a quiet stretch of road. Stiles parked behind him.

“Well?” Stiles asked.

“She hasn’t sat down with me and disclosed the details of her evil plan, if that’s what you mean,” Jackson said.

“Has she told you anything?”

“She’s complained about the school a lot. She had a moan with Lydia about the quality of the teaching compared to her old school, and seemed pretty angry that she was expected to be in a school with werewolves.”

“Did she say anything about doing anything about that?”

“If she had, don’t you think I would have started with that?” Jackson said, then muttered, “Dumbass.”

“Asshole.”

“She doesn’t want to be here and she doesn’t like that the werewolves are here but it was just normal moaning, not like she had a secret mission to kill them all or something.”

“I guess you have to know her more than two days to get that level of information.”

Jackson shrugged, “So are you going to tell Peter I helped you?”

“Yeah, but we’re going to need something more useful than that. Keep digging.”

“I’d better be getting something out of this, Stilinski.”

“You’ll get something proportional to what you give.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and stalked back to his porsche.

***

Things were just as tense back with the pack. Even safe inside the territory, everyone was on edge. Stiles sat through a painful dinner and then took his turn helping do the dishes after. After that, he
and Derek ended up in his room. Derek was sitting on the bed reading a book, while Stiles worked on his homework at the desk. It was all very... domestic, but it wasn’t that much different from stuff they’d done back before they’d gotten together.

“We need to do something,” Stiles said.

“About Allison?” Derek asked, looking up from his book.

“No. About us. We need to do something couply.”

“Couply?” Derek repeated.

“Yeah. I mean, we can’t go out on real dates because of the boundary and we can’t do much in the way of kissing and stuff because kissing leads to groping, and groping leads to... you know.”

“Your dad making death threats?”

“Exactly. So we need to do something else that marks us as a couple but without anyone getting shot.”

“What do you have in mind?” Derek sounded extremely sceptical.

“Maybe pet names?”

“Pet names?” Derek managed to make the tone sound like Stiles had suggested eating a kitten or something.

“Yeah. I could call you babe or honey or something.”

“No.” Derek raised his book and resumed reading, or at least pretending to.

“Sweetie?” Stiles suggested. “Darling?”

“No pet names.”

“Sweetie-poo. Der-bear. Cuddlykins.”

“I’m ignoring you now.”

Stiles was grinning, pressing on, wondering what it would take for Derek to break.


Derek’s eyebrows knotted together into a confused frown.

“Studdly wuddly,” Stiles continued.

“Wait, back up a minute,” Derek said.

“Studdly wuddly?” Stiles said. “You like that one?”

“No. Did you just call me Cthulhu?”

“What? You don’t think that’s a good pet name?”

“Well, of the two of us I’m not the one who can drive people insane with my mere presence.”
“Wait, are you saying I’m unspeakable abomination?” Stiles asked.

“If the shoe fits.”

Stiles grinned, “So Cthulhu’s my pet name now? I can live with that.”

Derek grinned back and muttered, “Idiot.” He returned to his book, but he was smiling still. Some of the unbearable tension had slipped away. At least for now.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

As an aside, Eternal Sterek over on Tumblr are doing voting for best Sterek fics and one of my other stories, Unchained, has been nominated in about three different categories. So if you've read and enjoyed Unchained, please go and vote. Or, you know, vote for some of the other awesome fics that have been nominated.

When Isaac was five minutes late for lunch, Stiles started to get antsy. Deputy Parrish wasn’t there either, so hopefully that meant Isaac still had his escort. Stiles left the others at the lunch table and went to look for him.

Thankfully, the search didn’t take long. Isaac was standing close to the door to the library, but against the wall. Parrish stood next to him, looking bemused. When Isaac saw Stiles, he beckoned him closer and put a finger to his lips. Stiles walked over there, still fairly confused and now annoyed at having been made to worry over nothing. As Stiles got close, Isaac grabbed him and pulled him beside him, against the wall, so that no one inside the library could see them.

“What the hell’s going on?” Stiles asked in a whisper. Parrish shrugged in confusion. At least Isaac wasn’t towing him around.

“Allison’s in there,” Isaac whispered back, “with Danny. They’re talking about us.”

“What are they saying?” Stiles asked. Isaac looked at him like he was an idiot.

“I’m trying to listen.”

He turned his attention back to the library door. Stiles fidgeted, frustrated that human hearing didn’t let him eavesdrop. He peered through the little window set into the door, but he couldn’t see Allison or Danny. He decided to try and get a little closer. He hurried in before Isaac could stop him.

He slid in through the door and hurried into the stacks, walking between shelves of books, listening. He ducked into the next row along, still listening hard and now he could hear the voices. He snuck closer. Once he was close enough to hear, he dropped down into a crouch so he wouldn’t be noticed through the books. Danny was currently saying something about having animal attributes and how there was scientific proof that some people shouldn’t have the same rights and freedoms as others.

Stiles wanted to push the shelves over onto them. He couldn’t believe Danny would say things like that. Danny was nice. And he’d been so helpful about getting the pro-werewolf message out there. Listening to his words now, it felt like a deep betrayal.

“Exactly,” Allison said, as Danny finished. “Werewolves are simply different from humans.”

“Actually,” Danny replied, “I was paraphrasing an eighteenth century writer who thought he had scientific proof that black people were born to be slaves.”

Stiles’ anger faded into guilt. Of course Danny wouldn’t say something like that about werewolves. Stiles should have known better.
“That’s not a fair comparison,” Allison said.

“I’m sure I could find others,” Danny said, “given a bit of time to look up the references. I’m pretty sure there were people who argued that women shouldn’t be allowed to vote because thinking about politics might make their uterus shrink. People always make up ridiculous stories to support their prejudices.”

“It’s not prejudice when it’s true. Werewolves are part animal.”

“We’re all animals, when you get down to basic biology.”

“You know what I mean. They grow fangs. They lose control and attack people.”

“I haven’t seen any of them lose control,” Danny pointed out. Stiles sat down, leaned against the shelves, and smiled a little.

“It’s just a matter of time until one of them does,” Allison said. “It’s inevitable. It’s in their nature.”

“Is there actually any evidence of that?” Danny asked.

“What are you talking about? There are loads of stories about werewolves attacking people.”

“Anecdotes aren’t evidence.”

“They murdered my grandfather!”

“And by all accounts, he murdered dozens of werewolves,” Danny countered. “Has anyone ever done any studies of attack rates compared to population sizes and stuff like that, to prove whether werewolves are more violent than humans?”

“I... I’m sure someone must have.”

“But you’ve never actually seen any evidence to support your beliefs about werewolves being inherently violent?”

“Someone will have done studies before the government tried to imprison them all.”

“OK,” said Danny. “Find one. Find a study or a statistical analysis or something from a reputable source that provides solid evidence for werewolf violence, and I’ll listen to you.”


She stormed out. Stiles smiled a little and, from his position on the floor said, “Nicely done.”

“Stilinski?”

Some books were pulled out from the shelf and then Danny peered through at him.

“How much of that did you hear?” Danny asked.

“The last few minutes. What happens if she does find evidence?”

“I guess I’ll just have to sign up with the hunters if that happens.” Danny said it lightly, joking, but this wasn’t a subject Stiles wanted to joke about. When he saw Stiles’ face, Danny asked, “Do you think it’s likely to?”
“You know what they say about lies, damn lies and statistics. Some anti-werewolf mathematician has probably managed to publish a waffle of numbers designed to confuse people into believing that werewolves are a statistically proven menace.”

“If that happens, we’ll give the numbers to Lydia to unravel.”

“You really think she won’t find anything?”

“I think any evidence she manages to dig up will be flimsy as hell and we can get some posts for the website by poking holes in it.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Stiles scrambled to his feet. “Do you want to join us for lunch? Brett brought cupcakes.”

The werewolves were still eating food from home in case of poisoning, but no one said that the food had to be a deprivation.

***

“I think whatever Danny said to her pissed her off,” Jackson told Stiles that afternoon. “She spent most of free period looking through the internet for accounts of werewolf attacks. She was trying to put together a list of every single death by werewolf on record. She’s gone over to Lydia’s house to go through some statistics and stuff.”

“But she’s not said anything else about attacking the werewolves at school?”

“She was talking about percentages of population, last time I saw her.” He made a face at that.

“I guess if she’s busy with math, she won’t be plotting murder.”

“No, but I might if I have to listen to it much longer.”

“Just stick with it,” Stiles said. “And see if you can talk to her parents somehow; you might be able to feel them out and see if they let slip anything.”

“Because they’re bound to spill all the details of their secret plots to a teenager they’ve just met,” said Jackson, tone dripping with sarcasm.

“I’m not saying they’ll tell you everything, but they might give away a few hints, particularly if you let them think they’re going to recruit you as a hunter when you turn eighteen.”

“If that doesn’t work, I’m I supposed to tie Allison up and stick needles under her nails?” Jackson asked.

“Just keep being friendly. I know that’s a foreign concept to you, but if you stick around, you might get lucky.”

“If I spend too much time sniffing around Allison, lucky’s the last thing I’ll get. Lydia’s the jealous type.”

“Your love life is not my problem. Just get information.”

Stiles headed back to the jeep and back to the pack.

***
Stiles froze, turning towards the unexpected voice. Lydia Martin was standing outside the library door, actually looking at him. Since the first moment they’d met, she’d basically acted like he hadn’t existed, and now here she was actually talking to him. It was rather unnerving.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Get in here,” Lydia said. “We need you to help with the math.”

Stiles walked slowly, expecting a trap, because, really, when was the last time Lydia Martin had ever needed anyone else’s help with math? He peered in through the library door and saw Danny and Allison sitting at one of the tables, scraps and notes scattered between them. The fact that Danny was there made him relax a little. The fact that Allison was glaring at him with undisguised hatred made it only a very little. Lydia put a hand on Stiles’ arm and towed him over to the table.

“We’ve been going over the calculations,” Lydia said, sitting Stiles down at the table, across from Allison, “but getting accurate numbers is a nightmare and Danny seems to think you have a knack for research.”

“Not that we can trust anything he might find,” Allison said.

“Like you’re a paragon of impartiality?” Stiles said.

“Quiet now,” Lydia said. “The figures we’re going to use for comparison are the human homicide rates. We can get statistics for that. There are published homicide rates per hundred thousand humans by state and the national averages for most countries in the world, per year. So we can see how werewolves stack up against those. The problem is, coming up with figures for the werewolves. There are no accurate figures.”

“We have the list of humans killed by werewolves since my grandpa,” Allison said.

Lydia ignored her, saying, “I think the best we can hope to do is come up with a range. We can get estimates of figures being as generous as reasonably possible to the werewolves to come up with the lower bound,” she looked at Stiles as she said this, then she turned to Allison and said, “and then we can make estimates as harsh as reasonably possible for the upper bound. We can then be confident that the rate of death per capita is somewhere within that range. We can start refining our estimates from there and do some comparisons against the human figures.”

She dug in the notes on the paper and found a list. She handed it over to Stiles. He saw a list of names, starting with Gerard Argent.

“We need to know how many homicides werewolves have committed,” Lydia said. “We have a list of all humans killed by werewolves from the hunter records, but for fair comparison, we need to know which were justifiable homicide, or would have counted as justifiable had all participants been human. We know that some werewolves killed humans who were trying to kill them. So for the generous estimates, Stiles, I need you to identify which cases on that list were claimed as self-defence.”

Stiles looked at the list. He saw Gerard Argent on it and, further down, Kate Argent. He said, “And how are we counting acts where werewolves killed humans who were known to have killed loads of werewolves and who were likely to try again? I know Kate Argent murdered more than a dozen werewolves in a single attack, including a baby and a human.”

“That’s a lie!” Allison said.
Stiles ignored her and continued, “Gerard Argent ambushed a group of people at peace talks and killed a bunch of werewolves plus at least one human, the lover of the werewolf who then killed him. Their deaths might not technically count as self-defence, but it’s hardly the same as the murder of innocent people.”

“Make a note of what you find out,” Lydia said, “and we can take into account what’s relevant when we make the lower bound estimate.”

Allison looked like she wanted to jump over the library table and set Stiles on fire, “My aunt is not a murderer.”

“I’ve seen the graves,” Stiles said.

“Exactly! How do you know she’s the one who killed them? The werewolves are monsters. They’ll kill their own kind. They could have killed them themselves and just told you it was my aunt.”

“This isn’t helping,” Lydia said, waving her arms between them. “Remember the goal of this: to find upper and lower limits. Stiles is working on the lower limit. Allison, you are going to look up records of animal attack cases that might have been caused by werewolves prior to their discovery. We don’t know how many deaths werewolves caused that weren’t treated as murder because of claw marks and stuff.”

“What about me?” Danny asked. He’d been sitting watching the entire exchange.

“You are going to figure out how many werewolves there are in the United States. It’s all very well coming up with number of deaths, but we need to know population size to compare rates. Once we’ve got the numbers, we can start comparisons. Got it?”

She started gathering up her notes. Stiles took his list and walked towards the library door. He had class to get to. He paused and looked back, seeing Allison sitting there, seeped in hatred and the certainty that her family’s cause was just. He had an idea. It was an idea he was absolutely certain Peter and Derek and everyone else in that pack would hate.
Stiles got more information out of Lydia about her estimates. He had the longest conversation with her that he’d ever had in his life. Not so long ago that would have made him incredibly excited. Right now, he was more excited by the numbers she was talking about. They had a long discussion over lunch about whether or not they could even fairly consider the killings after Gerard Argent’s death. As soon as that happened, they were effectively in a state of war. It wasn’t a fair comparison between wartime casualties and peacetime murders.

“But how are we supposed to come up with figures for murder by werewolves before werewolves were even known?” Lydia asked.

“Well, we can search for information on any arrested murderers who were discovered to be werewolves later. We can look up unsolved murder figures and try and guess how many might fit werewolf patterns, and do what Allison’s doing with animal attack deaths. That should be enough to get us started, right?”

Stiles was hoping somewhat that he’d find no evidence. One possible explanation for why no one had figured out about werewolves sooner was that deaths from werewolves were so rare they hadn’t been noticeable. That would allow them to put the lower bound at zero for Lydia’s estimates. That would be a hell of a victory. He doubted it would convince Allison or anyone else allied to the hunters, but it might help others believe.

The interesting thing about this whole situation was that Allison was trying so hard to find the numbers. She wanted to prove the werewolves were violent monsters. She was putting all this effort into finding records of death. Would she really be doing that if she was in the middle of some other plot? Or was this all a distraction? Had she gone along with this notion because she wanted him to be too busy to work out what she was really up to?

Stiles divided his free time between hunting for information for Lydia’s calculation and searching through the books for information on poisons that worked on werewolves and, more importantly, how to counteract them. He spent an evening in the kitchen at his dad’s house, brewing up potions from the supplies in the emissary box. The kitchen stank by the time he was done and he wasn’t entirely sure his concoctions were safe, but it was better to have them than nothing. If someone’s life was on the line, he’d risk them.

Two potions were specific defences against particular types of wolfsbane, one counteracted mistletoe, and two were general treatments against poison but he wasn’t sure if those two were going to be any use for werewolves. The book description made it sound like they were intended for humans. He poured them into drinks bottles and put them in the back of his jeep. His dad watched the whole process.

“You really think you’re some kind of wizard now?” he asked, watching as Stiles tried to scrub potion residue out of what had been their best non-stick saucepan. He might need to give the saucepan up for lost.

“I think I’m learning to be,” Stiles said. “I’ve got a long way to go but it doesn’t take me hours to light a candle anymore.”

His dad picked up one of the books, flicking through it.

“All this stuff,” he said, “it really works?”
“So far, I mean, it’s going to be a long time before I’m ready to do some of the tougher spells in there, but I’ll get there.”

“The school, you really did magic to protect the children?” his dad asked. Stiles remembered all his denials of that fact, and the subsequent conversation with Deaton.

“Yeah,” he said. “There were some circumstances that helped me out, but yes, I did magic to shield the kids.”

He wasn’t sure what he expected. An argument? Disbelief? His dad telling him this stuff was too dangerous and that he should leave it the hell alone?

Instead, his dad took the saucepan from his hands and set it down on the counter. He pulled Stiles into a hug.

“I’m proud of you,” he said.

***

His idea never vanished. Stiles kept trying to dismiss it from his mind, telling himself how stupid it was, that Peter would never agree to it. He was so sure of that he hadn’t even told anyone else about it. But the more he tried to dismiss the idea, the more it kept sneaking into his thoughts. Every time he sat down with Lydia, Allison and Danny to discuss the figures, the idea came back. Allison was determined that every word against her family was a lie, that all they’d done was protect innocent people from violent brutes. The more he heard her argue, the more he wanted to rub her face in the truth.

He sat out behind the school in a quiet space, took out his phone and sent Peter a text.

*I have an idea you’ll hate.*

*What?* Peter asked.

*I want to bring someone into the pack territory to show them the graves.*

Naturally, there followed the question Stiles didn’t want to answer. *Who?*

He typed the name and deleted it three times. Finally he sent the text, *You don’t want to know.*

There was a long pause. Stiles was fairly certain Peter knew exactly who he was referring to. After a couple of minutes, the phone started ringing. Stiles answered nervously, “Yes?”

“You want to bring her into our territory?” Peter demanded.

“I want to show her the graves. I want to tell her what you told me about what her aunt did.”

“You think that will do some good?”

“Probably not, I’m just sick of her talking about how it’s all lies and that they’ve never done anything wrong and that her family were heroes who defended people and saved lives and were slaughtered for protecting humans from rampaging monsters. I doubt this will convince her otherwise, but I want to tell her. I want to try.”

“This could be what they were planning? An invitation into our territory could be the opportunity they were looking for.”
“I’m not suggesting we bring her into the house and let her make herself at home. All I’m suggesting is we take her to the graves and then back again. She can’t do that much damage in the woods.”

There was a long silence.

“It would be interesting to talk to her,” Peter said at last.

“When you say ‘talk to her’,” Stiles said, “do you mean ‘kill her slowly in excruciating ways’? Because I’m not going to be a party to that.”

“I meant talk,” Peter said. “Give her the invitation. But only bring her if she agrees willingly. I don’t want her parents to accuse us of kidnap and use this as an excuse to attack.”

“OK. I’ll talk to her.”

“Stiles, remember you are entitled to make agreements as the messenger of the pack. Beware of what you say; I will be held by your decisions. Make sure you’re right about this and don’t promise anything that will put the pack at risk.”

“No pressure then.”

Stiles hung up. He knew that this was risky. He knew that it would probably achieve nothing. He also knew Peter had only agreed because he was the one who’d asked. He hoped this was going to end in disaster.

It probably wouldn’t end in much of anything. He fully expected Allison to call him an idiot and refuse to even discuss the notion. Even so, he went to find her. She was in the lunchroom with Jackson and Lydia, presumably talking about something other than math because Jackson appeared to be paying attention. Stiles walked over to them.

Allison glared, “What the hell do you want?”

“I want to show you something,” Stiles answered.

“What?”

“It’s not something I can show you here. I want to take you after school and show you it.”

She laughed, “Why would I go anywhere with you? You’d probably end up taking me directly into werewolf territory.”

“That’s exactly where I want to take you. The thing I want to show you is inside their territory.”

Allison looked at him like he was insane.

“Why would I willingly walk into werewolf territory where they can kill me?”

“They won’t kill you,” Stiles said.

She made a disbelieving noise. Stiles pulled the token of authority out from under his shirt.

“Do you know what this is?” Stiles asked. Allison looked at it.

“The pack’s symbol. It means you’re allied with them.”

“It’s more than that,” Stiles said. “It means I can make agreements on behalf of the pack that Peter
will be held to.” He saw Jackson sit up a little straighter at that. “I can promise you that Peter won’t kill you. As long as you don’t try to kill anyone in his pack, that is. You come, you see what I want you to see, you go home. As long as you don’t attack anyone in the pack, I promise no one will hurt you.”

“I’m expected to just believe you?”

“I have no reason to lie to you.”

“Except the fact you work with monsters.”

“They’re not monsters. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

It was somewhat reassuring that Allison was hesitant. It meant that this wasn’t part of her scheme, that she wasn’t manipulating him into bringing her to the pack. Or she was a really good actor.

“I just thought you might be interested in knowing more than the propaganda you’ve been spoon fed for the last few years,” Stiles said. “You seemed to have been interested in learning the truth.” He nodded towards Lydia. “Come find me after school if you change your mind.”

He walked away. He guessed this would make the rest of the pack happy. It had been a longshot anyway.

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Stiles was astonished to see Allison waiting for him by the jeep at the end of the day. She was staring through the back window at the bottles.

“What the hell is that lot?” she asked.

Stiles decided to go with honesty. “Antidotes for poison. Can’t be too careful when there’s a dangerous fanatic in the school.”

“Fanatic?”

“Sorry, I know you prefer ‘hunter’,” Stiles said, giving a sarcastic smile.

Allison looked at him, and then down at the bottles in the jeep, “You think I’m planning on poisoning them?”

“I don’t know what you’re planning, but the last time I was in a school with anti-werewolf fanatics, I spent a week in hospital. I don’t want to take chances.”

“Are you comparing me to those terrorists?”

“You, your dad, your mom, you all want to murder werewolves. That’s exactly what those bombers wanted. That makes you the same.”

“Hunters don’t murder children!”

“Your aunt did.”

“That’s a lie!”

“Come with me,” Stiles said. “Let me show you.”
“If this turns out to be trap, I will take you down.”

“And you wonder why I think you might attack people.”

She got into the passenger seat. Stiles got in and started driving. It was somewhat terrifying to have her sitting next to him, even though he was fairly confident she wouldn’t try to murder him while he was driving. This was a really stupid idea. It wasn’t like she’d believe him. So why did he think it worth bringing her into the pack territory? There were at least a million ways that this could go wrong.

But still he drove.

They reached the edge of the territory. Stiles could see the bus driving away as he parked. He walked into the trees and saw Isaac standing just inside the boundary, waiting. Allison glared at him. She stopped just outside the boundary line and kept glaring.

“Let me guess,” she said, “I cross the line and he kills me?”

“I don’t want to kill you,” Isaac said.

“Why should I believe that?”

“Because I’m pretty sure he wants to date you,” Stiles said. Allison looked like she wanted to throw up. “Isaac, maybe you should go back to the house?”

Isaac nodded. He walked away. Stiles lingered, crossing the boundary slowly. He turned and waited for Allison. She still waited on the other side of the line. Stiles pulled out the wooden token and held it visibly.

“I promise,” Stiles said, “unless you try to hurt one of the pack, no one will try to hurt you. I make this promise as a representative of the alpha of the Hale pack. He will be bound to uphold it.”

Allison hesitated a moment longer then said, “If you’re lying, my parents will destroy all of you.”

She stepped across the line. She looked at Stiles like she expected him to leap at her the second she did so. Stiles rolled his eyes and started walking, slowly so she could keep up even while she eyed the trees for signs of danger every step of the way. It was irritating, but Stiles knew it would be highly hypocritical of him to complain about it, particularly given that he carried poison antidotes to school out of paranoia of her. That just made him more annoyed. He could almost see why Deaton had been tempted to put both sides in time out corners to try and calm things down because right now everyone was so tense that it was inevitable someone would snap.

He just hoped no one snapped on his watch.

He stayed clear of the house and turned off the main path towards the graves. Allison hesitated, looking like she thought he was leading her into a trap.

“If you want to carry on going,” Stiles said, “be my guest. But if you follow that path, you’ll end up at a whole house full of werewolves. Your choice.”

Allison looked like she was thinking it over, probably trying to decide if this was a trick, then she followed him into the trees. This path was much less commonly trodden, but it was still easily identified. It was narrow in places though, he was forced to let Allison walk behind him. He tried not to imagine getting stabbed in the back every time that happened. It was very hard not to imagine that.
He was almost relieved when the trees thinned out and he stepped into the clearing. Spread beneath the trees were the graves, some stone, some rough wooden markers. Stiles had come here with Derek and he’d gone over the details with Peter before his first negotiation with the Argents; Peter had wanted him to know as much as possible in case in gave him an advantage. Since he’d come up with this ridiculous plan, he’d done his best to remember it all.

“Why did you bring me here?” Allison asked.

Stiles went over to one of the markers, “This is Malia, Peter’s daughter. She would have been our age. You know, if she hadn’t been murdered. By your aunt.”

“How do you know it was her?” Allison asked. “How do you even know she was our age? Because they told you?”

“Look at the grave!” Malia’s was one of the stone markers, probably carved with name and dates, and obvious grown with moss over years. “Look at the dates. This grave was put here long before I ever thought about crossing the boundary. And look at this one!” That grave was the one Derek had said belonged to the wife of one of his cousins. There was a second name and pair of dates under the first, belonging to her son, the dates marking the lifespan of six months.

“You don’t know it was Kate who did this,” Allison said. “Werewolves are violent. They could have done this themselves.”

“I’ve been here a couple of months now, living in close quarters with them, and the only times I’ve seen the werewolves act violent was when one of the pack was threatened. Like when your dad nearly shot Derek in the head.”

“What?”

Stiles didn’t want to go into the details of that particular incident, given that her dad had been trying to keep the werewolves from taking him back to the pack at the time, so Stiles pressed on, walking further into the gravesite.

“These people were all killed by humans, by hunters. Maybe you don’t want to believe your aunt was the one going around killing babies and human pack members, so fine. I only have Peter’s word on that, and Derek’s, and every werewolf who I’ve asked about it, who have all been extremely consistent in their story. But you’re right, I don’t have any evidence to prove who killed these people. But you can’t deny that they’re dead. They were killed at the height of the violence, by humans. You’ve been fed propaganda about werewolves, but the truth is that they were slaughtered by humans. Some of them fought back but really, can you blame them when they just watched their children get murdered?”

“I guess fighting for their young is a strong animal instinct,” Allison said.

“It’s also a strong human instinct,” said Peter, stepping out of the trees. Stiles hadn’t noticed he was there until he spoke and it seemed Allison hadn’t either.

She spun round, startled, and suddenly there was a knife in her hand. Where the hell had she pulled that from?

“Don’t come any closer,” she said. She held the knife like she knew how to use it but there was a tremor in her voice.

“I only came to talk,” Peter said. “Stiles has promised you the safety of our territory so long as you don’t harm any of the pack. You might want to be careful where you wave that knife.”
He smiled in that cruel way he had, like he was hoping she would cut him with the knife so he had an excuse to claw her open. Allison seemed to see it too. She kept her tight hold on the knife, but she didn’t make a move to use it.

“Why did you bring me here?” Allison asked.

“Stiles seems to believe you’re worth talking to.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning he wanted to talk to you,” Peter said, looking at her like she stupid and letting his sarcasm show. “He seems to think that you might be interested in a conversation about things like evidence. He said something about trying to calculate rates of violence.”

“And you listened to him?” Allison asked.

“Of course. Stiles can talk some nonsense at times...”

“Hey!” Stiles protested. Peter shot him a smile that was almost affectionate.

“... But I’ve found he’s usually worth listening to,” Peter finished.

“So now you’ve shown me the graves, now what?”

“Now you will decide if you want to listen or not. You’ve spent your entire life hearing lies and half-truths and twisted propaganda. Have you ever listened to a werewolf?”

“So talk,” Allison said.

Peter nodded. He took his time. He walked over to his daughter’s gravestone and rested a hand on the stone. He stood there a moment, visibly gathering himself to speak. Stiles guessed this was at least partially an act; he wanted to show that he could feel emotion. He wanted Allison to feel sorry for him, to see him as a person who’d lost everything. When Peter started talking, Stiles became more confident that it was an act, but he also wondered if the act wasn’t really the truth. Maybe the strong, hard persona that he showed the rest of the time was just as much a façade, just one put on for the sake of the pack instead of for a hunter’s daughter.

Peter talked about the war, about the violence, about the way that anyone even suspected of being a werewolf was attacked. He told about how they were outraged, how werewolves were discovered and had their names plastered up on billboards and printed in newspapers, so that they would be ostracised from their jobs and attacked in the streets. Peter had been living in an apartment in downtown Beacon Hills, until his landlord had stood in the building doorway with a shotgun and told him to never come back. Peter had been forced to abandon most of his possessions and fall back to the house in the woods where his sister lived.

Other werewolves did the same. Those that had pack outside of town went to them, and the others, those who didn’t have packs to call their own, came to them for protection. And all the while, there was bloodshed. When the werewolves tried to protest, there was violence and death. They were attacked, beaten, and killed. Those that survived were terrified.

Then a young woman came to them, the daughter of the hunter whose death had started all this. Kate Argent had come to the pack, crying at the chaos. She’d told them that this wasn’t the way any of them had meant it. The hunters hadn’t planned for the secret to get out because they’d known this would be the result. She talked about the code that they were supposed to follow, that she claimed to believe in, that hunters should only target werewolves who were a threat to human lives. She sobbed
about the death of a werewolf child she’d apparently seen.

“She told her tale to one of my pack and got him to believe her, got him to vouch for her. He brought her to my sister, Talia, and she listened. Talia gathered the pack to talk about how we could end the cycle of violence, wanting to give the human a message to take back to her fellow hunters, to try and make peace. She wanted a second attempt at the peace talks that Gerard Argent had turned into an ambush. But it turned out Kate took after her father. She had snuck weapons into our territory, pressurised canisters filled with a wolfsbane substance. She was invited into our house to talk peace, and she killed everyone inside. There were humans who were part of the pack, not many but a couple. When they didn’t react to the poison, Kate slit their throats. That’s your legacy, Argent, the murder of entire families: humans and werewolves, adults and children. Your aunt didn’t care. Your parents don’t care.”

“You’re lying,” Allison said, but without the earlier anger. There were tears in her eyes. She shook her head in denial, but there could be no doubt she’d heard, even if she didn’t want to listen.

“You’re lying,” Allison said, but without the earlier anger. There were tears in her eyes. She shook her head in denial, but there could be no doubt she’d heard, even if she didn’t want to listen.

“Your grandfather started this war when he attacked a group gathered for a peaceful summit. Your aunt escalated it when she slaughtered children. Now your parents are doing all they can to continue it.” Peter tapped his fingers on the stone of his daughter’s grave. “You need to decide if you want to be like them.”

“I’m going to leave now,” Allison said. She turned, looking for the path they’d come down. Derek was running down it, so Allison brought her knife up, looking ready to fight.

Derek slowed to a halt. Stiles was still trying to calculate if he could stop Allison from stabbing Derek without getting stabbed himself, when Derek spoke: “There are hunters at the boundary. A lot of hunters.”
Derek had spent most of his life afraid of the hunters, but this felt different, more urgent. There was a hunter inside pack territory and a whole army of them at their borders. The pack were already rousing, ready for a fight, except for the children who were being herded into the shelter beneath the house with a couple of adults to act as last-line protectors.

Peter didn’t seem too concerned. He turned to the Argent girl and said, “Let’s get you back to your father before he decides to slaughter what’s left of my family.”

Allison looked at him in surprise, “You’re just going to let me go?”

“I have no interest in starting a bloodbath,” Peter said. He gestured towards the path and they started walking. He seemed amazingly calm given the heavily armed hunters here to slaughter them.

“Stiles,” Derek said, “go back to the house until this is over.”

“What?” Stiles asked.

“If they start shooting, you can’t heal. You’ll be safer back at the house.”

It was such an obvious precaution, Derek didn’t understand why Stiles didn’t immediately act on it. There were hunters at the border, people who shot first and considered it their right to slaughter werewolves. They weren’t likely to double check whether the person they were shooting at was actually a werewolf. Some of them might even want to shoot Stiles as punishment for him joining the pack and then claim it was an accident later.

“Hunters don’t shoot humans,” Allison said.

“Are you naïve or just stupid?” Derek asked. She bristled. He could smell her anger and it fed his own. This girl acted so righteous, despite her family’s history of slaughter.

“I’m not going anywhere with you without Stiles,” Allison said.

“We’re taking you to the edge of our territory,” Derek said.

“So you claim.”

Peter held up a hand to stop Derek saying what he wanted to say. He still looked calm, but he hadn’t stopped walking at a fast pace. Derek could pick of traces of anxiety in his scent, which slipped out despite Peter’s efforts to present a calm face.

“I don’t intend for there to be any violence today,” Peter said. “Stiles can stay with us. But,” he turned to Stiles and spoke sternly, “if they start shooting, you are to run back to the house as fast as you can. No excuses, no delays. Understand?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said and it didn’t register as a lie. Not that that gave Derek any confidence that Stiles would actually get out of danger when things went to hell. He made a point of walking between him and the Argent girl, just in case.

They quickly moved through the woods, along the main path to the boundary. Derek listened out,
hearing voices up ahead and the movement of people in the outskirts of the wood. Peter slowed to a halt.

“The boundary’s a little further on,” he said to Allison.

“You expect me to trust you and just walk on alone?” she asked.

“Your father and his friends will probably be carrying wolfsbane bullets,” Peter said. “I prefer not being poisoned.”

Derek was listening, trying to hear beyond the conversation at his side to the voices on the boundary. A familiar voice was talking, giving orders about deployments of men and getting reports over radio of where people were.

“Your father is a couple of hundred yards in front of us,” Derek said.

The trees were dense enough that they couldn’t see anything beyond faint movement on the other side of trunks and branches, but Derek was sure about the voice. He’d heard it in person more than once, and he’d heard it enough on TV denouncing the bombing while he’d been watching over Stiles in the hospital.

“Dad!” Allison yelled.

“Allison?” Argent yelled back from the direction of the boundary. “Have those bastards hurt you?”

“I’m fine.”

Peter gestured towards the sound of the voice and Allison started moving towards her father. Derek expected her to break into a run to leave the territory, but she took her time, picking her way carefully and checking each step, as though she expected to stumble into a trap. Her clothes were easier to spot through the trees than the camouflage gear the hunters were dressed in, so he could watch her progress. After a minute that seemed to last forever, she broke into a run.

Derek remained where he was, listening.

“Thank god. Oh, thank god,” he heard Argent say.

“I’m fine, Dad.”

Then Argent was on the radio, calling back his men, getting them to fall back and receiving confirmation that his orders were being obeyed. He made a comment about how he’d hoped a show of force would get the pack to release Allison, but how he hadn’t expected it to be this easy.

“I don’t think they planned on holding me prisoner,” Allison said.

“Let’s talk about this at home. They might be listening,” Argent said. That might have been the most intelligent thing he’d ever said. Derek shared a look with Peter, who was clearly also listening in.

“What?” Stiles asked. “What’s going on?”

He’d caught the look but he wasn’t able to eavesdrop the way the werewolves could. Derek reached out a hand and put it over Stiles’ mouth. Stiles glared and ducked aside, away from the hand, but he took the hint. He went quiet.

Derek listened to Argent rounding up his men, dismissing them. Argent was the last to go. As car engines drove off into the distance, Argent called into the woods, obviously wanting the werewolves
to hear: “Stay away from my daughter! If you lay a hand on her, I’ll burn this whole forest to the ground!”

Then his car drove away. Derek waited, listening hard, in case this was a trick, in case Argent and the others were trying to get them to lower their guard. After a few minutes, while Stiles got more fidgety and annoying by the second, Derek crept closer to the boundary, alert for danger, listening for signs of hunters. He didn’t start to breathe easily until he got right up to the boundary line and was certain that no one had lingered.

He made his way back to Peter and Stiles.

“They’re gone,” Derek said. He looked at Stiles and said, “Well that was a needless risk that accomplished nothing.”

“I didn’t know that her dad would show up with an army,” Stiles said.

“What did you think would happen? Or did you even think?”

“I thought,” Stiles said, “that we could have a chance to reason with someone and maybe prevent another generation of uber-fanatic hunters going around murdering every werewolf they see. I thought that if there was a chance of getting the daughter of the most influential hunter in the area to listen then it was worth taking it, however slim it might be.”

“And you took it upon yourself to bring a hunter into our territory? Where she could hurt us? This is what they do, Stiles! They lure you in with smiles and a pretty face and make you think that maybe, just maybe, this one’s different. And then they kill everyone you care about!” Derek’s voice rose to a yell. He couldn’t control it. It wasn’t Allison he was seeing in his mind right now. It was another hunter, who’d acted like she could be made to see reason. Memories of Kate that Derek had tried to keep buried all came surging back.

Stiles started to say something but Derek was hearing the echo of screams in his memory, the cries of pain as his family, his pack, succumbed to wolfsbane poison from Kate’s weapons.

Derek cut off whatever Stiles might have said, “You put everyone at risk, Stiles! All because you had to play the hero. You think that you can just stroll in here and say a few words to the right people and suddenly everything will be OK. Well the world doesn’t work like that. There are people who would kill us all without a second’s hesitation and you unilaterally decided to bring one of them here! You don’t get to take those risks with our lives, Stiles!”

Derek only stopped yelling when he took a step towards Stiles and Stiles flinched away. A hint of fear touched his nostrils. Stiles was afraid of him.

That thought froze the anger inside Derek.

“Stiles asked my permission,” Peter said, quietly.

“Which I would have told you if you’d let me get a word in edgewise!” Stiles snapped. He moved closer to Derek, crowding in and getting in his face, angry now, as though that anger could undo the earlier flinch.

“I...” Derek didn’t know what to say to that. He wanted to apologise to Stiles for scaring him, but he was still furious about the fact that Allison had been here. And Peter had allowed it? He really should have known better. He’d nearly been killed in Kate’s attack.

“You know what, Derek,” Stiles went on, “screw you! I didn’t rush into this and I made sure Peter
was OK with it so if you want to yell at someone, yell at him! I’m going home.”

Stiles turned and walked away from Derek. But he didn’t walk towards the house. He walked in the opposite direction, across the boundary and towards his jeep. It took Derek a heartbeat to realise that when Stiles said ‘home’ he wasn’t referring to the pack.

Derek just stood there, frozen in the wake of his own stupidity, as he heard the jeep door slam and the engine start up. Peter was watching him as though this whole exchange had amused him. Derek fought the urge to punch that smirk off Peter’s face.

“I knew bringing Allison here would be a risk,” Peter said. “That’s why I kept her away from the rest of the pack and kept her in the open, so that the only risk would be to me.”

“And Stiles,” Derek said. Because Stiles was no match for a hunter. He might have a magical spark of talent, but Allison could have slit him open with that knife and Stiles wouldn’t have stood a chance.

And now Stiles was out there, where he could protect him with Argent decided to go after Stiles for this act. Why did Stiles have to take such risks? The image of Stiles beneath the ruins of the elementary school came rushing back.

“I wouldn’t have agreed if I’d thought Stiles was in serious danger,” Peter said.

“She could have been another Kate. She still could be.”

“But it’s a good thing Stiles is too in love with you to notice her, isn’t it?”

Derek felt his heart race for a few moments at Peter’s words, but then reality pressed in. Whatever Stiles might have felt for him, it was obvious Derek had ruined that. Stiles had flinched. He’d reacted like Derek was a threat.

Derek wanted to just collapse and let the earth swallow him.

“You know,” Peter said, “Stiles has heard quite a lot of the story of Kate, but he hasn’t heard all of it. Maybe you should tell him the parts he hasn’t heard. It will help him understand why you reacted so badly to his bringing Allison here.”

“Or make him hate me even more.”

“I doubt that boy could ever hate you. When he comes back, tell him about Kate, apologise for your temper, and then while you’re down on your knees begging for his forgiveness, do a few other things that can be accomplished from that position.” Peter gestured towards Derek’s crotch area and Derek realised exactly what Peter was implying. Derek avoided looking at his uncle.

“Assuming he ever wants to talk to me again after this.”

“Of course he will. Talk to him when he comes back.”

Derek drew a breath to compose himself, then said, “You’re right. I can apologise to him when he comes back. He has to come back; he’s still bound to serve the pack.”

“Actually, he isn’t,” Peter said. “He hasn’t been for some time.”

Derek just looked at his uncle in confusion, “What?”

“I released Stiles from service after he saved the children at the school.”
“He’s...”

“He’s part of this pack by choice not obligation.”

“But that means he might decide not to come back.”

Peter shook his head, saying, “I really doubt that.”

But Derek just looked out through the trees, towards the road where Stiles’ jeep was no longer parked. What if Stiles decided to just be done with the pack because of the way Derek had acted?

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Stiles slammed the door of his jeep. He stalked into the house and slammed that door, just for good measure. It did very little to relieve his feelings. He couldn’t believe Derek had just yelled at him like that. Derek had yelled at him about putting the pack at risk, which while technically true wasn’t really his fault. He just made an easier target than Peter.

“Stiles?” his dad emerged from the study, presumably drawn by all the door slamming.

“Hi, dad.”

“Stiles, what’s wrong?”

“Derek. Derek’s what’s wrong. He yelled at me and there was absolutely no need for that because even if the Allison thing had been my idea, Peter signed off on it so Derek should have yelled at him really.” Except Derek had no way to know that Peter had agreed to it, and so he’d been fairly justified in believing that Stiles had been responsible for the army of hunters that had been minutes away from invading his territory and probably shooting anyone they came across. And given everyone Derek had lost, it was hardly surprising he’d freaked out.

He’d been scared. He’d been terrified. Of course he’d lashed out. And Stiles had been too busy being annoyed at being wrongly accused, even though it had been his idea, to see how scared Derek had been. He’d jumped straight to yelling instead of seeing what was really going on.

“Oh god,” Stiles said.

His dad was suddenly right in front of him, a hand on his arm, looking at him with concern.

“Stiles, what happened?”

“Derek and I just got into a screaming match. I need to apologise. I need to go back there.”

His dad kept hold of his arm, the comforting touch shifting to keep Stiles’ from racing back the way he’d come.

“Stiles, take a moment and calm down. Unless you think Peter will be launching an attack to drag you back to the pack?”

Stiles shook his head, “It’s not like he has authority to do that anymore even if he wanted to.”

He stopped. He caught his dad’s expression, the look of confused surprise. He realised what he’d just said, and the implications behind it. He really wasn’t thinking so well right now.

“Stiles, what do you mean by that?” his dad asked. The secret was out now. Stiles couldn’t take it back.
“So, hypothetically,” he said, “it’s possible that Peter might have released me from the agreement to serve the pack.”

“When?”

“After the bombing.”

His dad’s eyes narrowed, “So all those times you went to the pack over the past couple of weeks?”

“Were entirely voluntary,” Stiles said.

“And you didn’t tell me this, because?”

“Because I figured if you knew I didn’t have to go back you might not ever let me go back.” Stiles avoided looking at his dad’s face because the glimpses he saw there showed enough concern.

“You’re no longer a prisoner of the werewolf pack,” Stiles’ dad said. It wasn’t a question, but Stiles answered anyway.

“No.”

“You’re under no obligation to return to them.”

“No.”

“They have no authority over you at all?”

“No. I mean, technically I have authority over some of them because I have this.” He pulled Peter’s token out from under his shirt. “I can speak for the alpha under certain circumstances.”

His dad was looking at him, all serious and concerned.

“When were you going to tell me about being free?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I just didn’t want you to try and keep me away from the pack.” ‘Away from Derek’ was left unspoken but he was fairly sure his dad heard those words just as clearly.

“I’ve resigned myself to the fact that you’re going to be a part of all this. Now, tell me everything that happened with this argument.”

“I should go back and apologise.”

“Stiles, just tell me what happened. Please. It won’t hurt if you delay your apology by a few minutes while you explain things to me and it will give him a chance to cool off too. You said he was yelling?”

“Yeah.” Stiles went into the living room with his dad and explained what had happened, starting with his idea to show Allison the graves, explaining how the hunters had shown up, and how Derek had yelled at him.

“I yelled back,” Stiles said, “and then just stormed off but he must have been hurting. He must have been scared when he saw the hunters.”

“Fear makes us all do stupid things,” his dad said.

“I should apologise for yelling.” Stiles still thought that Derek had been in the wrong to yell at him,
especially since Peter had agreed to the visit, but he couldn’t stay mad at Derek. Not knowing how much he was hurting.

Stiles stood to leave, expecting his dad to call him back or try and keep him from going in some way. Instead his dad called, “Remember: make-up sex is still illegal.”

Stiles smiled a little as he walked back to his jeep.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is interested in hearing about my new book, I will be talking about it over on my Tumblr.
Derek lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. All he could see was the way Stiles had flinched away from him. Derek had shown himself as the animal the hunters claimed he was. He’d just screamed at Stiles, blaming him for trying to help. It didn’t matter that Derek still thought the risk Stiles had taken was stupid, Derek shouldn’t have lashed out at him like that. No wonder Stiles had fled. No wonder Stiles didn’t want to see this place as home.

The door to Derek’s bedroom opened. Derek didn’t turn to look at first, expecting it to be Isaac or Boyd coming to check he was OK. Then the scent wafted across the room. Stiles.

Derek sat up suddenly, almost scared of what he might see. It was possible Stiles had only come back to pack up his stuff. He didn’t have to be here anymore. Stiles opened his mouth to speak, but Derek cut him off. He couldn’t let Stiles get words out in case they were him saying goodbye.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that and it wasn’t your fault. I was just scared because of the hunters and because Allison might have hurt you. I was worried because it was a really risky thing you did but I didn’t mean to take it out on you when you’re only trying to help. I’m sorry. Please don’t leave.”

A lot of things flashed across Stiles’ face in quick succession: sorrow, amusement, confusion. Stiles crossed to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, close to Derek but not quite close enough for them to be touching.

“You thought I’d leave?” Stiles asked.

“I screamed at you. You... you flinched.”

“I did?” Stiles frowned in obvious puzzlement.

“You flinched,” Stiles said. He sat there calmly, even though Derek was still holding his arm up by the wrist. “Does this mean you’re scared of me?”

There was a moment of silence. Then Stiles’ hand came out of nowhere towards Derek’s face. On instinct, Derek leaned back a little and brought his own hand up. He caught Stiles’ wrist before the blow could make contact. That earlier fear surged again, that Stiles might hate him now, that his actions might have destroyed their relationship before it even began.

“You flinched,” Stiles said. He sat there calmly, even though Derek was still holding his arm up by the wrist. “Does this mean you’re scared of me?”

“Of course not,” Derek said. He let go of Stiles’ wrist and dropped his hand down to his side. Instead of taking back his hand, Stiles used his to cover Derek’s, the warm touch of his fingers gentle against Derek’s skin.

“We were standing really close to each other. If you moved suddenly, of course I was going to react. It’s a natural thing, a reflex. It doesn’t mean I was scared of you. I could never be scared of you.”

Derek turned his hand over so that it was palm to palm with Stiles’. Their fingers slid slowly together, linking them in this soft touch.

“I’m sorry I yelled like that,” Derek said.

“I’m sorry I yelled back. You were scared by what almost happened; I get it.”
“I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“No. You really shouldn’t,” Stiles said. “But given the army of hunters on the doorstep, I think it’s understandable.”

“Bringing Allison here was a huge risk.”

“I know. I knew at the time, that’s why I talked it over with Peter. I’m not completely stupid.”

“Not completely,” Derek said.

“Hey!” Stiles bumped his shoulder against Derek’s in protest.

“Just promise me you won’t do something so dangerous again,” Derek said, “even if you think it will help the pack.”

“Or next time, how about we talk instead of screaming at each other?”

“Next time?”

“I’m not going to stop trying to help you, Derek, all of you. And that means I’ll be pissing off some powerful people. But how about in the future I run my dangerous ideas past you as well as Peter?”

And Derek knew by those words that the thought of leaving had never even occurred to Stiles. Even now, even after Derek had acknowledged the fear of Stiles leaving him, Stiles didn’t even consider it. He’d seen an army of hunters show up on the pack’s doorstep and he was still here, ready to fight with whatever weapons he had at his disposal, even if that was just his mouth.

Derek didn’t know how to respond to this. He couldn’t imagine the words that would convey what he felt, the reassurance that Stiles had given him with that simple statement, with all the implications for a joint future that it held wrapped up in it, the certainty that Stiles truly cared about him. Derek wanted to say something profound, something to tell Stiles everything that was running through his head right now. But language wasn’t good enough, at least not the way he could shape it.

So he cupped the back of Stiles’ head and pulled him in for a kiss, trying to convey this way all the meaning that he wanted to say, hoping that warm lips might say more than words ever could.

When Stiles pulled back, he was breathless and flushed, a pink colouring on his cheeks and his eyes sparkling. Derek could smell the heady scent of arousal mingling with his natural musk.

“So, make-up sex is off the table,” Stiles said, “but how about make-up making out?”

Derek laughed, relief and joy dancing with desire somewhere inside. He pulled Stiles further onto the bed and the lay down side-by-side. Derek’s arm was beneath Stiles, holding him close, his hand rubbing circles through the fabric of Stiles’ t-shirt. Their lips met again and again, while their hands slowly explored each other, feeling through their clothes to the person beneath. Derek was hesitant at first, not wanting to push too far too fast, but Stiles’ hands were groping, needy things, as though trying to grasp every part of Derek all at once.

“Hey, guys, I just wanted to--” Isaac’s voice came outside the door, followed by, “Jeez! Close the door before doing that!”

The bedroom door slammed shut and Isaac stomped away outside.

Stiles rolled onto his back, away from Derek, and started laughing. It began as a small chuckle but
then rose until his whole body was shaking with mirth, his eyes dancing and his mouth open in a wide smile. Derek might have yelled at Isaac for ruining the mood, but how could he be annoyed when Stiles was lying beside him, laughing and delighted, face flushed with joy, and looking like the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen.

Derek knew then the thing that had been growing inside him for months. What he’d felt at the school, in that moment of terror, he felt now in joy at seeing this young man beside him. He loved Stiles. He truly, deeply loved Stiles.

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Stiles was a little disorientated when he woke up. The bed felt different and, more significantly, there was a warm body pressed up against his back. The realisation that it was Derek made Stiles’ usual morning wood even more enthusiastic. Stiles decided to get out of here before he did something that would make his dad want to murder them both.

Derek made a sleepy noise of complaint and then rolled over into space Stiles had just deserted. He buried his face in the pillow Stiles had been lying on and then apparently went straight back to sleep. Stiles forced himself out of the room to the bathroom because staring at Derek half-naked and sprawled on a bed was not going to help him get to school on time.

He had to leave the house and cross to the new building to get clean clothes to wear. He really should have thought this whole thing through. When he returned to grab some breakfast, he saw the other teens in the house smirking at him. Erica actually winked and said, “You go, Stiles.”

“Nothing happened,” Stiles said.

“Uh huh,” said Erica, expressing in those two little noises her utter lack of belief.

“We just slept.”

“Uh huh,” Isaac said, mirroring Erica’s tone. Those two exchanged a knowing look. Stiles wanted to pound his head against the table.

“I’m serious! Nothing happened last night. We talked; we slept; that’s it.” There had been some making out involved, but that was all.

“Uh huh,” Isaac and Erica said in perfect sync. Boyd was obviously holding back laughter.

“God! Can’t you put your lie-detector powers to use and tell that I’m telling the truth?”

“Relax, Stilinski,” Boyd said. “We know you’re telling the truth. If you’d had sex, we’d be able to smell it. They’re just winding you up.”

“Oh. OK then. But just so you know, sniffing out people’s sex lives is extremely invasive and a violation of privacy.” But at least he’d have nose-witness accounts that no laws had been broken if it somehow got back to his dad that he’d spent the night in Derek’s bed.

“I hate you guys,” Stiles said. Boyd chuckled. Erica threw her arm around Stiles’ shoulder and squeezed him in a sideways hug.

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Allison cornered Stiles as he was on his way to his first class. Stiles looked down, checking her hands for weapons. They were empty, but that didn’t mean much; he hadn’t spotted the knife until
she’d decided to whip it out.

“Can I talk to you?” she asked.

“Is your dad going to show up with an army?”

“Look, I sent him a message in case something went wrong or you guys tried to hurt me; it was the sensible thing to do.”

There was no hint of an apology in there but Stiles let it go. In her situation, he probably would have done the same, alerting someone about the situation in case a rescue was needed later. Stiles let Allison lead him away from the main hallway and the lockers and all the other people. They stood in an empty classroom, a cautious distance between them.

“So what do you want?” Stiles asked.

“My parents talked to me about what happened yesterday. I told them about what you told me, and the graves and stuff, and they said that you were trying to manipulate me, that this was what werewolves did. My dad said you were trying to deceive me to make werewolves look like the victims but that it was all stories and lies.”

“If you believe that,” said Stiles, “why are you talking to me?”

“Because of what my mom said after. She said they’d pulled me out of boarding school because things are heating up between humans and werewolves again and we need to be ready. I need to be ready. My mom says it’s time for me to finish my training and take my rightful place.”

“As a hunter.”

“Yeah. And she said that this could be a great opportunity for me to prove myself, to show that I’m ready to be a true member of the family.”

Allison turned away from Stiles a little. For a moment, he thought she might start crying, but then she looked back at him, face serious and set.

“My mom,” she continued, “said that I should pretend to be taken in by you and let you take me back to the pack, but this time I could take a weapon. She said that they have wolfsbane gas canisters, weapons that basically spew out a highly potent werewolf poison at high pressure into the atmosphere. She described doing exactly what Peter said Kate did. I didn’t want to believe anyone in my family could do something so horrible, but then my mom basically told me I should do it. She said I should pretend I wanted to talk peacefully and take a weapon into the werewolves’ home and kill everyone inside.”

Stiles didn’t know what to say. Pointing out that he’d told her that her family were killers would be hugely insensitive, even for him. He didn’t know if he should go over there and try to comfort her. He wasn’t sure if she’d want him to. Allison looked like she was going to cry again, and Stiles just stood there, like an idiot.

“You’re not surprised?” Allison said after a minute of trying to hold herself back from crying.

“No,” Stiles said. He was slightly surprised she was freaking out this much, particularly given how adamant she’d been about werewolves’ inherently violent nature, but he guessed there was a difference between calling people violent and committing violence herself.

Allison continued, “I’ve been going through Lydia’s calculations and there isn’t any evidence.
Nobody’s done any real studies or analyses or anything. The numbers we’re coming up with are guesses. I’ve been looking at death statistics and reports and stuff. My parents don’t keep records; none of the hunters do. There are stories about violent werewolves and how they had to be put down, but there’s nothing written down. There’s no evidence, nothing that could actually be counted to prove how violent werewolves are. And before my grandpa’s death, no one knew about werewolves. If they’re really as violent as my mom says they are, surely there would be loads more deaths. And maybe they were all reported as animal attacks, but death from animal attack is actually really rare. Do you know that only two people have been killed by wolves in North America in the twenty first century? Two! And those were definitely real wolves, not werewolves. So even if all the animal attacks where the animal wasn’t seen were actually werewolf attacks, that would still be a really low murder rate. But maybe loads of unsolved murders were actually werewolves and the reason they’re unsolved is because the police were looking for motives and there was no motive because it was a violent werewolf. But most of those murders were gun and knife injuries and stuff, and police went back over cold cases after werewolves were discovered just in case there was evidence of werewolf involvement and there were only about two cases where they thought the killer had actually been a werewolf and one of this, this Calvi-something-or-other guy in Mexico was actually a werewolf hunter, so that comes back to your point about self-defence.”

Allison was talking quickly, spewing out words. Stiles wondered if this was how he looked when he got agitated about something. He wondered if she’d got any sleep last night. She looked strung out, like she was buzzing on caffeine and confusion. She’d spent last night hunting for evidence to prove that her family’s violent actions were justified, and now she was trying to tie together random threads of reasoning into something resembling and argument, and watching them all fray apart in her hands.

“You know what I think about werewolves,” Stiles said. “I can show you graves and videos and stuff, but you need to make up your own mind. You need to decide who you’re going to believe.”

“My parents have been telling me stories about my grandpa since he died, telling me about how brave he was and how strong and who he fought against the werewolf menace even when there was no one to thank him for it. They told me he was a hero. They made me want to follow in his footsteps. They told me how Aunt Kate was murdered, ripped apart in a slow and painful death and how we had to fight werewolves to keep that happening to other people.”

Stiles noticed movement behind Allison. Isaac had slipped into the room while she spoke, listening to all these words.

“My parents taught me that fighting werewolves in the right thing to do,” she said.

“My dad,” Isaac said, “told me that I was a worthless waste of space and that I should have died instead of my brother. You can’t always listen to your parents.”

Allison did start to cry then, the tears she’d been fighting slipping down her face. Isaac walked across the classroom and pulled her into a hug. She let him.
“It’s a double bluff,” Derek said. He was standing in Peter’s study, listening while Stiles and Isaac recounted their conversation with Allison. Peter listened carefully. He seemed to be thinking it over.

“You can’t be considering trusting her,” Derek continued, looking straight at Peter. “She’s admitted that her parents want her to come in here with wolfsbane weapons. She’s told Stiles that the plan is to make us think she’s being swayed to our side and that’s exactly what she’s trying to do now.”

“I don’t think she was lying,” Isaac said.

“And I don’t think you’re thinking with your head,” Derek said.

Peter held up a hand to silence them.

“There are two possibilities,” he said. “One is that Allison has been swayed by reason and compassion to understand that her family’s actions are wrong. The other is that she is pretending to have been swayed in order to gain entrance to this house and kill all inside it. Derek has a point, which is that we’ve seen hunters use such a ploy before.”

“So don’t bring her into the house,” Stiles said. “Last time, even when we brought her into the territory, we kept her away from the house and the rest of the pack. Even if she did bring some poison gas weapon, it wouldn’t be nearly so effective outside.”

“Or we don’t bring her here at all,” Peter said. “If she truly has been brought to see the truth of our cause, let her speak out.”

“You want her to make pro-werewolf statements?” asked Derek.

Peter nodded, “If she’s genuine, she will speak out against her family and in favour of the packs and her words will gain a lot of attention. If she’s lying, then either she won’t speak and we’ll know not to trust her, or she’ll speak out in an effort to gain our trust, and we can still use her words to our advantage.”

“I can get her to record some videos for Danny’s website,” Stiles said. Peter nodded again.

“It feels like we’re using her,” Isaac said.

“She admitted that her mom wants her to poison us all,” Derek said. He didn’t understand why Peter would even consider listening to an Argent of all people, but he did like the idea of using them, of turning their plots to gain the pack’s confidence into weapons that could be used against the hunters. If they could get an Argent to speak out publically against the hunters, Peter was right that it would carry weight, but Derek would not allow her to come anywhere near this house.

“If she is genuine about wanting to help,” Peter said, which Derek couldn’t help giving a derisive snort at, “then she will happily agree to speak for us, so it would hardly be using. If she’s not genuine, then she’s part of a plot to kill us all and I have no qualms about using someone like that.”

“I think she really did mean it,” Isaac said. “She seemed genuinely upset about what her mom asked her to do.”

“This is what they do, Isaac,” Derek snapped. “They make you feel for them, make you think that they really do just want to help, that they’re really sorry for their family’s crimes, then they slaughter
everyone that matters to you. She’s an Argent.”

“But how is it any different for you to hate her because she was born into that family,” Stiles asked, “than for her to hate you because you were born a werewolf?”

“She’s been trained all her life to kill us.”

“And you’ve been trained all your life to think of that family as a threat.”

“It’s not the same at all,” Derek snarled.

“I don’t see why not. You can’t condemn her for crimes her relatives have committed. That’s no more fair than blaming all werewolves because one killed her grandfather.”

Derek’s temper flared inside him, his own secret killed adding fuel to his rage. He grabbed hold of Stiles’ shoulder and shoved him backwards until he hit the bookshelves.

“Don’t you dare say I’m anything like them,” Derek snarled into his face. Then he let go and stalked out of there before Stiles could protest.

“Hey!” he heard Stiles call out behind him. “Not cool, man! Not acceptable!” Derek slammed the door between them and left the house, setting off at a run to patrol the boundaries.

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Stiles thought he was going to have a bruise on his back from the edge of Peter’s shelves. He reached behind him, rubbing at the sore spot, while Peter dismissed Isaac.

“Let me see,” Peter said. Stiles didn’t even hesitate. He turned his back and lifted his shirt to Peter could see the sore point. He brushed his figures gently against Stiles’ skin. There was a soft sensation of warmth and the pain vanished.

“I didn’t really need the pain sucky thing,” Stiles said. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“My nephew has inflicted pain on you. You’re right. That was unacceptable. Do you want me to punish him? Or would you prefer to deal with him yourself?”

It was a serious question and Peter looked at him expectantly for Stiles’ answer.

“When you say punish,” Stiles said, “what exactly do you mean?”

“Nothing serious. He is my nephew, after all. A punch in the back perhaps. That would seem symmetrical.”

A punch, even from an alpha, would heal almost instantly. It would be symbolic more than anything else but even so, Stiles didn’t want Derek to be in pain. Even mad at him as he was, Stiles didn’t want to hurt Derek. He shook his head.

Peter nodded, “Tell me if you change your mind.”

Stiles hesitated. He wanted to take Derek to task himself. He wanted to yell at Derek again, to make it clear that he wasn’t someone to be pushed around and that he wasn’t going to accept violence from his boyfriend. At all. The problem was he didn’t know where Derek had gone to and he didn’t have much confidence in his ability to track a werewolf through the woods.

Stiles headed back to his bedroom and pulled out his homework to try and distract himself. He didn’t
want to think about this. He didn’t want to think about Derek shoving him around. All that time he’d spent arguing that Derek wasn’t violent, that he was a good guy, and now Derek had shoved him into a shelf hard enough to bruise. He could picture his dad’s concerned look if he told him about this.

Stiles finished his homework and got back to his magic database. He was writing up about blessing spells when there came a very timid knock on the bedroom door. He had a suspicion who was there.

“Yes?” he called out. Sure enough, it was Derek who opened the door.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said.

“You’ve been saying that a lot lately.”

“I know, but I am.”

“You shoved me into a shelf, Derek. It hurt.”

“Do you need me to...?” Derek held out a hand towards Stiles, stepping further into the room. He was offering to do the pain suck thing. Stiles shook his head.

“Peter took care of that while you were away sulking off your temper tantrum.”

Derek looked down, hand dropping to his side. He looked thoroughly miserable but Stiles wasn’t going to let him off the hook just because he looked like a kicked puppy.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said again. “It’s just... this situation with Allison feels like history repeating itself.”

“It’s not. She’s not going to attack here. Even if she’s working for her parents, we’ll keep her from attacking, but I think she’s genuine.”

“Kate seemed genuine too,” Derek said. He closed the bedroom door and stood there for a moment, a hand on the wood. “You’ve heard most of what happened with Kate but Peter didn’t tell you everything. He left one little detail out.”

“What detail?”

Derek sank down onto the bed. He sat there, hands clasped in front of him. He stared down at his hands.

“Kate came to me,” Derek said. “She made it seem like she didn’t believe in what her dad had done and her family were doing. She seemed genuine. She acted like she wanted to help us. She made me think she really thought we were worth protecting. She made me think like I was worth protecting. She made me think she loved me.”

Stiles let out a soft, “Oh,” of breath as the implications of Derek’s admission hit in. “You’re the one who brought her to the pack.”

“I invited her into the house. I took her to my mother and the rest of the pack. And then she killed them all. She left me alive, not because she cared at all, but because she thought it was fun to let me live knowing that I’d caused the death of my entire family.”

Stiles couldn’t stay mad at Derek, not in the wake of this revelation. He left his desk and sat down on the bed beside Derek. He place a hand over Derek’s clasped hands.
“You didn’t cause their deaths,” Stiles said.

“I invited her into the house. I knew she was a hunter, I knew she’d been trained to kill us, and I brought her home.”

“That just means she was a manipulative bitch. You were trying to help.”

“And now you’re trying to help by bringing Allison here.”

That comparison sent a chill through Stiles. He’d known Derek had been freaking out about the similarities between the Allison situation and the history with Kate, but this explained why Derek was feeling it so strongly. All these fears mingled with his sense of guilt and he was projecting that onto Stiles. And Stiles had basically been prodding at that guilt, goading him until he snapped.

“We’re not going to bring her back here,” Stiles said. “We’ll do what Peter suggested and get her to speak out without coming here. What happened with Kate won’t happen with her.”

They sat for a while. Stiles leaned his shoulder against Derek’s. Derek clasped Stiles’ hand between both of his.

“I am sorry,” Derek said, “about shoving you.”

“I know you’re sorry. And I know you’re stressed because of the Allison thing, which I get, especially given the Kate stuff which makes your reaction make a lot more sense. But that doesn’t make it OK.”

“I know. I’m s-.”

Stiles cut him off, “Telling me you’re sorry again is pointless. I heard you, I believe you, I just need to know this won’t happen again. I’m not going to be the guy who gets shoved into walls by his stronger boyfriend whenever he loses his temper.”

Derek’s hands released Stiles’. They dropped down onto his lap. Derek’s weight shifted slightly away from Stiles.

“Does this mean...?” Derek trailed off. “Do you want to...?”

He didn’t finish his questions but it was obvious what he was asking. He was asking if Stiles wanted to end their relationship.

“I want to know you’re not going to do this again,” Stiles said.

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Good. Because I’d hate to have to set my dad on you for being an abusive boyfriend.”

“I don’t think your dad would be able to get close. I’m pretty sure Peter will tear me to pieces over hurting you.” Derek said it in a tone that suggested he wasn’t at all concerned about that. He accepted it.

“Nah, I told Peter I’d handle you. But he has offered to punch you in the back if I want him to.”

“He probably should.” Derek sounded thoroughly miserable as he said it. Stiles took hold of Derek’s hand again.

“Not this time,” Stiles said. “But if you do something like this again, I will research a spell to give me
werewolf-level strength and then I will punch you myself. Understood?"

“It won’t happen again. I promise.” Derek turned his head a little and pressed a kiss to Stiles’ cheek.
“I don’t ever want to hurt you. I love you.”

Those words caught Stiles off guard. For a moment, he thought his heart stopped beating. He turned to look directly at Derek and saw the terrified look in his eyes. Derek was scared of how Stiles would react. He’d opened himself up and left his heart open for Stiles to do what he liked with. He looked scared to death that Stiles was going to stomp on his feelings and crush his heart to a million pieces. In the instant need to reassure Derek that he wouldn’t hurt like that, Stiles knew the truth, knew what he felt as well.

“I love you too,” Stiles said.
Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

Hi guys. Have a cliffhanger. :)

Sorry it's a short chapter, but sometimes the ending is just too good to pass up.

Allison agreed to record videos for Danny’s website. She didn’t express any reluctance about it, which meant she was either genuine or she was determined to go the distance with her plot to deceive them all. Stiles wanted to believe her, but he couldn’t help thinking about what Derek had said about Kate, and how sincere she’d seemed. Either way, they’d get some videos with the Argent name attached.

They set up in the library during lunch, with Stiles aiming the video camera at Allison’s face. Danny and Isaac were there to watch, and Lydia was there, sitting a table over and filing her nails with an air of extreme boredom.

Stiles started the camera and nodded to Allison to begin.

“Allison Argent. You’ve probably heard of my grandfather, Gerard Argent. You may have heard of my parents, Christopher and Victoria Argent, who lead the hunters in Beacon Hills, an area of werewolf activity that’s been in the news lately. Now there are a lot of people, my parents among them, who talk about how violent and danger werewolves are, but we actually have no evidence for that. I have been working with an expert mathematician,” at the other table, Lydia’s smirk betrayed the fact she was listening, “to get more information on the statistics of werewolf attacks. What I found astonished me and goes against everything my parents have told me.”

She paused for dramatic effect and then pressed on, “There is no evidence that werewolves are more violent than humans. There are no records of humans killed by werewolves before my grandfather. There are anecdotes and urban legends, but nothing that can be quantified, and given the number of humans murdered in mass shootings, acts of terrorism, or crimes of passion, it seems astonishing that we will condemn an entire culture based on a few rumours and unsubstantiated stories.”

Allison paused again, glancing at the notes she had on the table in front of her. “I’m sure some people will be quick to talk about my grandpa’s death, and the deaths of humans since then. I have been informed that my grandfather organised an ambush of a group of werewolves who were involved in a peaceful meeting, killing a number of werewolves along with the human lover of the werewolf Kali. Kali held my grandfather responsible and killed him in what she believed was an act of justice. I can’t say whether the death was justified. I can’t say whether he did commit the murders she accused him of. But the reason I can’t say one way or the other is because Kali never got a trial. In this country, even murderers are entitled to a fair trial, with legal representation and the opportunity to defend their actions. Instead, Kali was killed by hunters. Hunters who were never arrested for their actions. One of them even got a commendation for bravery. It seems strange to me that one person killing an accused murderer gets a commendation, while another person killing an accused murderer gets shot in the head. These double standards are the problem I would seek to remedy.”
“Now,” she continued, “I’m sure someone will bring up the deaths since my grandfather. In the years since my grandpa was killed by Kali, there have been three hundred and twenty seven humans killed by werewolves. In more than two hundred of those cases, there is evidence that the werewolf was under attack by the human or humans who were killed. Most states have Stand Your Ground laws, which authorise people to protect themselves against a threat. Under those laws, these werewolves were entitled to protect themselves from people who were trying to murder them and their families. And if you think they weren’t justified in their actions, put them on trial, the same as you would do for anyone else. If a human kills a human, then they are subject to arrest and trial. The same should apply when werewolves kill humans, and when humans kill werewolves. We have a legal system in place in this country; we should use it. We should apply our laws equally, and stop persecuting innocent people because of the actions of a few.”

She nodded at Stiles to stop the recording. Her speech wasn’t exactly a ringing endorsement for an end to segregation, but it was fair and it was the sort of thing which might appeal to the middle-grounders, to the people who were worried about werewolves but not prejudiced to the same degree as the hunters.

“What next?” Allison asked.

“Now I check the footage,” Danny said, “tidy up the start and end, and upload it to the website. I have a free period this afternoon so it should be done by the end of the day. I’ll send you all a link when it’s up in case you want to stick in on Facebook or something.”

Allison nodded. She’d seemed calm and confident when she’d been on camera, but now she seemed to be crumbling a little.

“My mom’s going to kill me when she sees that,” she said.

Stiles was certain that the hunters would be absolutely furious, and he was determined to spread the story before they could try to keep a lid on it. He had plans to send the video link to the reporter who’d interviewed the werewolf kids about attending school. He wanted this to be all over social media and plastered on the local news. Controversy inside the hunters’ ranks was bound to be a good story.

“It’ll be OK,” Isaac said. He reached out a hand and put it on Allison’s shoulder. She didn’t flinch away.

“We should probably record some other videos,” Danny said, “with little sound bites. We can guess that some people will see this video and start making claims about how you want to put people at risk or give werewolves power over humans and all the stupid stuff they’re putting in comments. We can come up with some standard responses to that stuff.”

Allison agreed and they recorded a few short statements that could be rolled out later if needed.

“I’m not saying werewolves should be allowed to get away with killing humans. If a werewolf kills a human, it’s still a murder and should be treated as such, but a werewolf is still a citizen of the United States and should have their constitutional right to a fair trial and be punished under the law only if proved guilty, the same as anyone else.”

“Werewolves are people. They’re people who have had their constitutional rights stripped away and it’s only fair that they have them restored.”

“We shouldn’t judge every werewolf because of the actions of a few.”
“There are werewolf children who have never done anything wrong. Is it right to punish innocent children for events that happened before they were even born?”

“If you support the systematic oppression and murder of an entire group of people, find conclusive evidence that justifies your position.”

She continued, with generic statements in favour of treating werewolves fairly, some statements about using the same laws for both groups, and requests for evidence. Stiles suspected that those would get rolled out a lot when people started responding with protests about how violent and dangerous werewolves were. When Danny had a couple of dozen, some of which were just rewordings of other statements, they decided he had enough.

Stiles recorded a few statements of his own, saying that he’d seen werewolves being perfectly calm and non-violent, even on a full moon. He talked, as Allison had, about removal of rights, and how innocent people were being held responsible because of the actions of a few. He compared anti-werewolf people with fanatical racists. He didn’t do quite so many statements as Allison, because the point of this was to get the Argent name out there, but there were a few clips that could be pushed out in support of Allison.

Then they were ready. Danny would polish up the video and they’d be ready for it all to hit the fan.

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The video went online and Stiles sent the link out. Parts of the video were played on Beacon Hills News that evening. A couple of the major news outlets picked up the story. Allison’s face was all over the internet within hours. It was everything they could have hoped for, and the backlash was everything they’d feared.

There were people who claimed that the whole thing was fake, that Allison wasn’t really an Argent, that she’d recorded the video under duress. There were people who believed it was real but called her brainless for believing werewolves could be good, making passionate arguments about the threat to human existence that werewolves posed. Then there were the people who skipped past making arguments and just made threats. Over the course of a few hours, Allison’s social media and email were bombarded with threats of beatings, rape, and death. The next day at school, she seemed utterly distraught as well as terrified. She showed some of the messages to Stiles and Danny.

“All I said was that if werewolves kill people they should be put on trial for murder like anyone else,” she said.

“You see why I call anti-werewolf people fanatics?” Stiles asked.

She stared at the screen of her laptop, at the text filled with vitriolic rage.

“Is this what it’s like for werewolves?” she asked.

“Pretty much,” Stiles said. “Only it’s not just anonymous assholes on the internet, it’s people who’ll show up on their doorstep with shotguns and poison gas.”

“What if they find out where I live?” Allison asked.

Stiles wanted to point out that her parents probably had enough weapons to equip a small army, but he doubted that was what Allison wanted to hear right now. He also wondered whether her parents would actually protect her against anti-werewolf nutcases. He definitely didn’t voice that thought out loud, because implying that her parents might prefer their fanaticism to their daughter would be incredibly hurtful.
“You should show this lot to my dad,” he said instead. “Most of these people are probably just shooting their mouths off but you shouldn’t take chances.”

He didn’t say that having the police involved would give them a better story. If they could talk about how people were making threats against a teenaged girl for just talking about werewolves, it would make the fanatics look like what they were. She agreed to go with Stiles to the sheriff station after school. Stiles tried to remember Derek’s warnings, but it was hard to see Allison as anyone but a traumatised girl.

He wondered whether, even if she’d begun this as a trick, the reaction of her parents’ allies might have been enough to sway her for real.

At lunch, Stiles saw her sitting with Isaac, discussing why Isaac had chosen to take the bite. It was a story that Stiles didn’t really know. He’d heard a few hints about Isaac’s dad and guessed that Isaac had considered his home situation bad enough that being an outcast from society was a step up, but Stiles didn’t know the details. He was tempted to go over and join them so he could learn more, but he figured that Isaac might do a better job of winning Allison over than he would, so he sat down with Boyd, Erica, and Scott instead.

Stiles went to his jeep after school and Allison came to join him. It was less scary this time to have her in his passenger seat, particularly since he wasn’t heading to the pack this time. For once, he was actually doing the sensible thing and going to the police to report a potential crime to let the authorities deal with it.

When they got to the sheriff station, Stiles parked and they went in together. Allison gave a quick summary of her situation to Deputy Clark on the front desk, who told her to wait and arranged to get one of the other deputies to take a look at the threats and determine the appropriate next steps. Stiles took this as a sign of a job well done and let himself relax just a little bit. Allison getting killed by raving humans would be a good way to get their story onto prime time news, but Stiles couldn’t help wanting her to be genuine, and that meant wanting to protect her too.

He returned to his jeep and drove towards the pack. He was just leaving town, crossing into the edge of the woods, but still a good distance from the werewolf territory, when his jeep’s engine stuttered and died. He guided the jeep over to the edge of the road using the last of his momentum as it ground to a halt.

“Oh come on,” he muttered. He pulled out his phone and sent a text to Peter saying that he was going to be late because of car trouble and that he shouldn’t let Derek work himself into a frenzy. Then he climbed out to see if he could handle this himself without needing to call a mechanic. He had a load of Peter’s money still in his bank account, but he wasn’t sure spending it to fix up the jeep would count as putting it to serve the pack.

He lifted up the hood of his jeep and peered inside. Nothing was obviously smoking or leaking, which was a good sign but which also meant he couldn’t easily identify the problem. He still had his head in the engine when he heard movement behind him and the click of a gun’s safety coming off.

“Put your hands where we can see them,” a man’s voice said from behind him. Stiles knew that voice.

He slowly extended his arms, holding his hands open so it was obvious he wasn’t trying to conceal anything. They were in the open, away from people who might see, but still far enough away from the pack that werewolves wouldn’t instantly know something was wrong. It was the perfect place for an ambush and Stiles didn’t believe for a second that Argent and his hunters would just happen to be here when his jeep just happened to develop a fault.
“Did you sabotage my jeep?” Stiles asked. After everything the hunters had done, this would be really a minor act in comparison, but it still made him furious. It was so personal, hitting him in his most prized possession.

“That’s really the least of your problems right now,” Argent said. Stiles turned to face him, keeping his hands raised. There was half a dozen other men around him, all armed to the teeth. Argent jerked his head towards Stiles in a signal to one of the men. “Cuff him and take his phone, then check for weapons.”

That meant they weren’t planning on shooting him in the middle of the road. That was a silver lining, right?

“You do know that kidnapping a minor is a crime?” Stiles asked, as the hunter grabbed his arms and yanked them behind his back. Cold handcuffs fastened around his wrists, tight enough to pinch his flesh. Stiles winced involuntarily.

Argent looked at the hunter who was currently frisking Stiles.

“See if you can find something to gag him with too,” Argent said.
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

See end notes for trigger warnings.

As of this chapter, the word count for this story should overtake that of Unchained. So this is now officially my longest fic (unless you count The Long Way Round trilogy as one thing).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Someone was crying in the woods. It was a soft sound, muffled, but Derek heard it as he patrolled the territory. He changed direction, moving as silently as he could towards the faint noise of sobs. The crier must have heard him, because the noise faded into uneven breaths as whoever it was tried to hold back the tears, or at least force them to come silently.

Derek wove through the trees until he saw her. Millie was huddled up between the roots of an old tree, half hidden behind a rotten log. Her knees were pulled up tight in front of her, shrinking her down into a tiny ball. She had a sweater on her knees and her face was pressed into it to try and muffle the sound of her sobs, but her eyes were red and streaming. She looked up at Derek, eyes pleading, though Derek wasn’t sure if she was pleading for help or for him to pretend he hadn’t seen this.

Derek stood there, feeling awkward. Millie’s shoulders shook quietly. He couldn’t just walk away, so he walked over to her. To give himself time to think, he kicked at the old log, seeing if he could sit on it without it giving in. He decided not to risk it and sat down on the ground instead, close enough that he could reach out towards Millie and place a hand on her arm, but not crowding in.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. She buried her face in the sweater. “Are you hurt?” She shook her head without looking up. “Did someone at school say something mean?” She shook her head again. Derek stared about, trying to think of other explanations. “Someone on the internet?”

“I don’t look at comments now,” she said. Her face was still pressed into her sweater, so the words were hard to make out, but he saw clearly the shake of her head as she spoke. That wasn’t what had upset her.

“Did someone in the pack do something?” Derek asked. She shook her head again. “So what is it?”

“It’s stupid,” she said.

Derek sat there, unsure what to say next. He hated this. He wasn’t good with people. He had no idea how to comfort someone. He wished Stiles were here. Stiles would know what to do. He would know what to say. Derek took a surreptitious glance at his watch. Stiles should be back from school soon. Maybe Derek should just find Stiles and bring him here so he could help.

Unless Stiles had gone to his dad’s tonight. Derek looked at Millie, huddled into her ball, crying into her sweater. If he walked away now, even to look for Stiles, that would probably just make things worse. Derek had to do something. Even if he would rather face an army of hunters than deal with a crying girl.
He shifted so he was sitting closer to her and put an arm round her shoulder. That didn’t seem to do anything. He felt so useless.

“It can’t be stupid,” he said. “If it was stupid, you wouldn’t be upset, but you are, so it must be important.”

He didn’t think he’d ever been so inarticulate, but it seemed to do the trick. At any rate, Millie raised her head a little. She pointed. Derek followed the finger and saw her school bag.

Derek wanted to go to that school and start clawing people to pieces. Had one of her teachers marked her down because she was a werewolf? Had someone insulted her or her abilities? Had someone called her stupid or called her drawings rubbish? Derek left her side briefly to retrieve the bag then he sat back down beside her and opened it up. He expected the worst. He pulled out workbooks and textbooks, expecting to see insults scrawled across them. He checked a few bits of work to see if it was a poor grade that had caused this, but he saw little notes in red pen about, ‘Good effort’, or ‘Nice work’. The worst bit of criticism he saw was a note suggesting she do a bit of reading on a subject that the other kids had studied the previous year, but even that made it clear the failing wasn’t Millie’s fault.

Derek decided, despite himself, that he liked Millie’s teacher.

He eventually found a piece of paper screwed up in the bottom of Millie’s bag. He smoothed it out, expecting to see something horrible. Instead what he found was an invitation, with a border of colourful balloons, asking Millie to attend Isabelle Bletchley’s birthday party.

Derek almost put the invitation aside to keep looking, because why the hell would Millie be upset about a party invitation? Surely this was proof that the kids in her class treated her like a person and maybe even considered her a friend.

Then it hit him. The party was on a Saturday at the bowling alley in town. It would be impossible for a werewolf to cross the boundary on a Saturday and go into Beacon Hills without causing every hunter in the area to go on the attack.

“Maybe Stiles can talk to people and get them to make an exception,” Derek suggested. “Maybe one of the deputies can take you to the party.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Millie said. She’d stopped crying now, but her face was still pressed into her sweater, leaning against her knees.

“Obviously it matters to you.”

“If I go to the party, it’ll need special permission. Justin says he’s going to have an ice skating party next month, so there’d need to be special arrangements for me to go to that. And Mrs Hinchley was talking about this art exhibition in town and she showed me some postcards from it because I can’t go. And the twins were talking about how their parents are going to take them skiing over the Christmas break and I’ve never even seen snow. And I...” Her breath started shaking as it looked like she was going to crumble into sobs again. Derek put an arm round her and pulled her close. “I don’t want Stiles to have to make arrangements. I just want to be normal.”

Derek sat there, feeling useless once again, because what could he say to that? He could try to cheer her up with the benefits of being a werewolf, but that wouldn’t help her current issue. He could talk about how Stiles was trying to change the world and make werewolves accepted, but Millie was old enough to know that wasn’t going to happen overnight, certainly not in time for bowling alleys and ice skating parties.
“Life sucks,” Derek said.

He sat there for a while with his arm round her because he couldn’t say anything to make this better and he couldn’t change the world to make it fairer, but he could at least do that. It seemed to be working.

She stopped crying. Then she wiped her face with her sweater. It was still obvious to anyone with eyes that she’d been crying, but she had it under control now.

“Do you want to go back to the house?” Derek asked.

“No, I... I’ll stay out here for a bit.”

“Do you want me to see if Stiles is back?”

Millie hesitated, then nodded.

“OK.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “I’ll be back soon.”

He stood up and dusted off his pants and walked away. When he glanced back, Millie had pulled her notebook and pencil out of her bag. Derek really, really hoped that his failed attempts to be comforting weren’t going to end up as a cartoon on the internet.

He headed back to the house, sniffing and listening for a sign of Stiles, but there was only the lingering scent of his frequent presence here, nothing fresh. He went to Peter’s study.

“Is Stiles coming back to the pack tonight?” Derek asked. He knew Stiles had a right to stay with his father, and that it was probably better for all of them that he keep the sheriff happy by spending nights there sometimes, but it bothered him when he didn’t know where Stiles was.

“He was planning to,” Peter asked, “but he sent me a message saying that he’s having car troubles. He wants me to make sure you’re not worried.”

There was a softness in Peter’s tone that Derek rarely heard, but Derek didn’t want to think about that now. He wanted Stiles to be here. At the very least, he needed to be able to go back to Millie and tell her when Stiles would be back, and to make sure that Stiles wasn’t planning on staying with his father tonight when his pack needed him.

“Can I use the phone?” Derek asked. Peter pulled the phone out of desk drawer and handed it over. It was already turned on. With members of the pack going into town regularly, Peter no doubt wanted to be easy to contact, plus the solar panels on the new building gave them a bit more electricity than they used to have, so one phone wasn’t going to destroy their power capacity.

Derek pulled up Stiles’ name from the phone’s memory and called it. The phone went straight to voicemail. Derek hung up and tried again.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked.

“He’s not answering.”

They both knew that this was bad. Stiles wouldn’t just turn off his phone, not without giving them a message or explanation. Derek pulled up another number from the phone’s memory.

“Who are you calling now?” Peter asked.

“His father.”
Stiles watched Victoria Argent flick through the pages of the magic notebooks. He glared at her, because the rag stuffed in his mouth wouldn’t let him say anything. He didn’t want her touching those books. He’d had them in his schoolbag so that he could keep up with his reading in breaks between classes, but he was now wishing he’d kept them locked away somewhere safe, somewhere creepy hunters wouldn’t be able to touch them.

Stiles was in the Argent’s basement, hands chained up over his head with so little slack that he had to go up on his toes if he wanted to move at all. It was infuriatingly cocky of them to bring him back to their own house. That added to his anger, but maybe it would work to his advantage. After all, if his dad figured out that the hunters were holding him prisoner, this would be the obvious place to start looking. The floor of the basement had been swept clean around him but then the Argents had poured a circle of salt around him. Outside that, Victoria had draped a long, silver chain to make another circle. Basic protective circles, right there in the early pages of the first notebook, which would prevent him from casting spells on them.

He tried anyway, just because it was better than standing here while his arms ached more and more and his mouth got drier by the minute. He tried gathering energy to move something in the basement. He didn’t think he’d be able to lift one of the Argent’s guns with telekinesis, but it was worth a try.

It quickly became apparent though that the circles were working. He could feel his energy stopping short as though held back by an invisible wall. All he could do was watch as Victoria put down the book and picked up the next one, flipping through the pages quickly, skimming her eyes over the text, occasionally pausing but then quickly moving on. She was looking for something specific, he realised. This wasn’t idle browsing or satisfying her curiosity. She was hunting through the books for something in particular.

At last, Victoria set down the book. She walked over to the edge of the silver circle but didn’t cross it.

“I’m going to reach in and take the gag out,” she said. “If you try and cast a spell on me while I do so, you should know that I have a sword upstairs. It’s long enough to reach you from outside the barrier and it won’t disrupt the protective circle. I imagine it will be hard to focus on magic with stab wounds. Do you understand?”

Stiles nodded. Victoria’s feet remained outside the silver chain, but she reached into the circle. She took hold of the cloth wedged into Stiles’ mouth and untied the knot. The instant the gag came free, she stepped backwards, taking refuge outside the circle. In some ways it was flattering that she seemed to consider him a serious threat. In other ways, it was absolutely terrifying.

“Tell me what you did?” Victoria asked.

Stiles was too confused to give a sensible answer, so he just went with, “The last thing I did was get myself kidnapped.”

“Don’t get smart with me. Tell me what you did to Allison.”

Now Stiles was really confused. “All I did to Allison was give her a lift to the sheriff’s station to report the guys sending her threatening messages online.” A worrying thought hit him. “Did someone hurt her?”

He couldn’t believe something could have happened in the few minutes between leaving her with the deputies and getting captured, but with all the madness recently, he couldn’t be certain.
Victoria looked angry, but it was cold, controlled fury.

“I am talking about before that. I want to know what you did to make her sprout nonsense in those videos about how werewolves are all soft and cuddly. Did you threaten her? Or is it worse than that? Did you perform some spell when you had her in the werewolf territory? Are you manipulating her thoughts to make her help you?”

Stiles could only stare in utter disbelief. Allison had expressed an opinion that differed from her parents’ and their first thought was that someone was performing mind-control magic on her.

“You want to know what convinced her to speak out about treating werewolves fairly?” Stiles asked. “You did, when you suggested she poison children.”

Victoria perfectly calmly walked round behind Stiles. Stiles turned as well as he was able to give the chains pulling his arms up over his head. He saw her walk to a pile of junk in the corner and pick up a length of cane, of the sort people used in the garden to give plants something to climb. Stiles felt his heart start to race as she swung the cane a couple of times, almost experimentally. He winced at the swishing noise.

“You wouldn’t actually hurt me,” Stiles said, with absolutely no conviction. “I’m human.”

“You’re a witch,” she said. “You’re as bad as them. Worse, because you chose this. Now tell me, what did you do to my daughter?”

“I just talked to her!” Stiles’ voice was fast and high with terror but apparently the answer wasn’t good enough.

The cane swished through the air. Stiles screamed as a line of fire sliced across the back of his legs.

“We just talked!” he yelled again. She swung the cane twice more in quick succession, pain cutting across his thighs.

“You did something,” she said. “You swayed her with magic to win her over. You will tell me what you did and then you will undo it.”

“I just talked to her about how your family have slaughtered innocent people,” Stiles said.

The cane swished again. This time, the pain burned across his back, slicing diagonally from shoulder to hip. He screamed as she swung again and again, the lines seeming to lay burning on top of each other.

The basement door opened with a crash and Chris Argent hurried down the stairs.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. Victoria raised her arm to strike again, but Chris caught her by the wrist.

“He’ll tell me what he did,” Victoria said.

“He’s just a boy.”

Stiles was shaking, dangling from the chains. It felt like someone had laid red-hot wire across his skin. He saw Victoria shake of Chris’ hand and he knew he had to say something before she swung the cane again.

“This is why Allison has doubts,” Stiles said.
“You’re trying to take my daughter from me,” Victoria said.

Stiles got his feet under him again and straightened, looking her in the eye, “I won’t have to try when she finds out that you torture innocent people in your basement.”

“You are hardly innocent.”

Chris took the cane from Victoria’s hand and touched her gently on the arm, “Maybe you should go upstairs and let me handle this.”

Victoria gave Stiles a furious glare and then walked up the basement steps. She shut the door behind her as she left. Stiles turned to Chris, trying to think about something other than the burning pain and the fact that no one knew he was here.

“Let me guess,” Stiles said, “you’re going to play the good cop to her bad cop?”

“No,” said Chris.

“If she was the good cop then I don’t want to know.”

Chris walked back over to the corner of the basement. Stiles tried to remember to breathe, afraid of what other implement of torture he might be facing now, but all Chris did was put the cane back down in the junk pile. He returned to stand in front of Stiles.

“Stiles,” he said in a tone that was calm and only slightly patronising, “I’m sure you think you’re helping people. Maybe you think whatever you did was necessary, but changing people’s opinions like this isn’t right. Messing with people’s minds is dangerous.”

“All I did was talk to her.”

Chris looked at him. Stiles tried to look strong and defiant, but it was hard to be defiant when he’d been whimpering in pain a minute earlier.

“What did you talk to her about?” Chris asked.

“I talked about how you people are fanatics who’ll murder werewolf children, how you’ll resort to violence as the first and only option, how you’ll kill people who haven’t done anything wrong, how you’ll slaughter innocent people. She got all angry about that, said it wasn’t true.”

“Is that when you did whatever it is you did?”

“No,” said Stiles. “That’s when you showed up with an army ready to attack people who hadn’t done anything wrong and the werewolves got scared that you were planning on slaughtering innocent children.”

Chris stared at Stiles in silence for about a minute, then he said, “I find it hard to believe my daughter would change her entire worldview thanks to a simple conversation.”

“I think what swayed her was when you guys suggested she trick her way into the pack’s house with poison gas weapons to kill every single werewolf inside, including the children.”

Chris bristled with anger, “I don’t know what lies the werewolves have told you but we would never do something like that.”

“Allison told me that was her mom’s plan.”
“We don’t kill children.”

“I bet you don’t torture them either,” Stiles said. He twisted to look at the cane, and then looked back at Chris. Chris looked up at the door out of the basement, the door through which his wife had left only a couple of minutes earlier.

“Your sister killed more than half of the Hale pack,” Stiles said, “including a human and several children. Then your wife told Allison to do the same thing again. That’s what freaked Allison out enough to listen to me. I didn’t do any magic to her. I wouldn’t even know where to start with a mind-control spell and the idea of even trying something like that is... revolting. All I did was talk to her. All she did was go on record saying that maybe werewolves should be given a trial if they do something wrong instead of being slaughtered like rabid animals. Your reaction to that was to kidnap and torture me. If you want to hunt monsters, maybe you should start with yourself.”

Stiles expected Chris to attack him, to punch him or to go for the cane again. Instead, his just pressed his lips together tightly and kept a check on his anger.

“I think I need to talk to my wife,” he said. He walked towards the basement steps.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for torture - specifically, Stiles is beaten with a cane.
Stiles stared down at the circles around him. He’d tried stretching out his foot to disturb them, but he didn’t have enough slack in the chains. He basically ended up waging his toes over the top of the line. He didn’t think it would be possible for his magic to cross the lines, but he was willing to bet that Victoria hadn’t done any magic to hold the circles in place. The way she’d talked about being a witch being as bad as a werewolf made her think that she wouldn’t do anything remotely resembling magic. Putting a salt circle as a barrier was probably as close as they’d go. Which meant he just had to disturb the physical barrier.

It wouldn’t be possible to do magic directly on either of the circles, but maybe he could interfere with them indirectly. His magic was contained inside the circles but he could still do magic, and it wasn’t like salt was heavy or difficult to move. He remembered his experiments with Derek and the candles. He’d guided a breeze around a point. Maybe he could use magic to focus his breath in the same way, then it would be the air acting on the circles rather than his magic. It might work. He looked down at the circle of salt, took a deep breath, and visualised his power growing inside him. As he breathed out, he pushed his magic with it, pouring that power out until a long gust of air pushed against the salt. A break appeared in the circle.

That had been surprisingly easy, but breaking the silver circle would be much harder. He couldn’t just blow a chain away. Maybe he could push it at the point where the two ends of the chain overlapped. He just needed the circle to be slightly broken. Besides, what else did he have to do except stand here and focus on the way his back and legs hurt from the caning?

He tried the same approach again, on the grounds that it had worked for the salt circle. He twisted as well as he could given the chains and looked at the point where the circle was formed, where about four inches of the perimeter were made by overlapping ends of the chain. He took a deep breath, centred on his magic, and breathed out. The chains twitched slightly. He took another breath, focused, and tried again.

And again.

And again.

Over and over he went through the process. Each time, the chains twitched outwards slightly under the power of his magically enhanced breath. After a few dozen attempts, there was a noticeable bulge in the edge of the circle but the two ends of the chain were still touching. He was already feeling like he wanted a sit down and a break, but that wasn’t an option. Sitting down was physically impossible and he didn’t dare pause for long because he had no idea how long he had before the Argents finished up their discussion and came back down. It was possible that they were leaving him to stew as part of his torture routine. He actually hoped that was the case because that might buy him the time he needed. Either way, he pressed on.

He breathed in, he focused his magic, he breathed out. The chain twitched outwards a fraction more. He breathed in, he focused his magic, he breathed out.
He felt it when the circle finally broke. With one last breath, the two ends of chain twitched apart creating a tiny break and he felt a shudder run through him. Of course, it was possible he was going to collapse from magically induced exhaustion. He felt tired. His whole body ached, but some parts of him were worse than others. His shoulders were pretty bad and the chains were digging into his wrists, but the lines from the caning throbbed, and now his head pounded as well.

He was certain he didn’t have enough magical juice left in him to fight his way out of here, but maybe he didn’t need to fight himself. He just needed to let people know he was in trouble. It was possible that Peter and Derek were already freaking out about him not being back, but he’d sent the car trouble text so it was also possible that they were both happy and convinced he had a mundane reason for running late. They might also have assumed he was staying at his dad’s, and his dad would assume he was staying with the pack. He couldn’t risk assuming that they knew he was in trouble, not when Victoria Argent was probably willing to kill him, judging by the ‘just as bad’ comments about witches and werewolves.

If they were convinced he was doing black magic on Allison’s minds, they might decide that murdering him was the best way to break the spell. He had to make certain someone was coming for him.

He wished he could flick through the magic books for messenger spells, but the books were well out of reach, where Victoria had left them. For about half a second, Stiles toyed with the idea of using magic to bring them closer to him so he could read them, but that would probably use up whatever energy he had left. He couldn’t risk that, so he just had to go by what he could remember.

He was connected to the nemeton. Both Deaton and Satomi had told him as much. When he’d first awakened his spark, he’d been sitting on a representation of the nemeton in his dreamscape. The nemeton was in the Hale pack territory, and the werewolves were connected to their territory, which should mean that they were connected to the nemeton too. He hoped. He wished he had a big more background knowledge on this because right now he was trying to perform magic with little more than guesses. At least they were educated guesses.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture the nemeton. He tried to remember the way it had looked in the dreaming: the shape of the trunk, the texture of it, the lines and the way it was weathered. He tried to conjure up an image in his mind so real that he could reach out and touch it. He painted it in his imagination one detail at a time.

Then he pictured sitting down on the centre of the stump, his magic flowing out and into the ancient tree. He pictured the flow of magic and he felt a tingling running through him. This was definitely not just wishful thinking now. He wondered if he could draw on this power to fight the Argents, but he pushed that thought aside. He had to prioritise. It was more important that he let someone know where he was.

He focused on stretching out with his magic. He didn’t even have to try to visualise it this time. He could feel the Hale territory, the shape of it, the rolls of the land. He could feel the pack, like bright points of energy, so many of them clustered around the structure of the house. It was like a map in his mind but moving, somehow living. It was hard to focus on any single detail. The whole of the territory lay before him, everything pouring into him at once, but he could think about Derek. He could remember Derek’s face, the feeling of his hands, the sensation of a kiss, the way Derek’s presence made butterflies flutter in his stomach. Stiles concentrated on all of that and on reaching the bright point of energy that was Derek. He needed to touch that point, to make the connection, to tell Derek where he was. He needed Derek to know that he was here and that he needed help.

He felt the connection, just a tremor through his soul, and he knew he’d made contact. He hung from
the chains, stretching out with his spirit, drifting in some timeless space. The discomfort of his body faded away; all his thoughts were out there, with the pack. With Derek.

It was something like a dream, but one in which he was aware he was dreaming. There was no pain here, all the problems his physical body faced fell to nothing and he just drifted. He could stay like this forever.

Stiles heard the basement door open and shut, heard the footsteps on the stairs, but it all sounded like it was coming from a hundred miles away. He was too busy trying to focus on Derek. He heard someone speaking but it took effort to come back to himself to work out what was being said.

Someone was calling his name. Someone sounded concerned. Had it worked already? Stiles couldn’t tell if he’d been drifting for a minute or a day.

Stiles forced his eyes open and saw Chris Argent standing there.

“Oh thank god,” Chris said.

Stiles drew a shaky breath and forced his bleary eyes to focus on what was in front of him, the magic of the connection still there in the back of his mind, “What? Did you want to kill me yourself?”

“I don’t want to kill you, Stiles. I just want my daughter back to normal.”

“And by normal you mean believing that my friends deserve to be killed for just existing.” Stiles was feeling so thoroughly tired that it was a struggle to keep supporting his own weight, but the alternative was dangling from the cuffs and those things didn’t have padding. He didn’t want to keep into an argument with anyone right now, but talking to Chris might keep him from looking down. If he looked down, he might see the broken circles.

“It seems a very abrupt change for Allison to suddenly be speaking out in favour of werewolf rights,” Chris said.

“Well, has she ever met a werewolf before? If she’s never interacted with werewolves, she’s never had a reason to consider that you might be wrong before.” Stiles wanted to curl up in his bed with his pillow and sleep for a week, but he tried to look alert and awake. Hopefully Chris was attribute any dazedness to having been tortured by Victoria. He probably didn’t know enough to recognise the side effects of performing magic.

“Are you saying that you did nothing to Allison except talk to her?” Chris asked.

“Yes! I told you that. I told your wife that when she was whacking me with a garden cane.”

“Then why did you take her off into the werewolf territory? You could have talked to her at school.”

“But I couldn’t have shown her the graves of murdered babies in school. Those are in the middle of the pack’s territory.”

“The babies you say my sister killed.”

“In her defence,” Stiles said, “there was only one who was technically a baby. Sixth months old. The others were a bit older. Peter’s daughter would have been about my age. I would offer to show you so you can check dates, but Peter probably would kill you if you stepped into his territory.”

Talking had never seemed like such an effort. He forced himself to keep looking at Chris, not to let his eyes drift shut because it he fell asleep standing here he’d probably damage his wrists and Chris
would no doubt investigate what was wrong. Right now, Chris was keeping a little distance between
them.

“We also talked about evidence,” Stiles went on, still concerned on keeping Chris’ eyes on him and
not the circles. “Allison was convinced at the start that you were right and that werewolves are all
dangerous monsters, so we challenged her to find evidence. Do you know what we found? Not a
damn thing.”

“There are hundreds of instances of werewolves killing humans.”

“Mostly in self-defence. And there are hundreds of humans killed by humans every year. We tried to
do comparisons and ended up with this confusing pile of numbers that told us nothing. We can’t
prove that werewolves are friendly and peaceful. We can’t prove that they’re dangerous and violent.
We can’t prove anything because no one bothered looking for evidence before making it a crime to
be born a werewolf.”

“The number of werewolf attacks we’ve stopped speak for themselves,” Chris said.

“Not when you look at the numbers. Allison looked. She was desperate to find something to justify
what her mom asked her to do and she couldn’t find anything. To me, that says everything.”

“If all you’ve done is talk,” Chris said, “why do you have books of magic?”

“Because I’m studying magic. In case, you know, someone sets off a bomb and I need to make an
impromptu shield.” It didn’t feel like much of a secret; Chris would probably put the pieces together
given the books in Stiles’ bag and the fact that the kids in the school hadn’t been burned in the
slightest.

“You saved the children?”

“I had some circumstantial help, but yeah. Some of us try to protect people.” Stiles tried to fill that
last part with as much sarcastic venom as possible, but it was hard when all he wanted was to close
his eyes and go to sleep. It seemed to work though, judging from the anger on Chris’ face.

“All I want to do is protect people,” he said.

Stiles rolled his eyes, “And torture fits into this worldview, how?”

Chris actually looked away, turning from Stiles a little, eyes trailing on the floor. For about half a
second, Stiles thought he might look at the circles on the floor, but he looked towards the edge of the
room instead. Stiles managed to breathe again.

“Victoria...” Chris said. “She shouldn’t have done that.”

“So she should have stuck to kidnap and threats to traumatis me?” Anger was good. Anger kept
him awake. Stiles tried to feel this instead of the ache inside.

“Stiles, this is about trying to protect our daughter.”

“Because every parent resorts to kidnapping the people they think are a bad influence on their kid.”

“Only when the influence might be magic,” said Chris.

“What were you planning on doing if I had put a spell on her?” Stiles asked.

“Convinced you to take it off.”
“Convinced me? How? Torture? Threats? Death? How the hell can you still see yourself as one of the good guys?”

“We do what we have to do to keep people safe.”

Chris actually said that with a straight face, perfectly seriously. Stiles didn’t know whether to groan or scream or roll his eyes. He settled for glaring instead.

“Can you come closer and bend down a bit,” Stiles said, “so I can kick you in the face?”

“Look, Stiles, I know you and I have been at odds a few times through this, but werewolves are dangerous, you have to realise that. I know that sometimes as hunters we have to do things which aren’t necessarily pleasant, but it’s all in the name of protecting people. I realise this,” he gestured a hand towards Stiles and the chains, “isn’t my finest moment, but when my daughter’s safety is at stake, what else can I do?”

“Anything else,” Stiles suggested. “If your first instinct is ‘hey, let’s kidnap a teenaged boy and chain him up in the basement’, you’ve got something seriously screwed up upstairs.”

“We decided, given the circumstances,” Chris picked up one of the magic books and waved it slightly as a demonstration, “that it was better to treat you as a dangerous spellcaster and act with all due caution.”

This time, he gestured towards the circles on the floor surrounding Stiles. He froze. His face paled as his eyes locked on the gaps, the little break in the salt line and then the way the ends of the chain had flared out. He stared at them in shock and Stiles felt his heart racing. What would Chris do now? What could Stiles do?

Chris looked up slowly, eyes meeting Stiles’. He looked about as scared as Stiles felt.

“What have you done?” he asked.

From somewhere overhead, muffled by walls and ceiling and what was presumably some industrial strength soundproofing, gunshots rang out and Stiles knew that his spell had worked. He managed a tired smile.

“Just a little distress call,” Stiles said.

Chris started towards the basement steps. The door burst open before he could get there and something leapt down from the top. Derek landed on top of Chris, knocking him to the ground before he could react. Blood was dripping down from Derek’s side but he didn’t seem to notice, he just snarled into Chris’ face. Chris shifted beneath him, hand reaching for something.

“Give me a reason,” Derek said.

“Derek!” Stiles’ dad was suddenly in the doorway, gun out. “Leave him! Get Stiles out of here.”

Stiles half expected Derek to claw Chris’ throat out on principle, but he listened. He jumped to his feet and hurried over to Stiles, kicking at the silver chain as he did so. He reached Stiles’ side and Stiles tried to give him a reassuring smile, to let him know everything would be OK. But Derek just looked at him in shock.

“What did they do to you?” he demanded. Stiles just shook his head, too exhausted for words.

His dad was descending the basement steps, gun still aimed at Chris Argent, saying something. It
was hard for Stiles to focus, but there were words like ‘arrest’ and ‘kidnapping’. His dad was reading Chris his rights. Stiles wanted to give a warning, but Chris didn’t seem about to fight back. He kept his hands out and let himself get arrested. In the meantime, Derek took hold of the metal cuffs around Stiles’ wrists, yanking at them. Metal snapped apart with an angry screeched and suddenly there was nothing holding Stiles up.

His legs gave out beneath him and the next thing he knew, he was pressed against Derek’s chest, strong arms wrapped around him.

“I’ve got you,” Derek said. “It’ll be OK. I’ve got you.”

He held Stiles close. A touch on Stiles’ back that was probably meant to be comforting pressed a little too hard on one of the throbbing lines left by the cane and Stiles gave an involuntary hiss of pain.

“I’m sorry,” Derek said. “I’ve got you.”

His hand shifted to Stiles’ neck, already drawing away the pain as he got his other arm under Stiles’ legs and lifted him up, carrying him towards the stairs. Stiles closed his eyes and let himself finally rest.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

This chapter went through a lot of changes. I can’t remember the last time I rewrote a chapter quite this much between first draft and posting. I hope it still makes sense.

Derek could feel Stiles’ need for help though he couldn’t articulate exactly how he could feel it. It was like a burning urge to rush to Stiles’ side. That was the other part; he knew exactly which direction to run. Only the fact that the sheriff was already hunting for Stiles kept Derek from tearing across the boundary towards the sensation, that and Peter’s warnings that this was almost certainly a trap. It was possible that Stiles was calling out for help all by himself, but the Argents knew he had magic. That could still be part of the plan, intended to lure Derek and the pack out from behind the boundary where they could be killed. The hunters could then justify their slaughter by claiming they’d simply stood up to an attack.

It was Peter who suggested that they call the sheriff again.

“If we let humans deal with humans,” he said, “we can’t be blamed.”

“But what about Stiles?” Derek demanded.

“We’re not going to help him by falling into an Argent trap,” Peter said. He sounded far too calm. Derek had no interest in being calm right now. He wanted to feel flesh beneath his claws. But maybe that was the point too. The Argents were the obvious suspect if something had happened to Stiles. Maybe they wanted to provoke this reaction so they could prove how dangerous werewolves were. Even in his current state, Derek was determined not to give them that satisfaction.

So Derek took Peter’s advice and called the sheriff. He answered almost immediately.

“Do you have something?” he asked. “Did Stiles show up?”

Because there was still that frail hope that this was all a misunderstanding. Maybe Stiles had been delayed and then his phone had run out of battery. Maybe nothing at all was wrong. That faint whisper of a chance had vanished when Derek started feeling this sensation.

“I know where he is,” Derek said.

“Where?” the sheriff asked, like he expected Derek to spout an address.

“It’s not like that,” Derek said. “I can feel he’s in trouble and I know which direction it’s coming from.”

“You feel it?”

“I think Stiles must have done a spell.”

He waited for doubt or suspicion, or even scepticism. There was a moment of pause, then the sheriff asked, “Are you still in your territory?”
“Yes.”

“I’m coming to get you.”

This startled Derek. Peter, who’d been standing close enough to overhear the other side of the phone call, looked up at him in surprise too.

“So I can point you in the right direction?” Derek asked.

“So you can take me there. If this causes problems with the hunters, I’ll deal with it. I’m already in the car; be with you in ten minutes.”

The minutes were excruciating. Derek could feel the pull of Stiles’ call for help. He wished he could send a message back, let Stiles know the call had been heard, but there was nothing he could do. He paced along the boundary, feeling the tug towards the town.

Peter tried to talk to him, tried to discuss strategy, but he was in no mood to hear anything right now. So Peter simply said he would be here, preparing the pack, in case this turned out to be something the humans weren’t prepared to handle. When that didn’t have any effect, he said the only thing that could give Derek hope: “As long as you feel his call, you know he’s alive.”

Derek tried to hold on to that thought when the sheriff drove up. He hurried out of the woods, not caring as the boundary symbols lit up at his passage. Derek wanted to just jump into the car and drive, but the sheriff had another plan. He pulled out a large map and started spreading it on the hood of his cruiser.

“Do you know how far away Stiles is?” he asked.

Derek shook his head, “Just the direction.”

“We can work with that.”

The map was old, marked with small holes as though pins had been poked through it at various times. Derek wondered if this map had been used before for plotting crime locations. Now, the sheriff angled the map with the help of a compass and marked their location on it. Then he handed Derek a straight edge.

“Line that up with whatever it is you’re feeling,” he said. As soon as Derek did so, the sheriff marked it on the map with a pencil.

That was when they got back into the car. Derek sat in the passenger seat, glad to be doing something and tried not to sprout claws. He needed to stay in control now if he was to help Stiles.

He was so busy trying to hold himself in check that it took him several minutes to work out that they weren’t heading into town. They weren’t heading towards the source of Derek’s anxiety.

“We’re not heading towards Stiles,” he said.

“No. We’re going to figure out where he is before we go in,” the sheriff answered. After a few more minutes, he decided they’d come far enough and he stopped the car. He pulled the map out again so they could repeat the procedure. Derek realised then what was going on. By plotting the direction of Stiles’ spell from two different locations, they’d be able to pinpoint where Stiles was, or at least get as good an estimate as they could given the crude measuring tools they had on them. Assuming Stiles was stationary.
When the sheriff drew the second line, it crossed the first in the middle of a smart residential area. Derek saw the sheriff’s jaw tighten with anger.

“You know what’s there, don’t you?” Derek asked.

The sheriff nodded. He got into the car and got on the radio, calling all available units to an address. He didn’t even have to check the map to recite the location. Then he turned on his lights and sirens and drove straight towards the heart of Beacon Hills.

“Those arrogant assholes,” he muttered under his breath. “Their house. They took him to their house!”

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The sheriff organised his deputies via radio as he drove. His plan was to treat this as a hostage negotiation. They would surround the house and then try to negotiate with the Argents for Stiles’ release. Derek hated the thought of just standing and talking, but the sheriff was right; this plan had the least danger to Stiles. The Argents weren’t likely to kill Stiles if he was their only leverage and it was possible that they might release him to his father so that they could claim they’d only been trying to protect him.

The sheriff told Derek to stay back, to stay in the car if at all possible. The hunters would hopefully think twice before opening fire on an officer of the law, but they wouldn’t hesitate about hurting Derek. So Derek agreed, because getting himself killed wasn’t going to help Stiles, but he would be watching for an opening. There were three other cruisers in sight as they approached the Argent house, with deputies in body armour taking up positions around it.

“They know we’re here,” Derek said, glancing up at the house. It was a large residential property, an unlikely site for such a siege, but he caught the glimpse of movement at an upstairs window and saw the rifle there, the person holding the gun keeping behind the wall.

The sheriff nodded. He got out of the car, keeping it between him and the house. He took a megaphone and started addressing the house, demanding that those inside come out with their hands up and surrender.

“Do you really think that will work?” Derek asked. He’d wound down the window so they could have a conversation, but he was still in the passenger seat. He wasn’t sure if the other deputies realised that the sheriff had a werewolf as a ride-along. He definitely didn’t want the Argents to know yet.

The sheriff shrugged and said, “It’ll start a dialogue.”

It took only a few minutes from a window to open a crack and then a voice from within called out, “Why should we talk to you when you have a dog in your front seat?”

Derek recognised that voice. It took all of his self-control not to start growling like the dog Victoria Argent thought he was.

“Where’s my son?” the sheriff demanded through the megaphone.

One of the deputies hurried over. Derek recognised him as one of the ones who’d worked with the children. He stood close to the sheriff’s side.

“Sir, someone else should negotiate. You’re too emotionally involved.”
The sheriff handed over the megaphone and Derek saw that his hands were shaking. The only thing holding Derek together right now was the fact that he could still feel Stiles’ spell, the call for help, drawing him towards the house and downwards. Stiles was in the basement.

Derek focused on the house, on the windows. Victoria Argent was downstairs, in a front room. He couldn’t see her, but her voice was coming through clearly with no electronic trace, so he didn’t believe it was a radio. She was actually there, but hidden behind a wall to avoid snipers. There were two other hunters that Derek could spot, each behind upstairs windows. There were probably more round the back.

This seemed to take far too long. Derek had never been the best at patience and right now he could feel Stiles needing him. The spell hadn’t diminished in the slightest. Maybe Stiles didn’t know they were here; it was possible the basement was heavily soundproofed. Or maybe Stiles had set the spell off and it was still running despite him being unconscious. Or dead.

Each moment he waited, Derek’s anger and anxiety grew. He wanted to launch into an attack. He wanted to get in there, to find Stiles. He didn’t want to sit here while Victoria Argent exchanged meaningless words with a deputy. Every time the deputy suggested that the people inside come out, Victoria would call out that there was no need to, that no crime was going on. When the deputy suggested they come in to prove that, she demanded to see a warrant. She threatened to sue the police department for harassment and trespassing on her property. Derek heard it all, his rage building to a seething mass inside him.

When the deputy specifically asked about Stiles, Victoria cheerfully called out, “Oh, why would we want anything to do with that boy? We certainly wouldn’t invite him into our home.”

That was the last straw, because Derek could feel Stiles needing him, calling out to him. He flung the door of the cruiser open and leapt out, running over the car roof and onto the Argents’ lawn.

He heard the first gunshot and felt a force knock him back, knocking him off his stride, but he kept moving. He charged towards the window where Victoria was. Another gunshot then another. He felt pain blooming in his side but he didn’t let himself care. He just launched at the window, falling inside in a crash of broken glass. He rolled and was on his feet before Victoria could get a shot with the small handgun she held. Derek grabbed her wrist, twisted until the gun fell from her fingers, and then flung Victoria out through the window he’d just broken.

The cops could deal with her. He had to find Stiles.

It took only a few seconds to find a likely door and he charged into it, splintering it off the hinges. Sure enough, there were the steps down to the basement. There was Stiles, hanging in chains in the middle of it all. And there was Chris Argent, starting up the stairs. Fury boiled inside Derek and he leapt, his whole body becoming his weapon as he slammed Chris into the ground. He wanted to sink his claws into the man’s neck, to feel him bleed out beneath him. He wanted to become the monster these people claimed he was, to show them just how violent he could be.

But then there was the sheriff on the steps, telling him to go to Stiles. Because Stiles was what mattered here, more than vengeance. And Derek didn’t want Stiles to see him as a killer.

***

Derek could guess what was wrong with Stiles. He looked at pale and tired as he’d been after the school bombing, and after his experiments with magic. He’d stretched himself too far trying to contact to Derek. Derek had spent the last half hour knowing which direction Stiles was in and that he was in need of help. The only explanation for that was magic. But that didn’t explain the pain.
Stiles was feeling. Derek drew the pain out of him even as he carried Stiles up the stairs and out through the house, past handcuffed hunters, some of whom were going more quietly than others. At any other time, Derek might have felt satisfaction at seeing one of the hunters go for a knife and get slammed into the ground face-first, but right now Derek was having difficult feeling anything but worry.

One of the deputies outside the house saw Stiles in Derek’s arms and his face instantly filled with concern.

“Is he...” the deputy trailed off.

“He’s hurt,” Derek answered. Someone had already called for medical assistance and an ambulance was pulling up at the side of the road. Derek carried Stiles over to them as the paramedics leapt out. It was hard for Derek to let go, but he knew that these men would be better able to look after Stiles’ injuries than he was. He forced his arms to lower Stiles’ motionless form down onto a stretcher and they began searching him for injuries.

One of them came over to Derek and tried to get him to sit down, wanting to lift up Derek’s shirt and see his side. It was only then that Derek felt the throb of pain there. He looked down and saw the blood on his shirt, the holes where the bullets had gone in.

“Don’t worry about me,” Derek said. “Look after Stiles.”

“Torso wounds can be very dangerous, sir,” the paramedic said.

“I’m fine.”

“Adrenaline will be masking the pain but I need to see the damage.”

“I’m fine.” But now that Stiles was in safe hands, he was aware that he wasn’t fine. A burning pain was spreading out from the wounds in his side. They ought to be already healing. The pain should be fading, instead, it seemed to be growing. He saw the paramedic take a nervous step back and felt the faint tingle that meant his eyes were shifting colours. The world seemed to heave for a second. Wolfsbane.

“Sit down before you fall down.” That came from the deputy who’d asked about Stiles. He took hold of Derek’s shoulders and basically pushed him down onto the sidewalk.

“Wolfsbane,” Derek muttered, “In the bullets.”

“Have you got treatment for that?” the deputy asked one of the paramedics, who just shook his head.

“I can treat it,” Derek said. “I need one of the same bullets and a lighter.”

The deputy didn’t argue. He hurried towards the house, calling out to one of the others, “Hey, Carmichael, you smoke, right? Need a lighter.”

Derek tried to swallow down his pain as the deputy hurried back. It took less than a minute and then Derek had Victoria’s gun and was emptying the bullets out onto the sidewalk. This would be better if he had a clean surface, but he’d take what he could get. He broke open one of the bullets, releasing the purple powder within, and then set it alight with the borrowed lighter. Before the ash had even cooled, Derek scraped it up, probably gathering dirt and dust with it, but he couldn’t care about that right now. He shoved the mess against the bleeding wounds.

Burning flowed through his body. He threw his head back and howled in pain. The burned ash and
the wolfsbane met inside him, and it seemed like he whole body was on fire. Searing agony followed
the lines of his veins and arteries until every part of him blazed with torment.

But it was over quickly. He lay on the ground for a moment, gathering himself as the pain faded and
his normal healing kicked in. He was aware of everyone staring at him, including the sheriff who
must have hurried out of the house at the noise.

“What the hell was that about?” he asked.

“Wolfsbane,” Derek said.

“This is why I told you to stay back. You could have got yourself killed. You’re lucky one of those
bullets didn’t go through your brain.”

The sheriff was at Derek’s side them, helping him up. Derek stood. His side throbbed where the
bullets had gone in, but it was already fading. He’d be fine soon.

“They were never going to let you in,” Derek said. “Stiles needed help.”

They both looked towards Stiles now. One of the paramedics had cut away Stiles’ shirt. Derek saw
the angry red welts crossing Stiles’ back and a low growl built in his throat. He wanted to go back to
Chris Argent and sink his claws into the man’s lungs, but when Derek glanced at the house, he saw
Argent being brought out in handcuffs between two deputies and herded towards a police car. If
Derek tried to get justice here, he’d be the one who ended up getting killed. The sheriff was also
staring at those red lines on Stiles’ skin.

“Bastards,” he muttered. Derek suspected he wasn’t alone in wanting to hurt someone right now.

“Sir,” one of the paramedics said, “his injuries appear to be superficial but I’m concerned about the
lack of responsiveness. I want to get him back to the hospital to run some tests. Is there anyone else
who needs medical attention?”

The sheriff looked at Derek.

“I’ll be fine now,” Derek said.

“I really think a medical professional should make that judgement,” the sheriff said. He hesitated,
looking between the unconscious Stiles and the number of police cruisers that were currently being
filled with hunters by the deputies. He looked back at Derek, face pale and body tense.

“Besides, someone needs to stay with Stiles and I have to deal with this mess,” he said. “Get in the
damn ambulance.”

When it was put that way, Derek wasn’t going to argue. He didn’t want to leave Stiles alone right
now and the sheriff had a job to do. So Derek nodded his agreement.

“Don’t take this opportunity to do anything stupid,” the sheriff said.

Derek glanced towards another cruiser. Victoria Argent was glaring at him through the back
window. There was no point doing anything stupid; the people he most wanted to hurt were all in
police custody.

“I won’t,” he promised, then climbed into the back of the ambulance, where Stiles was being
strapped down. He was lying on his side on the stretcher, eyes closed. When Derek reached out to
take Stiles’ hand, his fingers were cold and clammy, but he was still alive. Stiles had recovered from
his previous overuse of magic. He’d recover from this too, Derek told himself.

The ride to the hospital seemed to take forever. Derek sat in the back, getting unnecessary gauze taped over the wounds in his side, and drawing out Stiles’ pain. When Derek arrived, he watched paramedics do handovers, using terminology Derek didn’t understand. Derek just stayed close to Stiles’ side until someone asked him if he was family. It was strange to realise that these hospital staff didn’t have the faintest idea that he was a werewolf. Maybe they hadn’t seen his face on the news reports after the school bombings. Maybe they just weren’t putting the connections together now.

“I’m his boyfriend,” Derek said. Then added, “His father asked me to stay with him.”

Another nurse rounded a corner and this one Derek recognised as Scott’s mother, who’d visited a few times when Stiles was last here. She obviously recognised Derek too and took it upon herself to allow Derek to accompany Stiles now. There were no deputies; they were all busy rounding up the hunters and arresting them for kidnap. There was no one watching over Derek, in the name of protecting the humans around him. There was also no one to protect Derek. If the wrong people realised he was a werewolf, someone could attack him, even in this public place. It would be nice to believe that all the fanatics were currently on their way to the sheriff’s station, but Derek knew better. So Derek went to Scott’s mom.

“Hey,” he said quietly, “would you be able to get me a change of shirt?”

She looked down, taking in the bullet holes and the blood. The wounds beneath were already almost gone, his healing well on the way to dealing with them, but the stain was too obvious. Even in a hospital full of injured people, it was sure to draw attention. If someone realised that there was no injury beneath it, they’d know exactly what he was.

She nodded, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

Derek followed Stiles through the hospital. They took him to a room with a large machine, making Derek wait in a room beside it, a large glass wall separating the two. They wanted to look inside Stiles’ head, to see if there was some injury that was keeping him unconscious. Derek didn’t think there was, but he wouldn’t stop being tense until Stiles opened his eyes again. There was no way to know what else the Argents might have done to him. A doctor emerged and asked Derek what he knew about the injuries. Derek tried his best to explain without mentioning the word ‘magic’. Yes, Stiles had been conscious when he’d found him. No, there was no sign of head trauma. Then he was asked if Stiles had any metal implants. When Derek looked confused, the man explained that the machine used magnets. There were no implants on Stiles’ medical charts, but the doctor wanted to make sure.

“I don’t think so,” Derek said. “He’s never mentioned anything.”

The doctor gave Derek a reassuring smile and promised that they were going to see to it Stiles got the best care possible. Derek just nodded. He returned to staring through the glass as the doctor started up the machine. The thing clanked and clunked. Derek rested his forehead against the cool glass, eyes fixed on Stiles. He wanted to be in there. He wanted to touch him. Instead, he tried to listen out for a heartbeat beneath the loud noises of the machine.

A door opened. Derek glanced round. A man in an expensive-looking suit walked in. Derek wondered if this was another doctor, a consultant or someone. But the man seemed more interested in Derek than what was happening in the room beyond the glass.
“Derek Hale, I assume,” the man said. “I know this must be a difficult time, but I was hoping for an opportunity to talk with you. I was actually planning a trip out to your territory when the sheriff got the call about his son.”

Derek gave the man a suspicious look, “And you would be?”

“Gregory Aichman,” he extended a hand. “I’d like to talk to you about the werewolf situation.”
Chapter 60

There's a little bit of NSFW stuff near the end of this chapter. Only took me sixty chapters to get there!

It's worth noting that all I know about the US law making process comes from a quick read of Wikipedia. And watching The West Wing. Any discrepancies between this fic and real life will be covered under the, "Well, this is already an AU about the werewolf stuff, so clearly this is different too" clause.

Stiles woke slowly, aware first of the fact that he was lying on his side, which wasn’t the most comfortable position. He rolled over onto his back and realised in that moment why he’d been left on his side. He drew in a sharp breath in pain as lines on his back felt like they’d been set on fire.

There was a sudden movement from beside him. Stiles looked over and saw his dad jerking awake in the chair next to the bed. Their eyes met and then his dad was reaching out for his hand.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. Stiles took in a little more of his situation. He was lying on a hospital bed in a private room, the lights turned down low. No one else was in sight, but Stiles distinctly remembered someone else taking him from the Argents’ basement.

“Where’s Derek?” Stiles asked.

“He had to go back to the pack. He wanted to be here to watch you, but we were having enough trouble about me arresting half the hunters in town. Plus, he said he needed to talk to Peter about something important.”

“But he came to rescue me?”

“When he told me that he could sense were you were, it seemed like the only logical choice. Of course, that was before I realised that Argents had stowed you in such an obvious location.” He shrugged a little. “Scott’s gone to the pack to pick up some of the energy-boosting tea for you. Should be back soon.”

Stiles made a face, “Do I really need the tea?”

“Did you exhaust yourself magically telling Derek where you were?”

“No,” Stiles said. “I exhausted myself magically breaking the barriers that were stopping me from telling Derek where I was.” He supposed he’d drink the foul tea. It probably did help with the whole magical exhaustion issue. It just tasted awful.

He rolled over onto his side to relieve the pain in his back.

“What’s the prognosis?” Stiles asked. “Will I ever play the piano again?”

“God, I hope not,” his dad answered, chuckling a little at the joke. Stiles’ attempt at music lessons in early childhood had not ended well. “You’ll be fine. Grazed wrists from the cuffs. Bruising on your
back and legs, but no broken skin there. Your clothes probably gave you some protection. You should be out of here tomorrow.”

“Thank god. I’ve had enough of hospitals to last me to lifetime.”

“Me too, kiddo.”

“So what happened to the Argents?”

“They’re in custody back at the station,” his dad said. “I’m going to need a statement from you when you’re feeling up to it.”

“Up to it now,” Stiles said. His dad pulled out a notepad and Stiles gave a concise account of what had happened, from his jeep being sabotaged to the rescue and everything in between. His dad listened and wrote it all down. When Stiles had finished, it seemed his dad wasn’t.

“You said Victoria Argent was the one who hit you,” his dad said, “not Chris?”

“No. Chris wasn’t even in the room. When he came down and saw what was going on, he took the cane from her. I think torture wasn’t on their agreed upon list of things to do to me.”

“Interesting.”

“Why interesting?”

“Because that contradicts directly with Chris Argent’s signed confession.”

“He confessed?”

“Given that we caught him red-handed, there wasn’t much hope for him. He confessed to the kidnap, the assault, the torture. He claimed he organised the whole thing and his wife was against the whole idea.”

“So he’s taking the fall,” Stiles said.

“So it would seem.”

That didn’t make any sense to Stiles. Chris hadn’t even liked the fact that his wife had beaten him, so why would he be willing to take the blame for it? Maybe Stiles was just too tired right now for his thoughts to unravel that. Victoria was cruel and vicious and Stiles couldn’t see how anyone could care about her enough to try and protect her. Then again, he couldn’t see how anyone could care about her enough to marry her, but Chris had done that too.

“Don’t let it work,” Stiles said. “Don’t let them release Victoria. She’s evil.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to stop it,” his dad promised. “With your testimony and the fact that she opened fire when we had the house surrounded, we should be able to hold her for trial. I’ll make a case to the judge that releasing any of them on bail would put your life and others at risk.”

“She opened fire?” Stiles had a suddenly memory of Derek bursting into the basement. “Derek! He was bleeding.”

“He’s fine. There was some wolfsbane in the bullets, but fortunately he knew how to counteract it. He was all healed up when he went back to the pack.” Stiles’ dad reached out and gave Stiles’ hand a squeeze. “He really does care about you. He took a hell of a risk to keep you safe.”
Stiles nodded because it was too difficult to put into words how he felt right now. He felt the fuzzy, warm glow that came from knowing Derek loved him so much that he’d take a bullet for him. But he also felt fear about what might have happened, and anger that Derek had taken such a risk. He felt ashamed that he was the one lying in a hospital bed when Derek had been hurting being a hero and deserved to be the one being taken care of. All those things churned through him all at once, and it was exhausting.

“What happens now?” Stiles asked.

“Now it’s a police issue. You just focus on feeling better.”

Stiles was still feeling tired, though nowhere near as bad as it had been after the school bombing. That might be because he hadn’t drained his magic quite so much, or because he was building up some sort of stamina. Either way, he was content to just go back to sleep, knowing that his dad was watching over him and the Derek was safely back with the pack.

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When Stiles woke again, the lights were up in the room. He turned to look at the chair beside the bed, expecting to see his dad or maybe Scott. Instead, he saw a grey-haired guy in a suit.

“Who the hell are you?” Stiles asked, because apparently his sense of tact hadn’t woken up yet.

“Ah, Mr Stilinski,” the man said, setting aside the tablet he’d been tapping away on, “I’m glad you’re awake.”

“Where the hell is my dad?”

“Your father had to return to work. Apparently there’s quite a mess to tidy up in the wake of several prominent hunters kidnapping a teenaged boy.”

“So he left a creepy old guy in my room while I was asleep?”

The man frowned, looking mildly offended. “Old? I’m forty seven, that’s hardly old.”

“But you agree about the creepy part?” Stiles asked.

“I understand that finding a stranger near you while you’ve been asleep might be a little unnerving.”

“And yet here you are.” Stiles wished he had his phone on him. He wanted to call his dad or someone. This guy hadn’t made any threatening moves, but that didn’t always mean much.

“I wanted to speak to you as soon as possible,” the man said. “I was already in a meeting with your father to arrange a conversation when he got the message that you were missing. Given everything that’s just happened with the Argents, it seemed speed was of the essence so I asked your father if I could wait to speak with you when you woke up.”

“I can’t believe he agreed to that.”

“He left a deputy to watch as well, but he’s gone to fetch some coffees. It was probably him closing the door when he left that woke you up. I expect he’ll be back any minute.” The guy seemed perfectly relaxed about all this.

“You still haven’t explained who the hell you are or why you want to talk to me. Are you a reporter?” Stiles couldn’t believe that his dad would leave him alone with a reporter, especially when
he was hurt and vulnerable. He would also need to have a conversation with whichever deputy his
dad had left to watch him about how leaving him unconscious with a stranger was probably not what
his dad had in mind.

“No. My name is Gregory Aichman. I’m a senator. I’ve been following the situation in Beacon Hills
closely and I wanted to talk to you about the werewolf situation because of a bill that I will be
introducing to the Senate Chamber next month.”

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Deputy Parrish drove Stiles out to the werewolf territory because his dad didn’t think he should be
driving but was too busy dealing with the aftermath of huntergate to drive Stiles himself. The
sheriff’s department were questioning hunters who had been associated with the Argents to see how
far the conspiracy went, and now a number of them were making claims of discrimination. To make
matters worse, a lot of people were angry, claiming that the sheriff had left the town helpless by
locking away the top hunters. On top of all that, Stiles’ dad had to put together evidence that the
Argents and their minions shouldn’t be released on bail, but he had to do so in a way that wouldn’t
get the entire case thrown out of court because of personal involvement prejudicing police procedure.

Stiles had seen his dad for all of twenty minutes while they went through the hospital discharge
process, but then he’d had to get back to work. Stiles decided to give him a hard time about letting
Senator Creepy stay near him once he was slightly less stressed out.

Parrish pulled the cruiser over near the side of the road by the edge of the territory, “Do you need me
to come with you?”

“No, I’m fine. See you later.”

“I’ll just wait and make sure no one kidnaps you between here and the boundary,” Parrish said.

Stiles rolled his eyes but didn’t argue. He climbed out of the cruiser and walked up into the woods.
He crossed the boundary easily enough and made it about twenty metres into the territory when
Derek came racing through the trees. Derek pulled himself up short right in front of Stiles, greeting
him with a hand on the shoulder though it was clear he wanted to be more enthusiastic in his
greeting. Stiles hugged Derek, who held him gingerly, as though afraid the touch might break him.

“I’m fine,” Stiles said. “Some bruising, but it’ll heal. Thanks to you.”

“I didn’t do that much,” Derek said. His fingers brushed against Stiles’ neck and soothing warmth
flowed down through Stiles’ back, the pain leeching away from the marks on his back. “I tried
calling you and when you didn’t answer, I called your dad. He was already organising a search for
you when I felt... I felt you needing me.”

“Supernatural distress call. I’m going to have to remember that spell.”

Derek pulled back a little from the hug, but left his hands on Stiles’ body. Once he could look Stiles
in the eye, he said, “I’m just glad you called on me.”

“To be fair, I probably would have called my dad to rescue me, but I was using the connection to the
nemeton, which connects me to the pack. I can’t believe you crossed the boundary to help me. You
could have got yourself killed.”

“I was with your father. And the hunters were rather distracted.”

Derek kept his hand on Stiles’ arm and they started back towards the house. They didn’t get very far
before Peter came hurrying out of the woods. He greeted Stiles with a tentative hug as Derek had.

“Hey, Peter.”

“I’m glad you’re safe, Stiles.”

“Me too. But there are other things we should discuss, probably where the rest of the pack can’t overhear.”

Derek looked between the two of them, “Is that including me?”

Stiles looked to Peter and shrugged, “Up to you.”

Peter only hesitated a moment before saying, “Come with us.”

They headed off into the woods looking for a hidden area to talk. It only took a few minutes to find a clearing with some rocks suitable for sitting on. Derek settled down next to Stiles. The way he kept his hand gently touching Stiles was probably a sign of how worried he’d been.

“Well, what do you want to talk about?” Peter asked.

“Apparently Senator Whatshisface talked to Derek,” Stiles said. He glanced at Derek, who nodded. “He says he’s going to be introducing a bill to basically say that werewolves are citizens who deserve due process if they do things wrong and shouldn’t be persecuted without cause.”

“So he claims,” Derek said.

“Well he showed me the draft of the bill and it seems pretty fair,” said Stiles. “He asked that I help with a campaign to build support.”

“Do you think it will work?” Peter asked.

“Almost certainly not. I don’t think there’s much chance of the bill passing, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t give it a good try and in the meantime we can do our best to demonstrate that werewolves deserve fairness. That’s the other part.”

“The other part?”

“Well, the leaders of the local hunters are currently in a jail cell so someone needs to officially take charge of protecting the humans of Beacon Hills from werewolves.”

Peter looked at him, “I assume you’re going to follow this up with a name.”

“Well, the senator can’t just make an appointment, but he can make suggestions, pull a few strings.”

“Stiles,” Peter said, “are you planning on arriving at a point any time soon?”

“My dad. Or more accurately, the local police force. The senator’s going to make the point that it’s already the sheriff department’s job to protect the citizens of Beacon Hills, so giving them this job makes perfect sense. He says it’s time that we stop letting vigilantes think they’re above the law and that the situation with the Argents will give him some leverage to get things back under control of an organisation with some oversight.” From the conversation Stiles had had with the senator, it seemed he’d been arguing against unregulated hunters practically since the start of the war but now he thought the kidnapping of a human teenager should win him more support. “If it works, then my dad will get to decide what measures are necessary to protect humans, and what measures aren’t.”
“Meaning the boundary.”

Stiles nodded. He’d been studying the magic books, which his dad had retrieved from the Argents’ house, and he’d had a period of boredom in his hospital room between then conversation with the senator and his release. The books didn’t describe the boundary spell specifically, but they had enough in there that Stiles had been able to go through the principles and figure out how it was probably done, particularly given the symbols that were visible on the trees.

“I think I should be able to take it down,” Stiles said, “but I have conditions.”

“Conditions?” both werewolves said it at the same time. Peter sounded angry; Derek sounded hurt. The hand that had been casually resting on Stiles’ shoulder dropped away.

“I’m not going to take the boundary down until we know whether or not my dad’s going to be in charge of the hunters. If he’s in charge, we can do this all officially. If he’s not, we’ll have to be sneaky about it.”

Peter nodded. “You said ‘conditions’ plural.”

“A lot will be riding on this and if the boundary comes down it won’t just be this pack. All the local packs will be affected. I need you to talk to the other alphas and make sure everyone agrees to be on their best behaviour. Like the school thing, everyone will be watching Beacon Hills to see what happens. If a werewolf hurts a human, even if the human provokes it, this whole thing could come crashing down.”

“I’m aware of that, Stiles,” Peter said. “I hardly think this needs to be a condition; my pack’s future is at stake.”

“It’s not just about the pack though. If my dad pushes this through and something goes wrong, he’ll get a load of the blame too. I’m looking out for him. So the condition is, you can’t hurt anyone. At all. Even if the barrier comes down, even if the bill passes and werewolves get legal rights as full citizens, you can’t go after anyone. Not the hunters. Not Deaton. That’s my other condition.”

Peter didn’t answer right away. He looked at Stiles seriously, apparently thinking it over. At last, he nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “I suspect your father will see that the Argents are dealt with under human law for their actions to you, which will shield them from my wrath, at least for a while. I don’t intend to assault a prison. As for Deaton, if you bring down the barrier, I won’t go after him.” He smiled then, “At least not until sufficient time has passed and I can find a way to make it look like an accident or an attack by a human.”

In some ways, this was comforting. If Peter had just outright promised not to hurt Deaton, Stiles wouldn’t have known whether to believe it. This statement, he could be sure was the truth and he was confident that Peter was smart enough to follow through with making something look like an accident. Stiles didn’t feel too worried though that he might be an accomplice in some future murder; Deaton was probably smart enough to get the hell of town or skilled enough in magic to make it a fair fight. In some ways, the sensible option was to let the two of them deal with this and just stay out of the way. So Stiles nodded his acceptance.

“Any other conditions?” Peter asked.

“One last one. If things go to plan and the bill passes, whether now or at some point in the future, I want you to offer Scott the bite.”
Peter looked surprised. Stiles tried not to feel smug that he’d managed to surprise Peter.

“You want me to make him a werewolf?” Peter asked.

“I want him to have the choice. He gets asthma really badly; he’s been in and out of hospital the whole time I’ve known him. If the bite will help him, he should have the option. He might say no. I mean, even if the barrier comes down, it won’t be exactly safe to be a werewolf. It’s not like my dad can arrest every asshole fanatic. But it will be up to him.”

Peter nodded again. “Agreed.”

Stiles let out a slow breath. Tension he hadn’t known he was feeling slipped out of his body.

“You didn’t ask for anything for yourself,” Peter said.

Now it was Stiles’ turn to be caught be surprised, “What the hell would I ask for? I’ve already got what I need.”

Warm fingers caught hold of Stiles’ and squeezed gently.

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Stiles expected the hugs this time when he returned to the house. Millie basically launched herself at him. He lifted her up and spun her around a bit.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said.

“Did you get yourself nearly killed again?” she asked.

“No bombs this time.” He tried to dismiss what happened. He didn’t want to talk about his fear or the pain or all the things he’d been feeling. Beside him, Derek put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. Stiles set Millie down to allow some of the others in to hug him. Stiles enjoyed it, though he made a show of protest as Erica ruffled his hair.

He got to pick what the pack watched when they squashed into the living room that evening for a movie, even though he tried to protest that Derek should get that honour. Everyone was treating him like a hero again, even though all he’d done was fall into the Argents’ trap. This was worse than the aftermath of the school. At least that time he’d actually done something, even if he hadn’t believed it. This time, he’d got captured and beaten and it felt like the pack were trying to celebrate that. He knew they were really celebrating his return, but what he knew and what he felt weren’t the same.

He sat through the movie, spending half of the time wishing he’d picked a shorter one, then he headed out to his room as soon as he could escape, dragging Derek out after him. He was hurrying, almost running, as they crossed the woods to the new building. Derek hurried without hesitation or question.

“You seem to be in a hurry,” Derek said. Stiles got them into his bedroom and shut the door firmly behind them.

“Well, it occurs to me that I never properly thanked you for saving my life,” Stiles said. “Again.”

Stiles put a hand on Derek’s shoulder and pushed him backwards until Derek’s back was against the door. He crowded in close, pressing their lips together. Chest pressed against chest until they could feel each other’s breaths. Stiles worked his hand through Derek’s hair, silky strands feeding between his fingers.
“What,” Derek gasped when they came up for air, “exactly did you have in mind?”

Stiles ran a hand down Derek’s hip and slipped it forward slightly, hinting at a destination.

“Well,” he said, “there are rules about how we have to keep our clothes on around each other, but we can still get creative.”

He didn’t push things. Derek might be hesitant, whether because of Stiles’ dad or his own doubts. What Stiles had in mind wasn’t so much walking a fine line as balancing on a tightrope over a pit of vipers. Technically, he’d be following his dad’s rules but he’d be going against the spirit of them and they’d all know it. He wouldn’t blame Derek if he wanted to back off. He didn’t want to try too hard; pressure worked both ways. So he waited. He’d made his intentions clear and now it was time to see how Derek responded.

“Creative, huh?” Derek said. He kissed Stiles again and Stiles could feel the way his lips were turned up in a smile.

He hooked his hands under Stiles’ ass and lifted him up. Stiles gave a yelp of surprise and leaned his weight against Derek’s chest so he didn’t fall backwards. Laughing, he let Derek carry him over onto the bed.

Then Derek hesitated.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “We’ve had our arguments and your dad...”

“If you’re thinking about my dad right now, I’m doing something wrong,” Stiles said, “but if you don’t want to, I get it.”

“I want to. I just don’t want to push you too far.”

“This isn’t too far,” Stiles said. “Besides, what I have in mind doesn’t even involve taking our pants off.” He leaned in for another kiss, running a finger over Derek’s crotch through his jeans. He spoke, his lips brushing against Derek’s as they moved, “I hope you aren’t wearing nice underwear.”

Derek laughed again, the sound swallowed up as they kissed, the joy passing between them.

“Are you sure you’re not too tired?” Derek asked.

“Not for this. I’ve been wanting to do this since the first time I saw you with your shirt off.”

Stiles ran his fingers over the front of Derek’s pants, feeling for the flesh beneath, feeling Derek’s cock through the fabric. Derek did the same. Warm fingers applied soft pressure through pants and Stiles moaned into Derek’s mouth. Somehow knowing that they were technically breaking the rules made this more exciting, it added a taste of danger to the kisses.

They fingered each other through their clothes, working each other to climax while they kissed and pressed their bodies together on the bed. Stiles was alive and safe and things were good and he wanted to celebrate this moment. It took a few minutes before he was cumming in his pants and then he collapsed on his side on the bed, hand still rubbing over Derek’s crotch until he was cumming too.

They lay side-by-side for a minute.

“Your dad’s going to kill me,” Derek said.

“What are you talking about? We never even took our clothes off in front of each other. You’ll be
able to look him in the eye and say that of course we’ve never had sex.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to look him in the eye again.”

“Well you should. I think he’s starting to like you.”

“I guess saving your life twice has worked in my favour,” Derek said.

“Make it three times and he might even put you on the Christmas card list.”

Derek laughed, and kissed the tip of Stiles’ nose.
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stiles decided to try taking down the boundary by himself, just to make sure it worked. The last thing he wanted was to have all the reporters and everyone here and have the spell fail on him. Besides, he wasn’t sure how long this would take. He could work out something else for later.

He had his notes all written out and a supply of items from the magic box. The problem was that the boundary spell was self-sustaining. Most spells had a limited lifespan, but the boundary had been built into the trees and the energy currents that flowed through Beacon Hills. If one part weakened or was damaged, the nearby parts of the boundary would restore it. It was a masterpiece of a spell. Stiles had spent the past week, while lawyers and politicians argued about hunters, going over what he knew and what he could work out, and he was thoroughly impressed with Deaton’s craftsmanship. So he wanted as much time as possible to bring this thing down before the camera crews turned up.

He needed to isolate one of the trees. He pulled out a small container of mountain ash and started pouring it in a circle around one of the carved trees that formed the boundary line. He kept the line thin because he had to make the circle wide enough that he could stay on the inside. He used almost the whole jar of ash, trying not to wonder what this might mean if he couldn’t get this spell to work first time.

Isolating one tree wouldn’t bring down the barrier. The spell would just stretch between the two marked trees on either side of the one he was working on. He’d need a hell of a lot of mountain ash to make a usable gap in the boundary and the ash would be washed away the first time it rained. He needed a more permanent solution. So Stiles picked up the silver knife from the collection of gear he’d left at the roots of the tree. He ran a finger over the markings, feeling the tingle of energy there, and set the knife against the trunk. He drew a disruption symbol, carving it into the bark, willing the spell to end.

He did that for each symbol carved there, and then leaned against the tree trunk for a minute, gathering his strength for the next part. He hesitated, then picked up the thermos flask he’d brought with him and drank some of Noshiko’s horrible tea. This was the easy part. He’d broken the spell on this tree but unless he felt like finding a few tons of mountain ash and doing this on every single tree along the boundary, it wouldn’t be enough.

He found a clean patch of trunk and pressed the tip of the silver knife against the bark of the tree and carved a new set of symbols. Ten runes, carved in a specific placement to make an eleventh symbol, another disruption symbol. He reached down into his pile of stuff and picked up the plastic pot he’d used for the herb paste. He used a stick of cedar wood to apply the paste to the runes he’d carved, since the wood was associated with rituals of cleansing and he was trying to cleanse the boundary spell from these woods.

When Stiles was done, he set everything down and crouched beside his mountain ash circle. He drew in a breath and with it gathered up his energy, visualising what he wanted to happen next. He held his hands over the line as he held his magic within him. Then he exhaled sharply and brought his hands apart. The line of mountain ash parted and he sent his spell shooting along the line of trees. This tree had been part of the boundary spell so it merged back in with them easily, but now it held the disruption spell and Stiles’ energy sent that shooting out along the boundary. He heard sharp cracks as tree bark split suddenly, the symbols carved there getting slashed and distorted. He could
feel the energy of it trembling like the aftershock of an earthquake, rippling outwards. His disruption spell would get weaker the further out it went, but it should still be enough to weaken Deaton’s boundary spell, and without the complete spell to renew itself, the remnants of the boundary should fade like any other spell.

Stiles straightened up. The world spun around him and he fell.

Suddenly arms were around him, holding him up.

“Hey,” Stiles said, looking sleepily up at Derek. “When did you get here?”

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t exhaust yourself.”

“Like I’d do something like that.”

Derek looped an arm under Stiles’ legs and lifted him up.

“Come on,” he said, cradling Stiles close. “Let’s put you to bed so you can have a nap.”

“No. I’ve got stuff to prepare for later.”

“After you’ve had a couple of hours’ sleep and some of that tea.”

Stiles closed his eyes and leaned his head against Derek’s arm, “I’m glad I didn’t do that with cameras there. That would have been embarrassing.”

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Stiles felt better for a nap and a pot of Noshiko’s energy-boosting tea. He still wasn’t back up to full strength but he had a job to do, so he looked up the simplest light spell in his magic books. He wanted something he could make look impressive without taking much energy. If he could do it without taking any energy, that would be great. He headed into the house, where Peter was addressing the entirety of the pack, talking about how there was still danger from fanatics and those hunters who hadn’t been arrested for kidnap and assault.

Stiles didn’t think anyone would attack during the official deboundarying ceremony, given all the cameras that would be there, but it was still a risk. Someone might decide that a public display was worth inevitably getting caught. There would be a load of deputies there, but still Peter was giving warnings and discussing strategies with the pack. He looked up when Stiles walked in and nodded to him, wrapping things up quickly. Then they all walked together out towards the boundary or, more accurately, to where the boundary had been up until that morning.

It shouldn’t be obvious to anyone else that the boundary was down. Stiles had purposely picked a tree for his spell that was away from where today’s main event was going to take place. Unless someone studied the symbols on the trees too closely or a werewolf crossed without a reaction, no one should know that Stiles had already worked the spell.

Peter led the procession out to the edge of the territory, with Stiles on one side of him and Derek on the other. Stiles had a bag of magical and fake magical stuff to perform his ritual. When they reached the boundary line, Stiles’ dad was already waiting there with half a dozen deputies and about as many reporters. Keeping a safe distance, there were groups of people. Stiles took a moment to read banners. One cluster of humans had signs about equality and fairness. The other had signs calling for killers to be kept out of town and for dogs to be put down. No one was throwing stuff yet, probably because of the cluster of deputies between them, but both groups were glaring fiercely at the other.
Senator Aichman stood beside Stiles’ dad. He stepped forward and gave a short speech about peace and building a better future and how today would stand as a monument that future generations would look back on as the moment that changed their world for the better. Stiles tried not to roll his eyes because, while most of the cameras were focused on Aichman, there was a chance he might get caught doing so and he didn’t want that to be the image plastered all over the news.

When Aichman was finally done with his little speech, Stiles got out his equipment to begin his fake ritual. He wasn’t sure how many people watching the recording of this would know anything about magic, but he could guess that lots of them would try to copy him. He knew that if he’d ever seen video footage of someone doing magic, he’d have copied it for sure. So he had his whole plan worked up around harmless things. He drew a long line between two of the boundary trees using a birch branch. He waved his hands over the line and then sprinkled it with a mixture of herbs from the kitchen, with some glitter mixed in for good measure. He muttered under his breath as he went through his act, quietly enough that only the werewolves would be able to tell that he was singing the elements song.

After about a minute of nonsense, he stood in the middle of the line he’d drawn, raised his hands, and then muttered the words of the actual light spell from his magic book. The air filled with sparkles, like a shimmering curtain spread between the trees. The tiny lights glittered and shone in the air, and then drifted slowly downwards, settling like dust on the earth and fading to darkness as they fell.

Stiles turned to Peter and smiled, “The boundary is down.”

Peter smiled and stepped forward, offering his hand to Stiles to shake. Then he stepped between the trees. Everyone looked at the symbols carved there as part of the boundary spell, but they didn’t light up. Stiles let out a breath but otherwise tried not to show how nervous he’d been. Derek came up to him and squeezed his shoulder while Peter walked down to Senator Aichman and shook hands with him in front of the cameras.

“I hope this will be the beginning of a new time of peaceful coexistence,” Peter said. “By working together, all our children can have a better future.”

It was Peter as his charming best, all smiles and apparent sincerity.

“What are you going to do now?” one of the reporters asked.

“Right now? We were planning on going into the town. Do you know that some of the children have never eaten pizza?”

This got a chuckle from the pro-werewolf people. Stiles caught sight of Allison standing among them, holding a sign saying that laws should apply to everyone. She gave him a smile and he smiled back. He knew this must be a tough time for her. She was suing for emancipation given the situation with her parents. Stiles knew he probably ought to feel sympathy for her having both her parents locked away, but he could only think that this was probably the best thing for her. Her parents’ reaction to her doubts had sent her completely in the opposite direction to the one they’d intended and she’d gone on national television denouncing her parents as violent fanatics. Stiles would have to talk to her about the campaign to get the bill through. But not today.

Today, Stiles walked with a cluster of werewolves out of the werewolf territory. They probably could have got cars, but the walk meant something. The walk meant they were taking ownership of their freedom. Peter walked at the front of the group, with the rest trailing after him. A group of deputies stayed with them, but their weapons were aimed outwards instead of in, ready to protect the werewolves from attack instead of threatening them.
Some of the little ones were being carried and after a few minutes Millie forced her way between Stiles and Derek, demanding that she be carried too. Derek rolled his eyes and complained that she was too old for this.

“You’ve carried me,” Stiles pointed out, “and I’m older than she is.”

“You were hurt,” Derek said. “It doesn’t count.”

But he lifted her up into a piggyback anyway.

“Marshmallow,” Stiles muttered, causing laughter from some of the others, including Millie.

Some of the news crews followed the group down towards town, recording the cheerful group. Stiles had booked ahead and they had an entire pizzeria reserved for the pack, but he and Derek had another destination, as did Millie. She had a birthday party to get to.

The three of them slipped away while the news crews were setting up around the pizzeria to get footage of the pack's first day in town. They headed towards the bowling alley. Millie clung to Stiles’ hand, seeming both scared and excited. She’d never been to a birthday party before and it was clearly a daunting experience, but she was smiling when they walked inside and saw a cluster of kids from her school. She let go of Stiles and hurried over, but Derek hesitated, looking round the place as though he expected fanatics and bombers to emerge from behind shelves of bowling balls.

“We shouldn’t leave her alone,” Derek said quietly.

Stiles agreed. The Argents and a great many of the hunters had been locked up, but there were still assholes and fanatics out there who’d love to take a shot at a helpless girl. But on the other hand, they didn’t want to loom too close to the birthday party and ruin the fun. So Stiles took Derek by the hand and towed him over to the counter.

“We’d like a lane please,” he smiled at the guy behind the counter.

“What are you doing?” Derek asked.

“We are having our first real date,” Stiles said.

Derek, who’d run into bullets for him, now looked anxious.

“I haven’t bowled in years,” he said. “I’m not sure I remember how.”

“That’s OK. If you need help, I can help you.” Stiles ran a hand down Derek’s arm. “If you need help adjusting your throw.” He hooked his other hand round Derek and onto his hip. “Or adjusting your stance.”

Derek smiled a little as he got the hint, “You’re devious.”

“Guilty,” Stiles grinned. Derek leaned in for a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me through this behemoth. I hope you’ve enjoyed it as much as I have. Thank you to everyone who's left comments. I'm not always great at
replying to comments, but they are always, always appreciated.

I'm going to have a bit of a breather with a couple of short fics. I'll be posting a Shadows of Tomorrow one-shot and a shortish Teen Wolf fic with Stiles being courted by a bunch of different alphas and Derek putting no effort whatsoever into his courtship gifts.

My next big fic will be a possessed!Stiles fic which I still need to come up with a name for. It will involve a roadtrip through Vegas.

For whatever random fandom stuff has caught my interest this week, come follow me on Tumblr. For more about my writing, check out my blog.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!