Making Connections
by KouriArashi

Summary

Every ten years, the hunter community hosts a gathering of all the hunters in the area, to share information and discuss tactics and strategy. This time, Chris Argent is the host, and a hundred hunters or more are coming to Beacon Hills.

Notes

Hi, everybody, I'm back! You can't get rid of me. ^_^

This fic is subtitled 'How to Win Friends and Influence People, by Stiles Stilinski', and as you can guess it will have a somewhat lighter tone than 'The Boy In Red', because let's face it, even I can only handle so much angst. If I keep torturing Stiles, eventually I'll break him, and I was taught as a young child that I should be careful with my toys. :)

This fic will have a fair number of original characters, and as such I've had to pare down the pack's involvement because otherwise I'd have a main cast of about twenty people and eventually I would go insane. So this fic will be very Stiles and Allison centric, with some Derek, and later Scott and Erica, joining in. Hope that's okay with everyone. Enjoy!
Chapter 1

The pack is involved in a lively game of capture the flag when Scott shouts, “Allison, your dad is calling you!” Their bags and the phones inside them are on the side of the ‘field’, about fifty feet away, but that’s nothing to a werewolf’s hearing. Allison, like all of them, has a special ringtone for her father so she’ll know when she shouldn’t ignore it.

“Time out!” Stiles shouts, for the benefit of the others but mostly because Erica is sneaky enough to try to keep playing as Allison trots over to her things. That’s okay; he needs a lemonade break anyway. It’s a gorgeous early summer day, but the combination of the sun and the exertion are making him sweat like a pig and thirsty besides. Shirts long ago went by the wayside; even the girls are just wearing bikini tops and short-shorts. Erica would play naked if they would let her, but nobody will let her.

He keeps half an ear on Allison’s phone conversation. “Hi, Dad, what’s up? Uh huh . . . now? Okay . . . oh. Is everything okay? . . . uh huh . . . uh huh . . . okay. I’ll see you soon, then.” She flips her phone shut and says, loud enough for the pack to hear, “He needs me to come home. Stiles, he wants to see you too.”

“That can’t be good,” Stiles says.

“He says it’s not bad,” Allison says, somewhat skeptically. “Hunter stuff, he said.”

“Goody,” Stiles says, picking up his shirt and pulling it over his head. “No time like the present.” He waves to the others. “Hey, we’ll be back in an hour or so.”

There was a time, not so long ago, that at least two or three others would have insisted on going with them. But they had a blessedly quiet spring, and nothing exciting has happened in months. Derek has stopped clinging, and the others are more relaxed about Stiles venturing out on his own. Besides, humanity aside, Allison is one of their best fighters and one of Stiles’ chief enforcers. He’ll be safe enough with her.

So they grab a bottle of water each and head back to Stiles’ Jeep. They’re playing out on the preserve, so her house isn’t far away. Stiles enjoys her company. Scott is his best friend, and Erica is his, well, best friend with benefits, and Derek of course is his lupa. But Allison is still a close friend. She’s the only other human in the pack, so she’s who he hangs out with while the wolves are running around in the forest. The time when he would have felt awkward to be alone in her presence is long since past.

He still isn’t one hundred percent comfortable around Chris, despite the fact that they’ve been allies multiple times now. He also doesn’t like the vague frown on the man’s face as they enter the living room. Allison greets her father with a hug; Stiles greets him with a handshake, and they sit down on the sofa.

“As you both know, hunters are not a tight-knit community,” he says. “We’re spread out all over the globe. There are some families who keep in touch, and there’s a loose code of conduct that governs us – not the Argent Code, that’s different – and so I suppose you would say we’re more of a brotherhood than an organization. There are certain rules we’re all expected to follow.”

“Like extending hospitality when other hunters are in town,” Stiles surmises.

“Yes, exactly,” Chris says. He shifts uncomfortably and continues, “Every ten years, there is a . . .
conclave, is what they call it. A gathering of all the hunters from different families around North America. To share intelligence, update our knowledge, et cetera. It lasts a week.”

“And you want me to look after the kids while you’re gone,” Stiles says, with a solemn nod. “Got it.”

Chris gives him that annoyed look that he wears so often while Stiles is present. “Each decade, there’s an honor bestowed upon a hunter that has particularly distinguished themselves in the preceding years.” Looking as if he’s bit down on a lemon, he says, “This time it’s me.”

“Wow,” Stiles says. “Congratulations,” he adds, with sincerity, because he knows that all this hunter stuff is important to Chris. Allison echoes him. “Is this because you killed Kali?”

“That’s undoubtedly part of it,” Chris says. “I’ve heard rumors that the honor was going to go to Vivien, but . . .”

“It can’t be presented posthumously, I take it,” Stiles says.

Chris shrugs. “If you’re dead, it means you don’t deserve it.”

“Fair,” Stiles says. “Who decides this shit, anyway?”

“There’s a special council of some of the older hunters,” Chris says. “Basically, once you get too old to fight. It’s assumed that if you lived that long, you’re probably pretty good at what we do. I don’t know how they choose. Not very much is known about the council of elders, actually.”

Stiles fidgets for a moment. “Was Gerard on it?”

“No, actually,” Chris says. “Gerard hadn’t yet retired from active hunting. He probably would have been in ten years or so.”

With a nod, Stiles says, “Okay, that makes sense. But I’m assuming you didn’t actually want me over here to tell me that exciting news.”

“The distinguished hunter,” Chris says, “is given the honor of hosting the gathering.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. He blinks. A moment later, it sets in. “Oh. Shit. You mean a few dozen hunters are coming to Beacon Hills?”

“Probably more like a hundred,” Chris says. “Yeah.”

“When?”

“Next week.”

“Next week?” Stiles squawks. “Geez, they don’t give a guy much time to prepare for a party, do they.”

Chris sighs again. “It’s a matter of security. The conclave tends to attract its share of party crashers, so to speak. It’s rare that so many hunters gather in one place, and some monsters think of it as an opportunity to take out a bunch of us at once. So the elders have probably known for months, but they don’t announce the location or the host of honor until the week before. We’ve all known it’s coming, because it’s always the week of midsummer, and the people who are in the running are usually aware of the possibility they’ll need to host, but nobody knew where until today.”

“Hoo boy.” Stiles shoves both hands through his hair. “Well, it’s a little short notice, but we had
been talking about taking a trip this summer to LA and San Francisco to look at some college
campuses. I mean, there’s no chance we’re all going to wind up at the same college, but we want to
at least wind up in the same city, so we can get a place together and – pack stuff, never mind, you
don’t care – anyway, we can bump that trip up to next week.”

“There’s going to be . . . a hitch,” Chris says. “Allison needs to be at the convention.”

“Hah! How about no,” Stiles says.

Chris rubs a hand over his face. “I’m not exactly thrilled with the concept myself, believe it or not.
But there’s some Argent family history and hunter politics you have to understand. It’s tradition in
most families that the boys are trained to be soldiers . . . and the women, leaders.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. “So that’s why Vivien was the only woman in the alpha pack hunters.”

“Basically, yeah,” Chris says. “And Allison is the only girl in her generation of Argents. In fact, after
Kate’s death, she’s the only living female Argent at all.”

“Reverse sexism, yay,” Allison says, rolling her eyes.

“No other women at all?” Stiles asks, surprised. “What are the odds?”

“Gerard had a sister, but she’s dead now,” Chris says. “He also had a brother. His sister had two
sons, and her brother had one son. One of them is also deceased now. That generation has had four
children – five counting Allison. Three of them are boys, and the only other girl died young when
she fell through some ice during a winter hunt. So Allison is the only girl. She is rather literally the
Argent family princess. And believe me when I say that there is no excuse for her not to attend.”

“Why do we care what some old hunters think?” Allison asks, still clearly dubious.

“They’re old, but they’re hardly senile,” Chris says, “and you don’t want to give them a reason to
look closer at Beacon Hills. I suspect that they’re already far too skeptical of the fact that I live in
peace with a local pack.”

Stiles gets it then. “You think they picked you so they could get a chance to come check things out.”

“I don’t think that’s the only reason they picked me, but yes, I suspect it played in.”

“And you’re afraid if Allison doesn’t show up, they’ll set up camp and start inspecting things with
magnifying glasses, looking for the slightest bit of evidence you’re in active collusion with the local
wolves,” Stiles says, and Chris nods. “Okay. Then Allison will stay here. And I will be with her
every second.”

“I figured you would want to stay,” Chris says, “but I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to come to
the conclave.”

“No, it’s a terrible idea,” Stiles says, “but I’m still doing it. We can say I’m her boyfriend and a
hunter in training. I’ll still send the rest of the pack away – well, except Derek, and I’m not sure Scott
will agree to go either, but they won’t be hanging around here. Will everyone – they can’t all stay at
your house, right?”

Chris lets out a snort. “No. I’ll be hosting the actual Council of Elders, and most likely my two
cousins and their children.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Stiles says. He glances at Allison and says, “So if these things are every ten
years, you’ve been to one before, right?”

Allison blinks at him and says, “No, I don’t think so . . .”

“I went to the last one by myself,” Chris says. “Victoria and Allison stayed home. I didn’t want her introduced to all the hunter stuff when she was so young. The competition between the kids at the conclave can be pretty fierce, so younger kids are often left at home or with relatives. Some families will only send one representative. It’s different for everyone.”

“Well,” Stiles says, leaning back in his chair, “this is going to be an interesting summer, then.”

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He breaks the rest of the news to the pack that evening over spaghetti and meatballs at the new Hale house, which has been finished for a few months now. He frames it carefully. Hunters are coming to town. Lots of hunters. He doesn’t want the pack exposed to danger. Everyone is to talk to their parents about going to Los Angeles and San Francisco next week to look at colleges and pick up information packets. Most of them are eighteen or older now – Isaac and Erica are the only exceptions – so there’s really no need for an adult chaperone.

Only once everyone has agreed to that and admitted that they don’t want to be in town while the hunter conclave is going on does he casually add, “Unfortunately, Allison’s presence is expected, so she’ll stay here, which means I’ll be staying with her.” A ripple of surprise goes through the pack. Derek opens his mouth, and Stiles holds up a hand to stay his protest and says, “Yes, Derek, you can stay in Beacon Hills too, but for God’s sake we’ll need you to lay low, got it?”

Derek nods. Scott immediately opens his mouth and says, “If Allison’s staying, I’m staying.”

Stiles shakes his head at him. “You wouldn’t be able to attend the conclave itself, not without a huge risk – not just to yourself, but to the entire Argent family. This isn’t just a couple hunters like it was when Vivien was in town. I can’t even begin to comprehend what will happen if the high muckety-mucks find out that the Argent princess is in a werewolf pack. You should go with the others.”

“But I – ” Scott says. Allison pulls him out of the room. The two of them engage in a fierce, quiet discussion out in the backyard, where the others can see them but not hear them. Finally, Scott pulls Allison into a tight embrace. When they come back in, he says he’ll go with the rest of the pack.

“What about me?” Erica asks.

“What about you?” Stiles replies.

“I’m your bodyguard, I should be with you,” she says, and as soon as he shakes his head, she adds, “but what if you need urgent sexin’?”

Stiles arches his eyebrows at her, amused despite himself. “I’ll have to use my right hand and memories of you, I guess,” he says, and she pouts at him. “Erica, no. You’re going with the others. This is not a negotiation.” He looks at Boyd and Danny, who still haven’t clued their parents in. “Any problems that you two foresee?” he asks.

“Nah, I drive down there to surf all the time anyway,” Danny says.
“You might have to bribe my little brothers with cookies to keep them from coming to look for me,” Boyd says, laughing.

The others laugh, and then Lydia starts listing the colleges they absolutely have to see, starting with Stanford and CalTech, of course. They’re all leaning more towards San Francisco than Los Angeles, although to a certain extent it will depend on where they get into college. UC Davis has a great veterinary program that Scott has looked at, although it’s nearly two full hours from Palo Alto, but they could get a place somewhere in between and split the distance. Erica has no desire to go to college and Isaac won’t be able to afford it without going thousands of dollars into debt, which he has no real interest in doing. Boyd is hedging on the idea of college; he wants to be a teacher so he knows he’ll need higher education, but the money is a hang-up for him as well. Derek has quietly offered to pay tuition for anyone that needs it, but Boyd is a little too proud to accept that kind of gift.

Stiles still wants to go into law enforcement, although he’s torn between forensics and profiling or plain old detective work. There are plenty of schools in both LA and San Francisco that would qualify, and he’s not feeling picky. Danny is almost certainly going to go into some sort of computer-oriented field, and colleges offering good computer programs in California are a dime a dozen. Allison doesn’t really know what she wants to do about school since hunting can be a full-time occupation and she’s talked about being a professional archer, but she wants to go to college if only to buy herself more time to make a decision.

Stiles lets their chatter about schools fade into the background while he thinks about the persona he’s going to need to assume in order to survive the conclave without giving himself away. It would help if he knew more about it, but Chris says every one is different. “What you can count on,” Chris said, “is a lot of weapons demonstrations, a lot of meetings about the movements of different creatures and vulnerabilities that have been discovered. Depending on who’s there, there’s usually a sparring tournament, but it’s not mandatory. There’s often . . . a group hunt. But that’s organized by the host, and I don’t plan on offering it at this conclave.”

“Will that raise eyebrows?” Stiles asked.

“I really don’t give a damn if it does,” Chris replied.

So there’s that, which Stiles supposes is good news. And technically, he won’t need to stay there all the time. Most of the visiting hunters will be staying at a few hotels in the downtown area where Chris has already blocked out some rooms. Stiles is thinking that he’ll wait to meet the people who will actually be staying at the Argent house before he decides if he’ll leave Allison alone there for the nights. He suspects that he won’t want to, and if he has to sleep underneath her bed so nobody knows about it, so be it.

Derek leans over and nudges him with his shoulder, and Stiles realizes he’s been absently twirling his spaghetti with his fork for over ten minutes while the others talked. “What’s going on in that head of yours?” he asks.

“Logistics,” Stiles says with a sigh. “So many logistics. Are you sure you don’t want me to have someone else from the pack stay? You’ll be all by yourself if I’m sleeping at the Argent house.”

Derek scowls a little, but then shakes his head. “I’ll be okay.”

Stiles suspects that Derek’s reasoning for this is uncharitable. If anyone is given the right to stay behind, it would be Scott. And if Scott and Derek have to stay together for a week without Stiles or anyone else as a buffer, they will likely beat the shit out of each other multiple times. Their relationship is definitely better than it used to be, but they still rub each other the wrong way, and Stiles knows that leaving the two of them alone, stressed out, and with a lot of free time on their
hands is a sure recipe for disaster. But if he suggests that someone else, like Erica, stays in Beacon Hills to keep Derek company, Scott will – not unreasonably – get pissed off that he’s getting packed off and they’re not. Derek will just have to suffer through by himself.

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All the parents are quite supportive of the idea of a trip to look at college campuses, although Boyd’s express some quiet concern about how he’s going to afford it. They know he spends most of his earnings from the skating rink on buying necessities for his younger siblings. Fortunately, Lydia and Danny both have enough money to casually offer to cover his portion without raising too many eyebrows.

Erica’s father is iffy on the idea, of course, but she talks him into it, mostly by convincing him that he doesn’t want her home for an entire week complaining about how he wouldn’t let her go. Danny’s parents are by now accustomed to the fact that Danny has been adopted into this circle of friends. It’s an abrupt change that they had initially expressed some concern about, but he reassured them that everything was okay with his usual combination of charm and confidence.

Scott’s mom isn’t sure why they need an entire week to look at college campuses but doesn’t actively argue, and Lydia’s mother probably has no idea that she’s going anywhere, Lydia and Danny are the only people in the pack with a car of their own besides those staying behind, so they get nominated for transportation. Hotel reservations have been made, and everyone is ready to go.

“Call us if you need us,” Isaac says. “Okay? You promise?”

“You got it,” Stiles says.

“And don’t take stupid risks,” Boyd says.

Stiles gives him a thumbs-up.

Scott kisses Allison for approximately ten minutes, and she promises up and down that she’ll call him if anything goes wrong, if they need anything, if she gets lonely, anything. The others try not to roll their eyes or gag. Finally, Scott gets in Danny’s car, the others load up, and they start down the road. Stiles checks his watch. It’s six hours before the conclave is due to start. He suspects that a lot of the hunters are already in town, but Chris has assured him that nobody will show up until the conclave’s official start, which is, of course, at moonrise. Stiles can’t help but roll his eyes when he finds this out. He’s beginning to suspect that he’s the only one in the supernatural world who isn’t prone to enormous amounts of melodrama. Exaggeration and hyperbole, sure, but not melodrama.

They get to the Argent house about an hour before moonrise. Stiles has brought several trays worth of appetizers that he’s prepared. Chris had said that they were providing food for the initial ceremony, but Stiles figures the more, the merrier. And he makes a killer deviled egg.

Chris greets them with his usual gruff welcome, and Victoria gives Stiles the sour look she typically saves for him. He smiles back at her and holds out a tray of appetizers. “Put those in there,” she says, gesturing, and not taking the tray from him. Which he figures is fair. She’s not the hired help.

“Is this acceptable?” Stiles asks, gesturing at his outfit. He had no idea what to wear to a thing like this, and figured that hunter garb would be relatively appropriate, certainly better than formalwear, which he doesn’t own any of anyway. So he has on jeans, a camo T-shirt, and his leather jacket.
“It’s fine,” Chris says. He hesitates, then says, “I have one other thing for you,” and slaps a small box into Stiles’ hand.

Stiles opens it to find a Claddagh ring identical to the ones Allison and Scott wear. “Oh, I don’t know, Mr. Argent,” he says. “I’m not sure I’m ready to take our relationship to that level – ”

Chris gives him a light slap upside the head. “It’s to match hers,” he says. “Relationships are serious business in this world. Allison’s boyfriend wouldn’t be invited to a conclave. Her fiancé would. You two are a little young, but betrothals can be made early if the parents think that the arrangement will work and benefit both families.”

“Okay, but, I’m not from a hunter family,” Stiles says.

“As of now you are,” Chris replies. “The Winchesters owed me a favor.”

Stiles lets out a guffaw. “Winchester, really? Like in the TV show?”

“Don’t even ask,” Chris says. “Apparently they knew some people in Hollywood. I told them that I didn’t want the Council of Elders to know my daughter had her heart set on marrying some nobody that had started training to be a hunter after he’d been roughed up by the local pack. And it’s not like you can use your real name; many of the hunters here followed the story when the three alpha pack hunters were put in jail, so they would recognize your name. So the Winchesters agreed that for the purpose of this conclave, you’re their grandson. Don’t worry; you won’t have to interact with them and pretend. They’re only sending one representative and given their family structure, he’d be some second cousin of yours or something.”

“Cool,” Stiles says, and slides the ring on. He extends his hand to Allison. “You like?”

“Oh, God, that is so weird,” she says, laughing at him. “Also, you’re wearing it backwards. Left hand, point of the heart towards your fingertips. That’s how you signal being engaged.” She takes her own off and transfers it from the right hand to the left. Chris grimaces but doesn’t object.

“So who am I?” Stiles asks Chris.

“Stanley Winchester,” Chris says. He sighs and says, “We figured that was vaguely close enough that you could still go by ‘Stiles’.”

“Since odds are good one of us will fuck up if I try to use a fake first name,” Stiles says with a nod, “and the nickname never made it into the papers, only my real name. Good. Got it.”

“Any more questions?” Chris asks.

Stiles thinks about it. “How do you know my ring size?”

Chris’ glower deepens. “Get out of my sight, Stiles.”

Stiles grins, grabs Allison by the wrist, and leaves the room. “Just helping him treat me like the guy dating his only daughter,” he says, and Allison dissolves into giggles. They go out into the backyard, where there are dozens of tiki torches and picnic tables set out. “Your dad sure knows how to throw a party,” Stiles says, looking at the liquor display.

“He hates this,” Allison says. “He’s been bitching about it all week.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t really seem to be his style,” Stiles agrees. “He should have let me throw it for him. I rock at this sort of stuff.”
“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Allison says.

“He’d kick my ass, huh?”

“Worse. He’d take you up on the offer.”

Stiles chortles and starts arranging the tables in a more aesthetically pleasing manner. Allison helps out. By the time the moon is rising and the guests are arriving, the backyard could have been set up by a professional. Suddenly, Stiles is being introduced to more people who he can possibly remember the names of. He starts categorizing them in his head under nicknames so he can at least remember who he’s met before and who he hasn’t. There are people of every ethnicity, but not every age. The party is predominantly men and women between the ages of thirty and fifty, with a handful of people older and a handful of people younger.

Stiles takes special note of the other teenagers, figuring that they’re who he’ll be spending the most time with. There’s a young man a few years older than him who has enough muscles to look like he could be a body double for Arnold Schwarzenegger. Stiles dubs him ‘Beefcake McAbcrunch’. He seems like a decent guy, with a handshake that practically crushes Stiles’ fingers and a thick southern drawl. He calls Victoria ‘ma’am.’ Then there’s a girl a year younger than them, dressed all in black, hair dyed black, makeup done in classic Goth. He talks to her without seeing a facial expression for almost ten minutes and nicknames her Wednesday Addams.

There are two siblings the same age as him, twins with pale blonde hair. They’re obviously fraternal, since they’re a boy and girl set, but their likeness is still spooky; they look like they’ve stepped out of ‘Children of the Corn’. They clearly think they’re far too good to be associating with some nobody and wander around with their noses in the air. Then there’s a teenager several years younger that Stiles immediately nicknames ‘Grabby Hands’ because every three minutes he’s saying “lemme see that” and snatching something from someone, whether it’s a knife, a plate, or a piece of paper. He’s the youngest there, only fifteen. The only other teenager is a whiny seventeen-year-old who spends a full minute complaining about how they don’t have the right kind of bottled water. She is duly named Veruca Salt.

“Which of these kids are the ones who are related to you?” Stiles asks Allison, then immediately sees the problem with his question when she says ‘Jake and Sam’ and he has no idea who those people are. Then he realizes that he already knew. There are no female Argents, which lets out Veruca, Wednesday, and the twins. That leaves Beefcake and Grabby Hands. He can definitely see the former being related; the latter, not so much. The kid looks and behaves more like a mouse than anything else. He wonders which one of them lost their sister to the winter hunt. Some subtle questions reveals neither; that girl was the daughter of Chris’ cousin who’s deceased. Apparently he became reckless on his hunts and died not long after his daughter. Grabby Hands has a younger brother, but he’s only nine and isn’t attending the conclave with his family.

After nearly an hour of mingling and drinking, Chris clinks a glass and everyone falls silent. The hunter looks about as uncomfortable as a man currently being suffocated by an anaconda. He clears his throat and says, “I’m not really one for speeches, so, let me just say, welcome to Beacon Hills and the fourteenth conclave. If there’s anything you need while you’re here, please feel free to let me or my wife Victoria know. Nous chassons ceux qui nous chassent.” He raises a glass and then quickly turns away from the crowd to indicate that he’s done with public speaking for the evening, or possibly forever.

Stiles is kept busy, but actually doesn’t talk very much. Allison has enough natural charm and charisma to get her through the night’s events. Almost everyone wants to meet her, as the Argent family heir, particularly those related to her. Some of Victoria’s relatives are there as well: an aunt...
and a cousin, who was Vivien’s sister.

He isn’t sure what to make of the elder council. There are three of them, two men and one woman. All of them are old enough to be his grandparents. He takes care to actually learn their names, because that sort of information seems important to know. The eldest is Dragan, who has a heavy European accent that Stiles isn’t quite cultured enough to actually place and a last name several syllables longer than Stiles can commit to memory. Stiles can only understand a quarter of what he says. The other man, Greger Aronsson, is happy and cheerful and always very interested in what the teenagers have to say. He’s got the same white-blonde hair as the twins and is obviously related to them somehow. Agnes St. James, the woman, is a stone cold bitch, like pretty much every other female hunter Stiles has ever met (Allison being the notable exception). He hopes he won’t have to interact with them much.

Given the givens, over the course of the party, he decides he will definitely be sleeping at the Argent house. These people are altogether too scary to leave Allison alone with them, even once most of the party has left for the hotel. That leaves thirteen people at the house: the three elders, Chris’ two cousins and their wives, Beefcake and Grabby Hands, along with the nuclear Argent family and Stiles himself.

He goes up to Allison’s room and calls Derek. “Gonna stay here tonight,” he says.

“Thought you would,” Derek says.

“Don’t stay up all night painting,” Stiles says.

“You’re the worst,” Derek replies, and hangs up.

Stiles just laughs and changes into his pajamas. Allison comes in a few minutes later and crawls into bed. Stiles curls right up to her, and it should be weird, because she’s not his girlfriend, but she’s pack, and he needs her right now. He needs to not be alone. After a while, he drifts off to sleep.

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Chapter 2

Stiles is surprised to find that the convention is a lot like, well, a convention. He’s been to a few in his life – ComicCon one year and Anime Expo, being a geek, and when he was younger he had gotten dragged along to some weekend retreat his father had gone to for law enforcement officers. He had won the trip in an office pool, and Stiles was, at the time, too young to stay by himself. Sheriff Stilinski, who at the time was not the sheriff, didn’t want him staying with Scott because he was not the biggest fan of Scott’s father.

So the next morning, after breakfast, when Chris hands him a schedule, he’s hard put not to start laughing. There are actual panels with names like “pack politics”, “working with law enforcement”, and “beyond werewolves: a guide to other urban monsters”. There are demonstrations of different types of weapons and discussion groups on the ethics of dealing with werewolf children.

“What are you smiling about?” Chris asks him.

“You forgot ‘Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them’,” Stiles says, grinning at him.

Chris just rolls his eyes, but Stiles sees a hint of a smile on his face. He goes back to the schedule. Chris has said it would be nice if Allison can put in an appearance at some of the panels, but they don’t need to be there all day. To be fair, Stiles is rather interested in attending some of them – hell, all of them – for his own education. It’s an unparalleled chance to see inside the hunter world.

They’ll need to be at the hotel for the evening meal anyway, or so says Chris, because that’s where he’s being presented with the ‘honor’ by the elders, and they won’t want to miss it. Stiles rolls his eyes a little but says okay, because what else is he going to say? Chris tells him that all weapons are to be peace-bound and unloaded at all times during the conclave. Stiles makes a face but doesn’t argue. He can protect himself without a gun if he has to.

So he spends a rather fascinating morning taking copious notes about different kinds of guns and blades, where he might find a Red Cap or a troll or a manticore. He witnesses a lively debate about whether or not leprechauns really exist. He learns that a lot of hunters have made some really foolish assumptions about how packs work, like the theory that packs are always looking to expand and thus increase their power, or how nearly all betas really want to be alphas. He notes these down but certainly doesn’t disabuse anyone of their notions. They’ve also made a few really stupid mistakes about how to interact with the police, but on the other hand, they are very, very good at hiding and disposing of bodies.

He sees the other kids a few times as they wander through the hotel. The two Argent kids, Beefcake and Grabby Hands, are pleasant if not always polite (depending on how one interprets Grabby Hands’ definition of property and personal space). Stiles finds this interesting because he had met the younger boy’s parents at the dinner the night before and found them disturbingly like Gerard in temperament: harsh and unyielding. Grabby Hands spends a lot of time playing on his phone when nobody is looking.
The twins treat everyone present as if they’re beneath them, and look down their noses a lot. Veruca whines incessantly about being bored, or thirsty, or the way she would have set things up so she didn’t have to walk as much. Wednesday Addams just watches everyone silently. Like Stiles, she takes notes, so he assumes she’s at least somewhat interested in what they’re learning about.

Allison demonstrates her archery skills to much enthusiasm during the latter part of the day, and Stiles can’t help but grin when he sees the proud, ‘that’s my daughter’ look on Chris’ face while the elders nod approvingly. Fortunately, Stiles isn’t asked to give a demonstration of anything.

Dinner is served in a banquet hall, food prepared by some caterer that Stiles hasn’t heard of. It’s decent enough. He’s glad that they’re not at a “kid’s table”, as he had half-expected. Instead, he’s seated with the Argents. The tables seat eight, so he’s with Allison’s family and Beefcake’s. As it turns out, Chris and Beefy’s father trained together when they were teenagers, so even though they don’t see each other often, they get along well. They share stories about their training days, which the teenagers lap up eagerly.

After dinner, the highest of the high muckety-mucks gives a long speech about the duty of being a hunter and tradition this and honor that. Stiles tunes it out despite himself, only coming back to himself when the lights start to dim. “What’s going on?” he whispers to Hunky McBiceps, who’s sitting next to him.

“It’s the memorial service for the fallen,” Beefy whispers back.

Stiles blinks at him, then blinks at the stage as a screen hooked up to a computer starts to display a slideshow of images. The elder gives a brief speech about each one of them: their age, their family, how they died and (usually) how many monsters they took out on their way. Stiles is braced for it, waiting for it. He knows Gerard is going to show up sooner rather than later. He’s so braced for that, he nearly falls out of his chair when Kate’s image comes up on the screen.

He only met her a couple times, and never for very long, so he really has no idea what she was like on a day-to-day basis. He knows that Allison loved her like a sister, and he can feel the sudden tension in Allison’s back when her face shows up. Of course, Stiles knows all he needs to know. He grips his cloth napkin tightly in his hands while the elder talks about the ‘bright star of the Argent family’ who was taken from them too soon, ‘brutally murdered at the hands of the alpha Peter Hale’. He can barely swallow from the rage, because he can hear his lupa crying while he dreams, begging for his family to be spared. If Kate had been alive and in the room, Stiles would have tried to kill her right then and there, consequences be damned.

Gerard’s image, of course, shows up right after hers, with a lengthy speech about the injustice of his imprisonment when all he was doing was upholding the hunter laws and protecting his family. Stiles closes his eyes and focuses on his breathing, trying not to think about his father, white and shrunken against the hospital bed, rambling incoherently while the wolfsbane wreaked havoc on his body, about the months of physical therapy, about the nightmares that he still has about finding his father’s body on the side of the road, where he wakes up reaching for the man.

There are only a few people after them in the slideshow, including Vivien, and then the lights come back up. Hunky is giving Stiles a cautious look. “You must’ve been close to the other Argents, huh,” he says, and Stiles just stares at him. “You . . . you got all pale and shaky when they came on.”

There is not a single cell in Stiles’ body that can prevent what happens next. He looks straight at Beefcake and says, “Kate Argent murdered an entire family without provocation or cause, including children and non-wolves. Gerard tried to kill the sheriff of this county for doing his civic duty. So no, I think it’s safe to say that I was not close to either of them.”
Biceps Boy’s eyes widen and he darts an uncertain look at his parents. Chris’ jaw is set in that unhappy expression, and he says, “Unfortunately, Stiles is correct in both those statements. I loved my father and my sister . . . but I don’t love what they did. Nor can I say that they didn’t deserve what was coming to them.” He stands up and sets his napkin on the table. “If you’ll excuse me,” he says, and walks away.

Allison takes Stiles’ hand and gives it a tight squeeze. “Do you need to get out of here?” she murmurs, and he just gives a slight shake of his head.

A few minutes of rambling speech later and Chris is called up to accept his reward, says a few very brief words about how he’ll try to be worthy of it, and then retreats back to his table. He doesn’t say anything about his departure or what Stiles had said, so nobody else does either. Once all the official business is over, the waiters bring out dessert, a passable red velvet cake. Stiles has completely lost his appetite, so he squishes it with his fork methodically, listening to the others talk. The evening plans seem to consist of the adults sitting around and drinking copious amounts of liquor while they share war stories.

He’s thinking that maybe he and Allison can sneak off and go back to Derek’s for a while, but those hope are dashed a moment later when Beefcake’s father says, “I’m sure the kids will enjoy having some time to hang out together,” and it becomes clear that those not of drinking age are going to be sent back to the Argent house for the night.

This amuses Stiles, mostly because he’s had so many ‘wolf slumber parties’ but this will definitely be his first hunter slumber party. Still, he agrees readily enough, and even manages to show some enthusiasm about it. This is the best of the next generation of hunters. Maybe he and Allison can make some allies or even friends among them. It could help in the future.

It’s nearly eight o’clock at night by the time the festivities are over and the teenagers are gathered in the rec room at the Argent house while the adults get liquored up at the hotel. Stiles is trying to think of some activity to suggest, sitting with Allison pulled close against his side, his arm around her shoulders. She smiles up at him, clearly quite content to be cuddled up to him.

After literally less than two minutes have passed, Veruca is complaining about being bored. ‘Complaining’ is actually a rather generous word; ‘whining’ is much closer to the truth. The Bobbsey Twins confer quietly for a minute before the girl says, “I know. Let’s go check out the old Hale place.”

Stiles rolls his eyes and thinks that this didn’t take long to go downhill. He glances at Allison to see what she has to say about the prospect. Allison gives a similar eye-roll, returns Stiles’ look, and then opens her mouth. “Why? It’s a burned out house owned by a guy who likes to have people arrested for trespassing.” That’s good, she thinks. Logical protest, not too vehement. She hopes it’ll work, but isn’t that confident.

“Oh, come on, he’d have to catch us first,” Freddie Bobbsey says, with a sneer that indicates how likely he thinks this is. “It’s a landmark.”

“That’s your idea of a landmark?” Allison asks. “Wow, are you morbid.”

“I don’t know, babe,” Stiles says comfortably, giving her a lopsided smile. “It is kind of famous in hunter lore.”

Allison huffs. “I still say it’s morbid.” She shrugs, giving in. If Stiles thinks it’s better and would be more fun to have them arrested than to try to deter them from the beginning, well, he’s her alpha. And to be fair, there would be a certain amount of pleasure in seeing Papa Stilinski read Veruca and
“Don’t be a spoilsport,” Veruca says, with her nose in the air.

“Totally,” Grabby Hands says. “After this, we can go throw a party at Auschwitz and maybe stop by the Trail of Tears on our way home!”

Allison’s eyes widen in surprise for a moment, and then she smiles at the kid, glad that there’s someone else in the family who isn’t a complete jerk or a psycho. “Well!” she says, slapping a hand down on Stiles’ knee. “I guess if I’m not allowed to have common sense or be a spoilsport, we should get this show on the road. The more tired we are, the more likely it is we’ll get caught.” As if Derek won’t see them on the camera she’s sure that half of these people won’t even notice, even if Stiles wasn’t going to text him to let him know they’re coming. “Maybe we’ll have time to stop at Ground Zero and have a picnic.”

Beefcake McBiceps frowns at her and says, “Too soon.”

Stiles shakes his head a little and says, “That was 2001. The Hale House fire was 2003. So technically, anything before that could be considered fair game.” He stands and shrugs. “Don’t forget, you’re on our turf. We know those guys. Just to warn you, there’s fences and shit.”

“Fences,” Freddie snorts, clearly conveying that he’s not at all intimidated. Stiles’ grin widens, but he doesn’t say anything to try to stop him. When it became clear to Stiles that a) supernatural intruders weren’t going to stop using the Hale house as a convenient place to call meetings, and b) it really bothered the shit out of Derek that people kept trespassing on his former family home, Stiles had taken on the security as a project. It had taken him almost all of the winter just to research and design, and then another month after that to make into reality. ‘Fences and shit’ hardly began to cover it. The security around the new Hale house is just as impressive if not more so.

“Come on,” Allison says. “If we leave through my room, no one will hear us.” She wonders if Veruca will fall on her ass. That would be moderately hilarious.

Nobody does, however. Everyone, even Grabby Hands, scales the drop with relative ease. Allison comes down last, quietly closing the window behind her. Stiles catches her casting a somewhat worried glance over her shoulder as they leave. Surprisingly, Hunky McAbcrunch steps up to reassure her. “They expect this,” he says. “The conclave is a chance for all of us to spend time with people our age that we don’t have to keep secrets from. Some showing off and sneaking away is par for the course.”

“Yeah, well, tell that to my mother.” Allison offers a tight, but appreciative smile. “She’s threatened to plant something poisonous underneath my window as a punishment for sneaking off.”

“Sounds like she’d get along great with my mother,” Grabby chips in. “She actually booby-trapped my door once so I’d stop trying to leave before I was finished studying.”

Hunky gives him a look. “Are you for real?”

“How long did it take you to find another way out?” Allison asks, grabbing him by the arm and steering him around a rocky outcropping that he was about to trip right over.

Grabby Hands blinks at her. “I didn’t bother. She just would have gotten mad. Besides, I prefer to stay in my room anyway, so it all works out.”

“You shouldn’t neglect your studying,” Veruca says, with a lofty air.
Stiles lets out an unmistakable snigger. “Yeah, you look like someone who spends a lot of time with your face in a book.”

“In all fairness, it’s possible she studies,” Allison says, herding people towards the cars. “I mean, look at Lydia.”


“Nice,” Beefcake says. “What kind of engine have you got in there?”

Since they start up car talk, Allison decides to take Veruca and Wednesday Addams, who she’s almost forgotten was there and certainly hadn’t noticed tagging along with them, in her own car. Grabby Hands tags along with her, since otherwise he’ll be squashed in the back of the Jeep with the twins, which does not seem to interest him. It takes about fifteen minutes to get them to the turn-off that leads to the Hale place. Stiles pulls his Jeep over where the road dead ends into a chain-link fence that’s locked with several padlocks. Even at night, the ‘no trespassing’ and ‘private property’ signs can be seen in abundance.

“We can’t even see the house from here,” Veruca complains.

“You think?” Allison says, dryly amused. “It was a family of werewolves. They didn’t want people looking in their front window. It’s another mile to the house.” With a smirk, she adds, “Don’t be such a spoilsport.”

“Yeah, well, they can’t be as concerned with security as you think,” Flossie says. “Look at this piece of crap fence. I see at least two places where a person could fit through, and it’s only, what, twelve feet? I can scale that easy,” she says, and begins to do so without further commentary. Stiles opens his mouth to say something, then shuts it and looks at Allison. She’s the one who wants to earn these people’s respect; she’s the one he’ll let have charge of this operation.

Again, it’s actually Biceps Boy who speaks up. “Those holes are for wildlife. I’ve seen that before.”

“We’re in a nature preserve,” Allison adds, moving over to stand in front of Stiles. “Give me a boost?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Stiles says, grinning at her, clearly glad to give her a chance to show off. He cups his hands like a stirrup and bends down a little to let her get her boot firmly seated in them. It isn’t a bad chance for him, either. He isn’t bulky, so being able to give her a real lift reflects well on the strength hidden away on his frame. She plants her foot in his hands, the fingers of her own hand on his shoulder for balance, and kicks off as Stiles tosses her upwards. She arcs up and over to catch the top of the fence with her hands, then tucks her body down, twisting and letting go in an easy crouch on the other side, facing them. “Come on, slowpokes. If we’re going to do this, let’s get it over with.”

Stiles grins at her, then just sidles over to one of the larger gaps in the fencing and slides through. He knows where it is and how to do it without catching on any of the jutting metal with the ease of long practice, but nobody watching knows that. He holds it up a little, then gestures for Grabby Hands to follow. “Through here,” he says, and both the younger teenager and dour Wednesday follow him. Beefcake and Freddie go over. Veruca hems and haws for a moment, but then decides to go through the gap.

Once they’re all through, Allison leads the way up to the house on a straight line, which eventually does take them away from the road. About ten minutes later, they fetch up against another fence that
rings in the old Hale House yard. Flossie makes a scoffing noise in her throat and reaches forward to climb up.

“Wait.” Beefcake reaches forward and grabs her by the wrist. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” she asks, snatching her wrist back.

“That humming,” he replies.

She just gives him a blank look for a moment, and then jumps as Wednesday tosses a stick against the fence. There’s a crackle of electricity and the sharp smell of burnt wood as the stick bounces back. “It’s an electric fence,” Wednesdays says calmly.

“Around an abandoned house corpse?” Veruca asks, incredulous.

Before any of them can say anything, the door to the house opens and Derek steps out silently onto the porch. His feet are bare; he’s wearing only a pair of jeans and he’s carrying a coffee mug. He leans against a porch support and gives them all a long, flat look, before shaking his head and taking a sip of his drink. Allison thinks she pulls off some of her best acting yet by not punching Veruca in the head, or laughing at the look on Derek’s face.

“Holy shit, is that – ” Grabby Hands squints at the porch and ends in a squeak.

“Yeah, and the fact that he’s out here means he’s probably already called the police,” Stiles says, tucking his hands behind his head.

Flossie and Freddie’s jaws set in identical expressions of distaste and determination. “It’s not high,” Flossie says, and glances around. “We could use a hanging tree branch to get over it.”

“And . . . do what on the other side, exactly?” Stiles asks. At this, Derek lifts his head almost curiously, one eyebrow climbing.

“Yeah, I’m pretty curious as to that answer myself.” Allison says, her arms crossing over her chest and one hip cocking. “What would you do once you were on the other side of that fence? With him. On private property. When he’s annoyed. And faster than you. And there’s an electric fence between you and freedom that you can no longer get past because your helpful tree is suddenly on the wrong side.”

“God, is everyone here such a fucking coward?” Flossie snipes. She goes over to the tree and starts climbing. Stiles lifts his eyebrows and lets out a dramatic sigh that covers his snigger. As soon as Flossie touches the branch that hangs over the fence, there’s another crackle of noise and she lets out a yelp and loses her balance. Her twin lets out an alarmed cry, and McAbs dives over, breaking her fall. They both end as a heap on the ground. Stiles sneaks a glance at Derek and tries to hide his grin. Leaving one branch over the fence and then wrapping more electric wire around it had been a stroke of genius on his part, and he’s not at all modest about it.

“No, I’m just not looking to get arrested,” Allison says in reply. She moves over to the pile and offers a hand up to her cousin, or whatever he was. “Or injured. Needlessly.” She looks back at Derek and can see the amusement on his face plain as day, but only because she knows him. To everyone else there besides Stiles, it still looks like stone.

Derek toasts them with his mug as if to say ‘keep trying’, before enjoying his next swallow.

“That patronizing son of a bitch,” Freddie growls, clearly upset by the fact that his sister fell. He gets her back on her feet as Allison helps Beefcake up. “Try this on for size,” he adds, and takes
something from the inside of his jacket and gives it an underhanded lob.

Stiles grabs it just after it leaves his hand and gives it a solid throw in the other direction. Moments later, they hear a muffled ‘pop’ and they’re all showered with dirt. “Are you fucking crazy?” Stiles asks. “Chris Argent has a truce with the local pack and you start throwing grenades onto their property?”

Derek looks honestly affronted by this for a moment, and then there’s the beginning of that werewolf grin as he waggles his finger at them.

Allison also rounds on Freddie and is right in his face. “You ruin things here and start a war with the local pack and you won’t have to worry about Derek Hale because either I or my parents will destroy you. Now let’s get the fuck out of here before he decides to have us nailed for vandalism as well as trespassing.”

Tweedle Dum doesn’t flinch. “Yeah, that’s right, hide behind your parents,” he says. “Like it’s not some kind of affront to all we stand for to have a truce with a pack of werewolves.”

Hunky intervenes here, pushing between the two of them. To Freddie, he says, “Whether or not you agree with it, it’s their territory, so we play by their rules.”

Allison steps back, and says to Hunk, “His face appreciates your intervention.” To Stiles, she adds, “This close,” and holds her hand out, thumb and forefinger maybe an inch apart, if that.

In the background, Wednesday lets out a heavy sigh. “Are we leaving or what? This place sucks.”

“Yes!” Stiles says. “Yes, we are leaving, right this way – ” but before he can take more than a handful of steps, he sees blue and red lights flashing as a cruiser bounces its way down the road. “Or we can just stay here and talk to the cops. Yep. That’ll work.”

The others look quite iffy about this, but before they can run, the car stops and the door opens. The lights are left on as Sheriff Stilinski gets out and walks toward them, looking peeved.

“Hi, uh, hi there, Sheriff,” Stiles says, smiling gamely at his father.

Stilinski gives him a hard stare, but plays along. He directs his inquiry to Derek. “Someone want to tell me why I’m out here in the middle of the night?”

Derek finally moves off his porch, pulling a T-shirt over his head as he crosses the yard. It’s a large lot, and just because he can hear them loud and clear doesn’t mean any of the humans besides Stiles have the same advantage. He’s not going to yell, or make Allison or Stilinski strain their ears. “Well, since I don’t recall sending out party invitations, I’m going to have to go with trespassers. They seemed to take the posted sign and the fence as an invitation. I can’t imagine why.”

“Oh huh.” Stilinski turns back to the teens. “Tell me. What level of education do you all have?”

All of them look a little baffled at this question, but then Hunky clears his throat and says, “Uh, I’m in my first year of college. Sir. The rest of them are all still in high school.”

“Okay.” Stilinski nods, seeming pleased by this answer. “So I can assume that you all can read?” he asks, pointing at them and making an inclusive gesture with his fingers.

“Uh, yes sir,” Beefcake says. Grabby Hands and Wednesday Addams are apparently trying to melt back into the darkness of the woods and let him handle this, because they’re all very sure that getting in trouble with the local law will not gain them points with their parents.
Veruca gives the sheriff a bright smile. “I’m so sorry, really, it was just a stupid dare, you know . . .”

“Uh huh. Save it for selling Girl Scout cookies, because I’m not buying,” the sheriff tells Veruca, completely unimpressed. “I like his answer better,” he adds, pointing to Hunky. “Straightforward, answered my question.”

Too surprised to be angry, Veruca just blinks at him and then mumbles, “Uh, sorry, sir.”

“You kids think you’re the first people in this town to have gotten this idea,” Sheriff Stilinski says. He sighs and looks at Derek. “Will we be pressing charges this evening, Mr. Hale?”

Derek looks at all of them. “Do I need to, or are you done with this?”

Hunky holds his hands up and says, “We’re done.” He elbows Grabby.

“Totally done, sir,” Grabby agrees.

“Never really started,” Wednesday mutters.

The Bobbsey twins aren’t ready to give in so easily. Freddie has his eyes narrowed at the Sheriff, and says, “If you’re the sheriff, and I know that the sheriff of Beacon Hills has been involved in a lot of the supernatural goings-on, then you must know that this man is a werewolf, and we have every right to be here and unf,” his sentence ends as Allison gives him a hard elbow to the ribs.

Stiles can’t help it. He just busts out laughing. He laughs so hard that he has to lean against a tree to keep his balance. “Seriously? Seriously?”

Stilinski’s eyebrows climb. He looks at Derek for a moment through the fence. “Derek, son, are you sure I can’t press charges for you? At least on these two and maybe the princess? I can let the others go.”

Derek huffs. “There’s a hunter convention or something in town. They’re just idiot kids trying to impress their betters.” He shrugs and takes a swallow of his coffee. “I’ll let it go. This one time. Even if some of them do have more guts than brains right now.”

Stiles is still laughing, so Biceps Boy takes the opportunity to say, “Thanks, really,” to Derek, and then, “Thank you, sir,” to the sheriff, and then starts jogging back through the forest in the direction of the outer fence before anyone can change their minds. Wednesday joins them, although she doesn’t jog – Stiles gets the impression that she never moves faster than an amble – and Grabby Hands tries to follow them but almost immediately trips over a tree branch.

Allison keeps him from falling and calls out, “Maybe we should stick to the road.”

“I agree,” Sheriff Stilinski says, and Abs obediently comes trotting back to walk with the rest of them. “You guys stick to the road; I’ll follow you.” He herds them onto the road in front of the cruiser, partly to make sure they don’t double back and also to make sure that they actually make it back to their vehicles. He also notes the way Allison has a hand on the youngest of the kids. If he hadn’t been afraid of blowing their cover, he would have offered the two of them and Stiles a ride.

Veruca whines somewhat, and the twins are glowering, but everyone falls into line on the road. Stiles is still chortling quietly. “What’s so freakin’ funny?” Tweedle Dee snaps at him.

“I just – oh man,” Stiles says, trying to hide another guffaw. “I can’t help but find it hilarious that you did enough research to figure out Sheriff Stilinski is involved with the supernatural side of Beacon Hills, but not enough to know that the alpha of the local pack is his freakin’ son.”
Grabby Hands stops in surprise so suddenly that Allison nearly trips over him. “Don’t do that,” she admonishes him, but gently. Once they’re moving again, she shakes her head. “Did you guys seriously think he was going to side with us?”

“Well, he – he’s the Sheriff,” Veruca says.


“So the law here is compromised,” Freddie says in a flat tone. “That’s good to know.”

“Yep,” Stiles says, too amused to even be angry. “That is exactly the lesson you should take away from this evening.”

Allison just shakes her head. “Wow. Just . . . wow.”

Flossie huffs. “This was a complete letdown. We’d better get some party-crashers or this whole thing is going to be a waste of time.”

Allison wonders if anyone would hold it against her if she just bitch slapped someone this evening. But it’s Stiles who suddenly figures out the undercurrents in what the twins are saying – and more importantly, what they’re not saying. “It’s not all that, you know,” he says.

“What isn’t?” Freddie sneers at him.

“Killing someone.” Stiles glances over at him. “You two haven’t ever actually killed a werewolf. You figure this is your big chance. You just have to find one.” He shakes his head a little. “Boy, do I wish I could still be that excited about the idea of ending someone’s life.”

“No kidding,” Allison says. In all honesty, if she had ever showed real excitement about killing, her father would have told her she was never hunting again. She’s the only one in the pack besides Stiles who has any kills under her belt, and she knows that Stiles has only killed when he’s been pushed to a wall. But saying that won’t get her anywhere here. “Sometimes you’re lucky and you get something that’s pure magical construct, and that’s a freebie. It’s basically lifeless. Or something that’s only an animal intelligence. But werewolves? Even when they’ve gone bad, they’re still people.”

“That’s just the sort of bleeding heart sympathy I would expect from the daughter of the man who kisses the local alpha’s ass,” Flossie says.

Without telegraphing so much as a molecule, Allison hauls off and punches Flossie across the face. She pulls it a little at the last moment because she knows she gains some physical strength from being part of the pack besides Stiles who has any kills under her belt, and she knows that Stiles has only killed when he’s been pushed to a wall. But saying that won’t get her anywhere here. “Sometimes you’re lucky and you get something that’s pure magical construct, and that’s a freebie. It’s basically lifeless. Or something that’s only an animal intelligence. But werewolves? Even when they’ve gone bad, they’re still people.”

“That’s just the sort of bleeding heart sympathy I would expect from the daughter of the man who kisses the local alpha’s ass,” Flossie says.

Without telegraphing so much as a molecule, Allison hauls off and punches Flossie across the face. She pulls it a little at the last moment because she knows she gains some physical strength from being part of the pack, but as far as she’s concerned, the bitch can eat every ounce of muscle that Allison has packed onto her archer’s frame. “You can talk to me and my father about whose asses we kiss when you’ve actually been on a hunt, had to make a kill shot, and done something besides talk a lot of trash. Until then, shut your face.”

“You bitch – ” Freddie snarls, and he’s starting forward when Grabby Hands nervously pipes up.

“Uh, guys, the sheriff is still following us in our car, don’t forget,” he says, “Pretty sure if we start fighting, someone is going to get arrested for assault.”

“If someone gets arrested for assault, it’ll be her,” Flossie says tightly, thumbing blood off her lower lip.

“Not if your brother brings a knife to a fist fight,” Beefcake says, giving his chin a slight nod to
where Freddie’s hand is resting on the hilt of a knife he keeps in his belt.

Allison grins. “I didn’t really think it was much of a fight.”

Beefcake turns to her, a frown creasing his pleasant features. “And you, knock it off,” he says, with authority that comes from age if not position. He’s clearly used to being obeyed. “Yeah, maybe she’s a godawful bitch and he’s got the self-control of a toddler, but stop egging them on. You’re only going to make things worse.”

Allison’s smile turns feral in that way the entire pack has, because who is he to give her orders? He’s not her parents and he’s not her alpha. He has no authority over her. But she gets a hold of herself. He at least has enough brains and experience that he might recognize wolf behavior even on a human. So she falls back to Stiles’ side and reaches for his hand, hoping that will soothe her temper, and settles for not saying anything else.

Stiles takes her hand and gives it a squeeze. He knows that Allison can get tense about family stuff, to put it mildly. A little too casually, he says, “Hey, Sir Abs-a-Lot, you riding with me on the way back? We can let little Grabby Hands over there ride with Allison. That way neither car will be overburdened.”

“What about me?” Veruca asks shrilly.

“Oh, I dunno, you seemed to like the sheriff so much, I thought you might be planning to bat your eyelashes and get a ride,” Stiles says.

Veruca lets out an indignant squawk at Stiles’ commentary. Beefcake just looks confused. “Did you just call me ‘Sir Abs-a-Lot’?”

“Dude, I’ve met what feels like four hundred people in the last twenty-four hours,” Stiles says. “I don’t know any of your names. Be glad you got one of the better nicknames in my head. So is that a ‘yes, I’ll ride with you’? Yes? Okay, cool. We can strap Freddie and Flossie over there to my roof rack.”

Hunk rubs a hand over his face. “What did I just say about egging them on?”

“Not to,” Stiles says, with a grin that shows his utter lack of remorse. “I just figured I would issue a general reminder that I don’t take orders from you, and neither does Allison. Argent women are leaders, right? So technically, she’s in charge of you.”

Allison laughs. “You are the worst,” she says to Stiles, but she’s clearly cheered up by his behavior.

“Just lookin’ out for you, darling,” he replies, his grin now turning into a smirk.

“We weren’t planning to ride back with you anyway,” Flossie says, in a haughty tone of voice.

“It’s a good ten miles back into town,” Hunk points out to them.

“Oh my God,” Allison blurts out. “Are you for real? Will you stop whining if one of us agrees to give you a ride?”


“Wha . . . what?! No!” Allison protests. Stiles just starts laughing, and Grabby is trying to hide his
suckers behind his hands. Beefcake shakes his head, but Stiles can tell he’s amused by the little crinkles around his eyes.

“I don’t think it’s such a big deal, giving me a ride back into town,” Veruca says.

Allison ignores her. “I can’t take her. I’ve got these two,” she says, gesturing to Grabby Hands and Wednesday. “That means you get her and Sir Abs-a-Lot. That’s fair.”

Stiles blinks, then says, “Oh! I forgot about Wednesday Addams again.” He turns to the sour-looking girl and says, “We should put a bell on you or something. But, if you ride with me so Allison has to take Veruca Salt over there, I will offer a bribe of your choice. Like . . . cookies or something. I make really good cookies.”

“I take cash,” Wednesday says comfortably, clearly not at all bothered by the nickname Stiles has given her.

“Cool,” Stiles says, pulling out his wallet and fishing around in it.

Freddie laughs suddenly. “Right, you’re from the Arnelle family. Bunch of broke-ass rednecks living in, what, Kentucky?”

“You just don’t quit, do you,” Beefcake says, and for the first time, he actually sounds angry.

Wednesday just reaches out and takes the money from Stiles. To Freddie, she says, “I’m comfortable in the knowledge that your geography skills are as poor as your self-control, and you’ll never end up on my doorstep as you have no idea where it is.” The words are all said calmly, without inflection or any sign of anger. Then she turns and walks away.

“I guess she doesn’t live in Kentucky,” Stiles remarks, amused. He fishes out the keys to his Jeep and unlocks the door. Shaking his head, Hunky opens the back door for Wednesday, then gets into the front passenger seat. The others are getting into Allison’s car. Stiles glances up at his father as the cruiser pulls up alongside them.

“Everything okay?” Stilinski asks, arching his eyebrows at the teenagers.

“These two are planning to walk back to town,” Allison says, grinning at his sheriff and gesturing to the twins.

Sheriff Stilinski heaves a sigh. “Of course they are.” He directs his attention to the two blondes. “The doors are unlocked, guys. Hop in.” He’s long since killed the swirling lights.

“We’re fine,” the twins say in unison.

The sheriff gives a little sigh and tries to be diplomatic. “I’m sure you are, but it’s late, you aren’t from around here, and it’s a long way back to the Mr. Argent’s house on foot. So I would feel better if I could give you a ride.”

“We said we’re fine,” Freddie says, his voice strained with the effort of keeping his temper.

Stiles decides it’s time to intervene. He knows what his father is trying to do, and he even appreciates the effort. But Freddie has proven that he’s willing to kill, and he’s made comments about the sheriff being ‘compromised’, and there’s no way Stiles wants to leave the two of them alone in a vehicle. Most hunters wouldn’t dare strike directly at someone in law enforcement, but Freddie just seems a little off somehow, too desperately eager to prove himself. But as much as his father can’t drive them anywhere, neither does he want to just leave them out there. They would
undoubtedly circle back to the Hale House, and he has no idea what would happen once they got there. “Fine. You’ll ride with me. Wednesday can go with Allison. Keep the money,” he adds to her.

“What do you not get about ‘we’re fine’,” Flossie snaps.

Stiles gives her a flat look. He is altogether done with this shit for the night. “Get. In. The car.”

The twins are both staring at him, agape. Wednesday just gets out of Stiles’ car and into Allison’s without a word. “You don’t – ” the twins begin in unison.

“Care,” Stiles says. “The word that you are looking for is ‘care’, as in, I don’t care if I have to tie you to trees and leave you out here all night to keep you from causing trouble. I don’t care if I have to cold-cock you and load you up onto the roof rack like earlier suggested. I don’t care if you think I’m not the boss of you. Get in my Jeep right now or I will make you.”

There’s just enough uncertainty in the moment that hangs there that Stiles knows he’s won, so once they’ve finally gotten in, he feels secure enough to add, “Now keep your freakin’ mouths shut on the way back or I will put wolfsbane in your coffee tomorrow morning, and trust me, the gastrointestinal symptoms it induces in humans are not something you want to experience firsthand.” He turns back to the road. “Sheriff, thanks for the offer, but I think they’ll pass.”

“So I see,” Stilinski says. “I’ll be sure to ignore any calls about teenagers tied to trees that I get tonight.”

Stiles nods at him and says, “Have a good night then,” and a moment later, the cruiser takes off. He looks over at Allison and says, “I’ll see you back at the house,” and leans over to give her a quick kiss on the mouth, which is a little weird, but hey, selling the whole couple thing.

Allison resists the urge to make a face and goes along with it. “Try not to murder anyone.”

Stiles lets out a snort of almost-laughter before getting into the car and turning the key in the ignition. Freddie and Flossie are clearly set to sulk for the entire drive home, so he just shakes his head, puts the car in gear, and pulls onto the road. “Gee, this conclave thing has been a blast so far.”

“Not that I’m excusing them,” Hunky says, giving a little tilt of his head to indicate the twins, “but Allison’s temper is sort of . . . sudden.”

“Uh huh.” Stiles doesn’t sound impressed. “Yeah. She got pissed off when they insulted her father. Who could have seen that coming?”

“I didn’t say it was out of line. Just, most people give a warning before they start throwing punches.” Hunk gives a bit of a shrug. “Unless they actually mean to injure. Like the fight was real.”

Stiles huffs out a sigh. “Look. You have seen actual action, unlike those two yobbos back there. But I bet you don’t know yet what it’s like to live in a supernatural hotbed, where something’s always going on, where werewolf packs who think they can seize territory show up any time, where there have been warlocks and faeries and shit. Nobody here telegraphs their punches. It’s a good God damned way to get killed.”

“And yet you have a truce with the local pack.” Beefcake doesn’t sound insulted or disgusted, just a little confused. “It wouldn’t be a contested territory if there wasn’t a pack here to take territory from.”

“The pack here has a new alpha, and a lot of packs thought that it should be up for grabs because of what happened to the Hales.” Stiles shrugs. “So they show up. But yeah, we have a truce with a local pack.” Somewhat over his shoulder, he says, “I don’t see why it’s so hard to understand.
They’re not bad guys. We’re not bad guys. So when the bad guys show up, we team up and get rid of ‘em all the sooner. What’s so fucking complicated about that?”

 Someone in the back mutters about how they’re animals. The other comments that maybe if the Argents kept them on leashes like they were attack dogs, it wouldn’t be so bad, but a truce is just insulting. Stiles lets it pass without comment. He’s already told them what the penalty for speaking will be. When they spend the entire next day on the toilet, they’ll regret it more than enough.

 “When laid out like that, nothing,” Beefcake says. “What happens when you don’t agree?”

 Stiles shrugs. “Mr. Argent and the alpha hash it out. I’m usually not involved.”

 “Have you ever met the alpha?” Hunky asks, blatantly curious.

 “A few times, yeah. Why?”

 “What’s he like? I’ve only ever seen an alpha at a distance and I’ve certainly never met one.”

 Stiles gives him a sideways look and a crooked smile. “He’s everything you’ve heard about him . . . and a lot more on top of that.”

 ~ ~ ~ ~
Okay, bbs, I know a lot of things in the real world suck right now, so hopefully some BAMF!Stiles and Allison will help improve your day...

By the by, I am ignoring the part of TW canon that says tattoos are made with blowtorches, basically for the reason of hahahahahawtf.

Since hunter slumber parties obviously aren’t going to work out, Stiles drops the twins back at their hotel on his way back to the Argent house. They get out of his Jeep and slam the doors so hard that the whole car rattles. He rolls his eyes but doesn’t comment. Allison drops Veruca off as well, but Wednesday opts to come back to the house with them. She doesn’t exactly look happy about it, but then again Stiles isn’t sure she’s actually capable of looking happy, so he decides to take it as a compliment.

Nobody is pleased to see the twins and Veruca show up the next day, dropped off by their parents around eleven o’clock in the morning so the adults can do adult things at the hotel and the kids can ‘hang out’ together. Stiles and the Argent kids have set up camp in the backyard, with Wednesday hanging on their outskirts, and have been discussing weaponry. Stiles has been showing Buff McHunky all the different tools on his Leatherman, and he thinks that if Grabby says, “lemme see that” one more time, he’s going to get stabbed. Possibly not on purpose. Stiles keeps his tools sharp and his knives sharper.

“Are you blind or something?” he asks the young teenager, as the kid pulls the screwdriver tool about two inches from his face to examine it.

“No,” he says defensively, and moves the tool out to a more reasonable distance. But there’s a definite squint to his eyes now.

Allison makes an annoyed noise and bats his hand down, then holds up her own at the same distance with three fingers raised. “How many fingers am I holding up?” she asks, and then rolls her eyes. “Geez. I feel like Coach Finstock.”

“He never bothers to ask,” Stiles says, amused.

Grabby squints harder and leans forward the tiniest bit, hoping nobody will notice. “Three?” he says, but it’s definitely a guess.

“Sometimes he does,” Allison says to Stiles, “but then he informs you of what the answer should be.” She puts her hand down, resting her bow across her legs. “Do you have glasses?”

Now embarrassed, Grabby Hands rubs his hand over the back of his head. “Yeah, but, my parents don’t like it when I wear them. They say it betrays a weakness. I have contacts, but I hate wearing them, so, uh, usually I just squint a lot.”

Across the yard, Freddie Bobbsey lets out a quiet snort of derision.
Allison turns and looks over her shoulder. “Hey, shut it, douchenozzle,” she says, and Stiles lets out a quiet snicker. Allison has been hanging around Erica too much if she’s picking up language like that. Then she turns back to Grabby, wishing Scott was there. He’s better at this sort of soft handling of people. “Well, right now your parents are nowhere to be seen. Even if you could see. So why don’t you go get them? Because personally, I’d rather betray a weakness like needing glasses than have a weakness like not being able to see.” Scott is so much better at this. She’s afraid she sounds sort of preachy.

“Nah, they’re a few years out of date anyway,” Grabby says, and then quickly changes the subject by asking Stiles what his favorite weapon is.

“Baseball bat,” Stiles says immediately, although a far more accurate answer would be to point at Allison and say ‘her’. “Well, and my .38 as backup, but gunshots draw attention and a lot of the time it’s better to avoid that.”

Hunk, who’s sprawled loose-limbed in a lawn chair, sits up at that. “Isn’t that getting a little close?”

“Hey, thick of the action is the place to be,” Stiles says, with a shrug. “And I’m not a marksman like Allison. Besides, it’s silver-studded. That will send most wolves running with their tails between their legs.”

Another snort and a spate of giggles from the twins. Stiles ignores them. Allison looks at them and then looks at Stiles. “I’m going to have to kill them soon. You realize that, right?”

Stiles gives a shrug. “Not my circus, not my monkey.”

“What a prissy attitude to take,” Allison says, pursing her lips and tapping her fingers against her bow.

“What does that even mean?” Grabby Hands asks, sounding baffled.

“It’s the literal Polish translation of the phrase ‘not my problem’,” Stiles tells him.

“Why do you know that?” Hunk asks, although Wednesday appears to be committing the phrase to memory.

Stiles shrugs again. “Why not?” He looks at Allison and says, “You, my darling dear, need to blow off some steam.”


“Of course you do,” Stiles says, amused.

Grabby Hands looks at the others and says, “It’s like they have their own language.”

Buff gives a snort of laughter. “Couples are like that sometimes.”

Allison bounces out of her seat and sets her bow down on the glass patio table with care. “Rules?”

Stiles is about to reply when Hunky says, “Wait, are you two planning to spar? You might not want to.”

“Why not?” Stiles asks, mystified.

“Well, because the tournament is going to be tomorrow,” Hunk says. “Some people don’t like to, you know, give away an advantage beforehand. Allow people time to think about the best way to
fight against you, or give them time to prepare.”

Allison shrugs and eels out of her quiver of arrows. “Okay, so the rules are not to pull out all the stops. I think we can manage that.”

“Yeah, take it easy on me,” Stiles says, laughing. “I didn’t sleep very well. You’ll probably kick my ass.”

Allison moves out onto the open grass. “I always kick your ass,” she says, but her tone is playful, without the bite she’s been throwing at the twins and the others who have occasionally annoyed her. “And you know you don’t have to stay here. You live in town. You could go home to your own bed.” To Derek, she thinks. But that part is left unspoken.

“And miss a Papa-Argent-sanctioned opportunity to sleep in your bed?” Stiles smirks at her. “I think not, my fair lady!” He’s aware of the twins watching them now, clearly ready to see what they can do in a fight. He rolls his eyes a little and pulls his shirt over his head. No sense in letting Allison get a handhold.

“Hah!” Allison pulls an elastic out of her jeans pocket and uses it to pull her hair into a bun for the same reason as Stiles took off his shirt. She could strip out of hers, too; she’s not afraid to fight in her bra in front of the audience. Being in a wolf pack pretty much kills all sense of body shyness anyone can have. But leaving it on gives her something to eel out of later. “Well, now I know why you’re really attending this party. It’s just to get into my sheets.”

Stiles lets out a snort of laughter, unable to help it, because it’s so untrue and they both know it.

Scott’s immediate declaration of interest in Allison the moment she showed up in their lives long ago made Stiles place her into a category containing complete nonsexual entities, like his grandmother, or a lamp.

“Nice tat,” Wednesday says, admiring the one on Stiles’ back, in between his shoulder blades.

“Nice scars,” McAbcrunch says, surveying the damage laid out across Stiles’ skin.

Stiles glances down. He still jokes about the tic-tac-toe board he has on his stomach, but there are a few other scars too, on his arms and one across his shoulder. He had expected that, but hadn’t thought about the tattoo. It’s so new; he only got it a few months previous. It’s a symbol of Derek’s design, similar to the triskele that the Hales used as their pack symbol. Danny, being the newest member of the pack, had asked him about it, and once Stiles realized its significance, he decided they should have marks of their own. Derek had designed it, and Stiles had gotten it on his eighteenth birthday. (His father likely would have given him permission to get it sooner, but Stiles tries not to traumatize him too much.)

His is on his back, in the exact same spot that Derek has his triskele. His lupa had gotten the new tattoo on his chest, just over his heart. Over the spring months, most of the pack had gotten their own. Allison’s is on her ankle; Scott’s on his hip. Boyd’s is on his upper arm and Lydia’s is just over her left shoulder blade while Danny’s is over his right shoulder blade. Erica and Isaac don’t have them yet, because they’re still seventeen. Erica has whined copiously at her parents about this, but they have refused to budge.

“Yeah, thanks,” he says to Wednesday. “It’s some ancient Sumerian symbol, supposed to protect me or something like that.”

Wednesday almost has a facial expression and says, “In that case, I hope the scars came first, or you got ripped off.”
“Most were before,” Allison says. “Just imagine how bad the others could have been without it, though.” In a way, it’s not a lie; the symbol is a protection. It makes the entire pack feel stronger, more connected. It might be completely psychological, but it makes all of them feel good to have that physical symbol of their connection. Since Erica and Isaac aren’t allowed to have tattoos yet, Derek had found a jeweler to make them each a pendant to wear instead. Erica’s is small, delicate, a gold pendant an equally thin gold chain. Isaac’s is heavier, and he had strung it on the same cord that they wore their protection charms on. “That’s what happens when you don’t use range weapons.”

“Now, wait just a second,” Stiles says, laughing. “I’ll cop to these two,” he says, drawing his fingers over the two thick scars Kali left him with, “being because it was an up close fight. But these two?” he continues, tracing the ones that criss-cross the others. “That was just me being completely flat-out ambushed in a grocery store parking lot.”

“Well, that’ll teach you to buy groceries when there are crazy people in town,” Allison replies, with mock severity.

Stiles shakes his head in amusement, but then looks at Buff. “Seriously, though, you look really surprised. You don’t have any scars?”

“I am really surprised. I have a few scars, but none like that. None that look like something tried to remove my organs.” Hunky gives a shrug. “I go on hunts, yeah, and I’ve been in the field, but I’m only just at the end of training. The chances that I would’ve gotten close enough to something that could do that to me are small.”

“Yeah, well, I basically got thrown in the deep end, sink or swim style.” Stiles grins at him, showing teeth despite himself. “Welcome to Beacon Hills.”

With that, Allison comes at him full force, foot first. He actually laughs as he swings around to deflect the kick. Hand-to-hand combat isn’t exactly his forte (although to be fair, it’s not Allison’s strongest suit either), but he enjoys it on occasion. Derek had been absolutely merciless with all of them about physical training, perhaps even more so with the vulnerable human members of the pack than the others. Stiles sustained more than his fair share of bruises and even a few breaks learning how to protect himself.

But Allison does take it a little slow, both because Stiles asked her to and because she doesn’t want to give all their skills away to the watching twins. She’s not sure if the tournament will allow them to have weapons. She’s better in a knife fight and Stiles is better with a bat or a club or even a bo staff. But they trade blows for a little while and then grapple, and then she shrieks when Stiles starts tickling her in the ribs. “No fair, no fair!” she protests, trying to get a knee up into his groin because fuck a fair fight, that’s why.

But he does let her go and when she smacks him upside the head, he doesn’t make a move to block her, just grinning merrily at her because he’s having a good time, really. Allison is still laughing. “Oh my God. You are so bad!” But she’s feeling better now. Much more relaxed.

“I can second that,” Freddie says dryly, from his side of the yard, and Allison’s good mood vanishes instantly. But Stiles is still smiling. He gets up and walks over to them.

“See these?” he asks, tracing the scars Kali left on his abdomen. “I got them from Kali. The leader of the alpha pack. Do you know why I got them? Because I was protecting Derek Hale.”

It’s not exactly accurate; the timing is a little incorrect. But it’s the best he can do without revealing that he was the alpha being tested, and it certainly gets the point across. Allison stands alone for a moment, because they may be fake-dating, but that’s not the same sort of unit that the pack is. But
then the instincts that come with the pack bond kick in, and her alpha is moving too close to a person that she knows to be unpredictable. Unless one counts the fact that he can be relied upon to be a jerk and inappropriately violent. So she paces up to stand next to Stiles and rests her forearm on his shoulder, as if she’s just watching the show. Normally she would stop behind him, since he’s the alpha, but here they have to be seen as no less than equals.

Freddie doesn’t seem to know how to respond, and there’s a beat of uncomfortable silence. Stiles waits until he starts to snap out something uncomplimentary, and then interrupts him before he can get more than two words out. “Furthermore,” he says, “I’m proud of these scars. Because I don’t have to have known you more than two days to know that Derek Hale is a better person and far more of a human being than you will ever be. And if I hear you insult him again, you are going to spend the rest of this conclave with your jaw wired shut. Am I making myself clear?”

“Please, insult him,” Allison says. “I’m begging you.”

Freddie is on his feet now, along with his sister, looking more and more like they stepped out of some horror movie. His face is twisted in an expression of rage. “You can’t fucking talk to me like that,” he snarls. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

“No,” Stiles says, “and I don’t care. Are you from some big, bad, hunting family? Are you going to threaten to come here and wipe us all out? I’ve heard it before and from people a lot fucking scarier than you.”

Before Tweedle Dum can reply and the situation escalate even further, Stiles’ head jerks around. There’s a rustle in the bushes off to his right. He hears it a moment before everyone else, but then a pair of werewolves emerges from the trees and catches everyone’s attention. They’re big ones, already in their partially shifted form, a man and a woman. “Well, well, well,” the woman says, in a voice that’s low and amused. “What have we here? Baby hunters, it seems.”

Allison’s already moving towards her quiver. She had started as soon as Stiles had moved to look at something she hadn’t heard yet, because she knows how to take cues from people with better senses. The arrows are slung over one shoulder and she has one nocked, bow drawn and arrow aimed, as soon as it’s in her hand. She aims at the man. If the woman is talking, she’s more likely the distraction. She moves to get a better angle, casting a lightning fast look at her alpha.

All the other teenagers have drawn as well, except Grabby Hands, who’s still sitting in the grass. Even Wednesday has a knife in her hand; Hunk has a .45 and the twins each have what Stiles cautiously identifies as a Browning. He’s not as familiar with heavier firearms. He opens his mouth to say something, but Freddie opens fire before another word can be spoken and everything dissolves into chaos.

Allison takes a split second to place Wednesday and notes that she’s on her feet, near the house, and that Stiles is close enough to her to pre-empt any attack she might make or get caught in. Then she lets the tension off her bow string, moving as fast as she can over to Grabby Hands, snagging him by the back of the shirt, then hauling him to his feet and dragging him over to Fab Abs. “Don’t shoot,” she says, planting herself in front of them. “For fuck’s sake. And I’ll do the talking when we see who’s left alive.”

“Do you know them?” Hunk asks, shouting to be heard over the noise of the gunfire. Freddie’s gun has already been torn out of his hands, but Flossie still has hers. The wolves have been hit a couple times, but they’re not slowing down very much.

“No, they’re not locals!” Stiles yells back. He’s thinking now might be a good time to take a vacation. It’s not good form to kill other werewolves just for showing up, but then again, how stupid
did they have to be to attack a bunch of hunters, even teenagers?

Allison agrees in principle, but the twins opened fire and turned what could have been a nasty conversation into a potential bloodbath. “Stiles?” she calls, irritated that she can’t see him easily anymore, but needing permission to handle this on his behalf.

“Take ‘em!” Stiles shouts back. He doesn’t dare get involved himself. Not only is it a little above his level, but if he gets more than a paper cut, odds are very good that Derek will show up.

Allison draws again and waits for the second gun to get knocked out of play. The instant it leaves Flossie’s hand, she lets fly, and is already nocking another arrow and releasing. The first takes the male werewolf through the knee; the second gets the woman in the shoulder. Both are shots designed to slow movement and damage joints, but obviously not kill. She steps forward, another arrow already on the string. “The next person that moves, I will cripple. And that includes the humans here. I will shoot your fucking knees out. Now, do I have your attention?”

The female werewolf snarls at her. The male just whines as he pulls the arrow out of his knee, but doesn’t make any threatening moves. Freddie goes for his gun despite Allison’s statement, but Hunky lunges over and grabs it. “Do you think she’s fucking kidding?” he growls, getting an arm around Freddie and putting him in a headlock.

Allison gives a huff and says, “Thanks,” although she would have preferred to mete out her own discipline. But when the wolf snarls, she just shows her own teeth in response, unfazed. “Now. You two. You are unwelcome here. This is not your territory, you have no business here, and you will leave or there will be consequences. Their behavior,” she adds, canting her head to indicate the twins, “was uncalled for and out of proportion to the act of you merely showing your faces, so any injuries they sustained will be forgiven. But you will get out of here. Now.”

The woman gives another snarl, breaking the arrow in half so she can remove it more easily. Her companion gives a little whine and starts backing towards the forest, clearly ready to make a retreat but not wanting to leave without his partner. After a moment, she apparently decides her own injuries are not as forgivable, and lunges forward to where Hunky has Freddie pinned.

Before Allison can loose her arrow, Stiles rises from a half crouch, his hand making a broad arc in front of him. Liquid leaves a tiny vial that he’s got tucked away in his palm, glittering silver in the sunlight before it splashes into the wolf’s face. She howls and staggers backwards, clawing at her face. “I think my girlfriend told you to leave,” Stiles says. “You’d better get out of here before she changes her mind about letting you.”

Whimpering, the female werewolf turns and runs into the forest. Her companion is right behind her. Seeing their retreating backs, Flossie’s eyes light up and her breath starts to quicken. She reaches for her gun, but then lets out a gasp of pain as Stiles’ boot slams down on her fingers. “Your enemy is defeated,” he says. “What are you going to do, shoot them in the back?”

Allison swings around, her arrow still nocked. “What is wrong with the two of you?” Her tone and expression demand an answer; she clearly doesn’t mean it as a rhetorical question.

Sullenly, Flossie says, “They came to pick a fight. They should be willing to accept the consequences.”

“Well, this isn’t your territory, so you have no right to decide if they get one or not. And speaking of consequences, if this upsets the truce with the local pack or turns into some sort of war, I hope that you two are willing to accept the consequences because I’ll make sure that they land right at your feet.”
By this point, Abs’ grip on Freddie has loosened up enough for him to push free. He gives the older man a dirty look and snaps, “It’s tradition that when party-crashers show up at the conclave, they can be used as target practice.”

“Oh, cool!” Stiles says. “It’s tradition in Beacon Hills that when stupid people show up, I get to put my foot up their ass.” There’s a pregnant pause. “Not so much fun when I’m the one making shit up, is it?”

Hunk and Grabby Hands both let out a snigger, unable to help it. Then Stiles calmly picks up Flossie’s gun and unloads it, checking the chamber for any bullets. He takes Freddie’s and does the same thing, while both of them shower him with protests and profanities to which he pays no heed.

“Well, I don’t trust you two not to go after them and make more trouble,” he says. “Allison, what do you think we should do with them?”

She gives each of them a frozen, disgusted look. “Tell my father. He’s in charge here, not me, and he needs to know what’s happening.”

“Okay. Why don’t you keep an eye on the two of them and I’ll go give him a call.”

Tweedle Dee growls at him and says, “You’d better stay right here while you call him so I know what bullshit line you feed him.”

“Hey,” Allison snaps, putting her arrow back in the quiver and using the end of her bow to tap his jaw. “How about you shut your mouth,” she suggests, with the obvious ‘before I shut it for you’ left unspoken.

Stiles just rolls his eyes and takes out his phone. He has Chris in his phone book, and has no problem letting the Wonder Twins listen to his side of the conversation. “Hello, Mr. Argent, sorry to bother you when I’m sure you’re so busy, but we’ve got a bit of a problem here . . . no, nothing like that,” he says, and laughs, leaving the others wondering what Chris said. “A couple of betas showed up and picked a fight. There was a . . . disagreement about how to handle it. Was wondering if you could head back here to mediate.” A long pause. “Uh huh. Yeah.” A very long pause. “Shit. I don’t know. The twins . . . yes, I’ll get right on that, but really, you should have provided name tags.”

Silence. “Yes, Mr. Argent, I will make sure to keep my opinions to myself in the future . . . aw, come on now, I don’t even know what that word means . . . okay, yes. Uh huh. Okay. See you then.” He hangs up his phone and slides it back into his pocket. “He’ll be here in fifteen minutes.”

“What word could my father have possibly used that you didn’t know the meaning of?” Allison asks, amused.

“I think I’d better not repeat it,” Stiles says. “There are children present.”

Grabby Hands and Wednesday both make a face at him. But it doesn’t last long before Grabby says, “That trick you used was so cool! It was like holy water on vampires!”

“Yeah, wolfsbane extract,” Stiles says with a nod. “Stings like a bitch if you can get it onto exposed skin.”

“It’s something that Stiles came up with,” Allison says. “Just bottling it up for plain use like that. Have to be careful, though, because if you get any on yourself and don’t clean it up fast enough, it’ll poison you, too.”

“Uh huh.” Beefcake frowns slightly. “I’d think it would be of more use in a water pistol or a spray gun. Yet you’re just . . . carrying a vial of it.”
“Yep,” Stiles says, giving him a pleasant smile.

“But you weren’t carrying it in case of werewolves.”

Stiles just gives a casual shrug. Allison looks between the two of them. She’s torn between laughing at the fact that Stiles was actually going to poison the twins, or pout that now it won’t happen. Presuming that Stiles is only carrying one vial of wolfsbane, which is a rather dangerous presumption to make. Beefy and Stiles just have a long staring contest for a minute. Stiles doesn’t flinch. Finally, Beefcake drops his gaze and looks away. “Jesus, this town is crazy,” he mutters.

“Hey, it’s not that bad right now,” Allison protests.

“That’s the craziest part of all!” Buff replies.

Barely another moment has passed before Stiles’ phone rings. He glances at the screen, makes a little grimace, and then picks it up. “Hey, there, Sheriff . . . no, everything is fine. Yes. No, I swear!” A pause. “Yes, even by your definition of the word. Chris Argent is on his way here to make sure it doesn’t happen again . . . I’m sure he’ll be thrilled. Okey dokey. Yes, sir. Okay.”

“Sheriff Stilinski?” Allison asks, when he hangs up, and he gives a brief nod. “Neighbors must have reported the gunfire, then.”

“Yep,” Stiles says. “He’s going to call your dad and talk to him about it.”

Allison’s grimace matches Stiles’.

“That’s bad, huh?” Grabby Hands ventures nervously.

“Well,” Stiles says, “Sheriff Stilinski doesn’t like getting calls about gunfire in residential neighborhoods. He’s probably going to call up Mr. Argent to find out who, if anyone, should be arrested.”

“Oh boy,” Buff says. “But he’s in the know, right? I mean, we can say ‘werewolves showed up’ and he’ll understand.”

“Yes,” Stiles says, “he will understand. That does not necessarily mean he’ll approve.”

“Right,” Freddie says, his tone snide. “Because he’s on their side. Didn’t you guys read about when Gerard Argent tried to get him out of the way because he was helping the local pack?”

Allison flicks a nervous glance at Stiles. There are fewer things that will rile him up faster than referring back to that incident. Stiles’ jaw sets in a blank mask of an expression, before he turns slowly to Freddie and says, “An event which resulted in a twenty-five year prison sentence and a funeral that nobody cried at.”

Freddie’s eyes narrow. “Gerard Argent was a better hunter than you could ever hope to be.”

“Gerard Argent was torturing Peter Hale because he needed an alpha’s bite to cure his cancer,” Stiles snaps back. “He wanted to become a werewolf. So maybe you should have a nice hot cup of ‘shut the fuck up about things you know nothing about’.”

This seems to render the twins speechless. Actually, everyone looks surprised. “That – that can’t be true,” Hunk stammers. “Gerard – Gerard was –”

Stiles looks at Allison and says abruptly, “I need to take five. Keep an eye on them.” He gives the
order without thinking, and turns on one heel and walks away. Allison just nods in response, not questioning for a moment. This generates even more surprise, and she realizes a little too late that their interaction there was the exact opposite of how they’ve been trying to act for the last two days.

It’s a little too late to do anything about it, so she just shrugs at their looks and says, “He gets like that sometimes.”

Nobody seems to know what to say to that, so they sit in awkward silence for a little while. Stiles comes back a few minutes later, visibly calm, and gives a brief nod to Allison when she gives him a questioning look. Only a minute after that, Chris Argent comes into the backyard. The hunter looks pissed as hell. “Someone explain to me why I got a call from the sheriff about gunfire in my backyard,” he snaps.

Allison stands up. “A couple betas showed up, and the twins –”

Now both the twins are on their feet, too. “Defended ourselves –” they say in unison.

“Shut up,” Chris snaps at all of them. He surveys the group of teenagers and then stabs a finger at Wednesday. “You. Tell me what happened. Facts only.”

Wednesday gives a slow nod. “We were sitting in the backyard when two betas came out of the woods. They hadn’t quite entered the yard yet. One of them said something about ‘baby hunters’. Both the twins opened fire.” She proceeds to give a very detailed, thorough description of the fight that had followed, showing a surprising grasp of tactics.

Chris gives her a nod when she’s finished. “Thank you,” he says. He turns to the twins. “First things first. Weapons are required to be peace bound and unloaded at the conclave at all times. I do not make exceptions for anybody. So that’s one rule you’ve already broken, and don’t try to tell me that you didn’t know about it. Secondly, what the hell did you think you were doing, opening fire in a residential neighborhood? The people next door are less than fifty yards away. Did you think they wouldn’t call 911? Thirdly, I don’t care what rules you play by when you’re on your home turf. This is my territory, and I am an Argent and we adhere to the code. You are not to make any sort of strike against a werewolf unless you are defending yourself, and preemptively firing at someone who’s made a snide comment as to your age and ability does not count. If that happens again, you are going home. And that is straight from your father. I spoke to him on my way here. And if that isn’t incentive enough, you’ve got two strikes with the Sheriff of this county, whom you will respect, and he says if you get a third he’s going to toss both your asses in lock-up and leave you there at least twelve hours to see if you’re capable of learning your lesson. In the meantime, since you obviously can’t be trusted on your own, you’re coming back to the hotel with me to attend those lectures and demonstrations that you so copiously complained about not wanting to attend. That was also your father’s decision, so if you have a problem with it, take it up with him.”

He takes a deep breath as the twins gape at him in a combination of shock and dismay. Then he rounds on Allison. “And you, young lady, you should know better than to let them provoke you like that. If you want to be a hunter, you’re going to be dealing with people like them who don’t follow the Code your entire life. Sometimes you’ll have to work with them. Get used to it. I’m not saying you were wrong to call me, but you should be able to handle this sort of situation yourself – without resorting to threatening to blow out someone’s kneecaps.”

Allison’s jaw sets unhappily, but then she nods and says briskly, “Yes, sir. I understand.”

Chris nods at her, and then gentles the lecture by giving her shoulder a squeeze. Then he turns to Stiles. “As for you . . .” he says, then lets out a low growl. “I don’t know why I bother. But I will remind you that I allowed you to attend this conclave with my daughter on the understanding that
you would not cause me any trouble. I can still change my mind.”

Stiles nods and echoes Allison. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. You two, with me.” Chris gestures to the twins, who reluctantly rise and follow him.

Once they’ve left, Stiles lets out a huff of a breath. His tension level is far too high, and it doesn’t look like Allison’s is much better. He hadn’t anticipated how much stress being separated from the pack was going to generate. He wraps an arm around her waist, feeling the rigidity in her back, and says, “You and I need us some alone time.” Allison gives a short nod, so Stiles turns to the others and says, “Hey, entertain yourselves for a while. We’ll be back in a few hours.”

“A few hours?” Beefcake can’t help but grin. “I admire your stamina.”

Stiles gives him a salute before tugging on Allison and leading her back into the house. Behind him, he hears Grabby Hands say, “What? What does that even mean?” and Beefcake replying, “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

Allison doesn’t speak again until they’re in the Jeep. Then she lets out a groan. “I don’t know why my temper is so short,” she says.

“Because you’re separated from your pack and you’re separated from your mate,” Stiles says. “It hasn’t been any easier for me. Also, those two do have a knack for picking which buttons to press. We need some downtime. Let’s go back to Derek’s. I can take a nap and you can skype with Scott. Just don’t let him see how stressed you are, or he’ll try to talk you into saying he can come back.”

Allison gives a weary nod and pushes her hands through her hair. Stiles puts the key in the ignition, hesitates, and then says, “Hey, you drive. I need to call my dad and find out how long I’m grounded for.”

She laughs despite herself, and they switch seats. Stiles climbs into the passenger seat and takes out his phone. He dials a moment later and opens with, “Hey, Dad,” to indicate that he’s in a position where he can acknowledge his father’s existence.

Sheriff Stilinski replies with, “Stiles, what the hell is going on?”

“This conclave thing is going a little bit worse than anticipated,” Stiles says. “Two of the teenagers are like little psycho wannabes. I swear, it’s like if Kate Argent and Kali Steele had a love-child or something.”

“Great. What are we doing about it?”

“Chris is handling it, or at least handling it as well as he’s able,” Stiles says. “The conclave only lasts four more days. Then they’ll be out of town. Maybe sooner, if they don’t shape up.”

“Okay. Keep me posted.”

Stiles says he will, then says, “Love-you-bye” and hangs up. He lets the back of his head rest against the seat and stares out the window as Allison drives to the outskirts of town and onto the little road that leads to the Hale property. They have a remote that disables and opens the fencing around it. Sometimes it feels like living in a prison, but Stiles took care in the designs to make sure that the fencing isn’t visible from the house they actually live in.

Derek has clearly heard the approach of the Jeep on the bumpy dirt road, because he’s waiting on the front porch when they show up. Stiles is out of the car before it’s even come to a full stop, and
flings himself at Derek, wrapping his legs around the other man’s waist. Derek actually has to step back at the force of Stiles’ tackle, hugging him tight and protesting, “Why are you always hugging me? Get off me!”

Stiles just grins at the familiar refrain and presses his cheek into Derek’s neck, enjoying the warmth of him, the scent of him. He actually feels a little drunk on it. He hadn’t noticed exactly how badly the separation was affecting him. From the way Derek is burrowing his nose into Stiles’ hair, he isn’t the only one.

Allison approaches a little more slowly, but Derek welcomes her gladly enough, letting go of Stiles with one arm so he can pull her into an embrace. She’s never been his favorite person in the pack, but over the years they’ve come to an understanding. He wraps an arm around her shoulders and presses his cheek against hers.

“You two look like shit,” he finally says, when they’ve gotten the worst of it out of their system.

“I missed you too,” Stiles replies.

Derek lets out a snort. “Did someone miss their nap?”

“And the last two nights of sleep, yeah,” Stiles says. “You, me, bed, not in that dirty way. Wake me in two hours. And I mean it; none of this ‘you needed more sleep’ mother hen bullshit. We can’t afford to be gone longer than that or someone will wonder where we went.”

Derek makes a face, clearly not approving of this. But he turns and goes into the house with Stiles still clinging to him like a limpet. He has no trouble going up the stairs while supporting the teenager’s weight, and dumps him on the bed. Stiles is awake long enough to be aware of Derek pulling off his shoes and then curling up next to him, not bothering to shift because he doesn’t want to take the time to undress. “You smell nice, like paint and wolf and . . .” Stiles murmurs, and then he’s asleep.

~ ~ ~
The next morning is a large meeting about current events in the supernatural world, which Stiles attends thinking it might be interesting. It isn’t. It seems mostly to be a bunch of assholes bragging about their latest conquests. He tries to hide his yawns and definitely tries not to fall asleep. He’s pretty sure that if he wakes up screaming from a nightmare, it will win him no friends.

He’s preoccupied, anyway, because day four is the mid-point of the convention and thus hosts the tournament. The kids go first, and then the adults have their own tournament after them. Stiles was asked as soon as he arrived at the hotel that morning if he planned to compete. He said sure, why not? He’s not thrilled with the concept, but he’s pretty sure if he backs out, Freddie Bobbsey will take that as a notice that he’s afraid of him.

The matches are supposedly determined at random, but Stiles isn’t at all surprised when he sees the schedule that he’s matched up against Freddie, and Allison against Flossie. He sighs and considers his options. It’s a weaponless tournament, hand-to-hand combat only, so he probably won’t fare very well against Freddie, who’s two inches taller and probably has at least twenty pounds of muscle on him. Then again, he hasn’t actually seen Freddie fight.

After thinking about it, he decides that as much as it might make sense to go down easy, avoid injury, and allow Freddie to continue to underestimate him, that is absolutely not going to happen. He just doesn’t have it in him. Tweedle Dum might grind him into paste, but Stiles is resolved to make him work for it. He texts Derek to let him know not to freak out if he gets beaten up a little. The resounding silence in reply makes Derek’s opinion on this quite clear.

Veruca Salt is up against Beefcake McAbcrunch, and Wednesday Addams has been matched up with Grabby Hands. This will be interesting, since as of yet Stiles has no idea what any of them can do. He sees Beefy wincing at the schedule; he clearly isn’t thrilled with his opponent. The tournament is set up so not only do the winners fight the winners, but the losers fight the losers. That way there will be a rank for everyone rather than just one champion.

The opponents may not have been chosen as randomly as the tournament’s organizers would like people to believe, but the order of the matches has been. Stiles is relieved to see that he’s not first. That honor goes to Buff McBiceps and Veruca Salt. Stiles’ match with Freddie is third, after Allison’s with Flossie.

He feels kind of bad for Hunky, who obviously doesn’t want to be fighting a sixteen year old girl. It doesn’t even seem to be a chivalry thing; it’s just that she’s completely outmatched, they both know it, and he feels bad. Fortunately for him, Veruca’s surprisingly competent in physical combat. She’s obviously had some martial arts training, and she manages to get a few hits in (probably even without Hunky letting her). So while Beefcake takes her down easily enough, she doesn’t exactly embarrass herself, either.
The rules of the tournament are similar to a boxing match—the opponent has to stay down ten seconds. It doesn’t matter if they’re unconscious, pinned, or if they simply yield the fight. Chris, being the guest of honor, gets to referee. This makes Stiles somewhat relieved, knowing that he’ll be up there in case things get out of hand.

He’s a little worried about Allison’s fight. Unlike him, she won’t have to hold back. She’s the princess of the Argent family, and everyone will expect her to be among the best. That’s good, because Stiles doesn’t think she’ll be capable of holding back right now. She’s separated from her pack, from her mate; she’s tense and edgy and sleep-deprived.

It doesn’t help that Flossie starts the match by going right for her throat. Allison sweeps a leg underneath her and then follows up with her whole body, slamming Flossie into the mats with enough force to make Stiles wince. The blonde fights dirty—hair-pulling, clawing, no-holds-barred. But Allison is simply better. It takes her about five minutes to get Flossie into a ground hold that she learned from her father, and no matter how much she struggles, she just can’t get free.

Allison gets enthusiastic applause for her showing, and then it’s Stiles’ turn. Freddie’s smirking as he walks up on the stage. Stiles has left his shirt on this time—he doesn’t think that any of the hunters present would recognize his tattoo as a pack symbol, but he doesn’t want to chance it. He yawns and stretches as Freddie settles into a fighting stance and Chris sounds the match to begin.

Stiles wasn’t sure exactly what to expect from Freddie. He holds himself like a fighter and he demonstrates quickly that he knows what he’s doing. He’s bigger than Stiles by quite a bit, and strong. Stiles takes a punch to find out exactly how strong, turning so he gets it in the side instead of in the solar plexus where it was aimed, and it sends him tumbling. But Freddie is slow. Stiles isn’t sure if he thinks that because he’s so accustomed to sparring with werewolves, or if it’s as bad as he thinks it is. His own speed is fairly average for a human. Being alpha of the pack enhances his senses, boosts his stamina, and augments his healing. But it doesn’t make him much stronger or faster. Of course, he’s a lot stronger and faster than he used to be, but that’s just the effects of working out and practicing all the time.

So with that on his side, he wears Freddie down. He dances around, avoiding the more serious blows because he can see them coming an hour before they hit. He gets in a jab here, a kick there, never strong enough to do any real damage in the moment, but the effect is cumulative. It’s a fight of endurance, so unless Freddie gets in a lucky hit, he’s doomed. If he does, Stiles knows he’s screwed; if Freddie pins him, there’s no way he’ll be strong enough to get free.

But that never happens. Freddie gets frustrated with the way things are going and lunges into a full charge. Stiles almost laughs because this is the very first thing he learned. He didn’t even learn it from Derek; he learned it from Gerard. It’s a typical werewolf move. They’re big and strong and charge straight into things. Stiles is small and fast. He uses it to his advantage, goes into a slight crouch, and gets his shoulder in Freddie’s stomach. Freddie goes flying over Stiles’ shoulder, carried by his own momentum, and lands flat on his back. He starts to get up, but Stiles is already on him, pinning him with his knee in Freddie’s abdomen and his elbow right in his carotid artery. Even though he has the raw strength to push Stiles off him, he can’t because of the force Stiles is applying to the pressure points.

The crowd is basically stunned into silence for a moment. Stiles has gathered over the course of the last several days that the Aronsson family is one of the most prominent in the hunting world, and that they were expected to do very well at the tournament. For Flossie to lose to Allison is no big deal, given Allison’s status, but Stiles is a nobody from a relatively small hunting family (that he’s not even actually from). The effect is emphasized by the fact that, after a long, slow fight, the ending was as sudden as it was brutal. Allison cheers for him, and there’s some polite applause, but he doesn’t
get anywhere near the reaction the other two victors did.

Although the opponents are supposed to shake hands afterwards, Freddie storms out of the ring as soon as Stiles allows him up. Stiles shrugs and goes back to his seat to watch the next match. It’s rather pitiful. As much as Grabby Hands has made jokes about his eyesight and played on his phone during lectures, at no point has it been quite so evident that he doesn’t want to be there. He’s had some training, obviously, but his attacks are half-hearted at best.

Wednesday Addams proves to be surprisingly adept, definitely an opponent worth keeping an eye on. She’s just as fast as Allison is and has obviously had a lot of martial arts training. She takes Grabby down quick and easy. She doesn’t bother to pin him and he doesn’t bother getting up.

There’s a break then while straws are drawn to determine the following matches. The losers will go first, of course, because people don’t care about them as much. In fact, Stiles notices that about a third of the audience actually leaves at this point, including Grabby’s father. He assumes they’ll be back later, for the winner’s matches.

Grabby Hands gives a little grimace when it’s announced that he’ll be fighting Flossie, leaving Veruca paired up with Freddie. The twins handily beat their opponents in this round; Chris actually has to step in for the first time to prevent Flossie from beating Grabby a little more thoroughly than the rules of the tournament would allow. He’s clearly bruised and in a lot of pain, but does his best against Veruca in his final match until she takes him down with a roundhouse kick to the face. After that, he stumbles off in the direction of the medic’s table. Freddie and Flossie vie for fifth and sixth respectively, a fight which Flossie wins, although Stiles isn’t sure whether that’s because she’s better or because Freddie doesn’t want to beat his sister in public.

Then it’s Stiles’ turn again, against Beefcake Abs-a-Lot. He knows he can’t win this match. People can consider his victory against Freddie as something of a lucky win – he waited for an opportune moment and then seized it. But if he beats two of the favored contestants, he’ll have a lot more attention than he can stand. People will start to wonder who this nobody kid is and how he got so good, and that is something that he definitely does not want.

About a minute into the match, two things become clear. The first is that Freddie really is as slow as Stiles thought he was. The second is that even if he wanted to win this match, it’s not going to happen. Buff is stronger than Freddie, almost as strong as Derek, but he isn’t weighed down by his muscles the way the blonde is. Stiles does just about as well against him as Veruca did. He blocks a few hits, gets in a few hits, then misjudges and takes a right hook to the face and is knocked flat out.

He’s actually unconscious the entire ten seconds of the count, and then another fifteen seconds after that before he shakes himself back to consciousness. Hunk is kneeling over him, looking concerned. Relief floods his face when Stiles opens his eyes. “Shit, man, I really thought you’d block that,” he says.

“Me too,” Stiles replies, and the older boy laughs.

Beefy gives him a hand up, and there’s more applause, a little more enthusiastic this time, as Stiles wobbles out of the ring and towards the medics. They sit him down, check him for a concussion, and give him an ice pack for his face. Grabby Hands is still sitting there, looking dejected. Stiles tries to strike up a conversation with him but is rebuffed, and really, his jaw hurts too much to talk.

He misses Allison’s fight with Wednesday, which is a shame, because he’s pretty sure it’s spectacular. They’re well-matched against each other, and he can hear the reactions of the audience. It’s one of the longer fights, so they must both be doing well, but Allison finally prevails.
Then there’s another break before the final two matches: the winner’s loser and the winner’s winner, as one of the medics says, laughing. Chris comes over to Stiles and asks, “Are you okay to fight?”

“Psssh, yeah, sure,” Stiles says, handing the ice pack back to the medics. Once he stands up, he revises his opinion. He still feels a little loopy. Beefcake cleaned his clock pretty good. He shakes off the dizziness and goes back into the ring to face Wednesday Addams. She still has that same dour look on her face, now emphasized by a split lip and a nasty cut over her eyebrow.

Like Allison, she’s quick, but her blows don’t land with the same force. Stiles struggles, though, because the world isn’t quite stable around him and the floor isn’t always exactly where he expects it to be. Wednesday seems to understand this, and he suspects that she’s going a little easier on him than the others. He also hears a few approving murmurs from the audience; apparently, they’re impressed that he’s still taking his place in the tournament despite his obvious injury. He gets distracted thinking of how Derek must be climbing the walls at home, knowing his alpha is injured despite knowing he’s not in danger, and takes a kick to the stomach that knocks him off his feet.

“So you have to pin me?” Wednesday asks, like they’re just chatting about the weather.

“No,” Stiles wheezes. “I’m good.”

Wednesday helps him to his feet and people applaud and Stiles takes a bow, because of course he does, he’s Stiles. Wednesday almost cracks a smile at this behavior.

So he officially takes fourth place and Wednesday third, leaving only the victor’s match between Allison and Beefcake. The medics try to get Stiles to sit with them again, but there’s no way he’s missing the last match.

It’s a long fight, and a good one. Hunky may have taken it easy on Veruca, but it definitely wasn’t to be sexist; he goes after Allison with everything he’s got. He’s fast, but she’s faster. She’s strong, but he’s stronger. Several times, they trade blows hard enough to make everyone in the audience wince. She actually manages to pin him twice, but he escapes with brute strength both times. When he pins her the first time, she squirms free, but the second time he gets her arm twisted up behind her back and his forearm pressed against the back of her neck. She struggles like mad but never manages to get out of it.

So Beefcake McAbcrunch officially wins the tournament, to much enthusiastic applause, but Allison takes second, which isn’t a bad showing, all things considered. All the contenders are called up to the stage to shake hands with their former opponents. The twins refuse to come up at first, and Stiles catches a glimpse of a tall man with the same blonde hair giving them what looks like a very thorough lecture. Begrudgingly, they go up to the stage. Freddie’s grip nearly crushes Stiles’ fingers. He’s reminded suddenly of every lacrosse game he’s ever played, where they have to line up and high-five or cross sticks with their opponents afterwards, and the familiar refrain. “Good game, good game, fuck you, good game . . .”

While he gets his things back, his phone has a message on it. Unsurprisingly, it’s from Derek, and it’s as terse as usual. “Need to see you. Room 615.”

“You’ll be all right without me for a while?” Stiles asks Allison, and she nods. Apparently the post-tournament idea of fun is to rehash the entire damned thing and talk about ways that the teenagers could have done better. Stiles is so not interested. Although it would be fun to see some expert instructor ask Freddie what the hell he thought he was doing, charging head-on at an opponent proven to be faster and more agile, he doubts that’s the way it’ll go. He’ll come back down for the adult’s tournament, which will start in a half hour. He sneaks off and takes the stairs up to the sixth floor, which is not a lot of fun in his current condition.
He knocks on the door of room 615 and it’s jerked open a mere moment later. Derek grabs him by the wrist, yanks him inside, and slams it shut. “You’re hurt,” he says, through clenched teeth.

“I did warn you – ” Stiles starts, but then decides fuck it, it’s not worth it. “Yeah, sorry. That older Argent kid got in a good shot when my guard was down.”

Derek takes his chin between two fingers and tilts his head so he can examine the swelling and the nasty bruise that’s already forming. Stiles allows this, and then Derek splays his fingers out over the injury and the pain starts to fade. Stiles lets out an involuntary little groan and sags against him. “Jesus, I always forget you can do that,” he says.

“You’re an idiot,” Derek says, scowling at him.

“Yeah. Hey, I placed fourth, though, that’s something to celebrate. Also, did you seriously get a room in this hotel just so you could corner me after the tournament and make sure I wasn’t permanently damaged?”

Derek’s glower doesn’t lessen. “What’s wrong with that?”

Stiles sighs and says, “Fuck this, I need to lie down for a bit.” He’d spent another night tossing and turning, wondering how the rest of his pack was doing, missing Derek, feeling lonely. “Wake me in a half hour or so, okay?”

Through clenched teeth, Derek says, “Fine,” and steers him over to the bed. He flops down onto it, pulling Stiles down on top of him. Stiles sprawls out with his head on Derek’s chest and one arm wrapped around his waist, and falls asleep almost immediately. He sleeps so soundly that his phone almost doesn’t wake him when it starts ringing.

He fumbles for it in the semi-darkness of the hotel room, trying to remember where he is. He doesn’t recognize any of the smells except Derek. Derek being there means he’s safe, and it’s tempting to ignore the phone and just sink back down into sleep. He has a nagging feeling that it would be a bad idea, though, so he manages to grab it. “‘Lo?”

“Stiles?” It’s Allison’s voice. “Where are you? We’re ready to head back to the house.”

“Fuuuuuuuck.” Stiles rubs both hands over his face. The bruise gives a little twinge as he does so. “What time is it?”

“Nearly six. Did you fall asleep?”

“Yeah. I’ll be down in a minute.” Stiles hangs up and is prepared to ask Derek why he didn’t wake him, but the answer is quite obvious: Derek’s so soundly asleep himself that even the conversation didn’t wake him. Stiles lets out a little sigh. He considers leaving without bothering him, but he doubts that waking up alone will make Derek feel any better. So he gives the older man a little shake. “Hey. Furball. Wake up.”

Derek opens one eye and snarls mildly at him. Then he blinks. His reaction to how long they’ve slept is similar to Stiles. “Fuck,” he mumbles. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Yeah, we were both out for a couple hours,” Stiles says. “I’ve got to go, okay? I’ll call you tonight if I get a chance.”

Derek nods and lets out a sigh, closing his eyes and forcing himself to let go of Stiles. The teenager stops in the bathroom quickly, washes his face, and then heads downstairs, closing the door after himself quietly. He finds the Argents in the lobby. Beefcake’s father gives him a solicitous smile.
“You okay?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I just found a quiet corner to take five in and must’ve fallen asleep,” Stiles says, and then of course everyone has to check to make sure he doesn’t have a concussion and Buff has to apologize another few times for nailing him so hard. Stiles protests that he’s fine, and eventually, they all head back to the house.

The mood at the Argent house that evening is moderately festive. Everyone knows, of course, that the Argents are the superior hunting family, but having proved it in the competition has everyone in good spirits. Stiles is pleased with his fourth place showing, given that physical combat really isn’t his forte. He’s also still basking in his victory over Freddie. Nothing can tarnish that. Allison is likewise so smug over her sound thrashing of Flossie that nothing can damage her mood.

Of course, not everybody is so happy. Grabby Hands is for all the world oblivious to the glares his parents are giving him, although Stiles thinks that perhaps that’s because he can’t see them. He’s blinking myopically around the table in his usual manner. Stiles wonders if he had bothered to put his contacts in for the tournament or not.

The grand high muckety-mucks are presiding in their usual display of crotchety old splendor, discussing the matches and thoroughly embarrassing the winners, the losers, and the parents. At least, Stiles thinks, they can all agree on something. Greger seems a little less ebullient than usual, probably because the Argents are quite smug about their victory over the Aronsson twins and not trying to hide it the smallest bit.

He wants to sneak out after dinner and go back to Derek’s, but doesn’t quite dare. Instead he takes a bath to soak his sore muscles and gives him a call. He has to keep his side of the conversation brief, and Derek is complete crap at phone calls anyway, but it’s nice to hear his voice and brag a little bit about the tournament now that they’re both in more of a mood for it. He’s just getting out when he hears a commotion in the next room. Even with his enhanced senses, he can only barely make out the words.

“. . . never would have expected you to beat that Aronsson girl, but losing to that whiny little brat from the Stoddard family! God, Jake, you’re the most pitiful excuse for a hunter I’ve ever seen!”

It’s a woman’s voice, and obviously Grabby’s mother (apparently, Stiles thinks, his name is Jake), since she’s the only one with reason to be bitching like that. He doesn’t hear Grabby respond at all.

“Coming in last place, my God, I wonder why we even brought you – ”

“You’re not alone there,” Grabby Hands remarks acerbically. “I told you that it’d be better if you left me home and brought Phillip instead.”

“Shut up!” There’s the sharp sound of a slap. “You will speak when spoken to, or you will regret it. Am I making myself clear? You know that your brother is too young to attend a conclave, although God knows that even at nine years old he would’ve done better today than you did – ”

Stiles hastily dries off and dresses himself in a T-shirt and flannel pants as the woman continues her tirade. He’s just leaving the bathroom when he sees Grabby Hands letting himself out of their guest room. He startles when he sees Stiles, and hastily wipes his hands over his eyes. “You okay?” Stiles asks, trying to pretend he hasn’t heard a word of the argument.

“Yeah. Fine.” Grabby gives a little shrug. “She’s always like that. She thinks if she yells enough, I’ll magically sprout muscles and be good at this like my dad and my little brother. I – ” He cuts himself off abruptly. “Never mind,” he says, and turns, jogging down the stairs before Stiles can reply.
Shaking his head a little, Stiles heads into the bathroom. Allison is lying on the bed, texting, presumably with Scott. “What’s shakin’?” Stiles asks her.

Allison glances up and smiles. “Well, Lydia has fallen in everlasting lust with at least two university libraries and is thus engaged in a love triangle with admissions boards. Scott is pretty sure that Erica wants to eat the bellhop at their current hotel. Isaac is more interested in real estate than colleges. And the rest of the . . . group,” she says, because she doesn’t want to use the word ‘pack’ just in case someone overhears, “hasn’t had their turn yet. I guess it’s one person a day.”

“I hope that they remember to pick up the packets for the colleges I wanted to look at,” Stiles says, and flops down on the bed next to her. “God, it sucks that we’re missing this trip.”

“They’re not going to forget about you.” She rolls onto her side, propping herself up on one arm. “Not only are they going to get you packets from everyone you asked about, but Lydia will grab extras from every place she’s interested in, and Danny from half the ones he likes, and Scott and Boyd from anywhere that looks like it might have a single, solitary course you’d want to take. You’ll be drowning in packets.”

“It’s good to be the king,” Stiles says underneath his breath, and Allison giggles. “Well, I can’t pity myself too much. Apparently my life could be a lot worse. Did you hear Grabby’s mom bitching him out for coming in last in the tournament?”

Allison’s mouth opens a little in surprise. “I heard her yelling. I mean, I heard her voice. That’s what it was about?” She shifts on her bed again and sits up, tucking her legs underneath herself. “What did the woman expect out of the poor kid? He’s younger than all of us and still kind of stringy.”

“Apparently, she expected him to do better than come in last,” Stiles says, with a shrug. “Actually, it reminded me of – ” He stops, then gives a rueful chuckle. “That’s right. I keep forgetting you never met Scott’s dad. Not a fun guy to have around during Little League; let’s put it that way.”

“God, I can’t even imagine.” She leans back against her headboard. “You know, for a while, I just got sick of archery. I mean, I was good at it, I just . . . got sick of it. And Mom and Dad let me stop.” She smiles a little and shakes her head. “Knowing what I know now, it must have killed them to do it, but they let me.”

“Yeah, well, your parents are good people, despite everything,” Stiles says. “Anyway, he – Grabby Hands – he went downstairs. Maybe to try to find your dad’s liquor stash.”

Allison snorts. “It isn’t hard. It’s in the kitchen next to the microwave.”

“Easy access,” Stiles agrees, then leans over and grabs her phone. “Let’s see how long it takes Scott to notice that I’m not you. Do you two ever sext?”

“Stiles!” Allison squawks, laughing, and dives for the phone. “I’m not answering that!”

“So, yes!” Stiles says brightly, holding it over his head.

“None of your beeswax!” Allison tries to climb up him for the phone. When that doesn’t work, she resorts to tickling. With his arm up like that, his vulnerable armpit is exposed. He lets out a whoop of laughter and throws himself backwards to get out of her reach, rolling over so he can protect the phone under his body. He has just enough room to keep texting, with his elbows tucked under his abdomen and the phone right underneath his face. Allison’s on top of him, still trying to get to the phone, when Stiles’ head suddenly jerks up, his face turning towards the window.

“What?” Allison stills. There’s no playfulness in her tone.
“I . . . I’m not sure,” Stiles says, staring at the window. “I just got a really weird feeling for a minute. You know how, last time a pack of wolves with an alpha showed up on our territory, I knew it, even before we had seen them? Because I could feel the alpha’s power kind of . . . creeping in?”

“Yeah.” Allison sits up but stays close to him, and waits for the rest of what he’s going to say. If it was the same feeling, he would have said that.

“This was like that, but . . . it only lasted a minute. And then it was gone. Not faded or different, but just . . . gone. And now everything’s back to normal.”

“That’s weird,” Allison says. “If another pack had found a way to mask themselves, why let it slip like that?”

“I’m not sure,” Stiles says, “but I think I had better go tell your father.”

~ ~ ~
Chapter 5

The plot continues to thicken.... =D

Added note: I just freakin' love this chapter. I'm very excited about it. Because I haven't said it in a while, thank all of you so much for reading and for your lovely comments. <3

Stiles leaves the bedroom with Allison in tow and pads down the stairs to find Chris sitting in the living room, having a serious discussion with the council of elders and his two cousins about some kind of creature Stiles has never heard of. Stiles clears his throat and says, “I’m sorry to interrupt, Mr. Argent, but could I just – ”

Before he can finish the sentence, the back door to the house slams open and then shut, and Grabby Hands comes bursting through, out of breath and clearly more than a little terrified. Chris is on his feet and grabs him before he can run right into the sofa. “What is it, what happened?” he demands.

“Alpha! In the woods. Big.” He starts flapping his hands around in an ill-advised attempt to indicate size. “I just, Mom and I, never mind,” he adds, shaking his head. “But I was in the woods and I saw an alpha werewolf!”

Chris’ brow furrows and he gives Stiles a brief glance. Stiles just shakes his head minutely, to indicate that he wasn’t the one Grabby had seen. “Was it a wolf? Or was it in human form?” Chris asks.


“Then let’s go take a look,” Chris says. He flicks a glance at Allison and Stiles. He obviously wants to tell them to stay behind, but Stiles, as the territory’s alpha, probably won’t. And if he won’t, Allison won’t. But they’re not suited up; Stiles isn’t even dressed. If other members of the hunting party go with them, he won’t be able to act as the alpha. “Stiles, how long will you need to get ready?”

“Two minutes,” Stiles says.

“Then catch up with us. Allison, grab your bow, you’re with me. Jake, take me to where you saw it.”

Grabby Hands nods, collecting himself, and jogs out the door with Chris, Allison, and the other two Argents in tow. Stiles scrambles up the stairs to grab his shoes and his jacket. After a moment to consider, he decides to take the time to get his chain mail shirt on. It’s saved him on more than one occasion. His phone rings a bare moment after he’s shrugged into it, and he sees on the caller ID that it’s Chris. Frowning, he picks up. “I’m almost ready.”

“Hey, Stilinski, it’s Chris Argent,” Chris says, as if he hadn’t been talking to Stiles a few minutes previous. “Listen, I think I’ve got a rogue alpha in town.”
It takes Stiles a minute to catch up, and then he feels unbearably slow. By the agreement that he
himself had set up, Chris has to check in with him before he hunts anything down. But he can’t just
talk to Stiles about it while the others are here. “So I heard,” he says in response, since they can’t
hear his end of the conversation.

Chris keeps talking as if he knows nothing about it. “Think it probably showed up because of the
conclave.”

“Yeah, tell the others I said that while the conclave is going on, you guys can do whatever to the
party crashers,” Stiles says. “You know, that doesn’t involve the Bobbsey Twins opening fire in
your backyard.”

Chris makes a disgusted little noise, then says. “Okay. I’ll keep you posted.”

Stiles tucks his phone away just as there’s a quick knock on his door and Beefcake leans in, drawn
by the noise. “What’s up?”

“Grabby Hands – sorry, Jake – saw something in the woods and the others are going to go check it
out.” Stiles plunks down on the bed and starts tying his sneakers. “Hang on half a sec and you can
come with me.”

“Let me load my .45,” Beefcake says, trotting back to his room. He’s ready a minute later, and the
two of them set off through the woods to find the others. Stiles fills him in on the way there. He
knows approximately which way they went, and he can rely on his pack bond with Allison for more
specifics. They’ve fanned out when he gets there, splitting into pairs. He and Hunky beat some
bushes, but after about a twenty-minute search, everyone agrees that there’s no alpha to be found.

“I know what I saw,” Grabby Hands protests, as the group trudges back to the house.

“Honestly, Jake,” his father snaps. “Are you even wearing your contacts?”

Grabby turns pink in the pale light from the moon. “Well, no, but I – ”

“So to get attention after losing the tournament, you’re going to make up some wild story about an
alpha in the woods?” his father scoffs.

Allison’s jaw clenches. She knows that Grabby Hands isn’t making this up, contact lenses or not, but
she swallows down her temper and tries to remember the important part of her father’s lecture earlier.
She isn’t going to win by butting heads with people all the time. She certainly can’t say she’s sure
Grabby is right, because Stiles felt the other alpha, but only for a moment, and she’s not sure what
that means. “Did Stilinski say anything about another alpha on the territory?”

Chris gives her a look and a frown, then shakes his head. While the others aren’t really paying
attention, he shoots a quick glance at Stiles as if to say, ‘Is there something I should know?’ Stiles
pretends he doesn’t see it, but says, “It’s hard to mistake two red glowing eyes for something else,
whether your vision is 20/20 or 20/200.”

“And there were those betas earlier,” Allison points out. “I mean, I’ll admit we didn’t find jack, but
that doesn’t mean he or she wasn’t here scoping things out.”

“Either way, we’ll double the watch tonight,” Chris says brusquely.

Grabby’s father gives a snort. “C’mon, Chris, that isn’t necessary. He’s just a little boy who is
literally crying wolf.”
Chris gives the man a sharp look. “Does he have a history of lying?” he asks, obviously banking on Allison’s faith that the boy is telling the truth.

“He has a history of attention-seeking behavior,” the man replies.

“He’s a child. That’s his job. As long as that behavior doesn’t include opening fire in my backyard, he’s still doing pretty well compared to some others.” He raises his voice. “Let’s get back to the house. We’ll double the guard tonight.”

At this, Grabby’s father shuts up. Stiles looks at Allison and mouths ‘mad respect’. She wrinkles her nose at him. Chris pulls him aside as they reach the house, saying, “Stiles, help me get these things put away,” loud enough for everyone to hear. They wait until everyone else has gone inside. “So, what aren’t you telling me?”

“I actually planned to tell you,” Stiles says. “I mean, earlier, I came downstairs to tell you. For a minute it did feel like there was an alpha on the territory. It would have corresponded with about the time Jake saw it. But then the feeling went away. It couldn’t have lasted longer than ten seconds. I’m not sure what that means.”

Chris’ jaw sets. “Probably that the pack has a witch or warlock in it, who’s somehow masking their presence, and Jake seeing them fouled it up somehow.” He gives a brisk nod. “Well, we’ll be on the lookout. Anyone who shows up tonight will have an unpleasant surprise.”

Stiles nods and helps him get the weapons put away without further commentary. When he goes inside, the adults are in the kitchen, making drinks. He prowls around the house a little. The basement is locked, as always, and the upstairs seems pretty empty. The bathroom door is closed and locked. He taps on it. “Jake? Are you in there?”

“No,” came the somewhat sullen answer.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be either, if I were you,” Stiles says. He sits down in the hallway, leaning his back against the door.

There’s a long silence. Then, “Why are you still here? I can see your butt blocking the light from the hall.”

“Look, I believe you, okay? And not just ‘he saw something that must have spooked him’ like half the others do. I believe you saw an alpha. Because I’ve seen one. Really, really hard to mistake that for something else.”

“My dad’s seen them before, too.” There’s a thump by the door like now he’s leaning against it. “Didn’t stop him from calling me a liar in front of everyone.”

Stiles lets out a sigh. Since his immediate reaction of, ‘hey, have you ever thought about joining a werewolf pack? We don’t mind if you want to stay human’ is obviously right out, he searches for something else comforting to say. He tries to imagine what his father would say to another kid in this situation. What comes out is, “Your dad is a dick and your mom is a harpy. You, somehow, bucked the nature and nurture odds and came out kind of awesome. So why don’t you try this neat solution: don’t give a fuck about what your parents think, because they suck.”

There’s a laugh that sounds a little unhealthy, but is still a laugh. “Are you deficient?”

“Apparently,” Stiles says, laughing with him. “C’mon, quit moping in there. We’ll find that alpha and then you’ll get the grand joy of saying ‘I told you so’, and until then you should come out of the bathroom and come play Call of Duty or something with me.”
“I’d have to put my contacts in for that.” There’s some shuffling and thumping and then the door opens.

“Well, we can play something else if you want. You know. Pin the tail on the donkey, maybe,” Stiles says, with a definite smirk.

“You’re a jerk, too,” Jake says, but his sullen face cracks into a smile.

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The next day starts off like it’s just going to be another boring day at the hotel, but after several long seminars that nearly put Stiles to sleep and a quick dinner of pre-made sandwiches eaten while the adults are gathered to talk about weapons acquisition, Jake’s father gathers up all the kids and tells them that he’s arranged for an activity for them. Stiles is surprised, since he thought that Chris was in charge of doing all this kind of thing, and he hadn’t mentioned it. But his job isn’t to question, so he does his best to look excited about it.

“It’s a scavenger hunt,” the man says. “Some of my friends here have helped me set it up. We’ve hidden different things in the forest – things you might need to use or find while hunting.” He hands each of them a typewritten list. “You can split up into pairs to look for them. It’ll be a way to practice your tracking and observation skills.”

Stiles clears his throat. “This is the same forest in which we’ve seen werewolves, right?”

The man scoffs. “There was no alpha in that forest last night.”

“Putting that aside,” Stiles says evenly, “there were still two betas a couple days ago. And that’s not to mention that a local pack, you know, lives in this city. And the preserve is their territory.”

Freddie laughs. “You scared?”

“Of your cutting wit?” Stiles asks, arching his eyebrows at the twins. “Yes, it’s terrifying.” When Freddie just scowls at him, Stiles turns back to the man who’s ostensibly in charge. “Have you cleared this with Chris?”

“Oh, he’s got a million things to do right now,” the man says, much too casually. “I thought this would be a nice opportunity for you kids. And there’s a time limit. Sunset’s in an hour, don’t forget, and it’ll get a lot harder after dark!”

At this, Stiles decides to let it go, mostly because it is a nice opportunity, although not the way the man intends it. He wants to go look for that alpha, and this is a good time to do it. He’s not thrilled with the idea of potential victims or hostages wandering around the woods, but he’ll have to trust that the others can take care of themselves.

They’re allowed to choose their own partners, so Stiles is of course with Allison, and the twins are together. Jake’s father “volunteers” Beefcake to be his son’s partner, obviously thinking that they’ll win and he can regain some dignity after the tournament. Beefcake is much too nice a guy to protest, and gives Jake a manly shoulder squeeze that makes the younger teenager wince. This leaves Wednesday with Veruca Salt, and she’s obviously already thinking about how quickly she’ll be able to ditch her in the forest.
As soon as they’ve been dropped off with their lists, Flossie turns to Jake and says, “Did you really see an alpha last night?” Her tone indicates that she really wants there to have been an alpha, so she can go hunt it down, but she doesn’t actually believe Jake for a second.

“Yes,” the boy says, apparently having regained some confidence after spending some time with Stiles and Allison. “I don’t care if Dad doesn’t believe me. I saw what I saw.”

The twins grin at each other. “You jerkoffs can do some baby scavenger hunt, then,” Freddie says.

“We’re going on a real hunt,” Flossie says, and the two of them jog into the forest without another word.

Stiles just lets out a little sigh. “If either of them actually find the alpha, they’re going to piss their pants and we’re going to have to go save them,” he mutters, and Allison giggles. “Okay, well, we’ll see you guys later,” he says, and heads in the opposite direction. Once he’s gotten far enough away from the others, he pulls out his phone.

“Whatcha up to?” Allison asks.

“I’m calling Derek,” Stiles says. “If there’s actually an alpha around here, we’ll need his nose to help us find it. I mean, maybe they’re masking their scent as well, but they came to fuck with hunters, not with another pack, so maybe not.”

Allison frowns a little. “You sure you want Derek out here while the Wonder Twins are on the hunt?”

“No, I really don’t,” Stiles says. “But I want to get this alpha taken care of sooner rather than later. If we don’t find anything in an hour or so, I’ll send him back home, but I’d like to at least check out the area where we were last night with him.”

“You just want to see Derek,” Allison says, grinning at him.

Stiles laughs. “I won’t lie and say that’s not a perk, but really. I believe Jake, but something weird is going on. And to a certain extent, despite the conclave, this is my turf. I have to at least check it out.”

She nods, and the two of them start heading back towards the Argent house. Derek comes through the preserve and meets up with them about ten minutes later. He’s in his human form, presumably so none of the other teenagers will recognize him as a werewolf from afar, but wearing a backpack that he can put his clothes in if he decides to shift. He greets Stiles and Allison, but really only briefly. There’s work to be done. Stiles explains the situation and leads them back to the general area where Jake had seen the alpha.

They’ve all had some basics in tracking, but they don’t see any footprints or anything else that might indicate where the alpha came from or where it went afterwards. Derek stops at one particular spot and sniffs around for a long minute. Then he says, “I smell a wolf here. Right here.” He starts pointing at various places and saying, “Not over there, or over here. Only in this one spot.”

“So . . . it teleported in and out,” Stiles says. “Sure. Is it an alpha?”

“Not a very strong one,” Derek says, “but yeah.”

Stiles chews on his lower lip while he thinks all of this over. He considers calling Deaton to see if the man has detected any mojo going around lately, but decides against it. “This isn’t right,” he says. “A pack with a weak alpha and two betas that any of you guys could have bested in your sleep wouldn’t have a witch or warlock good enough to pull off a spell that masked their presence this entirely. And
if they had really showed up to pick off hunters at the conclave, why didn’t it go after Grabby Hands last night? I like the kid, but he’s an easy target.”

Derek rubs a hand over the back of his head. “That whole thing about party-crashers doesn’t make any sense to me anyway. Most supernatural creatures avoid hunters like the plague. Why would they think a hundred of them gathered in one place would be a good target?”

“You know,” Stiles says, “I was kind of thinking the same thing, ‘cause it reminded me of Sebastian Stone. Who was like, ‘hey, that kid sounds like a real badass, so I’d better go . . . challenge him’. What the fuck, right? Stone was psycho so who knows how his mind works, but I can’t think of a single werewolf I’ve ever met who would think attacking this gig is a good plan. Hell, even Kali might have thought twice.”

“It does seem weird,” Allison admits. “But Dad says it happens. In fact, he says at the conclave that he attended when he was sixteen, some kind of minotaur thing showed up and attacked the house at night, and he got a lot of attention when he managed to kill it even though he was so young. So it’s not like it doesn’t happen.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. He huffs out a sigh. “We don’t have time right now to ponder it. I want to do a quick run of the forest. We’re going to split up. Stay within shouting distance, but look for anything out of the ordinary. Try to steer clear of the other kids. We’ll rendezvous back here in half an hour. I want to be out of here before full dark.”

Derek and Allison aren’t thrilled with the idea, but there really doesn’t seem to be anyone or anything dangerous in the forest, so they agree. Each of them picks a direction and jogs away. Stiles keeps his eyes peeled for anything that might indicate what the hell is going on, but the forest looks like it always does. He trots down the little animal path for about five minutes before stopping for a quick break. He’s in a little clearing, next to a stream that’s narrow but looks deep. He stands there with his back against a tree, just listening, for a long minute.

He hears rustling in the undergrowth a few seconds later, coming from his left, where the trees are more dense. He can see a figure approaching. It’s not in focus yet. It’s shadowy somehow, almost hazy. But he knows who it is, somehow, because it can’t be anyone else. It’s Peter Hale.

The last time he had seen Peter, it had been a hallucination in his kitchen, and that had been dead Peter, his skin burned and veins laced with wolfsbane. This is Peter as he was in life, dressed in the same leather jacket and with the same faint smirk he had always worn. Stiles is aware that his heart is thudding away rapidly in his chest, but he feels strangely calm, almost distant. He hasn’t slept for days and he’s having a hallucination, a flashback. What had Gwen told him to do when he has flashbacks?

“Hello, Stiles,” Peter says. “Have you missed me?”

Stiles swallows, but manages a response. He’s just chatting with a figment of his imagination, what’s the problem? “Not so much, really. And you, you really need to get some new material. I’m pretty sure you asked that the last time I hallucinated about you.”

“Clearly, the question is weighing on your mind,” Peter says, stepping closer. “I see you’ve been adding to my pack for me. That was very thoughtful of you.”

That breaks Stiles out of his stupor, and he grabs Peter’s wrist as the man reaches for him. “This is my pack,” he snaps. “Not yours. I took it from you fair and square, and you can’t have it back. Now or ever.”
“Poisoning me while I was wrapped in silver chains is your idea of fair play?” Peter makes a tsk-tsk noise, and it’s insane because it’s Peter, it’s not some figment of Stiles’ imagination, it’s Peter exactly as he was and Stiles can hardly breathe because it doesn’t make sense, it’s not possible and none of it makes sense. The last time this had happened, he had frozen up and just let Peter do whatever he wanted. He’s not about to let that happen again. He reaches for his .38.

Peter’s other hand snakes out too quickly to even really see, and his claws sink into Stiles’ forearm. Stiles lets out a hiss of pain and tries to pull free, the claws raking over his skin and leaving shallow wounds. They struggle like that for a minute and then Peter laughs and says, “Whenever I see you, I’m reminded of why I liked you so much, and how I was going to keep –”

The reference to the trunk, no matter how oblique, makes Stiles shudder. Thrown off balance, all he wants to do now is get away. He snatches his arm back from Peter, leaving another nasty gash, and Peter lets him take it. “Run,” he says, showing teeth. “Let me chase you, Stiles.”

Stiles takes another few stumbling steps backwards and trips over an exposed root, landing on his rear end. He thinks, well, this is a dumb way to die, but that sort of figures, given that this is his life, and then he hears Derek shouting his name. His lupa charges up behind him, already partially shifted.

The last time he had been hallucinating, Derek had run in and asked ‘what the hell’, so Stiles is expecting something similar this time. But it doesn’t happen. Derek stops dead just in front of Stiles, shielding him from Peter, and lets out an unhappy wheeze of disbelief, like he was just kicked in the stomach. Stiles can’t see Peter’s face because Derek is right in front of him, but then, suddenly and almost randomly, there’s a crackle and a whoosh and there’s fire, fire everywhere, in front of them and in back and to every side. Stiles yelps as a wall of flame washes over the trees next to him.

Derek shifts abruptly, going to his full wolf form without even bothering to shed his clothes. He’s almost cowering, trying to crawl underneath Stiles while the flames crackle around them. The air is already so hot that it hurts to breathe, and Stiles choke and coughs when he gets a lungful of smoke. He doesn’t see Peter anymore, doesn’t see anyone or anything through the fire and smoke. “Derek, we’ve gotta –” he says, tugging on the wolf. He manages to haul him to his feet, but he’s all tangled in his clothes. “Derek, damn it, get up!”

Normally, a direct order from the alpha would have any of the wolves springing to attention. But Derek just whimpers and cowers lower. Stiles realizes that he’s only making things worse. He drops Derek and lets him sink back to the ground. Then he kneels beside him and runs his hands over the wolf’s fur where he can reach it. “Okay, Derek, okay,” he says, in what he hopes is a soothing tone of voice. He choke back another cough. “You’re okay, it’s just a little fire, we’re gonna get you out of here but I need you to work with me, okay? You just stick with me and you’ll be okay –”

“Stiles?” Allison shouts from somewhere beyond the flames. “Stiles, where are you?”

“We’re in here!” he calls back. “We’re coming out; you stay where you are!”

“I can’t – can’t see you –” Allison says, and then she’s hacking and choking.

Stiles hears Derek give a whimper that’s almost a scream and looks down to see that the wolf’s shirt is smoldering. “Fuck, fuck!” he says, taking off his jacket and trying to smother the flames out. Derek just gives another wolf whine. “Derek, God damn it, I can’t lift you, you’re too heavy –” and he can’t drag him either because the motherfucking ground is on fire, and oh look, now his jacket is on fire, that’s just peachy, and every breath is getting shorter and sharper and he’s starting to get this terrible sharp pain in his temples every time his heart beats –
Then there are arms around his waist, hauling him up off the ground. He thinks it’s Allison at first, but the hands are too big, and the smell, such as it is through the smoke, is wrong. He reaches for Derek, then sees another figure in the smoke scooping him up. Everything goes cold and dark for a moment and he sputters, flailing, before realizing he’s been tossed into the stream. He surfaces, shaking himself, and looks around for Derek. He’s clawing his way up the bank. His clothes are long gone. Stiles fumbles, trying to remember how to swim, but even in the small stream, his clothes weigh him down. The same hands drag him to shore and up onto the embankment, where Allison is doubled over, coughing. Stiles manages to twist around to see who saved him. He stops and blinks in shock. “Scott?” He looks over to see Erica leaning over Derek. She’s clearly the one who dragged him out of the fire. “What are the two of you doing here?”

“We, uh, we were worried about you,” Scott says.

“Apparently with good reason,” Erica adds, as Derek crawls out of her grip and over to Stiles. He crawls into the teenager’s lap, hiding his face in Stiles’ shirt so he doesn’t have to see the fire or smoke. The stream is keeping it from reaching them for the moment, and the wind is in their favor, but California in June is a bad time and place for fires to be starting in the forest. Stiles tries to pull himself together as Allison starts coughing again and Scott wraps an arm around her waist to steady her, but then he starts coughing, too. It gets bad enough that he starts fumbling for his inhaler. “It’s just the two of us, though; the others are still in Los Angeles,” Erica continues.

Stiles nods at her but then hears something, he’s not sure what, and he looks up, across the river bank. Peter Hale is standing there by the fire. He smiles at Stiles, and then lifts his hand in a little wave before turning and disappearing into the smoke. Stiles tries to take in a breath and starts coughing again. Then he hears footsteps, quick ones, someone running towards them. Derek is still in his lap, his face mashed into Stiles’ stomach, and there’s simply no time for him to be anywhere or anyone else. That’s to say nothing of Erica and Scott, both of whom are still partially shifted. He doesn’t even try to get to his feet as the other hunter kids rush over from all directions.

“Holy shit,” Wednesday blurts out, showing real shock for the first time since he’s known her, when she catches sight of the werewolves. She reaches as if to go for her knives, but in that split second sees the way Scott is supporting Allison, the way Erica is hovering over Stiles, and changes her mind. Jake and Hunky are behind her, although Veruca is nowhere to be seen.

Beefcake likewise notices the body language and makes the appropriate assumptions. “Are you guys – ” he begins, but before he can finish, the twins jog up with their guns already drawn.

“Son of a bitch, that thing is huge!” Freddie says, and he’s already got his finger on the trigger. Stiles can hear the excitement in his voice, and he knows that Freddie isn’t saying that because he’s intimidated by Derek’s size; he’s thinking of the size of the head he will be able to mount on his wall.

Stiles is on his feet and in Freddie’s face before he can think about it, eyes blazing crimson and voice taut with rage. “If you lay one finger on any of the wolves in my pack, I will remove your entire hand at the wrist. I am done with your trigger happy bullshit, do you fucking hear me?”

Everyone is just staring at him in shock. Stiles realizes, a little too late, that perhaps he should not have said that out loud. But, in for a penny . . .

“I have tried to play nice with you bloodthirsty motherfuckers out of respect for Chris Argent, but I am done benching myself while you maniacs wander around thinking you can do whatever the hell you want. This may be the conclave but you are on my territory, and if you don’t play by my rules, I will bury you. Is that absolutely fucking clear?”

Hunky swallows and nods. He isn’t sure if the threats are directed at him and Wednesday or just at
the twins, but he’s very sure that he does not want to push Stiles with his alpha red eyes right now.

“We’re clear,” Wednesday states, as Erica comes up to stand at Stiles’ shoulder, just staring at the twins, waiting for them to make a wrong move. Derek, meanwhile, has pressed himself to Stiles’ legs and is nearly belly to the forest floor, making low, distressed noises and flinching every time an ember strays in their direction. He’s clearly close to outright panic.

Stiles immediately drops to his knees, wrapping his arms around Derek and hugging him close. “Shhh, it’s okay,” he murmurs, low enough that the humans won’t hear. Then, in a normal tone, he says, “Allison, call the fire department. Scott, Erica, check the Bobbsey Twins over there for weapons. Do it thoroughly; they’ll have some hidden. If they give you any trouble, drop them, but no permanent damage.” He looks at Jake and the other kids. “You guys okay?” he asks, more to reassure them that he’s not trying to threaten them than because he thinks they might not be.

Derek presses his face to Stiles’ belly, trying to block out everything except Stiles’ scent and heartbeat. Allison already has her phone out. “You want me to call Papa Stilinski, too?” she asks, and Stiles gives her a nod.

Scott and Erica both shift to their fully human form and start stripping them of their weapons. “Jeez! Anyone have a bag we can dump this stuff into?” Scott asks, as things start to get a little ridiculous. He gives the girl a hard look when she protests Erica groping her breasts. The look only gets harder when Erica comes up with a small knife. They had learned that trick from Allison. Stiles takes off his backpack and tosses it over to them.

Jake, for his part, moves a little closer to Hunky and nods. “I’m okay,” he says, and Hunky and Wednesday both offer up affirmatives as well.

Then Beefcake seems to shake off some of his shock. “What the hell is going on?”

“No, sure,” Stiles says. “I think this is some kind of monster that can take the form of whatever it is you fear. Jake saw a generic alpha. I saw . . . a specific one. And Derek . . . well, apparently it came with fire, whatever it was.” He knows damned well who Derek saw, but he isn’t about to go into that in front of everyone else. “We need to get out of here before the fire department shows up and thinks we set this.” He glances around, placing them in the preserve. “The den isn’t far. We’ll head there.” He makes an inclusive gesture at the teenaged hunters and adds, “You guys can come too, if you want.”

“Den?” Jake nearly squeaks. He sounds somewhere between terrified and excited. He clearly knows that they’re about to break some bigtime rules, and he’s pretty sure it’s going to be awesome. Then he remembers the monster aspect of this. “It’s gone, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” Stiles says, thinking of Peter giving him that little wave as he walked into the smoke. “It’s gone. For now.”

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For the curious minded, here are the things that I will not be attempting to incorporate into my AU ’verse from season 3:

1) Season 3

In other news, this chapter is a little slower, more of an exposition/reaction chapter, but hopefully it's still funny and we'll be back to the action in chapter 7. Enjoy! =D

“Get your fuckin’ hands off me,” Freddie snarls as Scott gives him one last pat down. Scott gives him an insulted look, then glances at Stiles as if asking whether or not that counted as ‘giving them trouble’. Stiles just sighs.

“C’mon, Derek,” he says, his voice gentle. “We’re going home. Can you get up?”

After a moment, Derek rises shakily to his feet, but he doesn’t move very far. His head is down and his ears are back.

“Awww, look at the poor widdle wolf, afraid of some fire,” Flossie says, her voice rich with malicious amusement.

Stiles’ eyes flare bright red and he rounds on her, fists clenched at his sides.

“Well!” Scott darts in between the two of them and puts his hands up to stay Stiles’ advance. “Hey, dude, let’s not go killing anyone today, okay?”

For a long moment Stiles just stares at him, and nothing in his gaze is human. Then he slowly sees that it’s Scott, not an enemy. He gives a nod and turns away.

Allison, who’s long done with her phone call, moves forward. “Erica.”

“Have at, sister,” Erica says, moving out of the way.

This time Allison doesn’t pull the punch. Once Flossie’s down, Allison crouches and wraps a hand around her throat, right underneath her chin. “That’s your only freebie,” she says. “I won’t step between you and my alpha again.” She digs her fingers in hard for a few seconds to purposefully leave nail marks before standing up and away.

Stiles takes a breath and tries to calm down. Everything is too close to the surface right now. He needs time and space between himself and Peter, between himself and disaster. “So what do you think is worse?” he asks, directing the question at Allison. “Forcibly abducting the two heirs to the Bobbsey family dynasty and tying them up in our den? Or allowing them to go back to the Argent house and tell everyone all about the fact that I’m the alpha?” He gives a snort and says, “Presuming anyone believes them.”
“I think we’re in trouble either way,” Allison says, “but if we let them go, we don’t have to put up with them. So who votes for that?”

Every pack member’s hand goes up. Even Derek looks up, and his tail gives a tick-tock. Jake raises his hand as well, and Hunk arches his eyebrows at the younger boy. “What?” he asks, bristling. “I don’t wanna put up with them!”

“Okay,” Stiles says. He looks at the twins with narrowed eyes and says, “Go home and cry to your mommy. But make sure you mention to them that you threatened my lupa and I let you live. That part is important.”

At this, Beefcake swallows and looks between Stiles and the clearly upset canine still pressed against his legs. He knows enough about werewolf culture to understand what that means. He wonders if the twins have any concept of how close they just came to death.

Clearly not, as they turn and flounce away. Stiles watches them go, and the red slowly fades out of his eyes until he’s just Stiles again. He rubs a hand over the back of his hair and says to the others, “I’m sorry for keeping secrets from you. But I didn’t want Allison at the conclave by herself, so that meant I had to play human for a few days.”

“So . . . Allison’s a werewolf?” Jake asks.

Further conversation is stalled when a tree branch, still aflame, crashes to the ground a few feet away. All of them flinch away, especially Derek, who lets out a low wolf whine. Then they hear sirens. “Later,” Stiles says. “We need to go, now.” Without another word, he turns and starts jogging through the forest. Derek wastes no time springing to keep pace with his alpha. The rest of the pack fall in with them, along with Jake and Wednesday, although Allison keeps a close eye out for Jake’s poor eyesight and resulting klutziness. Hunk hesitates for a moment before deciding that he’d rather take his chances with his cousin than get caught by the fire department or witness the inevitable chaos when the twins get back to the Argent house.

About ten minutes later, they come up to another fence with that same ominous humming. Stiles fishes through Derek’s backpack for a minute before pulling out a set of keys and a remote. He turns the fence off and lets them through it before rearming it. There’s a dense screen of trees afterwards – he didn’t want the fence visible from the house because that would just be depressing – before the house comes into view. The front door is unlocked, and he lets them all inside.

Jake just stops and gawks. Hunky steers him farther in so that everyone can make it through the door. To be fair, most of the pack is gawking, too, because it looks like half of Derek’s studio has exploded onto the rest of the ground floor living space, which is fairly open concept. His pens, markers, and pencils are strewn across random surfaces where he just dropped them whenever he finished with them. He has paper and half-finished artwork in just as many places. There’s a partially completed triptych taped to the kitchen cabinets, another piece with fine black lines on huge sheets of translucent paper plastered to the glass doors that lead to the back porch, and something that might be an entire zoo created out of twisted and markered store receipts on the table by the door.

“Huh,” Stiles says, at length, and looks down at Derek. “And people try to say that I’m the weird one,” he adds, but scratches Derek behind the ears. “I would like to put on record that you are responsible for cleaning this up, not me.” Derek just leans into his hand in response.

“Did you get high without us, or what?” Erica asks, but her tone is joking because she knows he wouldn’t. He gives a grumbling growl.

Stiles just shakes his head a little. He turns to the other hunters and addresses Beefcake as the one in
charge. “I have a little pack business to take care of. Do you mind waiting a few minutes for your explanations?”

“No, we don’t mind,” Beefy says. He tries to make it sound like he’s not leaping at the chance to see how a pack really works.

Erica and Scott, however, are already cringing. Their worst fears are confirmed a few moments later when Stiles turns back to them and says, “I seem to recall something about how you two weren’t supposed to be here. How I sent you to Los Angeles with the rest of the pack. If memory serves, you actually made specific protests and I overruled you at the time and gave you a direct order to leave town and not come back until the conclave was over. Am I remembering this incorrectly?”

Erica looks down and away, shaking her head. Scott lowers his gaze a little and looks off to the side. He’s not challenging his alpha, because he did disobey, but he isn’t giving way like Erica is. “No, that’s what you said.”

“All right then,” Stiles says. “Your entry was pretty superb; I will give you full marks for that, but there’s only so much you two can get away with. So, Erica,” he says, and she snaps to attention despite herself. “Dish duty for a week, vacuum duty for a week, and . . . you will lose two turns in the cookie rotation.”

“Two turns . . . !” Erica stops her protest in its tracks, knowing better than to argue. “Okay.” It’s clear what she thinks the worst part of the punishment is.

Stiles nods at her. “As for you, Scott . . . I’m not going to do anything to you. Instead, I’m going to let you explain to your girlfriend why you didn’t trust her to take care of herself, and I’m going to let you explain to my enforcer why you didn’t trust her to take care of me.”

Now Scott does cow down. He shoots a cautious look at Allison. She’s standing tall, hands on her hips, hair tossed back. Scott can see that there’s no way he’ll be able to appease her. His girlfriend, maybe, but not the pack enforcer. “I’ll just . . . go get my stuff out of our room,” he mumbles.


Scott’s shoulders hunch, and he shoves his hands in his pockets, one shoe nervously scuffing at the floor. “You looked upset when we talked. Really upset.”

Allison deflates. “Oh.”

Stiles lets out a snort. “I told you to be careful if you skyped with him.”

“I was!” Allison grimaces. “Or at least I thought I was.”

Stiles just shakes his head at her, clearly amused, before suddenly reaching out and wrapping one arm around Erica’s waist and the other around Scott’s shoulders. He pulls them both into a tight embrace. “I missed the Christing fuck out of you guys,” he says.

They both hug back fiercely. “It was weird without you,” Scott says, holding an arm out for Allison to join in. “All of you.” They make some leg room for Derek, who crams himself into the group hug.

“Yeah,” Stiles says, letting them go and pulling them back. “I don’t often admit that I’m wrong, so you should probably call Anderson Cooper or some shit like that, but fuck, splitting the pack up was a bad idea. Next time someone big and bad rolls into town, we’ll take it on together. And no, that is not an invitation to pull out your phones and tell the others to come back. We’ll handle this. Capisce?”
“And soon,” Allison says, as everyone nods. “Or we’re going to have hunters everywhere.”

“Like we don’t already,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes. “Speaking of which . . .” He turns back to the others. “Okay, hi, sorry,” he says. “Pack business concluded. Give me two more minutes to change clothes,” he says, and they nod, so he jogs up the stairs. He peels off his wet things and throws them in the shower, then pulls on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He grabs some clothes for Derek, too, since his are long gone, and goes back down. Everyone is still standing around awkwardly; nobody seems to know what to say. “Okay, so. First of all, let me re-introduce myself. Stiles Stilinski. I’m the local pack’s alpha. Allison is one of my chief enforcers, and no, she’s not a werewolf. This is Derek, my lupa,” he says, gesturing to the wolf, “Scott, my best friend and pack medic, and Erica, generally responsible for my personal safety. Guys, this is . . . Jake . . . Sam . . . and fuck, Wednesday, I still don’t know your name.”

“It’s Lucy,” she says, “so you’ll understand when I say calling me Wednesday is fine.”

Allison blinks. “Wow. Lucy. Not what I would have expected.” She grabs Scott’s hand and drags him over to the sofa, where they start cleaning up a bit. “Hang on while we tame some of the art-splosion and then we can all sit.” The ‘love pit’, as they’ve nicknamed it much to Derek’s dismay, is still art-free, but that’s for pack cuddling. None of them are inviting anyone who isn’t pack into the nest of pillows and blankets, no matter how well-liked they are.

Sam, meanwhile, is trying to sort things out. “So you and Allison aren’t dating.”

“Right,” Stiles says. “Scott is Allison’s boyfriend. Has been for pretty much the entire time I’ve known her. For the sake of uncomplicating things, you can pretty much presume that Derek is my boyfriend. That’s the simplest way for humans to understand what a lupa is. Speaking of which . . .” He looks down at Derek. “Are you gonna stay in your fur all day? We have company.”

Derek leans heavily into Stiles for a long moment and makes a grumbling noise, then he heaves a sigh and shifts. Stiles tosses him the clothes he brought downstairs, not wanting to traumatize any teenagers, although he supposes Jake can’t really see what’s going on anyway. “So, yeah,” he continues to the others, “I tried to avoid outright lying when I could, but Allison had to attend the conclave because she’s the Argent family princess, and I wasn’t about to let her go by herself, not with people like Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dumber invited.”

Wednesday’s clearly not at all traumatized, but Sam looks scandalized as Derek starts to shake out the clothes. He’s not rushed about it, showing no signs of nervousness or modesty, and is really only dressing because he’ll get cold otherwise. He sees Sam staring and says, “What?”

“There are ladies present,” Sam replies fiercely.

Derek snorts. “Please.”

Stiles is trying really hard not to laugh. He really, really is. It starts to leak out anyway. He hastily clears his throat and says, “Okay, so, uh . . . now we have some kind of fear monster to hunt down, Allison, get the bestiary.” He looks at the hunters. “Any, uh, any other questions?”

Derek pulls his shirt on and then stands behind Stiles, wrapping both his arms around him so he’s loosely clasping hands over Stiles’ chest. Meanwhile, Allison goes over to a bookshelf and pulls down the enormous three-ring binder that contains their printed copy of the bestiary.

“This . . . is not what I really imagined a werewolf pack to be like,” Sam finally says.

Jake talks over him, rattling off his questions. “How is Allison a part of your pack if she isn’t a
werewolf? Are you a werewolf? ‘Cause there are rumors that you aren’t but that seems weird. Why do you need a lupa and an enforcer and a bodyguard? Are those all different things? They seem to sort of overlap. Why do you have a medic if werewolves heal? What does losing two turns in the cookie rotation mean?’ he asks, at which point Wednesday puts her hand over his mouth to shut him up.

“Whoa, slow down, cowboy,” Stiles says. He fidgets and says, “Fuck this, I need to bake something. Let’s continue this discussion in the kitchen and you can get a prime example of what this alpha is best at: denning.”

“Denning?” Sam asks.

Derek lets Stiles go and follows him into the kitchen. He boosts himself up to sit in his usual spot on the counter, relaxing some at the normalcy of Stiles in the kitchen. “The verb form of the noun ‘den’, as in ‘this is our den’, so denning is like . . . the things you do to make a place your den. You’d call it ‘homemaking’.”

Stiles considers his options and decides to go with chocolate chip cookies. Simple, easy. He knows the recipe by heart. And they’re quick, too; they don’t need to chill or rise and he can make a batch in a half hour or less. Which is just what he needs right now. He starts digging around in the pantry.

“Homemaking,” Sam says, a little flatly. “You. I just . . . watched you try to tear a guy’s arm off.”

“I wouldn’t do that sort of shit if people didn’t fucking make me,” Stiles says. “That’s not the sort of alpha I am. You think Chris would have a truce with me if I made a habit of killing people?”

Allison boosts herself up to sit on one of the barstools they have. “They went after Derek,” she says. “When he was already upset. We’re always told that a lupa is important to their alpha and that to touch someone’s lupa will make them angry, but that’s such an understatement. It’s like the understatement of the century.”

Stiles gets out a set of measuring cups and cranks the oven up to preheat. “What you have to understand is that most werewolves are just like regular people, with some . . . eccentric habits thrown in, let’s say. Yeah, we’re pretty weird. We don’t blend into normal society very well – though some of us do better than others. But I don’t go looking for trouble.” He shrugs and adds glumly, “It just always seems to find me.”

Allison slumps across the bar. “I think it found all of us this time.”

Sam just shakes his head. “I’m just trying to match up your reputation with . . . cookies.”

“Well, that’s because you haven’t eaten any of them yet,” Stiles says, rummaging around in the pantry and coming up with flour, brown sugar, and vanilla. “Anyway, Jake, to answer at least a few of the questions you asked that I remember: no, I am not a werewolf. I am the only human alpha known to exist or, for that matter, to have ever existed. What happened is that I was a human member of the pack in Beacon Hills and I killed the alpha. Which apparently made me a human alpha.” He shrugs. “Go figure. Allison isn’t a werewolf either, but the other seven members of the pack are. There are two common ways to get human members in an alpha pack. The first is a pack of born wolves will sometimes have human children that are part of the pack. The second is when a werewolf chooses a human mate – that’s how Allison is part of the pack. On a more rare occasion, a human can just . . . integrate into a pack by way of spending a lot of time with them, shedding blood together, taking care of each other, and generally just being wherever the action is at. Which is how I got into the pack in the first place.”
“So you don’t shift, but you clearly still have some power,” Sam says. “I saw your eyes.”

Allison rests her elbows on the car. “Humans are part of the pack in more than just name. We get the same perks and disadvantages that any wolf would. Just to a lesser degree.” Speaking of disadvantages, now that Scott’s back, she can feel the stress just flowing away, leaving her nearly limp with relief.

“That’s kind of awesome!” Jake says, clearly excited. “So then – ”

“One thing at a time,” Stiles says, dumping a stick of butter into his mixing bowl. “Because one thing leads to another. That’s why we have a pack medic. Because there are human members of the pack, and although our healing is certainly better than an average human’s – case in point,” he adds, gesturing to the place where Beefcake had nailed him yesterday, which is now almost completely fine, “we can’t take damage the way a wolf can. And even wolves have some vulnerabilities, which, no offense, you’re not going to hear about from me.”

Sam tips his head, conceding this. “Okay. I understand the ‘boy’ part now, in that weird label you’ve got, but why ‘the boy in red’? Where does the red part come from?”

Stiles dumps sugar into the bowl with the butter and gives a melodramatic groan. Erica and Allison both giggle despite themselves, and Scott hides a smile behind his hand. Derek sighs and gestures for them to look into the living room. There’s a wall by the back of the house that’s plain white; it’s two stories and given its placement in the house, obviously load bearing. There are several paintings hung on it, arraying out from the center in a haphazardly artistic fashion. In the middle of the display is a painting of Stiles in a red hoodie, and moving somewhat indistinctly through the mist behind him is a pack of wolves. There are other paintings of the pack as it grows, and unlike the first, Stiles isn’t always the focus, but he’s always in some variation of the hoodie. “It’s at least half my fault.”

“The other half is Justin’s,” Stiles explains. “The current head of the alpha pack. I made the extremely foolish mistake of showing him one of the pictures once it was done, basically to brag about how awesome Derek had made me look. He in turn started spreading rumors about how badass I am. To be fair, Justin saw me at my best, and he was trying to help me by making it less attractive to try to take my territory. But somehow the ‘boy in red’ thing stuck. Hold that thought,” he adds, and starts the mixer up, drowning out their conversation.

Sam isn’t sure which is crazier. The fact that the leader of the alpha pack is helping to protect a pack of teenaged werewolves, or that the alpha of said pack, who’s rumored to be an all-around badass, just put the conversation on hold to mix cookies from scratch.

Once the butter and sugar are creamed, Stiles reaches for the eggs and continues, “I didn’t even know about it until Sebastian Stone came into town, and then I called Justin later to ask him exactly how I’d gotten that reputation, and he said he may, possibly, have been telling a few people or everyone he met about me and my fuckin’ alpha trial.”

“Well, you did fucking bitch slap Kali in the face with a baseball bat,” Erica says, clearly remembering the event fondly. Derek looks down suddenly, almost shy. “And then kick her ass in single combat.”

Scott growls. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Since the hunters are just standing around with their jaws hanging ajar, Stiles takes the opportunity to finish mixing the wet ingredients before he starts sifting together the dry. Then he says, “Don’t look so impressed. I played dirty. That’s something to remember about me. I pretty much always play dirty, if I’m going up against something bigger and badder than I am. It’s why I’m still alive.”
“He thinks everything is a trap,” Derek intones solemnly.

“Aww, yeah, Princess Bride quote, that’s my lupa.” Stiles leans over and just presses his cheek against Derek’s shoulder for a moment. “Okay, now everybody shut up and let me measure.”

The pack all falls silent. Cookies are clearly Very Serious Business. Stiles just whistles for a few moments while he mixes together the dry ingredients and then starts running the mixer again. It takes a few minutes while the hunters stand awkwardly in the kitchen and wonder exactly what they’ve gotten themselves into, since it clearly isn’t anything sane.

“Hm, now we’re going to have a problem,” Stiles says, as he dumps in a bag of chocolate chips. “I’ve got two beaters, one spatula, and four pack members to appease . . .”

Derek waits until the chips are stirred in and then sticks his fingers into the edge of the bowl. “I’ll relinquish my claim.”

“Since you’ll just eat wads of cookie dough anyway,” Scott says with a snort of laughter as Stiles half-heartedly whaps at Derek’s knuckles with the spatula.

“Okey dokey,” Stiles says. He takes out the beaters and the spatula, smiles at his pack, and then reaches around them to hold them out to the hunters. “Of course, the guests should get first pick.”

The wolves both make little whining noises of protest. Jake wastes no time in snatching up one of the beaters. Wednesday seems undecided, and Sam holds up a hand. “You can give mine to one of the ladies.”

“Awesome!” Erica grabs the other beater without waiting to see which ‘one of the ladies’ is going to get it. Stiles shakes his head at her, then gives Allison a rueful ‘what can you do’ look.

Wednesday takes the spatula, scoops off a glob of dough with one finger, and then hands it to the other girl. “We can share,” she says.

Scott reaches over to the bowl. Stiles pins him down with an alpha stare. “And exactly how many turns in the cookie rotation would you like to lose, Mr. McCall?”

Scott manages his stubborn look. “If you’re talking about me coming back early, we can talk about it.” He edges closer. “But if we’re talking about you saying that fight with Kali was ‘you at your best’ . . .”

Stiles gives a grimace. “Maybe I could have phrased that better,” he says, and grudgingly allows Scott to swipe a bit of dough out of the bowl. He shakes his head at all of them as he lays parchment paper down on a baking sheet.

“Okay, seriously, what does ‘losing a turn from the cookie rotation mean?’” Jake asks. “And this is really good, by the way.”

“Everyone likes my cookies,” Stiles says. “My cookies are an integral part of pack functioning. However, since I don’t want us all to weigh nine hundred pounds, I only make one batch a week, and everyone takes a turn choosing what kind of cookie I bake. So now Erica will have to skip her next two turns, which given that there are nine pack members and I let my dad have a turn, means she’s going an awfully long damned time without being able to pick which cookies I make.”

“Months and months,” Erica moans, although she doesn’t try to argue. She goes back to enjoying her beater. Actually, she’s enjoying it a little too much. Sam is kind of staring at the way she’s applying her tongue to it.
Stiles notices too. “Damn it, woman, you’re not allowed to make out with a beater like that when I haven’t gotten laid in over a week.”

“Uh . . .” Sam manages.

“Now, look,” Erica says, and gestures with the beater. “I realize that I disobeyed, and I shouldn’t have come back. But I did try to warn you that you might need urgent sexin’ so I will make it with a beater if I want to.” She licks it with purpose. “That was even dirtier than I intended it to be. I rock.”

“Wait, I’m confused again,” Jake says, somewhat plaintively.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “We’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“Not that,” Jake says, and bristles. “I know what sex is. I’m just saying, you said to assume that Derek was kind of like your boyfriend, so . . .”

“Wow, that would take way too long to explain and in all actuality is none of your business,” Stiles says, sliding the first tray of cookies into the oven. As if the topic of sex had never come up, he says, “The trick with these cookies is patience. They come out much better if you do them on the top shelf of the oven. So you can only bake one tray at a time. It’s tempting to put in a second tray on the lower shelf, but you shouldn’t do it.”

Derek steals more dough, as if his relationship status had never come up. “Denning. He’s good at it. Not so great at interior decorating, but you can’t ask for everything.” His head comes up as the front door opens and closes. “It’s Papa Stilinski,” he says, for the sake of those in the house don’t have supernatural hearing or scent.

Moments later, Sheriff Stilinski walks into the kitchen, looking a little tired and smelling of smoke. His hands and shirt are sooty. He looks at Stiles for a moment, opens his mouth as if to say ‘I leave you alone for a few days and you set the forest on fire’, but then shakes his head and instead turns to Derek. “You okay?”

Derek shrugs. “I’ve been better.” He swallows, trying not to think about it, which had been easier to do before anyone had made him assess his state of mind. “I’ve also been worse. It could have been worse.”

Stilinski rubs a hand over the back of his head and then bumps shoulders with his son. “You wanna explain to me what happened?”

“Dad, where are your manners?” Stiles asks, grinning at him. “You’ve met these characters before, but since you didn’t ask, this is Sam Argent, Jake Argent, and Wednesday Addams.” He gestures to each of the teenagers in turn. “Guys, this is my father, Sheriff Stilinski.”

The man’s eyebrows go up. “Wednesday Addams? And you ask where my manners are?” He holds out a hand to shake, which is met with politeness from Sam, nervousness from Jake, and sort of a matter-of-fact flatness from Wednesday, who seems curious about how Stiles would answer.

Stiles just grins at her and starts to sing. “They’re creepy and they’re kooky, mysterious and spooky –”

Wednesday flips the spatula at him with great precision. It smacks him right in the forehead.

“We’re sorry,” Scott says to her. “Stiles is the worst sort of person.”

Sheriff Stilinski sighs and tries to rein in the circus. “Okay, guys, seriously. What is going on?”
“What is going on is that there’s some kind of monster wandering around the forest, presumably drawn here by the conclave because it wants to eat some hunters, that is a shapeshifter feeding off people’s fears. Kind of like, what’s that, uh, that chupa-lupa thing . . .?” Stiles asks.

“Goat eater?” Erica asks.

“Uh, Derek is a lupa . . .?” Scott says, sounding uncertain.

“Mexican dish?” Allison tries.

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say,” is Sam’s opinion.

“God, you people are all freakin’ useless at decoding my brilliance,” Stiles says. “It’s a thoughtform, uh, from Tibet or something like that . . .”

“A tulpa,” Wednesday says crisply.

“Yes! A tulpa!” Stiles beams at her. “This is like a tulpa, which is a thoughtform, so for now I’m going to call it a fearform. Because hey, that’s catchy.”

“But don’t tulpas take the form of the most prevalent mental image?” Derek asks.

Allison slips off her stool. “I’ll go get the brick, I mean, the bestiary.”

“Someone want to clue in the guy who hasn’t spent a hundred hours on Wikipedia?” Sheriff Stilinski asks.

Stiles’ lips twitch in a smile. “A thousand easy,” he says. “But anyway, a tulpa is like . . . thoughts condensed into solid mass. Hundreds of people all thinking about the same thing until it actually shows up. The Stay-Puft Marshmallow man kinda thing. But this wasn’t like that. Without going into a lot of detail, I saw Peter Hale.” To the other hunters he says, “Previous alpha, batshit crazy, did a lot of nasty things. But as soon as Derek showed up, it changed.” He looks at Derek and says, “Is it okay?”

Derek nods. Then he hunches in on himself, shuddering as he remembers. “She smiled at me,” he says, his voice subdued.

Stiles leans over and takes his hand, giving it a solid squeeze. “It changed into Kate Argent. And fire. So the question is, why? Is that just because Derek has a stronger fear of Kate than I do of Peter? Or is it because it recognized Derek as the more dangerous opponent and so it wanted to undermine his psyche instead of mine? Either way, it’s safe to say that it can’t multi-task.”

Allison comes back and slides a huge binder onto the bar. “Maybe we should think about colored tabs for categories.”

“I would suggest that it was only taking on the appearance of these forms, like an illusion, if not for the fire,” Sam says thoughtfully.

“Oh, no, this was no illusion.” Stiles shakes his head. His voice is not quite steady. “This thing . . . was Peter Hale, as I knew him. The way it walked, the way it spoke. The – the things it said. It got a perfect impression of him from my mind and . . . hold that thought.” He opens the oven and takes out the first tray of cookies and places it on a cooling rack on the counter. Then he slides another one in. “I didn’t exactly have time to give him a job interview, but it was detailed. And this – ” He pulls up his sleeve to reveal the claw marks on his arm from where Peter had grabbed him – “is no illusion.”
Derek reaches out and snags Stiles’ hand again, pulling him over so they’re next to each other. He wants to pull him in for a hug, but he knows better than to crowd him when Peter’s involved. Scott takes a look at the marks, which are really more welts than actual cuts, and goes to fish out one of the many first aid kits he had stashed around the house.

“If this is the thing that Jake saw the other day,” Allison says, “then it actually was an alpha werewolf at the time, because you felt it. Even if only for a minute.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Stop me if I’m wrong, Jake, but it’s like . . . you heard a rustle in the brush. You saw something move. You were keyed up because of everything that had happened, and you knew that if there were two betas in town, there could be an alpha. So suddenly there was one. And then you turned and ran. And it’s like as soon as you weren’t watching it anymore, it just . . . stopped existing. Or at least stopped existing in any form that we could sense.” He pulls away from Derek a little and starts spooning cookie dough onto the next baking sheet, although he leaves his hip pressed against Derek’s legs.

Jake nods. “Well, up until the last part. I didn’t stop to check on its existence.”

“No, but I did,” Stiles says. “It’s part of how I knew you were telling the truth. When an alpha shows up on my territory, I can feel its presence. And I did. When it disappeared, Chris and I assumed that they had a witch or warlock with the pack that was shielding it from detection, and when you stumbled on it, it fouled up the spell. But apparently that’s not it at all.”

“It would also explain why I couldn’t pick up a scent,” Derek says. “Magic can hide a lot, but it’s hard to hide a physical evidence like scent. Possible, but hard.”

Jake takes his phone out of his back pocket and thumbs at it for a moment, making a face. Nobody really notices, because Stiles has proclaimed the first tray of cookies cool enough to eat, and the teenagers fall on them like, well, wolves. Even Wednesday grabs at one, and Sheriff Stilinski slides one off the sheet while Stiles isn’t looking. Only Stiles himself doesn’t go for one, and Scott manfully holds back as well, because he’s got the first aid kit open on the last clear counter and is reaching for Stiles’ arm. “Any reason you didn’t tell me about this and decided it was okay to ignore it and make cookies instead?”

“Uh, because cookies are awesome and getting open wounds swabbed with antiseptics totally sucks?” Stiles suggests.

“You know what else sucks?” Scott asks, as he inspects the claw marks. “Infections, and scars you can’t easily hide, which is what will happen if these heal badly.” He lets go of Stiles for a few moments to wet down a clean rag from the kit with water from the sink.

“Oh, but if there’s a fight when we run out of cookies because I had to stop and do this, you’re breaking it up,” Stiles says. “I mean, look at that, over there, Wednesday looks like she finally found something worth living for.”

“Fine, fine,” Scott says, cleaning up the dried blood so he can get a good look at it.

Wednesday’s eyes narrow over her cookie. “If you tell anyone, I will cut you.” This startles an amused snort out of Sam, who immediately apologizes.

“These are really, really good,” Jake says, his mouth full. He tugs out his phone again, glances at the screen, and then quickly tucks it away.

Stiles winces as Scott begins applying disinfectant to the shallow slashes in his forearm. He can’t
help but think back to Peter taking him by the arm, to the pain of his claws digging in. He swallows
and says, “Any luck in the bestiary, Allison?”

Allison shakes her head. “No. Every shapeshifter I can find so far is limited to one or two shapes. A
tulpa is the only thoughtform in here and it just doesn’t fit the bill.”

“It sounds like a boggart,” Erica says. “You know, like in Harry Potter.”

“Fun fact,” Stiles says. “Boggarts are mischievous household spirits that like to play pranks and
generally are not malevolent. I don’t know what JKR was writing when she wrote Harry Potter, but
a boggart isn’t it. They’re not shapeshifters.” He shrugs a little and says, “But she must have based it
on _something_, so that’s probably as close an example as we’re going to get.”

Scott dabs at Stiles’ arm with anti-bacterial cream and then pulls out a roll of gauze. Stiles patiently
waits while he wraps up the wound, then says, “Well, half the hunters in the continental US are
staying around the corner, so hopefully one of them will know what’s going on.”

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Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I was going to wait until tomorrow to post this, but hell, I just really like this chapter.
Stiles: like a boss.

The timer on the oven beeps and Stiles pulls his arm away from Scott to get the next set of cookies out of the oven. Scott lets him go and starts packing the first aid kit away. Jake pulls out his phone again, sighs, and doesn’t bother putting it away again. He just leaves it facedown on the bar with a sour face.

“Why d’you keep doing that?” Erica asks, her mouth full.

Jake huffs, looking sulky, and then makes grabby gestures at the new tray of cookies. “My parents keep texting me about how I’ve been ‘kidnapped’ by the werewolves.”

“Don’t eat those, they’re still too hot,” Stiles says. Then what Jake said set in. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.” He reaches over and takes Jake’s phone without being asked, and pulls up the texts. There are several of them, sent at about five minute intervals. The first is ‘what is going on over there?’, the second is ‘The twins told us everything, how could you manage to get kidnapped by werewolves?’ and the third reads, ‘Honestly, we leave you alone for one afternoon and you manage this?’ Nowhere do they express concern or ask Jake if he’s okay, and Jake hasn’t bothered to reply to any of them. Stiles looks at his father and says, “I’m yet again glad that my father is the sheriff, since apparently I’m a kidnapper now.”

Scott leans over Stiles’ shoulder and reads the texts. His eyes narrow, but he takes a breath and says, “Why don’t you at least text them back and say that you’re all right?”

Jake lets out a snort. “Sure, that’ll work,” he mutters, but begins texting anyway.

“I should probably call Chris,” Stiles says. “I’m frankly a little alarmed that he hasn’t already called me to demand what the hell I thought I was doing, threatening the twins . . . although to be fair he probably anticipated I’d lose my shit eventually.”

Allison gives a shrug, although she doesn’t stop looking through the bestiary. “He’ll be able to put things together enough from the twins’ bullshit retelling to know you had things you needed to handle. And he knows you’re not going to let anything happen to me especially, or innocent bystanders if you can help it.”

“Fair,” Stiles says, and then Jake makes a frustrated little noise in the back of his throat. Again without asking, he reaches over and takes the phone. For the sake of Jake’s pride, he doesn’t read it aloud, although Scott is still peering over his shoulder. The text reads: ‘If you’re okay, then get your ass back here this instant! You’re embarrassing the entire family with this, running off as though you’re still a child! And you had better not dare tell anyone you went with them willingly! You being kidnapped is bad enough but I won’t have anyone saying my son is a soft-hearted werewolf sympathizer like some others I could name.’

Scott growls. He knows not to let the telltale things slip most of the time now, after a lot of work
with Derek, but here in their own den, he doesn’t bother. “Give me that,” he says, reaching around Stiles and taking the phone, being careful not to snatch it too vehemently lest Stiles decide he can’t have it. He types in a text, pauses to consider it for a bare second, then signs it and sends it. Then he hands it back to Stiles and took his first cookie off the tray.

“Do I even want to know what you . . .” Allison says, giving her boyfriend a despairing look.

Stiles, biting his lip to keep from laughing, reads the text out loud. “Why are you so mean? Stop!”

Jake makes a protesting little squeak. Sam rubs his hands over his face and says, “I’m really not sure that’s going to help . . .”

Fifteen seconds later, as Stiles is taking his last cookie tray out of the oven, his phone rings. He glances at it, then picks it up and puts it on speaker. “Stilinski fertility clinic; you spank ‘em, we bank ‘em,” he says, and Allison dissolves into helpless giggles, protesting futilely that there are some things that just shouldn’t be said to her father.

Chris’ voice comes over the line as a growl. “Would you care to explain to me why my cousin just turned to me and asked ‘who the hell is Scott?’”

“The short answer is that your cousin is a dick,” Stiles says forthrightly. “For a longer version, I’m heading back to your place. And no, I won’t be by myself.”

“Are you craz – ” Chris starts, but Stiles has already hung up.

He smiles at the others and says, “So. Apparently we’re needed back at the Argent house.”

“Well.” Allison pushes the tome away and hops down. “Best be armed and armored because this is sure to be a hell of a lot more fun than the last few days have been.”

Scott’s eyes go glassy. “You’re going to wear your chain mail?”

“Chain mail?” Wednesday asks, perking up.

“Yeah, Allison and I each have some,” Stiles says. “We’d love to share, but it’s special-ordered and fitted exactly. We only have the two shirts. Grab mine while you’re down there, will you?” he asks, and Allison nods. “But if you don’t feel comfortable with your current level of armaments . . . Scott, Allison, would you like to take our guests to see the armory while I finish up this last sheet of cookies?”

“You have an armory?” Sam asks, sounding a little suspicious but very curious.

Allison gives a snort. “I’m an Argent. Dad would be ashamed if I didn’t have access to appropriate weaponry at all times.” She waves for them to follow, which they do, Jake snatching up another cookie on the way by. “The chain mail was Stiles’ idea, though,” she allows.

“And if you have the real thing, it will stop a full-on bite,” Scott informs them from the rear.

The armory is at the back of the house. There’s no basement in the house at all – both Stiles and Isaac can’t handle being in one, and Isaac doesn’t even like going near one, so Derek just left it out of the plans entirely. That made the ground floor a little bigger, but there was plenty of room. It’s set up much like the Argent’s basement, though: knives along one wall, guns along a second, and other equipment along a third, including Allison’s bows. There are several cabinets to hold smaller things, and a small light table near the back for plants.
The walls are fairly empty; they're still stocking up. So it doesn't look as frightening as it could. The werewolves tend to favor their own bodies as weapons anyway; it's rare that one of them will pick up anything else. Erica is somewhat fond of blades, and Lydia of pepper spray. Allison unlocks one of the cabinets and shakes out her chain mail shirt.

“May I?” Wednesday asks, looking at one of the guns.

“Sure. Just let me know how much ammo you’re taking.” Allison pulls out one of the thin cotton T-shirts that she wears underneath the chain mail and drapes both over a chair before unceremoniously stripping to her bra.

“Jesus, Allison,” Scott blurts out. “Remember what Stiles said to Erica about some things not being fair?”

“Just think about Finstock in a thong!” Allison says brightly. “There, problem solved.”

While Scott is fake-retching and Wednesday is loading the gun she’s chosen, Sam cautiously approaches the rack of weaponry, mostly so he doesn’t have to look at Allison while she dresses. He has his own gun, but it’s unloaded as per the conclave’s guidelines. Fortunately, it’s just a .45, and they have some ammo that matches, so he takes some. Better to be prepared. “Jake, do you want anything?”

“Why, so I can accidentally shoot one of us?” Jake asks bitterly.

“C’mon, kid, I know you’ve had weapons training.”

Scott looks over at the exchange curiously. “What am I missing?”

“Jake’s eyesight isn’t the best,” Allison says.

“Hard to practice range weapons when you usually can’t see past the end of your own nose,” Jake bites out.

“Well, how about a taser, then?” Scott suggests. “It’s pretty short range, but still effective if you’re in trouble.”

“Doesn’t do much against werewolves,” Sam says dubiously.

Scott rubs one hand over the back of his head. “Uh, right now we’re not so much worried about the werewolves, remember?”

Allison finishes tightening up the lacings of her chain mail so it’s pulled tight to her body and out of the way if she needs to draw her bow. “The wolves are on your side.” She puts her regular shirt back on, but it doesn’t hide what she’s wearing. After that, she lifts two of her favorite knives off the rack; one hooks to her belt and the other slips into her boot. “You may want to consider that. If you go back there with us, some of those hunters won’t take it well. And I’m walking into this just as much an enforcer of my alpha’s pack as I am a hunter and an Argent.”

Sam lets out a breath. He’s clearly considering cutting and running, if only so he can return to the Argent house by himself. But he knows it won’t make any difference now. He went with them willingly and the twins will surely have reported that. “Yeah, I guess so,” he finally says, and tucks his pistol back into his belt. He looks down at what’s in the cabinet. “How about some pepper spray? That’s good for an attack against just about anything.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jake says with a nod. “Worst I can do is blind you for a while.”
Once they’re all suited up, they head back upstairs. Stiles is having a serious conversation with his father. He glances up as they come in and gives them a nod. His father catches him in a hug, then leaves the same way he came. “You guys all set?” he asks, and everyone nods. He grabs his chain mail from Allison along with the thin cotton shirt that goes underneath and quickly gets it on. As they’re leaving, he grabs his leather jacket and pulls it on so it’ll be completely hidden.

Taking cars seems too complicated, as Stiles’ Jeep is still at the Argent house anyway, and it’s not too far if they cut directly through the preserve. Stiles sets a quick pace at first, but remembering Jake, slows down after a few minutes. The hunters are just going to have to wait; he doesn’t need Jake feeling his inadequacy any more keenly than he already does right now. He circles around the Argent property so they can ring the bell and come in like civilized people.

Chris yanks the door open almost as soon as the bell has been rung. He opens his mouth to say something, but Stiles cuts him off. “Returning some lost teenagers, safe and sound, unharmed, unbitten, et cetera, to their concerned parents.”

Scott snorts. Chris glares at him. But it isn’t a new glare, so everyone lets it go. To Stiles, Chris says, “The kids can come in. But you have to go.”

“Yeah, that isn’t going to happen,” Stiles says casually. “We’ve got bigger problems right now than whatever snit everyone’s gotten in about the fact that I’m the local alpha. The alpha that Jake saw the other night? Yeah, it’s a little bigger and badder than anticipated, or so we found out while we were tracking it down in the forest.”

“What were you even doing out there?” Chris growls.

“That stupid scavenger hunt your cousin set up,” Stiles says. When Chris blinks at him, he says, “Yeah, I thought he hadn’t cleared it with you.”

“Son of a bitch,” Chris bites out, and turns and storms back into the house, no longer caring if the others follow him or not.

Erica turns to look at Stiles. “I’m going first this time,” she says. Usually, she’s content to flank him, but the chain mail won’t stop bullets. Stiles just gives her a nod and she starts down the hallway. He follows with Derek right at his shoulder and the others behind them. He does a quick survey of the living room as they enter. It’s more crowded than he would have expected. The twins are sitting in front of the fireplace, looking smug. Their father is standing next to them, one hand resting firmly on Flossie’s shoulder. Jake’s parents and Sam’s parents are there as well, although Stiles doesn’t see Wednesday’s. In fact, now that he thinks about it, he can’t recall their faces and isn’t sure he’s actually met them. In addition to all of those people and Chris himself, all three of the elders are there. Agnes is seated regally in an armchair while Greger, the genial older man, is sitting next to the twins – of course, Stiles remembers, he’s related to them somehow – and Dragan is sitting on the sofa with Sam’s parents.

By the time they get into the living room, Chris is already shouting at Jake’s father. “ – the hell did you think you were doing, sending a bunch of half-trained kids out into a forest that we knew had werewolves in it, if only because werewolves fucking live there?”

“And whose fault is that?” Jake’s father retorts.

“Oh, why don’t you come out and say it, Henry?” Chris asks. “It’s been subtext in everything you’ve said since you’ve got here, how Chris Argent has gone soft and allows werewolves to live on his territory, how Chris Argent’s licking the boots of the local alpha, how Chris Argent let his father get hauled off to jail instead of protecting him – ”
Allison’s hands tighten into fists. It’s pretty clear that if people aren’t careful, it’s going to become ‘how Chris Argent’s daughter gave everyone the ass-kicking they deserved’.

“So yes, I work with the local pack, and I don’t give a damn what any of you think about it. That’s how I was able to kill the leader of the alpha pack and that’s how we put down a dangerous sorcerer last year. If you don’t like it, you can stop making your insinuations and get the hell out of my house!”

“Chris, I’m not saying that, that good can’t come of a truce like that,” Sam’s father says, somewhat dubiously, “but allowing the alpha to attend the conclave? Do you even realize how much intelligence he’s probably gathered?”

“Not much,” Stiles intervenes, “since you’re wrong about half of everything anyway –”

“You be quiet!” Chris shouts at him.

At that, Derek pulls himself up to his full height, and he takes half a step forward. His day has been shitty enough without putting up with someone who’s supposed to be an ally yelling at Stiles. He’s pretty damned sure that Stiles isn’t up for it either.

“Derek,” Stiles says quietly, putting out one arm to stay his advance. Nobody even notices because they’re all already shouting at each other again anyway, and now Jake’s father is yelling about the general lack of security and how the alpha of the local pack was able to just walk off with his son, and Chris is saying that would seem a lot more genuine if Henry wasn’t the one who had sent them into the forest in the first place, and Stiles takes a deep breath and counts to ten and none of it helps and then he looks at Agnes, who is haughtily remarking that if the children aren’t prepared to fight by now, they never will be. This is their first real conclave, they should be old enough to fight and they should be able to prove themselves, and all the pieces are suddenly lining up in Stiles’ head, a chain of little dominoes, and he waits for the briefest of lulls in the argument, into which he shouts, “Time out!”

Surprisingly, the adults actually stop yelling long enough to blink at him, as if they’ve forgotten that he was there and that he was, in fact, what they were arguing about. Stiles gives them all his best charming smile and says, “I’m sorry, I just had a question.” He turns to the elder council and says, “It would really speed things up if you could tell me exactly what kind of monster you released into the preserve.”

For a long moment, everyone just stares at him with their mouths ajar. Then the pack slowly turns to look at the elder council. They manage to do it without betraying overt aggression, but even so, the effect is somewhat unnerving. Finally, Greger manages to bluster, “That’s one hell of an accusation, young man –” and Stiles sees Chris’ shocked expression change to one of grim amusement. Chris knows damned well that Stiles wouldn’t say something like that if he couldn’t back it up.

“The whole ‘party-crasher’ idea seemed weird to me from the beginning,” Stiles says. “I mean, here I am, the local alpha. Pretty much a badass. Got a reputation that a lot of people respect. And my first reaction to this conclave thing, before I knew Allison would have to attend, was to get the hell out of town. Who the fuck would want to stick around when a hundred people who want to kill me – and generally, might even be capable of doing it – are coming to town?”

He gives them a smile. He talks slowly, casually, but he’s commanding the entire room now and he obviously knows it. Even the adults have stopped to listen. “Once I found out Allison had to be here, I decided to stay behind, and kept my lupa with me. But even then I sent the rest of my pack out of here, and that’s not really something I do lightly. So I’ve been thinking, why would people want to come mess with the few people in the world who could actually kill them? It’d be like someone
allergic to bees thinking, ‘oh wow, a beekeeper convention? I should go visit!’

“But I thought hey, maybe some people are stupid. But what you said just now. Proving yourself. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it. It’s a chance for the elder council to vet the next generation of hunters. Check them out and see how impressive they are, see who’s the best. Like when Chris was sixteen and he killed some minotaur thing. A minotaur? Seriously? I could believe a few betas showing up, but what are the odds of whatever-the-fuck this thing is? Some kind of telepathic shapeshifter that takes on the powers of whatever it shapeshifts into, that’s so fucking rare it’s not even in our bestiary, which is very extensive, by the way. Come on! You would’ve done better if you’d just brought a plain old alpha.

“But what really gave it away in retrospect was the twins.” Stiles gestures to them, and they both rocket to their feet, squawking out protests. “I didn’t understand their behavior at first. Which bugs me, when I don’t understand the way someone is acting. Were they just psycho? Why were they so fucking eager to take on anything that knocked on the door? But then I realized it’s because they know what’s going on. It’s supposed to be a secret from the younger generation – I bet even most of the adult hunters don’t know about it, right? Because let’s face it, Chris Argent isn’t going to let you release some kind of monster in his back yard. But you – ” He points to Greger. “You’re related to the twins, right? You’re like their great-grandfather or great-grand-uncle or something. You told them about it. This is their one chance to really impress their betters. So that’s why they’ve been trying to find someone or something to kill at every freakin’ opportunity. Of course, being psycho probably helps, but hey, at least they’ve had some larger goal in mind, which is actually a comfort to me, believe it or not.

“But see, now we’re going to have a problem,” Stiles says. “And not just of the ‘the local alpha is really pissed at you for bringing a monster to town’ variety. Because this thing, it seems like, once it finds a shape it likes, it sticks with it. It finds a shape that gives it power. That’s better than any of the others. So it just keeps it! And therein lies our real problem, because you brought this thing to town to face a handful of inexperienced, half-trained teenagers. And instead you got me.” He glances sideways at Chris, and sees the stricken look on his face, knows that Chris, at least, has put the pieces together. “And so now, instead of some generic, medium-sized monster for the kids to hunt down, you’ve got Peter fuckin’ Hale.”

Behind him, he hears Scott mumble, “Oh my God” under his breath. Derek has gone tense and rigid behind him. But the adults don’t all get it, not yet.

It’s Sam’s father, trying to be polite, who says, “I’m sorry, I’m not sure…”

“Let me tell you a few things about Peter,” Stiles says, and counts them off on his fingers. “He’s highly intelligent. He’s methodical. He’s ruthless. And he’s fucking crazy. Oh, and let’s not forget that he hates the Argent family. Only ‘hate’ is much too weak a word.”

Since Stiles seems to be finished, Derek gives the assembly one of his tight, angry smiles. “Because the Argent family burned his entire family to death in their own home. In cold blood.” He takes a slow breath. “You’re lucky that I only blame one Argent for that.”

Chris is less concerned with family politics and more with the immediate situation. He turns to Stiles and says, “What’s your best guess as to his next move?”

“Well, see, there’s where I need more information on exactly what this creature is capable of,” Stiles says. “If it’s the Peter that I knew… he will come after you and your family. But if it’s the Peter that I fear… he will come after me and mine.”

Agnes folds her arms over her chest and says, “If we’re so worried about it coming after you, maybe
we should tie you up in the forest and leave you there for him.”

Derek lets out a low growl at this suggestion, Scott starts to shift despite himself, and Erica gets three words into, “Look, you bitch – ” before Stiles actually starts laughing. “And there’s the A-plus thinking I’ve come to expect from this crowd,” he says, shaking his head in amusement. “Sure. Give him what he wants. Let him kill me. Where’s the harm in that? Oh, right, the harm is where he goes from being an alpha all on his lonesome to assuming control of an extremely tight-knit pack of wolves who will all be extremely pissed off at you.”

Dragan says in his heavy accent, “Your questions are valid, but . . . I’m not sure we can answer them. Typically this sort of fear-based creature only takes on generic shapes. To have met someone with such a powerful fear of someone specific is . . . not something that . . .”

He seems to be fumbling for words. Stiles isn’t sure if it’s because of a language barrier or because he just doesn’t want to admit what comes next, so Stiles says it for him. “You had no idea this could happen, and no idea how to deal with it.”

Allison actually facepalms. “Oh my God. This is such bad planning that I almost want to laugh.”

Chris doesn’t seem to agree. “Well, if that’s the case, could you lower yourselves to telling us what the damned thing is so we can see what we can find out about it?”

Agnes just looks down her nose at him. “Not while that thing is here.”

Stiles looks at Chris and says, sotto voce, “Which one of us is she talking about?”

Chris just gives him a sour look. Allison opens her mouth, looks at her father, and then closes it again.

Stiles shakes his head and then gives a snort of laughter. “Fine. Okay. Because you know what? I think I’d rather not have any help you could provide anyway. My pack and I can take care of this. So why don’t you guys just stay here, put your feet up, wash your hair, while we clean up the mess you made?” He looks at Chris and says, “How’s that sound to you?”

Chris sighs and says, “Like you’ll do whatever you want regardless of my opinion.”

“Hey, I try to at least pretend I care about your opinion sometimes,” Stiles says. He slings an arm around Erica’s shoulders and then looks at the three hunter teenagers. “You guys wanna come with? I’ll show you a good time, I promise.”

Sam looks uneasily between Stiles and his parents. “I . . . think I’d better stay here,” he says.

“Suit yourself. No hard feelings, I swear.” Stiles raises his eyebrows at the other two. He’s already got plans to make sure that Jake tags along, but he figures he’ll let the kid voice his opinion first.

“What about you?”

“I’ll come with you,” Wednesday says.

Jake starts to nod, but then looks at his parents, who already look like they’re going to explode. His mother is managing to look even more sharp-edged with every passing moment. He’s torn between trying to lessen what’s coming to him and thinking that, since it’s coming anyway, he might as well actually deserve it.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, for him, Stiles takes his little half-nod as a yes. “Okey dokey,” he says. “We’re out.” He looks at the Bobbsey twins and says, “Paint your nails or something. Let us
handle this.”

The pack members, taking this as a signal, close ranks around Jake. Allison pulls away and heads to her father, giving him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I love you,” she says, as she always does before a hunt. “I’ll keep you posted.”

“Jake, where do you think you’re going?” Jake’s father demands, as he shuffles a nervous step backwards with Scott pressed close to his side.

“Uh . . . they . . .” Jake decides maybe it’d be better if he didn’t finish his sentence.

“He’s coming with us,” Scott says firmly, staying close to him.

“He likes us,” Erica says, smirking.

Chris blinks at them suddenly. “No. No!” He makes an abrupt gesture with both hands. “Absolutely not!”

Derek folds his arms over his chest and raises his chin in a stubborn manner. Allison just starts to laugh, even more so when Scott says, “Only a little,” while hiding behind Stiles.

“Only a little what?” Jake asks.

“Chris likes to make mountains out of molehills,” Stiles says to him, grinning.

“You are not adopting him into your pack!” Chris snaps.

“Of course not,” Stiles says. “Half my pack is still out of town. It’d be extremely poor form to add a member without getting everyone’s approval first.” He looks at the other hunters and says, “I’m sorry, would you like to write that down? It’s a little bit of actual pack dynamics that you could add to your laughably inaccurate seminar.”

Allison smiles brightly. “That includes Jake’s approval, by the way. Fully informed approval.”

“What?” Jake is starting to sound a little flustered. “I, I don’t want to be a werewolf!”

“That’s okay, you don’t have to be,” Stiles says. “Anyway, seriously, Chris, it won’t hurt him any to spend a couple hours in our company while we track this thing down. I – ”

“A couple hours?” Flossie blurts out. “That’s it?”

Stiles ignores her. “ – think he can handle that much, and if we leave him here, his parents are going to strap the shit out of him and you know how my dad gets about child abuse, it’s like a thing he has, something about how child abusing mouthbreathers are the lowest form of scum to crawl around on the planet – ”

“Wait just a God damned minute – ” Henry thunders.

“ – so it’s really in everyone’s best interest if Jake goes with us. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Derek steps in between Jake and his father, cutting off his line of sight. This incidentally cuts off Scott’s line of sight, too; he figures both of them will have an easier time if they don’t have to look at the man. Chris just rubs one hand over his face and then says, “Fine. Fine! But you had better return him in the exact same condition you got him in!”

Stiles holds up his hand in the Boy Scout salute. “I so solemnly swear,” he says. “Unless we buy
him glasses. Which remains a possibility.”

“You can’t do this!” Henry snaps.

Stiles grins at him. “Stop me.”

“I’ll call the police!”

“And the police will tell you that when your fifteen-year-old son gets in an argument with you and storms out with his friends, it doesn’t warrant a missing persons report.” A beat. “You guys want to write that down, too? Really, you should all be learning something tonight.”

Allison’s trying not to laugh and says to her father, “You’re just mad because none of them could tell what was happening right under their noses. They wouldn’t know someone building a healthy pack from a hole in the ground.”

Chris opens his mouth to tell her how wrong she is, then grimaces and says, “We’ve got work to do. And so do you, I imagine.”

Jake’s father is still protesting as the pack turns to leave, with Scott tugging Jake along with an arm around his shoulders and Wednesday calmly walking after them as if she doesn’t have a care in the world. Sam hesitates, then says to his father, “You know what, I think I will go with them. I can keep an eye on Jake, you know, make sure he’s okay.” His father nods in agreement, and Sam jogs after them, catching up as they leave the house. Stiles greets him politely and doesn’t argue with his decision. He leads them out front and puts a finger to his lips to caution them into silence. He walks down three houses until they’re around a bend and out of sight. Then he cuts through a neighbor’s side yard and through the back so they can approach the Argent house from behind.

“Uh, what are we doing?” Scott asks in a low voice.

Stiles gestures for them to close in around him so he can speak quietly. “Look, whatever this thing is, it either wants me or it wants the Argents. If we split up, we don’t know where it’ll go. We stay together, and it’ll show up here, one way or another.”

“Then why did we leave? Or was it just to get everyone off our backs?”

“Two reasons,” Stiles says. “The first is that it really would have turned to bloodshed, sooner rather than later, if we’d stayed in there. The second is that I suspect – and this is just a theory – that it won’t want to attack when there are so many people with so many potent fears around. It likes this shape. It won’t want to risk it being . . . subsumed, by a greater fear.”

“It might not go near you if I’m nearby then,” Derek says reluctantly. “I don’t know which one of us is worse.”

“Me neither,” Stiles says. “But we don’t need to know. Because we’re going to have bait.”

“Bait?” several voices echo.

“Yep,” Stiles says. “Because I give the Bobbsey twins about fifteen minutes before they sneak out the back and come looking for the damned thing.”

“If only we could let them get their asses handed to them by it,” Allison says.

Wednesday is looking at Stiles in open admiration. “You baited them.”
“I baited the shit out of them,” Stiles agrees cheerfully.

“All that stuff about how you can handle this, how you don’t need their help.”

“All complete bullshit,” Stiles says, with a nod.

Allison grins. “We don’t just keep him around for his pretty face.”

“You think they’re really stupid enough to go off into the forest hunting down some monster that even those old assholes don’t know what it can do?” Scott asks, somewhat incredulously.

Stiles lets out a snort. “Dude, you haven’t been here the last few days. They are at least twice that stupid and three times that desperate for glory.”

“We’re talking Jackson’s level of need to prove himself with none of his brains,” Allison says.

The others stare at her in disbelieving horror.

“In any case,” Stiles says, “we’re just going to hang out back here until they manage to get out from underneath the thumb of everyone else, and then follow them, at a safe distance, until this thing turns up. At which point we’ll . . . I don’t know. I’m fuzzy on that part, so now it’s time for everyone to shut up while I think about things.”

~ ~ ~ ~
So in other news, I'm not subscribing to Teen Wolf's new premise that Peter was always a malicious, manipulative bag of dicks. To be honest, I don't think it makes a lot of sense in the larger narrative. (If Peter had always been like that, why did Derek visit his comatose ass in the hospital? Why did he beg Peter for help solving Laura's murder? For that matter, why wasn't Peter his prime fuckin' suspect?) So I'm going to stick with Peter-before-the-fire being kind of a jerk, but not actually a bad person.

The silence lasts about thirty seconds before Jake stirs and says, uncomfortably, “Can I, uh, can I ask about this . . . adoption thing?”

Scott shrugs. “Well, yeah . . . sure.”

“Okay, then . . . I’m asking. I mean . . . what does it mean?”

The wolves all exchange glances, somewhat confused. Derek holds up his hands in surrender, bowing out of trying to explain anything, since it never works out when he does. Scott does the mature thing and sticks his tongue out in response. Then, to Jake, he says, “It means we like you. That we . . . think you would make a good addition to the pack.”

“Well, yeah, I figured out that much,” Jake says, rolling his eyes a little. “But, uh, why?”

“Why what?” Scott asks, clearly not understanding the question.

“You guys are all like . . . you know, smart and strong and you know what you’re doing, you can take care of yourselves and fight monsters and shit. I can’t even walk around the house without bruising my shins. Even with my glasses.”

Erica laughs, muffling it in her hand. “Wait ‘til you see Stiles flailing.”

Scott makes an amused noise, but also tries to keep it quiet. “You think that’s how we pick people for the pack?” He shakes his head. “Stiles and I have been friends since we were four. He used to walk into stuff all the time. Which was fine, because he’d have to stop and wait for me to have an asthma attack every three minutes. We pick people that we think would fit in and make a good part of the family. Not people who don’t trip on things.”

“I guess . . .” Jake says. He still seems somewhat dubious.

“Gotta be honest with you,” Stiles remarks, “it’s also because your real family kind of sucks. Most of us were pretty much loners. We needed a family. So we’re drawn to other people who seem to need the same thing.”
Scott’s expression gets a little pinched. “Your parents . . . my dad was like that, and my mom threw him out.”

Jake shrugs and looks down. “I don’t see how it matters either way. When the conclave is over, they’re just going to take me home with them.”

“We’ll see,” Stiles murmurs, almost to himself.

Scott hears him, but Jake doesn’t, so he lets it go. “The real question is, do you mind?”


“You seem kinda nervous,” Scott replies.

“Uh, you think?” Jake asks. “Before this week I had never even met a werewolf. Now I’m being told that pretty much everything I knew about them is wrong, and I’m kinda sorta hanging out with them like we’re all old pals or something, which I don’t understand at all, and on top of that my parents are mad at me and there’s some of magical monster out there trying to kill us all.”

Stiles glances at him, then at Scott, and says with a wry smile, “Remember, that kind of thing doesn’t happen to most people every other week.”

Scott leans back against a tree. “Right. I remember when it wasn’t normal for us, either.” He considers this somewhat philosophically. “Man, parts of my life are much better now. But seriously, everything about werewolves is wrong?”

“It’s pretty sad,” Allison says with a shrug. “It’s mostly centered around a few psychos and treats them like the norm. I guess it does offer some protection to packs like us.”

“How so?” Erica asks, frowning. “To me it sounds like they’ll kill the sh*t out of every werewolf they come across, thinking they’re all like that bitch Kali. Doesn’t sound like protection to me.”

“Oh, sure,” Allison says, not bothering to sugarcoat it. “But the assholes are going to do it anyway. But this way, they have no real information to look for. They don’t know what sort of things to use to pinpoint a normal pack.”

“What would those things be, anyway?” Stiles asks, giving an amused snort. “A big grocery bill?”

Allison laughs and nods. “Well, yeah,” she says. Then she closes her mouth, her gaze cutting over to Sam and Wednesday, then back to Stiles, with a shrug. She could list some things, but she doesn’t know how trusting she feels.

Fortunately for all concerned, she’s saved from having to reply as the back door of the Argent house opens and two figures come out. It’s a man and a woman, dressed all in the dark blues and shifting grays that would make good night camouflage in a forest. Stiles starts to stand up, saying, “And right on schedule, the . . . that’s not them.”

“That’s my parents.” Jake’s tone, while quiet, still manages to be both incredulous and scandalized.

“For the love of . . . great,” Stiles grumbles. “They’re going to take the law into their own hands. Okay, we’ll split up.” He glances around his available talent pool quickly. He doesn’t want Jake anywhere near his parents, and he doesn’t want to be split up from Derek. He would have liked to keep Jake around Scott, who seems to handle him better, but he’s pretty sure that splitting up Scott and Allison would be a bad idea, and he has to decide quickly. “Scott, Allison, Erica, follow them.
Derek and I will wait here for the twins. Jake, stay with us. Sam, I’ll presume you want to stay with Jake, so Wednesday, if you could go with the others for extra backup, that’d be cool.”

“You get hurt without me and I’m gonna kick your ass,” Erica says. She leans over and give Stiles a thorough kiss and a wicked grin before bouncing up to follow Jake’s parents.

Stiles stares after her with somewhat glassy eyes. “What a bitch,” he says, in a tone that can only be described as adoring.

Derek claps him on the shoulder. “I think that’s called ‘incentive for survival’.”

“I’m confused again,” Jake grumbles.

“Still none of your business,” Stiles says cheerfully.

“No, I’m with Jake on this one,” Sam says.

“Gee, that makes it sound like you think it’s your business,” Stiles replies.

Sam holds up his hands in surrender. “I’m just saying. I thought an alpha and a lupa were usually in a pretty tight relationship with each other. No room for dating others. Apparently, I was wrong.”

“Well, we did tell you that half of what you guys think about werewolves is wrong,” Stiles says with a snort, “but since you obviously aren’t planning to let this go, okay. You’re at least partially right about this. About ninety percent of alpha/lupa pairs are romantical in nature. Derek and I aren’t. End of what I plan to say about this.”

“Uh huh,” Sam says. It clearly doesn’t fill in the blanks anywhere near as he would like, but he knows better than to ask for more information.

“However,” Stiles says, “don’t make the mistake of thinking that nontraditional pairs are any less protective or defensive of each other, because that is an excellent way to get yourself killed.”

“Noted.” Sam’s quiet for a long minute. “Maybe if I survive this, I’ll write something on how not to be a jackass when meeting werewolves.”

Stiles lets out a little chortle despite himself. “You have no idea what it’s been like sitting through those lectures. I think I deserve some sort of medal for my self-control.”

“Would you like me to have one made for you?” Derek asks, deadpan.

Stiles gives him the side eye. “Are you mocking me?”

Derek’s eyebrows go up. “Yes,” he says, but the good-natured feeling is evident, at least to anyone who knew him. Stiles just makes a face at him and then pounces on his back, wrapping his arms around him from behind and letting Derek take his weight as his feet dangle a few inches above the ground. “Why are you always on me? Get off!” Derek says, scooping up Stiles’ leg by the knee so it’s more like an actual piggy back ride. “Besides, you’re already composing a fifty page document in your head correcting all their mistakes. The only question is who you’re going to give it to.”

“Oh! That reminds me.” Stiles hops down, landing in an easy crouch. “I want to send an e-mail out to a few people describing this thing to see if they’ve ever heard of it.”

Derek nods and sighs, and tries to ignore Sam staring at them. “We used to have a library. You know . . . before.” He looks away, cutting himself off. He’s not used to talking about what he lost,
particularly not in front of strangers, but it’s clearly going to be dragged to the surface. “Not that I ever actually read a lot of it.”

“You’re many things, but an intellectual is not one of them,” Stiles agrees absently, as he types away on his phone. “I suppose at some point I should probably also call my dad and tell him that none of the hunters killed us or anything. Shit.” He looks up, forehead suddenly creased with worry. “You don’t think Peter would go after my dad, do you?”

Derek pauses. “No. At least . . . not unless he’s really pushed into a corner. Because that would push you into a corner. It would make you dangerous, unpredictable. You know how I hunt sometimes? Run prey, like deer and stuff?”

“Yeah. Still creepy, by the way.”

“Dude, I’m a wolf. At least I want it cooked before I eat it.” Derek waves this aside. “Anyway, Peter is who taught me how to hunt. He taught all of us kids to hunt. And one of the things he taught me is that there are a few things that will turn prey into a predator. Going after your father would be a lot like backing a three point buck into a corner. If he lived, he’d be carrying some internal organs home with him.”

“You know, this’ll sound funny, but . . . I wish I could have known Peter,” Stiles says pensively. “The real Peter. I think I could have learned a lot from him.” He rubs a hand over the back of his head. “Is that weird?”

“No.” Derek tilts his head back to look at the sky. “I wish you had known him, too. You would have gotten along. Genuinely liked each other.” It would be true to say ‘Peter would have liked you’, but he knows that Stiles still dreams about Peter saying that himself. “He was funny as hell, and so damned smart.”

“And you’re right about my dad, but . . . that’s the thing. Real Peter wouldn’t do that. But this isn’t real Peter. This is some . . . nightmare Peter. And, and I know Peter wasn’t responsible for putting my dad in the hospital back then but I spent weeks thinking he had been, and . . . him hurting my dad is always something that . . .” Stiles trails off and jabs the send button in his email with extreme prejudice. “I just wish I knew what we were dealing with.”

Derek reaches out and squeezes his hand. “You’ll figure it out. You always do.”

Stiles glances at him and nods, even manages a little half-smile. It looks like he’s about to say something else when the back door opens again and the twins sneak out, easily identifiable by their blonde hair. Flossie is pulling on a navy blue hat as they walk through the backyard. Stiles mimes zipping his mouth shut, and leans in close, knowing that the other humans won’t be able to hear him if he speaks under his breath the way he would if it were just Derek he needed to talk to.

“If we all follow them together, we’ll make too much noise; they’ll hear us. So we’re going to make a chain. I’ll go first. Then Sam, Jake, and Derek, you’ll bring up the rear. I know that doesn’t thrill you, but I don’t want to risk another forest fire. If I need you, I’ll scream like a little girl. Leave as much distance as you can between yourself and the person in front of you that you can without losing sight of them. Questions?”

Sam and Jake shake their heads. Derek is already on his feet, stripping off his clothes. “Jesus, does he always do that with as little warning?” Sam hisses, as the older man shifts into a wolf.

“Mm hm,” Stiles says, amused. They’re going to have to be careful. None of them were thinking about a night stalking situation, so none of them are dressed for it. He’s doing all right in his jeans
and leather jacket, and Derek of course will be fine. But Jake is wearing a green shirt and jeans and Sam is even worse off, in a white shirt and khaki shorts. Stiles scoops up Derek’s charcoal gray shirt off the ground and tosses it to Sam. “Put that on,” he says under his breath. Sam blinks at him for a moment but then nods in understanding. He strips off his own shirt, showing off an impressive set of washboard abs, and pulls Derek’s over his head. That will have to do; Derek’s pants won’t fit him. As it is, the shirt strains dangerously at the shoulders. Stiles takes Derek’s leather jacket and hands it to Jake, who blinks at him but then pulls it on. It’s cartoonishly large on him, but should afford him some basic protection. It’s not great, but it’s better than nothing.

“Tell me you’re wearing your contacts,” he murmurs to Jake. The last thing they need is him tripping over everything. The teenager grimaces but then pulls a white plastic case out of his pocket. He shudders a little but manages to get them into his eyes without too much trouble. His movement is a lot more smooth, less tentative, now that he can see. Stiles resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Okay. Shout if you need me,” he says. The twins are becoming dim in the distance, and he jogs after them without another word. He gives an occasional glance over his shoulder and can just barely see Sam following behind him.

Far up ahead, he can hear the twins bickering about which way to go. They’re not making any effort to keep quiet, which seems like a stupid move, but actually isn’t a bad one. They’re trying to flush out prey. They don’t know where to go, so they’ll bring the prey to them. Which would be a wonderful idea, except nobody’s told them that they’re the prey.

He’s been standing there, listening to them argue for nearly five minutes, when his phone vibrates. He pulls it out and sees that the call is from Allison. After a moment of debate, he decides to take it. The twins are far enough ahead that as long as he keeps his voice down, they won’t hear him over the sound of their argument. He presses ‘accept’ and says, “Talk to me.”

All he hears are gales of laughter. Allison is clearly trying to talk, but she’s overcome with giggles, and in the background, Stiles can hear that Erica is as well. What Allison eventually manages to gasp out is, “Assholes” and then “tiger pit”.

“They’re in the pit? Really?” Stiles asks, excited. This is big news for him. The pit is his favorite of all the traps he had used in the house’s security. Like the others, it uses an obvious vulnerability to attract intruders. In this case, it’s the gate. The whole thing is reinforced, but Stiles knew that people would be able to get through it. So he put the fuse box right next to it, to encourage people to try. After the theoretical intruder has used their technical savvy to disarm the electric fence and then their physical strength or cleverness to get through the gate itself, they walk through feeling all cocky – and immediately fall into the tiger pit that’s been covered with thin screening, dirt, and leaves.

When he had designed it, everyone had gotten a kick out of it. Chris, who had helped with some of the technicalities, had found it particularly eye-roll-inducing. He seemed to be of the opinion that nobody would actually fall for that. Apparently, he was wrong.

As for the pack themselves, they simply don’t use the gate. Coming and going on a regular basis, they just disarm the fence with their remote and then climb over. Even Stiles and Allison typically do this. It’s high, sure, but they’ve all practiced enough that they could do it in their sleep. When they come and go with their cars, or if Sheriff Stilinski or some other parent comes to visit, an entire panel of the fence actually detaches and swings out.

The pit is as deep as they could get it without hitting bedrock or ground water. Isaac ‘borrowed’ his father’s backhoe. He still knows how to use it. The entire thing was lined with cement sheeting so the walls are too smooth to climb, and then Stiles had padded the bottom with industrial-sized sheets of bubble wrap so the fall wouldn’t seriously hurt anyone. They’d spent hours trying to figure out
how to get out of it. The conclusion was finally that one werewolf alone couldn’t, a human and a
werewolf together couldn’t, but two werewolves together could. However, in order to do so, they’d
have to climb on each other’s shoulders. Stiles figures that if this ever happened, whoever in the pack
was home at the time would be able to stand at the edge of the pit and, well, discourage this sort of
behavior.

As it is, two humans won’t be able to get out of it. Jake’s parents are going to be stuck there until
Stiles decides to let them out.

Allison is still giggling madly. “Fuse box and then through the gate and then whoosh! Down they
went! Here!” There’s some funny shuffling noise and then Stiles’ phone chimes to let him know that
he’s received a photo. He pulls it up to see both of Jake’s parents on the bottom of the pit.

“They look pissed,” he says, trying to contain his own laughter lest someone hear him.

“They so are! I’ve gotta send this pic to Dad.” There are more shuffling noises. “Oh, and now she’s
climbing on his shoulders. Aw, isn’t that cute. We tried it with werewolves, you know! You’re
screwed!”

“Wolf tested, alpha approved,” Stiles cracks.

“Wednesday actually smiled, and look! Dad sent me an annoyed little text face. And now he’s
saying they’re idiots.” She giggles again. Then, “Oops, better go. Their cell phones have made an
appearance. Gonna get the jammer running.” The call abruptly ends. That was another precaution he
had taken. Cell phone jammers are illegal, but relatively easy to buy on the internet and not even that
expensive. That will prevent anyone stuck in the pit from calling for reinforcements.

Stiles shakes his head a little and tucks his phone away. He’s had some thoughts on how to deal with
Jake’s parents, although he supposes it would be nice to talk to Jake about it first. Them now being at
the bottom of the tiger pit is going to make things somewhat easier for him.

But now he has more important things to worry about, because he hears a rustling up ahead and
Peter has stepped out from between two trees, bold as brass. “Are you lost?” he addresses the twins,
smiling at them.


Stiles sighs and rolls his eyes. He thinks about intervening, but decides he’ll wait for the others to
catch up. He wants to see this Peter that isn’t Peter in action, see what he plans to do. Everything he
can learn about the monster’s methods and intentions will help him figure out how to defeat it. He
reaches for his gun, but then changes his mind. He’s not a marksman like Chris or Allison. In the
dark, with a fast-moving creature, his chances aren’t good, and he could hit the twins by accident.

“Oh, I was just out walking,” Peter says. “The preserve is beautiful this time of year.”

“Yeah, great,” Flossie says rudely. “But we’re kind of in the middle of something, so if you don’t
mind . . .”

“Oh, no,” Peter says, with a broad smile. “I don’t mind at all.”

And then he attacks.

To their credit, the twins respond quickly. Flossie dives out of the way of his first charge, and when
Peter wheels around, Freddie’s already got his gun trained on him. But it only lets out a hollow click,
and he remembers a moment too late that Chris had insisted they unload their weapons. There’s no
time for him to even *realize* what just happened before Peter’s arm sweeps out and knocks him aside, into a tree. He hits it with a thud that sounds painful.

There’s a glittery blur in the air as Flossie throws a knife in Peter’s direction. He catches it between two fingers, but then hisses and let it drop to the ground. Silver. While he’s taken off guard, Flossie aims a kick at his face. Peter just grabs her by the ankle and twists, sending her whole body into a spin that ends with her on the ground.

Freddie lets out a cry as he lurches to his feet, but by then Peter has picked up a fallen branch and just casually slams it into Freddie’s stomach as he runs toward his sister. He’s knocked backwards and onto the ground, choking and gasping for air. Peter ignores him and kneels down next to Flossie, grabbing her by her long blond braid and hauling her upward. Stiles sees the red shine of his eyes and the points of his teeth as they descend towards her shoulder.

Since it’s obvious that the others aren’t going to catch up before disaster strikes, Stiles charges in. He’s had hundreds of nightmares about having to face down Peter Hale, but each one has left him a little better prepared than the last. He knows that in a physical fight against the alpha, he won’t win. As usual, he plans to play dirty. Which is why he brought his second vial of wolfsbane.

Peter’s face turns towards him as he hears Stiles approach, and Stiles tosses the liquid in his face. It’s the last of it, which is sad; growing the plants is all well and good but the volume produced by each is small. Stiles hopes that Derek catches up soon. Peter recoils from the wolfsbane; he smells it and retreats, so only a few drops splash against his face. He lets out a hiss of pain but it’s not the injury Stiles hoped it would be.

“Get up!” he shouts at Flossie, who scrambles to her feet. Her eyes are wide and shocky. Now Stiles pulls out his gun and fires three shots as Peter charges forward again. He dodges to one side and none of the bullets connect. Stiles throws himself out of the way, ducking behind a tree, and thinks seriously about just running away.

“Hey!” another voice shouts. It’s Sam; he’s caught up with them. Derek won’t be far behind. Sam charges straight into the fight as Peter darts around the tree to find Stiles. Sam swings at him and connects, but it doesn’t slow Peter down very much. He leaps on Stiles and knocks him to the ground. Stiles lets him because really, that’s all part of the plan. A plan he hadn’t shared with anyone else, sure, but then again a lot of his plans are like that. He feels one of Peter’s claws nick him just above his eye, but the chain mail and leather jacket keep him relatively safe. Sam grabs the discarded tree branch and starts swinging it at Peter to get him off of Stiles. Stiles has just enough time to slide his phone into the pocket of Peter’s jacket before he goes tumbling away.

Then Derek arrives. He leaps on Peter and knocks him away, and everything dissolves into chaos. He hears snarling and a high-pitched yelp as the two of them tangle. Peter gets free and lunges at Sam, jaws first, but Sam is ready for him; he ducks to one side and then spins, his foot going solidly into Peter’s ribcage.

At this, the creature seems to decide it’s had enough. Faced with too many opponents who are more focused on fighting than on being afraid, it turns tail and bounds into the woods. But it doesn’t shift forms. Stiles can see the hulking shape of alpha Peter as it goes over a rise and disappears from view.

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Chapter End Notes
On a totally unrelated note, how many Veronica Mars fans do we have in the audience? Because my girlfriend has challenged me to write a Teen Wolf/Veronica Mars crossover. She thinks that Veronica and my Stiles would get along like a house on fire. Any takers?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter is like... half mouthy Stiles and half domestic fluff, LOL. What a weird chapter.

In other news, as much as I love Chris and his badassery, I really wish someone would occasionally call him out on his dickitry.

It’s a rather messed-up crew that stumbles back into the Argent house. Jake is fine, since he was smart enough to hang back, so he’s somewhat reluctantly helping Flossie along. She’s generally okay, but her left ankle is badly sprained and she can’t put any weight on it at all. Freddie is the worst off, with bruised or possibly even broken ribs, but Sam has a few nasty claw marks that Stiles didn’t even see him get. Derek has shifted back and is whole and uninjured, wearing only his jeans. Jake is still wearing his leather jacket, which falls to his mid-thighs. Stiles is okay, although his shirt has a sizable rip in it through which the chain mail shines when the light hits it. The cut over his eye looks worse than it is; it’s not giving him much trouble although it stings like a bitch.

There’s a group of six people sitting in the Argent’s living room, which is fewer than he had expected to see. He forces himself to really look at them, dig in his memory, and remember who the hell they are. Chris and Victoria are there, of course, along with Sam’s parents. Julien and... Nicole, he thinks. The other two people are the twins’ parents, recognizable from their white-blond hair. He can’t remember the mother’s name, but the father is Mikael. The elder council is gone. Stiles presumes that it’s past their bedtime. Old folks turn in early. That, or Chris has banished them from the house in fury after finding out what they did.

All of them are on their feet pretty much instantly as the teenagers come into the room. “Jonas, what on earth!” Mikael says, and so hey, apparently Freddie’s real name is Jonas. Stiles notes it down as chaos erupts. He starts trying to explain that they ran into the monster in the woods, but he’s gotten fewer than two words out when Jonas starts blustering about how they were walking in the woods and were attacked by Stiles and his pack.

Derek opens his mouth to protest that he hasn’t attacked any humans, but then realizes who he’s trying to compete against. He closes his mouth and all but throws his hands up in surrender.

Chris is frowning, and addresses the twins’ father. “Mikael, I don’t think – ” he starts, but before he can finish his sentence or Stiles can launch any sort of defense of his own, help comes from an unexpected quarter when Sam marches over, grabs Jonas by the shoulder, and gives him a rough shake.

“You shut the fuck up, you lying son of a whore,” Sam says. “I am so sick of your bullshit! You know damned well that not only did Stiles and his pack not attack you, they saved your God damned life because you were stupid enough to try to track down some monster that could have eaten you for breakfast. Try showing a little gratitude!”

Everyone startles at this. Jake looks particularly shocked, but then gleeful. “It’s true,” he picks up with a nod. “It was all about to bite them and we, well, they, ran in and started kicking ass.”
Chris rubs a hand over his face. He hasn’t missed the hilariously oversized leather jacket that Jake is wearing, that they’ve dressed him like he’s one of their pack. “Would someone please tell me what has happened. From the beginning. Without dramatics.”

Stiles grins but decides against a comment about how Chris never lets him have any fun. “Long story short: the twins went into the forest to try to track down the monster and bring glory to their ancestors, et cetera. Being in that it’s now an extremely powerful alpha, it handed their asses to them – hey, no judgment, guys, Peter was pretty badass – and was about to turn . . .” He looks at Flossie. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember your name.”

Subdued and a little shocky, she says, “Uh, it’s Annika.”

“He was about to turn Annika when we showed up, there was a general brawl, we got roughed up a bit, but we managed to get them out there and then we came back here,” Stiles says. “Nobody is seriously injured although I think Annika could use an ice pack for her ankle and if you’ve got any stuff that will stop this cut from dripping blood into my eye, I would super appreciate it, and I think Jonas might have some fractured ribs.”

Victoria sweeps a judgmental look over the lot of them, then leaves the room. Chris just shakes his head, looking like a migraine is coming on. “He, it, actually is trying to build a pack. I wonder if it was just opportunity that the first person it tried to turn was someone with hunter training.”

Stiles shrugs a little, and Victoria comes back in with an extensive first aid kit. She pulls out some gauze, disinfectant, and a butterfly closure to deal with Stiles’ cut. Then she tosses a chemical ice pack to Annika, not waiting to see if she catches it. “Take what you need for the boys,” she says to Julien, who has stepped up to help his son.

“Am I the only one wondering where our cousin is?” he asks.

“Yes?” Derek hazards quietly.

Mikael’s eyes are narrowed as he, too, reaches for the first aid kit to patch up his son. “And where the rest of your pack is,” he says. “I don’t suppose those two things could possibly be related.”

Stiles gives him a shrug and an innocent look as he lets Derek apply the bandage to his forehead. “Hey, the rest of my pack went back to the den,” he says. “So unless Jake’s parents decided to try to break onto our property . . . there shouldn’t be any sort of problem.”

“And we all know that the Argents would never needlessly damage any of my property,” Derek says evenly, as he wipes the blood off Stiles’ forehead.

Stiles laughs a little, then sees the grimace on Chris’ face. “Wait. What?”

Derek shrugs. “A minion smashed my car window once.”

“Whose minion?” Stiles turns to Chris. “Your minion?”

Chris rubs both hands over his face. This is not a conversation he had envisioned himself ever having. “It was a long time ago . . .”

“Your thug smashed his car window?” Stiles asks. “What the hell for?”

“It was a scare tactic,” Derek said. “Back when I first got into town.”

“They broke your car window to scare you?” Stiles’ voice is colored with incredulity. “Laura gave
you that car.”

Chris winces.

“You don’t have to remind me. If they had so much as dented a panel, someone would be missing an arm.”

“Really? Dismemberment over a car?” Mikael says, and while he isn’t as bad as his children, it’s easy to see where they got their condescending tone.

“Who’s Laura?” Jake asks, leaning in close to Sam and hoping the older boy knows.

Stiles overhears and answers, although his gaze is fixed on Mikael. “Laura,” he says, “was Derek’s sister. His alpha. Who had just been murdered less than a week before this little incident occurred. Frankly, I’m surprised that there wasn’t dismemberment just over the window being broken. Which, I would like to remind you, was done for no reason other than brute intimidation, since we are all now well aware that Derek had done nothing wrong.”

Derek huffs a little, remembering that Stiles generally likes Chris even if he doesn’t like Chris right now. “In the interest of being fair, both you and Scott thought I was the bad guy, too. And you weren’t my alpha then.”

Stiles gives him one of those alpha stares. “Derek,” he says evenly, “shut up.”

Derek’s mouth closes without protest. Sam looks a little stunned, having been watching them interact up until this point. Jake blurts out, “Whoa,” loud enough for everyone to hear.

Stiles thinks all this over, then says, “I know you had it fixed. Do you remember how much it cost?”

Figuring that a direct question was tacit permission to speak, Derek says, “Not exactly. About two hundred bucks.”

“Okey dokey.” Stiles turns to Chris. “We take checks.”

Chris considers this for a moment, then nods. “Sure. If that’ll make things square with Derek, I’ll write him a check.”

“Seriously?” Mikael asks, startled. “You’re acting like you actually did something wrong. So you put the fear of God into him. So what? Maybe the car has some sentimental value, but it’s not like you knew that.”

Chris looks back and forth between Stiles and Mikael, clearly wondering how Mikael is stupid enough to tread that close to insulting Stiles’ lupa right now. “It was an ugly situation for everyone, yes, but I really don’t see how my ignorance really makes the fact that I damaged a gift from his sister and alpha any less painful.”

“This kid wasn’t even alpha back then – ” Mikael starts.

“No, but I am alpha now,” Stiles says, his eyes starting to glow crimson. “And I have a right to demand reparation for wrongful damage that was done to the pack that I assumed control of. If Chris doesn’t have a problem with it, and he doesn’t seem to, then how about you accept the fact that this is none of your business and stay the hell out of it?”

“Listen, kid, you don’t – ”
Chris pinches his nose and wonders if he’s the only adult in the room. “Mikael, Derek is Stiles’ lupa.” He’s careful to keep his voice even, but he’s clearly wondering why this hasn’t sunk in yet. “It has been a stressful day. I don’t see why you’re harping on this, especially when they just rescued your children.”

Mikael’s jaw tightens. “Well, I don’t see why you’re not defending yourself. You were just doing your job. You made a mistake in judgment maybe, but Derek himself said that Stiles thought he was the bad guy, too. Nobody got hurt. So why are you apologizing for being what you are, for trying to keep the people in this town safe?”

There’s a pause while Chris considers this. “I guess because I have a code,” he says. “I didn’t have proof, so I shouldn’t have done it. I don’t want to turn into my sister, and in the end I can’t really defend my actions in this particular case.”

“But it’s not just about your actions in this particular case.” It’s Julien who speaks up now, and he looks very uncomfortable with the entire situation. “It’s that . . . look, Chris, I’ll be honest with you. We, all of us, are worried about the extent of influence this alpha has over you. And this is just . . . it’s like the equivalent of him saying jump and you saying ‘how high’.”

Stiles can’t help but snort with laughter. “None of you guys have been around the many, many times Chris has told me what a fucking idiot I am.”

“How do you attend the conclave undercover – ” Mikael starts.

“Was a mistake,” Stiles says, and nods briskly. “I never should have asked. I should have known my real identity would come out eventually and cause this sort of trouble.” He looks at Chris and says, “Sorry.” To the others, he adds, “But you have to understand, the reason Chris does this sort of shit isn’t because I’m the alpha. It’s because I’m a dumb teenager. It’s like letting your kid host a party. That way, at least you know where they’ll be. Chris likes to keep me under his nose so he knows what the fuck I’m up to, because let’s face it, I’m pretty much always up to something.”

Julien cracks a bit of a smile at this despite himself.

Mikael still doesn’t seem impressed. “Even so, the way you spoke to the elders earlier – ”

“Had nothing to do with Chris. And his reaction had nothing to do with me. We were both righteously, separately pissed off at the fact that they brought a monster to town and let it go in the forest.” He shakes his head a little. “Guys, we work together for the greater good. But this ‘influence’ stuff is crap. Trust me on that. I have never known anyone with the principles and the backbone of Chris Argent, and I can envision no situation in which he wouldn’t tell me to take a long walk off a short pier if he thought I was the one in the wrong.”

After a moment, Julien nods. He looks at Chris and says, “I’m sorry. It’s just – ”

“You had to know,” Chris says. “I would have done the same.” He looks at Mikael. “Are we good?”

“I . . . will continue to observe,” Mikael says.

“Good enough,” Stiles says, and Chris nods. Stiles glances at his watch and says, “Well, now that we’ve delivered the twins home to you safe and sound, we’ll be going. It’s getting late, and I think we could all use some sleep.”

Mikael nods at this. He thanks Victoria and Chris for the use of their first aid kit, and then looks at his children. He hesitates for a moment, and then says, “Before we go, Jonas, Annika. Do you have anything to say to the people who saved your lives?”
Jonas’ cheeks flush bright pink. Annika studies the floor. She gets it over with first, murmuring a quick, “Thank you.” Jonas is a harder nut to crack. He glares for a minute before finally biting the words out and then heading towards the door with all due speed.

Mikael grabs him by the wrist. “That’s not all you have to say,” he says, his voice firm and unyielding. “Apologize to Stiles for lying to us and trying to blame your injuries on him.”

“Dad – ” Jonas protests.

“Now!” Mikael snaps.

Jonas goes from pink to red, but he swallows hard and says, “I . . . I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Apology accepted,” Stiles says, because he thinks Mikael might smack him if he says anything else.

Mikael gives them both a nod. “Now shake hands like gentlemen,” he says.

Stiles extends his hand. Jonas takes it reluctantly, squeezes it harder than he needs to, and then drops it as if it’s burned him. He flees the room without another word, dragging Annika behind him.

Mikael frowns after them, then turns and addresses the others, making sure to include Stiles as much as the other adults. “I apologize for his behavior. I’ll be sure to speak with him.” With that, he turns and heads in the same direction. They hear the front door open and close behind them.

Stiles just shakes his head a little. “On that cheerful note, I think we’re going to head home, too. Sorry about all the fuss. Or at least about all the fuss that’s actually been my fault.” He reaches out and laces his fingers through Derek’s. “C’mon, guys, let’s bounce.”

Jake fidgets a little, not sure if he’s supposed to stay or to go with Stiles. He starts to slip Derek’s oversized jacket off, but Derek reaches out and puts it back on his shoulders. “We’ll take him with us.”

Chris just looks tired. “Stiles . . .”

Stiles considers for a moment, then turns to Julien. “Okay. I’m going to clear this with you, since you guys are worried that Chris is ‘influenced’. Jake is coming with us. We’re not going to adopt him into our pack. I solemnly swear that to you. I would never do that with the rest of my pack out of town. But I think he could benefit from spending time with people who are not horrible to him. And I’m willing to give all of you guys the benefit of the doubt because you don’t actually interact with your cousins on a day-to-day basis, so you probably didn’t know, but Jake’s parents? They are awful. And I don’t mean to let Jake out of my sight until I’ve managed to convince him of that fact.”

The others glance at each other. Sam can’t help but agree. He could tell his parents about the texts, or the contact lenses, or how low Jake’s self-esteem seemed to be in general, but that would just embarrass him. “I’ll stay with him again, if you want,” he offers.

Julien gives a little sigh. “Okay,” he says. “I guess you’ve got a point. But . . . seriously, do you know where his parents are?”

Stiles gives a little shrug. He doesn’t want to lie, and he knows that Allison has already told Chris where they are. If the other adults somehow find out that Chris knew and withheld the information, that will only cement the impression that he’s been compromised. He turns to Derek. "Did Allison send you the photo?" he asks, since his own phone is in Peter's pocket, and Derek nods and pulls up the photo of the two Argents in the pit. Jake lets out a muffled squeak. “Whole, unharmed,” he says,
“but they tried to break onto our property and were caught in one of our traps. And that’s where they’re going to stay for a little while.”

Sam looks at the photo and then up at Stiles and Derek. “You have . . . a tiger pit?” he asks, and Derek smiles that same obnoxious smile that he gave them all that first night from behind the fence.

“You have to understand, I never actually expected anyone to fall in it,” Stiles says, biting back laughter.

Chris frowns. “That’s a lie.”

Stiles’ grin widens. “ ‘Don’t put in a tiger pit, Stiles,’” he says in a voice somewhat deeper and rougher than his own. “ ‘No one’s going to fall for that, Stiles.’”

Chris rubs a hand over his face. “I’m kind of ashamed they’re related to me. Now get out of my house.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Stiles draws himself up for a salute. Then he sobers up a little and says, “Thanks. I’ll keep you posted.” He turns to leave, letting Derek loop an arm around his waist as he goes. Jake ducks his head a little nervously but follows along with Sam right behind him. Stiles’ Jeep is still parked where he had left it much earlier that day, before the scavenger hunt, so they all get in.

“Okay,” Derek says, as soon as they’re on the road, “what are you up to?”

“Derek!” Stiles exclaims. “I’m hurt! Why do you always think I’m up to something?”

Derek just turns a look on him and says, “Because I’ve met you.”

Stiles smirks at him. “I remember when you wouldn’t say two words to me voluntarily. When your idea of a conversation with me was to try to glare me into submission.”

“That was before I realized you’re selectively blind and so my glares have no impact, and compliance comes easier with bribes of small kitchen appliances.”

“Fine, be that way,” Stiles says. “Maybe I won’t tell you where the fear factor monster is.”

Derek just raises his eyebrows at him.

“Oh my God, guys!” Jake says, pounding on the back of Derek’s seat. “Stop trying to one-up each other and just tell us!”

“Seriously, y’all are like old ladies,” Sam agrees.

Stiles can’t help but laugh. “Okay. In the tussle with Peter, I slipped my phone into his pocket.”

“Using his own trick against him,” Derek says approvingly. “Well played.”

Sam sighs. “Stop forgetting that we don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I actually was going to explain,” Stiles says. “We all have GPS tracking on our phones, and can log in to see where they are. It’s actually . . . back when real Peter was still alive and was the alpha, he kidnapped me once and forced me to access Scott’s GPS tracking information because long story, a lot was going on. So that’s what Derek means. Anyway, once I get back to the den, where I have my laptop, I can see where this thing is hiding out.”

“And then what?” Derek asks.
“Not sure yet,” Stiles says. “If it’s relatively stationary and therefore not causing immediate trouble, my impulse is to let it go for tonight. It’s late, we’re all tired, we need some sleep. If it’s on the move . . . we’ll wait and see where it goes and decide from there.”

Derek nods and slouches in his seat, clearly expressing his opinion that it had better not be on the move. From the back, Sam asks, “What do you plan to do with Jake’s parents?”

Stiles sighs and pushes a hand through his hair. “Tonight? Nothing. They’ll get some food and some water and we’ll keep an eye on them. It’s warm out. Sleeping outside won’t kill them.”

“No, but they might kill me,” Jake mutters.

Stiles pulls off the main road onto the dirt road that leads to the new house. He comes to a stop and then turns in his seat to look at the younger teenager. “Jake, do you actually want to go home with your parents at the end of this conclave?”

“What?” Jake jerks up in his seat, suddenly tense. “You can’t just ask me that!”

“Why not?” Stiles replies. “You don’t have to answer right now. You can think about it. But the offer was serious. You can stay here, if you like. Even if you don’t want to be a part of the pack, I’m pretty sure Chris and Victoria would take you in.”

Jake slumps back into his seat. “Why would they want me any more than my parents do?”

“Do you know,” Stiles says casually, “that Allison actually gave up archery when she was about ten? She got bored with it. And her parents said, ‘okay, you should do what you want to do’. She didn’t pick it up again until she moved to Beacon Hills. So if they were fine with her not wanting to be a hunter, I think they would be fine with you.”


“But . . . she’s like supposed to take over the family and everything,” Jake says, like he doesn’t quite believe it. “They were just okay with her stopping?”

“I think Chris intended to introduce her to all of it when the time was right,” Stiles says, “but yeah, I think they would have been okay if she’d decided to walk away with the whole thing. Because they really love her. Her happiness is the most important thing to them.” He starts the car again. “Just think about it, Jake. Okay? If you want to go home, I won’t stop you, but I will . . . let’s say I’ll have a strongly worded discussion with your parents about why they should treat you better.”

Jake nods a little. “I’ll, uh, think about it.”

“Okey dokey.” Stiles hits the remote to disarm the fence and open the panel to let the Jeep through. He parks the car and closes the gate, then rubs a hand over his face. A quick glance over at the fence and he sees Erica keeping watch over the pit. “Derek, why don’t you take our guests inside and I’ll go check in with Erica?” he says. He doesn’t want Jake anywhere near his parents right now. If he gets his way, the kid won’t have to see them again at all unless he actually wants to.

Derek nods and waves for the other two to follow him. Once inside, he takes a moment to just breathe in the scent of home. Then he leads Sam and Jake farther inside to where Allison and Scott are curled up on the L-shaped sofa together. Wednesday’s sitting on the shorter arm of the L, looking comfortable and leafing through one of their reference books, which collect around Stiles like lint. “Stiles is checking in with Erica,” he says. He leans in to give both of them a hug and rub cheeks, even Scott, and doesn’t bother trying to hide it under the veneer of something polite, human, or manly. The day has sucked and he needs the reassurance of pack right now. After a long moment, he
moves back and away. “We brought Jake and Sam with us,” he says, and then falls awkwardly silent. His social skills are starting to run thin.

Allison smiles up at her two cousins. “I’m glad you came back,” she said. She hesitates a little, then says, “I know it’s kinda late, but are you guys hungry? Dinner was a while ago, but there’s always food around here.”

“I’m actually starved,” Sam admits.

“Food it is, then.” Scott gets to his feet. “I’m pretty useless in the kitchen for anything except using the microwave,” he admits, “and Stiles has a vendetta against unhealthy food, so uh, you may wind up with sandwiches. Or you can wait for him to come inside and work his kitchen magic.”

“Are there still cookies?” Jake asks. “You know, while we wait? Or . . . with the sandwiches?”

Amused, Allison says, “There are a few left.” She frowns a little and then says, “Hey, it just occurred to me to ask . . . where’s Veruca?”

“Who?” Sam asks blankly.

“Ugh, I’m reduced to using Stiles’ cute little nicknames,” Allison says. She glances at Wednesday and says, “You know, your partner on the scavenger hunt.”

“Sally Stoddard,” Wednesday replies. “Inheritor of the Stoddard family hunting mantle, and a vain, spoiled little bitch. I ditched her half an hour into the scavenger hunt because she was whining about how her allergies were kicking up. I think she went back to the hotel.”

Allison rolls her eyes, then says, “Hey, do you guys want to see the house? We could eat the cookies and I’ll show you around while we wait for Stiles.”

“Are you going to try to convince us that it isn’t an art gallery?” Sam asks.

“It’s not that well-organized,” Derek mutters, retrieving the tin in which Stiles usually keeps the cookies.

“Trust me, parts of it are definitely not an art gallery,” Scott says, laughing. He starts counting places off on his fingers. “I mean, there’s the greenhouse, and then Stiles’ library-slash-research-room, and the entertainment center of doom, and you guys saw the armory already . . .”

Jake heaves a sigh of relief. “I was afraid you guys were some of those weird anti-TV people.”

“How big is this place?” Sam asks in a sort of wonder.

Scott lets out a snort of laughter at Jake’s statement as Derek starts handing out the cookies. Then, to Sam, he says, “Well, it started out as a little place just for Derek. Then Stiles got involved. And, uh, you’ve sort of seen the way things typically go when Stiles gets involved. They don’t stay small.”

Derek makes a sour face. “He commandeered my house,” he says, and thumps the cookie tin back down onto the counter. “And stole my kitchen.”

Sam tries not to laugh. Allison doesn’t bother. “You let him,” she says. “C’mon, guys. Tour time! So, this is the living room or general ‘let’s hang out together’ room. Dining room is over that way, really kinda boring, table and chairs and stuff. Over there,” she gestures to a set of double doors, “is Derek’s studio and he will kill me if I let anyone in there.”

“Oh, God, he’s kidding, right?” Jake blurts out. “Please tell me he’s kidding.”

“Sort of?” Allison says. “Yeah, he’s kidding. But seriously, we don’t look at his half-finished work. That would just be rude. This stuff,” she adds, gesturing to the art littering the house, “is just weird. But if he left it out, it’s okay to look at.” She assumes. Derek seems to be hoarding his words. The separation from the rest of the pack clearly hadn’t been good for him. At the moment, he’s staring out the window as if something outside is fascinating.

“And moving on!” Scott directs, waving them down the hall. “Okay. Entertainment room of doom,” he says, pointing through the first door. Inside are two separate sofas with a generous helping of cushions and bean bag chairs in front of them. There’s a gigantic TV and at least three separate video game systems hooked up. The entire wall opposite the door is shelves full of DVDs, CDs, and game cartridges.

Jake swallows. “I . . . I think I need a minute alone with this room.”

“A moment’s not gonna cut it,” Scott says with a snort. “Isaac, Danny and I practically lived in here for the first week after the house was built.”

“We still had to pry you out with a combination of threats and bribery,” Allison remarks, and Sam laughs.

Derek peers at Jake, who’s moved into the room. “Is he . . . petting one of the consoles?”

“Mom and Dad think video games will rot my brain,” Jake says dreamily, giving the Playstation 3 one final, wistful pat as he stands back up. “I think they were just mad because I was actually pretty good at first-person shooter games, which they took as evidence that I could be good at other stuff if I put my mind to it.” He stands up and changes the subject. “Isaac and Danny are other pack members?”

Scott nods. “Yeah, there’s nine of us total. Besides those two, there’s Lydia and Boyd. That’s everyone.”

Jake looks over at Allison. “Are any of the others human besides you and Stiles?”

Allison shakes her head and then shrugs. “No. But getting the bite, being changed, isn’t a requirement or anything. Stiles told the others when we were building the pack that they didn’t have to if they didn’t want to.”

“Okay,” Jake says.

Scott gestures for them to follow him. “Okay, so this is the study,” he says, leading them into the room across the hall. This room is the messiest they’ve seen so far. There are several tables covered in books and papers. Most of the chairs are wooden, but there are two comfortable armchairs as well. “Basically, we figured we’d better have a quiet room or we would never do our homework. And Stiles comes in here when he needs to research things like, well, where to buy material for electric fences or how to build tiger pits or whatever tangent he’s on at any given moment.”

“Like the entire history of the drinking straw,” Allison says.

“What happened to WD1 through WD39,” Derek adds.

Sam looks back and forth between them. “You’re serious, aren’t you.”
“Oh, yeah,” Derek says. He glances up, as does Scott, at the noise of the front door. “That’ll be him,” Derek says, relieved at the chance to leave the tour group and be antisocial again. “I’ll go tell him to make us something to eat,” he adds, and leaves the room.

Scott rolls his eyes a little at Derek’s hasty exit. “C’mon, guys. You’ve seen the armory already, so . . . next up would be the training room, I guess.” He leads the to the room at the end of the hall, which is one of the larger ones. The walls and part of the floor are lightly padded. There isn’t any exercise equipment, but there are some bars and pegs for pull-ups or climbing. “We do a lot of our physical stuff outside, but when the weather’s bad we’ll work out in here.”

Sam looks at Allison. “Cuddles or violence?”

Allison looks a little embarrassed, then bites her lip and tucks her hair behind one ear when Scott turns to look at her. “My temper was a little . . .” She measures it for Scott, holding her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. Then she gives Sam a bright smile. “But I’m really much better now that part of my pack is back, especially my mate, and the twins aren’t being allowed to tread on my last nerve while on our territory!”

“Uh huh,” Sam says. He looks kind of amused, and shakes his head at her. “They really are awful.”

“Noooo kidding,” Jake says under his breath. Then he looks nervously at the room and says, “I can’t, uh, I mean . . . I’m not very good at this kind of thing.”

Scott shrugs a little. “You can’t be any worse than Stiles was at the beginning. He and his limbs don’t always talk to each other. I’ve been there when he’s just flat out fallen out of chairs with no provocation. We all have to learn self-defense, like real self-defense, but not everyone is made to be a fighter. Lydia hates it and Boyd would rather be reading. So you don’t need to learn any more than the basics.”

“It’s hard to believe that about Stiles,” Sam says, arching his eyebrows. “He’s not that strong, but son-of-a-bitch can move.”

“Chairs,” Scott repeats.

“It’s totally true,” Allison agrees. “I was with him when Gerard started training him, and after that it’s all been Derek and I. The two of us do all the combat training for the pack. And Stiles is still kind of flaily.”

“If you say so,” Sam says, shaking his head.

Scott just laughs and gestures for them to follow. The end of the hallway has a spiral staircase that he goes up. “Okay, so, there’s actually not a lot interesting up here. I mean, the pack typically shares a bedroom while they’re here. Allison and I have a separate bedroom ‘cause, uh, ‘cause we do, and there’s a guest bedroom just in case, I don’t know, anyone ever comes to visit us or anything, or Isaac gets tired of Stiles kicking in his sleep or Lydia needs to spend time alone with the complete works of Shakespeare or whatever she does when no one’s looking.” He pushes open a door that’s already mostly ajar to reveal the master bedroom, which is the largest room in the house except for the living room downstairs. There’s a perimeter about two feet wide before several steps down into what basically looks like a pit filled with blankets and cushions. A door leads to a walk-in closet on the other side of the room, and there isn’t much other furniture.

Jake and Sam both give this the side-eye. It’s Sam that finally says something. “You all sleep together.”
“Yeah,” Scott says, with a shrug. “It’s a pack thing.”

Allison takes pity on them, seeing their expressions. “I know it seems weird, at least from the outside. But once you’re actually part of the pack, it’s not. It’s comforting. Relaxing. It brings a feeling of safety. Those stupid seminars make it seem like being in a pack is all about power, but that’s not the way it works, not in a healthy pack. The power is just a safety net to protect your family.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Sam says, although he still sounds a little dubious.

“It’s hard to explain to anyone who isn’t pack,” Scott says. “Just like the whole thing with Stiles and Derek . . . if you aren’t in a pack you’ll just never really be able to understand what that connection is like.” He perks up and adds, “Speaking of Stiles, we should wrap this up. He’s cooking bacon.”

“Is he making breakfast?” Allison asks, and Scott nods, leading the way back down.

Stiles is indeed in the kitchen. He’s got two skillets on the stove. One of them has a large portion of scrambled eggs; in the second, he’s flipping French toast. His laptop is on the counter on the other side of the stove, displaying a GPS grid with a red dot on it that he’s keeping half an eye on. The computer is also playing Led Zeppelin, and Stiles is singing along and occasionally playing air guitar. Derek is sitting in his normal spot on the counter. He has one foot tucked up under the knee of his other leg and a sketchbook open on his thigh, held steady with one hand. He’s holding two pens in his other hand, flipping back and forth between them. The foot that’s hanging down is nudging Stiles in the knee. Every now and then, he looks up to shake his head at Stiles, amused.

The teenager looks up as the group comes in. “Oh, hey guys,” he says. “Food’s gonna be another few minutes.”

There’s a round of nods. Sam gestures at the laptop and says, “So what’s going on with that?”

Stiles gives it a glance and reaches over to turn the music down before turning back to the eggs. “He’s hanging out in the preserve. Wandering a bit, but pretty aimlessly. He’s not going within five miles of anything we care about, so I’m content to let him ramble.”

Scott blinks. “You got a GPS on him? Exactly what happened on your half of the misadventure?”

“To make a long story short,” Stiles says, switching spatulas to flip the French toast, “the twins went out a-hunting, we tailed them until not!Peter showed up, saved their asses from him, whereupon I slipped my phone into his pocket. We took the twins back to their at least somewhat loving parents, cleared at least some air with the hunter families we actually give two shits about – sorry, Jake – and then came back here. As long as not!Peter doesn’t look like he’s going to get up to any mischief tonight, we’re going to get some sleep and tackle the problem in the morning when we’re fresh.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Happy weekend, everybody! I hope you enjoy! <3

“What’s the watch schedule for the Argents in the box?” Scott asks.

Stiles gives a sigh. “As much as I’d love to make the watch double duty, the cell phone jammer will stop the laptop from tracking the GPS. So one of us will have to stay up and do that, too. Fun night, huh?” He shakes his head and looks at the hunters. “Look, guys . . . I want to trust you. I really, truly do. And I trust you with this.” He points to the laptop. “I do not trust you with them.” He points to the window and by extension, the imprisoned Argents. “Does that strike you as fair?”

Wednesday nods. “That sounds acceptable,” she says, speaking before either Argent has a chance to venture an opinion. Sam gives a nod, and in fact seems a little relieved that he won’t be asked to guard the Argents.

“Okay then,” Stiles says. “You guys will take the fascinating chore of watching the red dot in two-hour shifts. Allison, you’ll be their fourth. I don’t want you out there with the Argents because they don’t need more ammunition against Chris. So the rest of the pack will take two-hour shifts on the Argents. Erica says she’s good out there until midnight. We’ll draw straws to decide the shifts.” The timer on the oven buzzes and he swings it open to bring out two trays of bacon. The smell makes all of them, humans included, start salivating. Stiles starts dishing things up. After a moment to consider, he takes out some plastic disposable plates. Two of them get a portion of scrambled eggs, a single piece of French toast, and two slices of bacon. A third plastic plate gets a more generous serving of everything, including enough syrup to attract an entire colony of ants. “Derek, could you take these out to Erica and her charges?”

“Sure.” Derek closes his sketchbook and slides to the floor. “Whatever shift you want, give me the one next to it,” he adds. It’s his way of saying that he’s just as likely as Stiles to wake up screaming tonight, if not more so, and he’s not sleeping without Stiles. He stacks the two dry plates in one hand and takes Erica’s in the other, then heads out of the kitchen.

Stiles shakes his head at him. “Does he even know what ‘drawing straws’ means?” he asks the open air, then holds out a stack of plates. “Have at, guys,” he says. He’s not particularly hungry himself. Personally, he has no intention of sleeping, and has already taken some Adderall to assist with this. He wonders if maybe he and Derek should just watch the Argents all night and not bother the others.

Scott snatches up a plate and a fork from the pile on the counter and watches everyone else do the same. In the end, there’s only one plate left for Derek, since Stiles didn’t get one for himself. He gives Stiles the side eye. He knows Stiles and his tricks with medication as well as how he deals with stress. “Do you?” he asks, with a snort.

Stiles just makes a face at him as the others dive into the food. “I have research to do anyway,” he says. “Keep your judginess to yourself.”
“You like my judginess or you wouldn’t have put up with it for over a decade.” Scott says, but then moves a little closer and speaks under his breath so the others won’t hear. “You two just take the watches after Erica, okay?”

Stiles gives a little nod. “Maybe I’ll be able to sleep after that,” he says, and gives a little shrug and turns to the coffee maker. Derek comes back inside and Stiles hands him a mug and a plate full of food. The others certainly have healthy appetites; Sam is already on his second plate.

Derek takes both, giving the coffee a look of blind adoration. “I don’t think I’ll want to,” he admits quietly.

Allison moves closer to the three of them in an instinctual offer of comfort, even as she watches Jake and Wednesday square off over the last slice of bacon on the tray. “There’s a second tray, you know.”

“Right,” Jake says, hastily redirecting his energy.

Stiles rolls his eyes at both of them, going over to his computer and tapping a few keys to see if he has any e-mail. He lets out a quiet snort a minute later. “Gwen didn’t appreciate me e-mailing her to ask if she knew of any creatures that could feed off people’s nightmares and then not giving her any details,” he says, more to Derek than anyone else.

Derek breaks into one of his sudden and short-lived bursts of laughter, nearly snorting his coffee in the process. “No, I can’t imagine she would tolerate that well at all.”

“She seems to be under the impression that I live to torment her,” Stiles says.

“If she believes that, she should probably have a conversation with Chris,” Derek replies, and then he has a moment with his coffee.

“Okay, so, who’s Gwen?” Jake asks, with his mouth full of eggs.

“She’s the woman I pay to listen to me bitch about my life,” Stiles says, and sees Jake’s blank look. He lets out a snort of laughter. “She’s my therapist. Yes, I have a therapist. I’m done being awkward about it. If you’d lived through what I have, you’d need one too.”

Sam is quiet for a moment before he decides it isn’t impolite to ask a question. “How do you manage to talk about things without giving away ‘werewolves’?”

Derek decides to field this question, shoving his plate at Stiles with the clear implication that Stiles is to eat at least some of what’s on it. “She’s in the know. You can find someone in most professions that require discretion who has supernatural ties if you ask around and network. You think my lawyer doesn’t know who and what my family was? What I am?”

“I guess I’d never thought about it,” Sam admits.

“Typical hunter arrogances,” Stiles says, but he’s obviously joking, pushing a piece of French toast around on the plate, trying to get it to absorb as much syrup as is humanly possible.

“It’s because you don’t need to,” Derek says with a shrug. “Why would you notice a good pack?”

Sam shakes his head a little. “Even for someone who’s always been taught the Code, the idea of werewolves not causing trouble, just living normal lives . . . is a little weird to me. This whole place is just weird. Sorry if that’s offensive, but it is.”
Stiles just shrugs a little. In an effort to change the subject, he starts clearing the empty dishes, watching Jake as he yawns and rubs at his eyes. “Wow, you weren’t kidding about your contacts. Your eyes are really red.”

“I can’t wait to take them out,” Jake glumly admits. “I would’ve taken them out a while ago, but, well . . . anyway, Mom says I must be putting them in wrong or my hands must always be dirty or something.”

“Mm,” Stiles says, noncommittal. “Well, you may as well go take them out, since I assume you guys will probably want to crash as soon as you’re done eating.”

Sam nods. “Jake and I will take the sofas. Lucy can have the guest room.”

Wednesday gives him something of a death glare for the use of her real name.

“I’ll take the sofa in the TV room!” Jake says eagerly.

“Sleeping,” Sam says forcefully. “We are sleeping.”

“Right!” Jake says. “I’m going to go take my contacts out,” he says, and bounces to his feet. Stiles gives a little snort of amusement and turns back to his computer, typing away.

Scott looks over Stiles’ shoulder to see the page of Google results titled ‘contact lens irritation’. “Huh,” he says. “Don’t forget to eat,” he adds, then moves on to rinse off his plate and put it in the dishwasher. Then he starts to reach for the next plate.

Derek turns and gives him a look. “Erica has dish duty,” he reminds the teenager.

“But . . .” Scott protests, with a guilty look on his face. He clearly feels bad about having somehow escaped punishment. Derek just raises his eyebrows, so Scott slumps out of the kitchen. Derek considers this a win. Scott’s moral compass will give him all the punishment he can get in the next week or so as he watches Erica suffer. Erica is likely to heap on extra punishment as well.

Stiles glances down to check the time on his computer. “Tell you what, screw this whole watch schedule,” he says. “Let’s go get Erica so she can do the dishes. When we’re tired, we’ll come in and wake Scott to take over for us. Deal?”

Derek pours them both another mug of coffee and hands Stiles his. “After you.”

Stiles accepts it and says to Sam and Wednesday, “Scott and Allison will take good care of you, but let me know if you need anything, and if it looks like not!Peter is going to leave the preserve or go anywhere near the Argent place, come get me. Better safe than sorry.” They readily agree to this, so Stiles leads out the front door and back over to where Erica is seated at the pit, her feet dangling over the side. She’s painting her nails in the dim light. “Hey, you, we’re gonna take over so you can go inside and scrape syrup off of dishes,” Stiles tells her.

Erica wrinkles her nose but doesn’t protest her punishment. “They’ve been pretty quiet. Though that may be because I threatened to pour my maple syrup on them for the ants to find come daylight.” She gives them her usual wicked smile. “I’ll leave my plate.”

Both of them shake their heads fondly as Erica gets to her feet and saunters back in the direction of the house. Stiles swipes his finger across her syrupy plate and then licks it off. His laptop is inside and his phone is in not!Peter’s pocket. He could use Derek’s phone, but the jammer has a range of about fifty feet, so he’d have to back off first. So instead he looks down into the pit. Both of Jake’s parents are still there. Henry and . . . Rose, he recalls, which somehow seems an inappropriately
pretty name for such a horrible woman. “Hey. Henry. Cruella deVille. How’re you two doing down in there?”

“You can’t hold us here!” Henry shouts up with righteous indignation. “This is kidnapping!”

Derek rests an elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. “This is their favorite fallback, isn’t it.”

Stiles gives a snort of laughter. “Actually,” he says, “you’ll find that I can. And in fact that I am. Holding you here, I mean. I could, for example, claim I’m making a citizen’s arrest after I found you breaking onto my property and call the sheriff to come have you arrested. Which would all be very legal and aboveboard. Perhaps I’ll even do that . . . if some conditions are met.”

“A citizen’s arrest.” Henry seems to find this amusing.

“Conditions?” Cruella snaps. But she’s clearly sick of being down there and at least willing to hear Stiles out. “What conditions?”

Stiles licks another bit of syrup off his finger. “Did you know,” he says, “that the most common cause of contact lens irritation is simply that the lenses don’t fit right? It’s easily correctable by getting new lenses, and a quick visit to the optometrist to take measurements and such.”

“What,” Henry says, puzzled by the apparent non sequitur.

“It took me less than forty-five seconds on Google to figure out the most likely reason Jake hates wearing his contact lenses,” Stiles says, still in a conversational tone. “You couldn’t even invest less than a minute of your time on him. Instead, you chose to assume he’s a baby or a whiner or his hands are dirty or, I don’t know, maybe he was just trying to spite you. I’m really not sure. I think the narcissism and inadequacy of some people will always be beyond my understanding.”

“I don’t see how we raise our son is any business of yours,” Cruella sneers at them.

“Especially given that you’re just a kid yourself,” Henry adds, “and you’ve all but given up your claim to humanity anyway.”

Stiles just rolls his eyes. He can’t help it. “Okay, I’m not even going to dignify that with a response because I have no particular interest in banging my head against a wall. However you guys want to look at it.” He shakes his head and says, “Derek, I’ll keep an eye on them for a minute. Can you go call your lawyer pal – or I guess you should e-mail him, it’s late – asking him to draw up a set of papers that will transfer the custody of one Jake Argent from his biological parents to their cousin, Chris? If we could get it tomorrow, that would be super.”

Derek nods and leans over the edge of the pit. “What’s Jake’s full name? And your name, lady?”

“I won’t tell you any such thing!” she snaps.

“Jake’s name,” Stiles says, “is Jacques Francis Argent – really, guys? – and his parents are Henry Jacques Argent and Rose Phillipa Argent. He was born on August seventeenth in 1996, in Chicago Illinois.” He smiles down at them and says, “I have the internet. That kind of stuff is public record. So don’t trouble yourselves.”

Derek smiles down at them and it’s all teeth. They’re blunt like a human’s, but it can’t be mistaken for anything besides a wolf grin. “We’ll have the papers tomorrow. You know Keith likes us.”

Stiles lets out a snort. “God knows you pay him enough.”
Henry folds his arms over his chest and says, “We’re not going to sign any such papers.”

“Really?” Stiles lets out a sigh. “You’re really going to push me on this? Let’s be frank here because it’s just us. You don’t even like the kid. He’s a disappointment to you. I hear he has a younger brother who’s better at all the hunter stuff than he is. You treat him like an embarrassment. You want to be embarrassed? If you push me, I will have you arrested for child abuse and even if I can’t prove anything, that will sure as hell be embarrassing.”

With a disbelieving snort, Henry says, “Why would Chris want to add another embarrassment on top of the one he already has to put up with?”

Stiles blinks down at him. “Oh. I see. You want to do this the hard way.” He stares out into space for a minute, and then gives a little nod. “Okay. You’re not leaving that pit until you sign those papers. And don’t even think ‘people will come looking for me’. Sure they will. I’ll just knock you out, cover the pit, and let them search the property. No problem. Nobody knows you’re down there.”

This is a lie, but they don’t know that, and Stiles tells it without compunction. “Every day, you will get less food and water. Every day, your new home will start to stink a little more. Every day, it’ll be a little warmer, because hey, it’s only midsummer right now. And eventually, if you push me far enough, you will die as a result of your stubbornness and we will get custody of Jake by default, whereupon I will dispose of your bodies using the methods that you and your friends so thoughtfully taught me earlier this week. I’m sort of interested, actually – Cruella, if he dies first, would you eat his body to stay alive? I hear about that in movies and stuff but it’s got a definite yuck factor to it. Is that just me?”

When the Argents seem struck speechless, Derek offers, “I wouldn’t. I mean, he’d be nothing but skin and bones by then, and given the heat, he’d likely go bad really fast. But that’s just me,” he adds with a shrug. He can smell their fear, and he knows that they’ll eventually give in, but reminding them of the nitty gritty details of their possible demise can hardly hurt.

“You wouldn’t,” Henry finally says. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Well, that’s the sweetest part of this plan,” Stiles says. “I wouldn’t actually have to do anything. I would just have to go about my business and do . . . nothing. You got yourselves into this. You can get yourselves out of it.”

“While we’re on the topic of things you’ve gotten yourselves into,” Derek says, his tone mockingly casual as he moves forward a bit to dangle bare feet over the edge of the pit, “why were you trying to break into my yard and presumably my house?”

“To look for Jake, of course,” Cruella snaps. “You had left with him and we figured you had brought him back here.”

“Why did you want him back so badly?” Derek asks, genuinely confused. “You don’t even like him. I don’t understand.”

“For the same reason they won’t just sign the damned papers,” Stiles says with a shrug, when it becomes clear that the Argents aren’t going to answer. “Because what would the others think when they find out the child they raised is consorting with werewolves?”

Derek shakes his head. “I really wish it surprised me that you’re this awful.”

Henry scowls up at him. “I don’t care what you think. I’m not signing anything.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, “now we get to the fun part. The part where I show you what I learned from
real law enforcement officers. You know what they do when they have two accomplices who committed a crime but they don’t have proof? They put them in separate rooms, tell them they do have proof, and see which one rolls on the other first.”

“I think it works better if you don’t tell them about it,” Henry sneers at him.

“So how about we throw in a special bonus?” Stiles proposes. “Whichever one of you signs the papers first, I promise that it’s the other person I will tell the hunters gave permission for their son to be given to a werewolf pack.”

Derek laughs at that. “Stiles, you’re the best.”

“I’m the worst,” Stiles corrects with a grin. “And don’t even think I won’t do it. Because remember, the conclave at large still doesn’t know who I am. I will totally walk right in there and say, ‘oh my God, did you hear about that Jake Argent kid? He was so upset about being humiliated at the tournament that he ran off and joined the local pack! And his dad actually let him do it!’ Or Mom. You know. Depending.”

“Allison will help,” Derek says. “So will Chris and Victoria once they find out what you think of their daughter.”

The Argents sit in stony silence.

Stiles huffs. “Man, this is gonna be a long watch. I’m going to back fifty feet away and let you watch them so I can follow up on some of the e-mails I’ve gotten back. Cool?” he says, and Derek nods. He uses Derek’s phone – the screen is a little small, but he can manage. He’s gotten a couple e-mails back: one from Deaton and one from Justin.

Deaton hasn’t heard of the creature specifically, but includes some good links to online bestiaries that can be relied on. Justin says that both Mei and Ravinder have heard of similar types of monsters. Both of them have a name for it in their own language, which Stiles notes down. But they’re very slightly different – the Chinese version of the myth can appear as multiple things at the same time, and the Indian version isn’t actually tangible, so neither of them fit quite right.

Stiles is beginning to come to the conclusion that this is the kind of monster that no one really knows a lot about, which would make sense, given that it changes so often. He’s going to have to gather information based on what he’s seen and what he knows of this particular monster. It might be a while before he has concrete data to work with. What he’d really like to know is how to kill it. If they can get it to change into a less durable shape than an alpha werewolf – Kate Argent, for instance – and administer a wound that would be fatal to that shape, will it be killed? Or will it just shift into something that could endure? He chews on his lower lip as he ponders all this.

Minutes trickle by and turn into hours. He and Derek take turns sitting by the edge of the pit while the other sits far enough away to play on the phone. The Argents fall asleep around one o’clock in the morning, despite their best efforts. The sky is starting to lighten before Stiles finally, grudgingly, decides it’s time to go in. Scott wakes up amiable enough and shambles outside to take his watch. Wednesday is currently staring at the red dot on the laptop monitor. She says that he wandered close to the old Hale house for a while but then went back to the corner of the woods it had taken up residence in.

Stiles rubs both hands over his face and decides he’ll have to risk waking the others with his nightmares. “I’m gonna lie down for a bit,” he says, and Derek nods. He obviously doesn’t intend to let Stiles out of his sight, for which Stiles cannot blame him. To Wednesday, he says, “Can you tell Allison or Scott or whoever to wake us when they get up?”
“Sure,” she says.

They trudge up the stairs to find Erica and Allison both sprawled out in amongst the cushions. Stiles toes his shoes off, strips out of his jeans, and flops onto the bed. Derek shifts and curls up beside him a moment later. He falls into a deep sleep and doesn’t even wake when the others get up for the day. In fact, he doesn’t wake until the sun slants into the room and hits him in the eyes. He flounders for a minute before hauling himself up and untangling himself from the blankets. He checks his watch and sees that it’s half past ten.

When he gets up, Derek opens one eye and grumbles. “Up and at ‘em,” Stiles says. “We already overslept.”

Derek heaves a sigh and shifts back to his human form. He pulls on his jeans and a new T-shirt. Stiles puts back on the same pair of jeans as the day before. He needs a shower. He’s still covered in dirt and smells like smoke. He decides to get some coffee first. Allison has, of course, started the coffee maker. It’s a sacred duty of whoever gets up first.

“You were supposed to wake us,” Stiles says.

“Mm hm,” Allison replies.

Stiles grumbles and goes for a cup of coffee and some leftover cookies.

“Wait, I’m confused again,” Jake says. “Why do you punish them for disobeying sometimes but not other times?”

Stiles heaves a sigh. “Orders that often go directly against my own well-being, like, ‘wake me up at such-and-such time’ when I really need my sleep are pretty often disobeyed.” He takes a big swallow of the coffee. “The role of the alpha is to protect the pack, and the role of the pack is to protect the alpha. It can be pretty difficult to get them to go against their instincts. Sometimes, it’s just not worth it.” Another swallow. “Especially when they’re right. Have you guys eaten?”

“Yeah, we had some sandwiches,” Allison says. “Scott’s watching the Argents. They’re up and they’ve had sandwiches and they won’t say a word to any of us. Or to each other, if they think we’re listening.”

“Okay. What about not Peter?”

“Hasn’t moved in hours,” Sam says. “We think he probably found a nook or cranny to get some sleep in. Presuming this thing needs to sleep.”

“Good enough,” Stiles says. He drains his mug of coffee and says, “I’m going to go take a shower. I stink to high Heaven. Then we’ll go track down this thing and see what we can do with it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Allison says with a nod.

Stiles gives them a wave and heads upstairs. The bathroom in the master bedroom is big, almost the size of his bedroom at home. Derek designed it that way because he knows Stiles hates being in an enclosed space. The shower and bathtub are separate, and the shower is one of the open Japanese models that doesn’t even need a shower curtain and has a drain in the floor. The toilet area has a privacy screen and a door that can be shut, but usually isn’t. Stiles didn’t ask for any of this; Derek just put it in the designs without saying a word.

He turns the water cold for the first few minutes, knowing that will wake him up, which it definitely does. Then he turns it hot so he can give his hair a quick wash and scrub the grime off his skin. It
feels good, and he has to resist the definite urge to wallow in it. There are things that need to be done. He gets out about five minutes later, feeling clean and perky. He rubs his hair dry with a towel quickly, then decides to let himself air dry while he shaves. He grabs his razor. The mirror is coated with steam, so he reaches out with one hand to wipe a swath of it clear.

Someone is standing behind him.

The figure is a little blurry in the steam, and for a moment Stiles thinks maybe Derek has come in to check on him, but no, he’s not tall enough to be Derek, doesn’t have the stubble. He barely has time to recognize the figure as Peter Hale before one hand cups the side of his head and slams it into the wall, and everything goes black.
Okay, guys, because you’re the best fans and readers ever, I didn’t want to leave you on that terrible cliffhanger for too long...

plus I just love this chapter. Hurt!Stiles for the win.... I’m the worst sort of person....

Derek pauses as he goes to pour himself another mug of coffee. It strikes him that the amount of coffee left in the pot is a little odd. Stiles should have drunk at least a mug or two by now. He glances up at the ceiling. The water has been turned off for a while now. He puts the coffee pot down, his mug still empty. He can feel worry starting to creep down his spine, making his fur stand on end. “Is it me, or is Stiles taking too long?”

“You know Stiles,” Erica says, with a yawn. “He probably stopped to reorganize all the bathroom supplies by chemical content again.”

“Seriously?” Sam says, eyebrows going up.

“What?” Scott says, a little defensively. He’s just come back in from Argent watch, leaving Allison to take his place. “He has ADD.”

Derek shakes his head, his anxiety level climbing. “No. Not now. I mean, normally I’d agree with you, and everyone besides him and Lydia would need a periodic table to find things, but not while there’s a monster on the loose and things we need to deal with.”

“Then let’s go see where he’s at,” Erica says, hopping to her feet. “And if he’s making us worry for no reason, I’ll kick the shit out of him,” she adds, jogging towards the staircase at the back of the house. Derek and Scott both follow her. “Yo, super stud!” she calls out as she goes into the bedroom. “Your adoring public awaits!”

She shoves open the bathroom door. Steam rolls out in a small cloud. But the room is empty.

Derek makes a noise like someone had just kicked him in the balls with steel-toed boots. He shoulders past Erica and wrenches the window open to clean the steam out faster. His nose is already in the air, but mostly he just smells Stiles and soap, and some other things he would expect, like the dirt Stiles was washing off and the other pack members. But mostly, it’s just Stiles, which makes things all the worse.

“Look,” Scott says, his tone a little flat. He touches the wall right next to the bathroom sink. There’s a few tiny streaks of blood on it. The plaster of the wall is actually dinged a little.

The others crowd in to look and Derek feels his knees start to give way. “Oh my God,” he breathes out. Erica catches him on the way down so he doesn’t just collapse. “I felt it happen. There was – he felt surprised. But it went away. It was so quick. I thought he had just tripped or something.”

Scott shoves his way over to the window. The bathroom is on the second floor, but that would be an easy jump for a werewolf. Without bothering to warn the others of his plan, he jumps, landing in an easy crouch on the ground. He takes a deep breath, inhaling through his nose. Soap, Stiles, and a
smell that’s sort of like Peter Hale but sort of not. “They came this way,” he calls up to the others.

Erica pulls away from Derek, who by now is curled up with his back pressed against the sink cabinet, his knees pulled up to his chest, his breath coming harsh and rapid. “That’s great, but I think Derek’s having a panic attack!” she shouts back.

Scott looks worried and sympathetic for a brief moment, but then his face hardens. “Derek!” he yells, much louder than before. “You think you’re scared? Imagine how Stiles feels right now! So put on your big girl panties, grab your little blue vest, and pull your shit together, because Stiles needs you!”

There’s a long pause, and Erica looks like she’s about to duck and cover, but then Derek swallows hard, nods, and pulls himself to his feet. Erica gives Scott a thumbs up through the window. Before she can say anything else, Allison sprints around the house, having heard the shouting. “What, what’s going on?” she asks, alarmed.

“Stiles is missing,” Scott tells her. “Fuck if we know how. We went up to see why he was taking so long in the shower and he’s not there. There’s blood on the wall. Not a lot. And down here, I can smell him, and – Peter. Not Peter. Whatever.”

“Jesus,” Allison says. She darts a look over her shoulder to where she’s obviously left the Argents unattended. “What about – ”

“Screw it,” Scott says. He’s in charge now. They’ll need Derek, but he’s not going to be focused on anything except finding Stiles. That’s not a bad thing, but it’ll leave all other decisions on someone else’s plate. “If they get out, they get out. We’ll just have to deal with it later.”

Derek and Erica have both dropped from the window then. Derek looks at Scott and gives him a small nod. “Thanks.”

Scott just nods back. As much as he doesn’t want to delay, he also knows they can’t afford to run off half-cocked. Not when Peter Hale is in the picture. “Allison, go suit up,” he says. “Erica, run inside and get the others, have them grab any gear they need. Derek and I will follow the trail. Catch up as quick as you can.”

“How’d he get into the house?” Derek asks, although it’s mostly rhetorical. He’s already sniffing at the air and moving away from the house.

“We still don’t know how much this thing knows,” Scott says. “Sure, it’s Peter, but it’s like . . . Peter created from Stiles’ mind. So does it know stuff that Stiles knows? Like the back ways to avoid the traps and stuff?”

“Peter could figure it out if he had time. He’s smart as fuck.” Derek shudders a little. Just the thought of his crazy uncle holding Stiles prisoner . . . he shakes the thought off. “But how was he in the house and we didn’t know?”

“The thing can shapeshift, right?” Scott says. “It probably just shifted into a spider or something we never would have noticed and waited ‘til it could get Stiles alone.”

“You’re strangely logical under pressure,” Derek says.

Scott gives a little shrug, almost embarrassed. “I guess I have to be? Or maybe it’s because Stiles isn’t here to do the thinking.” He stops as they fetch up against the fence. As expected, Peter found one of the vulnerable places where Stiles had left a trap. There’s a bit of a downhill slope, so the fence doesn’t lie exactly evenly on the ground. There’s room to wiggle underneath it. Stiles compensated by laying down a tiny line of razor wire, but Peter found it and pulled it out before
“I’m going to rip him apart,” Derek says. It’s not a play threat in any sort of way.

“Yeah, we have to find him first.” Scott shakes his head and fishes for his keys. As he’s disarming the electric fence, Allison jogs up with the others in tow. Jake looks terrified, and Sam is grim, carrying Stiles’ laptop for no discernible reason. Wednesday is as blank-faced as ever. “Up and over,” Scott instructs them, not wanting to waste time going all the way around the house to where the panel opens.

Jake swallows. “I, I don’t think I – ”

Derek glances at him, looks him up and down and then eyes the exposed hole in their defenses. “You’ll fit underneath if you’re willing to wiggle,” he says, pointing to the dip under the fence. “It’s not really dangerous since the fence is disarmed.”

“Oh,” Jake says. He looks honestly startled that when he said he couldn’t do something, he was believed and an alternative was found for him without mocking. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Just a sec.” Allison kneels down and studies the grooves in the dirt. She looks up and says, “Peter dragged Stiles under. You can see the marks his feet made. So he was definitely unconscious. It, it doesn’t really tells us anything we didn’t already know but . . .”

“But it tells us that he was really out, not just stunned enough to be hauled out of the house without protest,” Derek says. It could also mean that Stiles was really hurt, but he doesn’t want to think too closely on that. He starts climbing the fence while Jake wiggles through underneath. A few moments later, they’re all on the opposite side. He ranges ahead, following the trail that Stiles’ scent leaves. After about fifty yards, they come to a dirt road and the trail ends.

“Great,” Scott says, pushing both hands through his hair. “God knows how far ahead he’s gotten.”

“Only one way to find out.” Derek starts down the road. He can’t not, because the panic will set in again.

His jog quickly turns into a flat run with which humans can’t possibly keep up. Scott turns to Allison and says, “I’m going to stay with him. Can you keep us in sight?”

“I think so,” Allison says, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“I’ll stay with her so we can track you by scent just in case,” Erica offers. Scott nods and takes off.

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One of these days, Stiles thinks groggily as he returns to consciousness, he’s going to figure out how to avoid these situations. Seriously, how does this keep happening to him? It seems like the universe just loves to shit in his sandbox. He shakes himself a little and does a self-inventory. He remembers seeing Peter in the mirror, not really having time to react, and then nothing. So where is he now?

His eyes are gummed shut, probably with blood, so he leaves them shut for now. He shifts a little, but can’t move much. His hands and feet are numb. He can feel thin cord around his wrists and ankles. He’s lying on something hard, hands tied behind his back. Something is over his mouth. He
thinks it’s probably duct tape, but can’t be certain.

The smell is new car smell. Unmistakable. He knows exactly where he is, and panic rises up in his throat in a nearly unstoppable wave. He pushes it back, swallowing hard. He knows he’s in the trunk of a car, but he can’t see that. If he doesn’t open his eyes, he doesn’t have to acknowledge it. He can pretend he’s somewhere else – anywhere else.

Now that he’s paying attention, he can feel the car jolting over the dirt forest roads. It’s a little uncomfortable. The grain of the carpet is digging into his skin. He realizes that he’s completely naked, which would make sense; it’s not like Peter had given him time to get dressed. This is not going to go down in history as his best day ever.

The car comes to a halt and Stiles hears a door open and shut. Terror seizes him, sudden and abrupt, because he knows that Peter is just going to laugh and walk away. He knows it, as sure as he knows anything. A muted scream claws its way out of his throat, muffled by the tape but by no means inaudible, and he starts to flail and struggle. He can feel the cord digging into his skin, blood dripping down his palms.

Then there’s a burst of fresh air and light. Stiles’ eyes fly open and his struggles abruptly stop.

“Awake already, are you?” Peter asks, with that terribly placid smile that hides all the turbulence underneath. “We can’t have that.”

He grabs Stiles by the hair and hauls him out of the trunk one-handed. Stiles is still trying to get his bearings when he flies into the air. He goes up in a high arc, sees trees and sky and the sun, and starts to flail again. Then he hits the ground with a thud that he hopes doesn’t mean broken bones in the brief moment before he’s unconscious again.

This time he wakes up when Peter rips the tape off his mouth. He makes a little grunt of pain and tries to take stock of his situation. He’s lying on a wooden floor. It smells familiar. He swallows a few times, trying to get enough saliva into his mouth to talk. His entire body aches, especially his head. He sees a pile of burned furniture in the corner and now he knows where he is. “Shit, really?” he mutters.

“What better place?” Peter asks. “I’ve missed it.”

Stiles tries to sit up, but the way he’s tied up makes it impossible. “You’re not Peter Hale,” he says, “and I would take it as a personal favor if you would stop pretending.”

Peter gives a little shrug. “But I am,” he says. “At least for now. Then it’ll be on to bigger and better things. Although I do like this form . . . and the reaction it generates in you,” he adds, showing teeth. “I could stay here and play with you for a long time. And he wants that too. Peter. He always wanted to keep you.” He lifts Stiles up and puts him in a wooden chair. “That’s better. Are you wondering why I haven’t killed you?”

Stiles has to swallow before he can speak. “It’s my greatest fear that Peter will take the pack from me,” he says. “And he’d have to kill me to do it. So yeah, I guess I am wondering.”

“You create quite a paradox,” Peter agrees. “You don’t fear death in and of itself. Not really. You’ve stared it down too many times for that. You fear losing your pack . . . but if I kill you, you won’t be afraid of anything.”

“Gee, I guess you’ll just have to let me go,” Stiles says.

“Which led me to wonder,” Peter says, kneeling down in front of Stiles and giving him that earnest
look, “what would happen if I bit you?”

Stiles feels his stomach churn a little bit. “No clue,” he says. “I guess I’d probably wind up a werewolf, but which one of us would take control of the pack? I couldn’t begin to tell you.”

“I think perhaps it’s time we found out,” Peter says.

There’s a chance he’s right, and Stiles knows it. Here in this room, they’re both alphas. If Peter turns him, in theory he would become Peter’s beta. The question has simply never been asked before, because Stiles is the first human alpha in recorded history. It’s possible that he’d be turned but keep his status, and possible he wouldn’t be turned at all. But somehow, he thinks Peter’s version is the most likely outcome. For Peter to turn him would give Peter power over him. Somehow, Stiles knows that Peter would get the pack.

He can’t think, can’t concentrate, can’t even breathe. Peter smiles at him and says, “I’ve asked you once before, haven’t I? If you wanted the bite. But this time, I don’t think I’ll give you a choice. This time, I’ll just take what I want.”

Stiles sees his eyes turn red, his fangs extend. He’s going out of his mind with fear and memory, and he has no idea where the thought comes from, but it comes nonetheless, and he blurs out, “Wait. There’s another way. A sure way.”

Peter withdraws a little, giving him a considering look. “Oh?”

“If the pack rejects me.” Stiles can’t really believe he’s saying this, but if nothing else, it will buy time. “I’ve seen it happen. A pack rejected their alpha. She changed back to omega and they chose a new alpha. They could choose you.”

“Why would they?” Peter asks.

“Because you’ll kill me otherwise,” Stiles says. “If they don’t reject me and choose you. It’ll work. You don’t know that turning me will.”

Peter tilts his head to one side and studies Stiles for a moment or two. “This is an interesting move, Stiles. I’ll think about it.”

Stiles can breathe again, but his respite is short-lived. Peter hauls him to his feet and pulls him down the stairs, into the basement. He’s never been down there before. Derek has never wanted anyone to see it. It’s not much to look at, but one thing immediately catches his eye. A deep freezer. Like the one in Isaac’s basement. “No,” he blurts out, trying to take a step backwards. “No, no, no – ”

“But I bought it just for you,” Peter says, his voice full of that gentle amusement.

“Please,” Stiles says, not even really aware that he’s begging, not knowing what else he can possibly say. “Please no. Please.”

Peter just smiles at him. “Do you promise you’ll stay down here and behave and be quiet?” he asks.


“Then I’ll think about that, too.” Peter takes out a roll of duct tape and puts another piece of Stiles’ mouth. Then, ignoring Stiles’ struggles, he picks him up and dumps him in the freezer. Stiles lets out another muffled scream, but Peter doesn’t close the lid. He’s cramped, but he can still see the ceiling, so the claustrophobia doesn’t strangle him the way it normally would. He hears Peter’s feet on the stairs.
He lies there for what feels like a long time. Then his rational mind starts to kick in and he realizes he just promised to stay quiet and not try to escape, which seems like a pretty dumb move, all things considered. Peter closing him in the freezer is bad, yes, but what Peter will do to him long-term is a lot worse.

He has to take several deep breaths before he can gather his wits about himself. He’s bought some time with his little ploy, and he’d better use it wisely. He can feel Derek’s panic and rage now; his lupa has obviously realized what’s happened to him. It won’t take Derek and the rest of the pack long to track him down. What does Peter intend to do then?

And how had Peter gotten into the old Hale house to begin with? This isn’t like the fencing around the house they actually live in, with gates and panels that slide out. The only way to get in here is to disarm the fence and then climb over it. Derek has a remote, and that’s the only thing that disarms the fence. Stiles breathes out a muffled curse. Peter had taken Derek’s remote while he was in the house. That means that not only was he able to get in, but he’ll be able to keep the others out.

Given time, they’ll be able to find another way in – but Stiles doesn’t know how much time he has. Then again, even if he manages to get out of the freezer and get untied, he himself won’t be able to leave the property until he can disarm the fence. He’s going to have to get the remote from Peter, which seems unlikely at best. He’s undoubtedly carrying it on his person.

If he can get out of the freezer, he can maybe hide somewhere on the property until the others get there. This seems like a different type of unlikely. Peter has alpha senses, so he’ll both hear and smell Stiles wherever he goes. The creature underneath Peter seems able to sense fear, so that will be another beacon he can use.

But hell, he can’t just sit there and wait for terrible things to happen to him. If Peter catches him, he’ll just have to deal with it.

All of which is great in theory, but a lot more difficult in process. There’s some wiggle room in the freezer, but not very much, not enough to get his legs underneath himself and just stand up. He can sit up, and with effort he’s pretty sure he could knock the freezer onto its side, but that would be sure to draw Peter’s attention. After a great deal of squirming, he manages to get his legs up onto the edge. His hands throb from the way they’re pinched underneath him. He worms his way forward, scooting his butt an inch at a time, until his knees are hooked over the edge. Now all he has to do is the mother of all crunches, hopefully without tipping the freezer over.

It takes nearly six tries. Sure, he works out, and he supposes his core strength is pretty good for a human, but his abs are not made of steel. He hopes that Peter isn’t paying attention upstairs, or that if he is, the grunts and groans he’s making as he tries to escape aren’t audible beyond the confines of the duct tape. The fact that he’s naked actually helps. There’s no cloth to catch on things, and as his body starts to become slick with sweat, the backs of his thighs slide along the metal edge. Eventually, he lurches upwards and tumbles over the edge.

He hits the floor with an ungraceful thud and lands on his side. The side of his face smacks against the stone floor in the same spot where it met with the bathroom wall earlier, and he sees stars. It takes another minute for his scrambled brains to come back together. He looks around for anything sharp that he might be able to use to cut the cords.

For once, he’s in luck. One of the small windows that line the top of the wall fell out during the fire and shattered. The frame is leaned against the wall, and there’s plenty of jagged glass still inside it. Stiles scrambling over and presses his back against it, rubbing his wrists against one of the edges. He winces as he feels it slice into his palm. He’s going to cut his forearms to ribbons doing this, but it definitely beats sticking around.
Five minutes and a lot of blood later, his wrists are free. He yanks the tape off his mouth and then uses a chunk of freed glass to cut his feet free. He bolts up and towards the stairs. Clothes would be nice, but this is one of the few places that Derek frequents that he doesn’t leave clothes lying around in. Still, maybe upstairs he can find an old curtain or something. Anything would be better than running around stark naked.

He creeps up the stairs and pokes his head into the foyer. Looks left, looks right. No Peter. He takes a step out and has just rounded the banister when he hears Peter clear his throat. Despite himself, he freezes and then turns to look.

Peter just smiles at him pleasantly. “We have visitors.”

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It becomes clear only a few minutes after Derek starts loping through the preserve that they’re heading in the direction of the old Hale house. He tries to ignore that fact, but it’s impossible. And now he can feel Stiles leading him on like a beacon, feel that he’s awake, and frightened, and in pain. He skids to a halt just outside the perimeter set up by the electric fence and starts fumbling for his keys, where he keeps the remote, cursing under his breath when he can’t find it. They should be in the pocket of his jeans, but they’re not.

“Good morning, Derek,” Peter says, emerging from the house. He comes down the front steps, winding what looks like fishing line around his palm as he walks towards them. He holds up the remote Derek has been searching for and asks, “Looking for this?”

“What have you done?” Derek asks, doing his best to swallow his heart so it would go back down into his chest.

“I’m just trying to take back what’s mine,” Peter says, giving him that innocent smile.

“I didn’t believe that smile when Peter was alive and I was six years old,” Derek snarls. “What about Stiles was ever yours?”


“No,” Derek snaps. “Peter was never my alpha. You were never my alpha. You are the person who took my alpha, my sister. Now I have a new alpha and this is his pack. The pack that we all built together and we don’t belong to you.” He can only hope that the rage in his voice covers the terror.

“But it doesn’t matter,” Peter says. “This is what Stiles fears. Of course, to take the pack away from him is a little trickier than I had anticipated. I thought about turning him, but honestly I’m not sure whether that would work or not. So I could kill him . . . or you could reject him as your alpha and choose me instead.”

“Even if Stiles wasn’t my alpha, I wouldn’t choose you,” Scott says. The last time he had managed to work so much venom in his voice, he had been ten and trying to provoke his father into hitting him so he would get arrested.

“Oh, so you would prefer if I kill him?” Peter asks, feigning surprise. “It can be arranged, you know, quite easily.”
“Wait!” Derek blurts out, his heart jackrabbiting in his chest at the mere idea. Real Peter, he can talk to, at least for a little while. But the Peter that Stiles is afraid of? Derek fears him, too, because it’s a Peter he doesn’t know.

“How do we know he’s okay?” Scott demands, stalling for time, hoping that Allison catches up soon. He has a feeling that she’s better at this type of negotiation, if only because she has nerves of solid steel, unlike either of them.

“I suppose you’d like to see him?” Peter says, and Derek nods, not trusting himself to say anything. Peter gives them a smile and then gives the fishing line he’s holding a sharp tug. It leads back into the house. Stiles stumbles out the front door and down the steps. The line is tied around his wrists, and there’s very little slack, so he can’t help staggering forward when Peter gives it another solid tug. There’s duct tape over his mouth, but other than that, he’s not restrained. One side of his face is dark with solid bruising, and his left eye is swollen most of the way shut. There’s blood all over his hands and forearms.

Derek makes another one of his kicked puppy noises and moves forward, stopping only inches from the fence, his hands coming up like he’s about to grab hold. Scott wraps his arms around Derek and pulls him back. Stiles, once he’s gotten his feet underneath himself, looks at them and raises his hands in greeting, clearly trying to pass it off as some casual ‘oh hey, come here often?’ sort of gesture to reassure them. But his gaze never leaves Peter. And there’s fear in that gaze, yes, but anger’s there too, and that gleam of calculation that makes him Stiles.

Scott’s expression is tight and angry, and his jaw clenches when he sees all the blood. He can smell that it’s fresh and still flowing, and that makes this even harder. He keeps a tight hold on Derek. Allison and the others arrive then, although Jake and Wednesday are trailing behind, both of them out of breath. Erica comes forward with a growl on her tongue and her claws already out. Allison looks both Stiles and Peter up and down, glances over at Derek and Scott, then takes a deep breath and forces herself to act calmly even though she doesn’t feel it. “So, what did I miss?”

“We were having a little discussion about the circumstances under which I’ll return your alpha here,” Peter says, smiling at her. “Those being that he won’t be your alpha anymore. You’ll reject him and choose me instead. That was his idea, by the idea.”

Stiles gives him a furious look and tries to say something pithy through the duct tape. When it’s obvious that it’s not going to get through, he aims a kick at Peter’s ankle instead. Peter gives the fishing line a sharp tug just so, bringing Stiles to his knees.

Allison keeps her breathing slow and even, like she’s about to take a difficult shot. She needs to be calm if they’re going to get Stiles out of this. Derek and Scott need her to be calm. Erica needs to be able to lay into something, and she won’t be able to if Allison blows this and they can’t get to Stiles and Peter. She forces herself to think and feel cold, as if this was an actual hunt. She watches Stiles drop to his knees, sees the way Derek flinches and how Scott has to tighten his grip on the other wolf. She looks at all the blood, that’s just too red to be dried or old. “Since it was his idea, we’ll consider it. Under a condition or two.”

“Oh, conditions,” Peter says. “I do like a good condition. Let’s hear it.”

“The first is that you bandage up whatever’s bleeding. There’s no point in any of us agreeing to anything if he bleeds to death.” She wonders if she can get away with setting terms for his treatment, but doesn’t think so. If he agrees to something like keeping Stiles above ground, he’ll just find some creative way to torture him.

“I’m afraid I don’t have any bandages,” Peter says. “You could simply agree to my terms and render
the whole issue moot.”

“We'll need time,” Scott says, his voice strained. “Half the pack isn’t in town. They’re at, at least four or five hours away. And I don’t think this would work if they’re not all here.”

“So will you agree to those terms?” Allison asks, figuring she can strip out of her outside shirt and toss it over for Peter to use, telling him not to be a pedantic asshole.

“Don’t let him bleed to death,” Peter says with a solemn nod. “Check.”

“And –” Scott clears his throat. “Let him wait out here for us,” he says, his voice firming up. He knows that even being inside will be hard for Stiles to handle with this weird version of Peter lurking.

“Mm, I don’t think so,” Peter says. “Stiles and I had our own agreement about where he would spend his time. He didn’t hold up his end of the deal.”

Stiles’ eyes go a little wide, and his Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he swallows visibly. Derek struggles against Scott, starting to shift. Allison’s gaze snaps over to him and she says, “Erica, help Scott get Derek out of here.”

“What!” Erica blurts out.

“He’s not helping.” Allison turns a sharp look on her. “Getting him out of here will help both of them,” she adds. Erica gives a reluctant nod and moves over to Scott and Derek, helping pull the other wolf back and away from the fence. Allison looks back at Peter. “He has to actually be recognizable as Stiles when this is over. Not a corpse, not a raving lunatic, not drooling due to mental or physical damage. You get the idea.” She shucks off her bow and quiver as she speaks and hands them to Sam, who’s nearest, to hold onto. Then she peels her shirt up over her head, ties it to a nearby branch that’s lying on the ground, and chucks it over the fence. “For bandages. Do we have a deal?”

“Agreed,” Peter says, picking up the shirt. “I hope he’s as tough as he thinks he is.”

Stiles flips him off.

“I hope that you’re the alpha you think you are,” Allison says, “or we’ll reject your ass too.” She takes her weapons out of Sam’s hands and turns to leave. The hunter teenagers seem a little stunned, but follow with her. She keeps her ears strained for any noise behind her, but there’s nothing. She walks for several minutes with everyone else at her back before she’s able to gather herself enough to turn and face the others.

“We can’t – we can’t just leave him there,” Sam says, his eyes wide with shock. “I mean –”

Allison takes a gasping breath of air and presses a hand over her mouth. Words start spilling out and they’re directed at the pack, although she doesn’t care if Sam and the others hear. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry! He wasn’t going to gives Stiles back to us. Stiles bought us time and we had to take it. He wasn’t going to agree not to screw with him. He’s a fear monster! I – I’m sorry, I –”

“Hey, hey,” Scott says, drawing her into an embrace and hugging her tightly. “You did just the right thing. You’re right, you know. Stiles bought us time. And he, he was making us see that he was okay. I mean, obviously he’s in trouble, but the way he was acting – he wanted us to see that he wasn’t going to let Peter break him.”

Allison looks over her shoulder at Erica and Derek. They’re holding hands, and Derek has shifted
back to full human. He looks wrecked, pale and shaky, but not angry. At least not at her. Erica nods at Allison. “Scott’s right.”

“We can’t get past that fence,” Derek says, his voice completely flat.

“There’s gotta be a way,” Scott says. “C’mon, this is Stiles.” He shakes his head. “Allison, your – your dad helped him design all that security stuff, right? Maybe he knows.”

“No gates. Just one remote. No one’s supposed to be in that house but me. Remember?” Derek squeezes his eyes shut and tries to breathe, tries not to think about the thing that’s in there, the thing masquerading as his dead uncle, torturing his alpha.

Allison pulls away from Scott, pulling herself together. “Yeah,” she says to Scott. “You’re right, he did. Maybe there’s a failsafe we don’t know about.” She squares her shoulders. “Let’s go ask him.”

“Ask him?” Jake’s voice rises in panic. “You want to go to the conclave after what happened last night?”

Allison’s face hardens. “Screw that. I’m going. And God help anyone who tries to stop me.”

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Chapter 12

Stiles winces as Peter reaches out and rips the tape off his mouth. “I like your pack,” Peter says, smiling at him. “I like the fear on them. Did you know, they fear losing you as much as you fear losing them? You should take that as a compliment. The things I’ll do once I’m their alpha . . .”

“Like what, talk them to death?” Stiles interrupts. “Because if that’s what you’re practicing right now, you’re doing a great job. A-plus.”

Peter just gives him that eye-roll that’s so familiar and so Peter that Stiles cringes despite himself. He has to take a few deep breaths to steady himself out, remind himself of what Gwen tells him. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the mastery of it. The quote seems quite applicable to his current situation.

“Let’s get your arms fixed up,” Peter says, and withdraws a knife from the pocket of his leather jacket. Stiles glances at it, where he saw the remote to the fence disappear into that pocket earlier. Peter doesn’t notice his gaze, busying himself cutting Allison’s shirt into shreds of cloth.

When he’s done with that, he gestures for Stiles to hold his arms out to see the damage. He makes a ‘tsk’ noise with his tongue while he examines them, and then cuts the fishing line, turning them this way and that. Most of the cuts are shallow, although a few are deeper than others, and he managed to avoid the inside of his arms where the veins and tendons are. “You’re that desperate to get away from me?” Peter asks.


An odd thing happens then. Peter’s form blurs and shifts, phases out, then solidifies again. He doesn’t seem to notice it happens, but Stiles does. He considers this while Peter pours water over the cuts to clear away most of the blood. Peter wants him to be desperate. To be afraid. Peter needs him to be afraid, or Peter might cease to exist.

Peter takes strips of the shirt and starts wrapping them around Stiles’ forearms to stop the bleeding, and Stiles realizes this is probably the best, maybe the only, chance he’s going to get. Even if he can’t get away, if he can get the remote long enough to disarm the fence and then scream like a little girl, Derek will come for him. They can’t have gotten far. It’s only been a few minutes.

Stiles waits. Patience isn’t his strong suit, but he can muster some up when the occasion calls for it. He waits until Peter is done wrapping the first piece of fabric around his arm and has turned to pick up the second. In that briefest of moments, Peter isn’t looking at him directly, and his grip around Stiles’ wrist is loose. He wrenches his arms free, and slaps both hands over Peter’s ears.

It’s another move he learned from Gerard. Boxing someone’s ears is bad enough on a human, but for a wolf it’s even worse. Their hearing is so sensitive, as is their sense of balance, that it throws them off completely. Peter is no exception. He stumbles backwards with a high-pitched wolf whine, eyes squeezing closed in a flinch.

Stiles just jumps on him. He’s not as strong, he’s not a wolf, and running would be better, but he needs that damned remote. Nothing can save him if he can’t get the fence disarmed. He thrusts one hand into Peter’s pocket. There’s only one thing in it. Stiles’ fingers touch hard plastic and then close around it. He pulls back, almost throws himself backwards, and then Peter’s hand comes out and
slams into his. The remote flies out of his grip and across the room, where it lands by the stairs.

“Fuck!” Stiles bites out the curse involuntarily and lunges for it. He comes up a little short, landing on his stomach on the floor, one arm flailing outwards. It’s just out of reach, and then Peter is on top of him. The two of them grapple for a few moments. Stiles squirms with everything he’s got, and again being naked is helpful, because there’s really nothing for Peter to grab hold of, although he can feel the claws digging into the flesh of his back and shoulders. The wolf reaches for the remote, but he’s not much bigger than Stiles. His reach is only a little bit longer, and the remote stays stubbornly out of both their grasp.

Desperately, Stiles gets his arms underneath himself and pushes up off the floor, bucking his entire body upwards. Peter lets out a grunt. He doesn’t give much, but it’s enough for Stiles to throw himself forward again. His fingers touch the remote for one beautiful shining moment before it slides away and Stiles realizes that the floor has a downward slope in this part of the house as part of it has caved in. He sees it go over the edge of the wood panel and disappear from view.

“Son of a hgck,” Stiles says, because now Peter’s arm is around his neck, pressing into his throat, cutting off his air. Now he’s done, he’s lost, and he knows it. Peter has all the leverage and there’s no way Stiles is going to be able to get free.

But he fights anyway, because he has to, because giving up is never an option for him, because even now his mind is wildly flailing for some way he’ll be able to win. His vision starts to go black around the edges and his fingers curl over the wood where he last saw the remote. “Shhhh,” Peter whispers to him, as his struggles become less purposeful and more instinctive. “Shhh.”

Just as he’s hitting the edge of unconsciousness, Peter’s grip loosens. Stiles gasps for air and nearly chokes on it, rolling onto his side as he coughs and retches. He’s vaguely glad he hadn’t eaten breakfast. Sunbursts and stars dance in his eyes and he loses track of what’s going on for a minute.

When he gets the world in order again, he’s sitting on the floor with his back braced against Peter’s chest. “Are we cuddling?” he asks, and his voice doesn’t even sound like his own.

“We are reminding you that any further escape attempts would be inadvisable,” Peter says, and for a brief moment, his arm presses against Stiles’ throat again. Stiles has to swallow hard to keep from panicking. With his other hand, Peter picks up the shreds of Allison’s shirt and dumps them in Stiles’ lap. “You want this done, apparently you’re going to have to do it yourself.”

“Great.” Stiles picks up the fabric and does his best. It’s awkward because he can only use one hand at a time. Bandaging his ankles would be much easier. His left arm turns out okay, because he’s right handed, but the right arm is really just a mess of fabric and blood. He thinks the bleeding has stopped, but it’s certainly not an impressive job.

“Up.” Peter stands, keeping his arm wrapped around Stiles’ throat and pulling him to his feet. “Walk. Try to get away, and I’ll do worse than choke you out again,” he adds, and for the briefest of moments, Stiles feels Peter’s teeth against his shoulder. He gives a little involuntary shudder and shuffles forward. It’s a little hard to walk, because the world is still a little gauzy and distant, but he manages. He even gets down the stairs into the basement without falling, although that may have something to do with the way Peter is supporting most of his weight.

Once they’re downstairs, Peter nudges him in the back with an elbow. “In.”

Stiles looks at the freezer. Then he says, “No.”

Peter lets him go, but then grabs Stiles by the arm and turns him around so they’re facing. “Try
“No,” Stiles says. His hands are shaking, but he keeps his voice firm and even. “You can put me in there if that’s what you’re going to do. But you’re going to have to do it yourself. Hit me, choke me, fold me up like a pretzel. Do what you want. But I’m not getting in there of my own free will, and you can’t make me.”

Peter studies him for a moment before he smiles. “Okay,” he says. “Sit.” He punctuates this with a firm shove to Stiles’ shoulder, and he’s sitting before he can do anything about it. Peter wraps his wrists and ankles in the fishing line again, and then covers it with duct tape for good measure. He puts another piece of duct tape over Stiles’ mouth again. Once the teenager is trussed up like a turkey, he simply lifts him up and drops him inside the freezer. Stiles swallows hard but forces himself to watch as Peter closes the lid. He hears it latch, hears the click of a padlock. Footsteps. Then nothing.

~ ~ ~ ~

Sam looks between Jake, who’s still out of breath, and Wednesday, who won’t admit that she was ever out of breath. “You guys go on ahead,” he says. “We’ll head back to the Argent house and, and wait there, I guess.”

Allison nods. “Sorry.” And she is, but not enough to do anything about it. “Wait. Keys.” She fishes them out of her pocket and hands them to Sam. Then she turns and runs like a shot. As it is, she can barely keep up with the wolves. Derek’s far in the lead, and she can only hope that he’ll stop to wait for the others when he gets back to the house.

He does, but he’s in the driver’s seat of the Camaro and it’s idling. He’s clearly impatient, barely keeping himself together. Scott’s holding the door open for Allison and she dives in. It takes her the entire drive to the hotel to catch her breath and get on something of an even keel. As the four of them enter the hotel, it occurs to her that she probably should have called her father to warn him that she was coming. It’s a little late now.

She glances down the list of the day’s lectures and demonstrations and knows where he’ll be. There’s a morning seminar on tracking and survival that he’s actually leading himself. “This way,” she says, gesturing for them to follow her down a hallway and then up a flight of stairs to the panel room where it’s being held. Chris is standing at the front of the room, holding some kind of knife and in the middle of a sentence.

“Allison,” he says, clearly too surprised to say much more than that.

“Hey, Dad,” she says. “We’ve got a huge problem and we hope you can help us.” She takes Derek’s hand, giving it a squeeze because she can hear his breathing pick up again. She tows him down the aisle between the chairs towards her father.

She’s halted halfway down the aisle by Freddie, who stands up and says, “What do you think you’re doing here? How dare you bring werewolves to the conclave?”

Without even blinking, Allison pulls out a knife, steps into Freddie’s personal space, and presses it to Freddie’s crotch. Then she smiles that wolf smile. “I think we can agree that I won’t kill you, but given how much I dislike you and how little time I have to fuck around, do you want to bet that I...
won’t cut your dick off? Move!”

White-faced, Freddie sits back down without a word.

“What the hell . . .” someone else in the audience says.

Chris clears his throat. “Allison –”

“That thing has Stiles.” Derek can’t hold it back any longer, can’t wait any longer. He searches desperately for words, finds none, and settles for repeating himself. “That thing has Stiles.”

“Jesus,” Chris says under his breath, not that it stops any of the pack from hearing him. He sheathes the knife he’s holding and gets a good look at Derek, who’s pale and practically swaying on his feet. His eyes are starting to shine a telltale blue like he simply can’t hold himself together any longer.

“Right,” Chris says, and steps forward. He points to the person nearest him, in the front row by the aisle. “You. Give Derek your chair before he falls over.” When the man just blinks at him, Chris claps his hands together and employs the drill sergeant voice he uses when training others. “Now.”

The man moves immediately at that, startled. Scott folds Derek down into the chair and he curls in on himself, elbows resting on his knees, hands curled over the back of his own neck. He rocks a little, trying to keep his breathing even. Once that’s done, Chris raises his voice to address the assembly at large. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to put the panel on hold for a little while. If I could ask you to file out, take a coffee break.”

About half the people in the room rise obediently and shuffle towards the door. A fair number don’t, however, and there’s a low buzz of angry conversation. “What’s going on?” someone near the back demands.

“Are you actually going to help them?” someone else asks, the voice thick with disgust and anger.

Chris begins to actively herd people towards the door, but decides to answer the question because hunters don’t like to be left in the dark. “Apparently the local alpha is in trouble, and yes, I am going to help him.”

“Why?” someone asks, their voice flat and blunt.

Julien steps up beside his cousin and says, “They have an alliance and he means to honor it. I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“How is what happens to those animals any of our –”

Erica opens her mouth to snarl something. Scott grabs her, slapping a hand over her mouth before her temper can get the better of her. It’ll only make things worse. Derek cringes lower at the harsh words. Allison moves over to him, pressing her hip to his shoulder. “Because aside from your opinions on werewolves, the last time I checked, humans were worthy of protection and Stiles is human. Because the elders brought this monster here, into our territory and down on our heads. I’m not asking for your help. I just want you not to stop other people from helping us.” She takes a deep breath because their tempers are all wearing very thin. “And I want that now.”

By now, most of the hunters have left. Two or three holdouts are remaining, and they’re all obviously looking for a fight. Chris’ glance snaps from Allison, then back to Derek, and then finally to the hunters. When one of them opens their mouths, he interrupts, saying, “Leave this room or I will make you. If you have a problem with what I’m doing, we can discuss it later. But now is not the time.”
“We will have that discussion,” one of them says, but turns and leaves the room. The others follow.

“Pretentious blowhard,” Chris mutters, then turns to Allison. “What happened?”

“It somehow got into the house and took Stiles. It was so fast and clean that we didn’t even notice.” Allison runs her hand through her hair and gives it a sharp tug to help herself focus. “Scott and Derek tracked them to the old Hale house. It’s inside. It must’ve taken Derek’s remote for the fence while it was at our place.” She huddles in on herself, curling closer to Derek and Scott. Erica wraps an arm around her shoulders. “Stiles and I negotiated for some time, but . . . it wants to take us from him. One way or another. We have to get him out.”

Somewhat cautiously, Julien says, “Will he . . . be in any sort of shape to help us?” It’s obvious that he wants to inquire about Stiles’ physical condition without outright asking.

Scott starts laughing and it’s actually genuine, not hysterical. Erica shows teeth and even Derek gives a snort as Scott answers. “His arms are cut up, yeah, but he’ll be able to help. He’d help with broken bones and a concussion. He fought off Kali by poisoning himself with wolfsbane directly to the bloodstream and then taunting her into making him bleed.” Scott traces his abdomen where Stiles’ scars are. “And then he beat her in one-on-one combat. He’ll be able to help.”

“Holy shit,” Julien mumbles.

“But we need to get past the fence,” Allison says, as she turns to her father. “You helped him design all of that. Is there a back door that we don’t know about?”

Chris pushes his hands through his hair. “Jesus. Not at the old Hale house. The security around the newer one has those sorts of built-in redundancies and back doors, but . . . he didn’t see the point at the old house. Derek was the only one who really needed to be able to get in, so . . .”

“So he kept it private for me and it’s going to get him killed.” Derek lets out another wolf whine. “I’m going to get him killed.”

“There has to be another way,” Scott says. “Come on, this is Stiles we’re talking about. He’s never met a backup plan he didn’t like.”

Chris frowns, but nods in agreement. “The simplest explanation would be a second remote that disarms the fence. It wouldn’t have required any extra work or preparation, and it’s not necessarily something that any of you would have known about, like the tree branch that goes over the fence itself.”

“But you don’t have it, and he never mentioned it to you?” Allison asks, like she’s hoping her father can pull a rabbit out of his hat, and Chris shakes his head slightly.

Erica hunches her shoulders up. “I hate to say it, but sometimes Stiles thinks he’s got everything handled and he doesn’t. Like when he thought Scott could fix him up after his fight with Kali. Or this whole conclave thing. Sending us away? Two turns in the cookie rotation or not, it was a shitty plan. He even admitted it.”

“I don’t think he – ugh, never mind,” Scott says, shaking his head. There’s just no time to talk about this. But Erica has a point. Stiles sometimes plays things closer to the vest than he should or even than he realizes.

“Maybe he gave it to somebody not in the pack,” Julien suggests, and everyone blinks at him. He hesitates and adds, “Well, I don’t know him, but logically speaking, that would make the most sense. If he’s worried about some sort of disaster striking, odds are good the entire pack would be involved,
so he would entrust something like that to someone outside. Is there anyone else he trusts?"

There’s a moment of tense silence as they blink at each other and then Scott suddenly shakes his head. “God, how could we have been so stupid.” He’s already pulling his phone out and dialing. “Papa Stilinski.”

Erica groans and Allison actually facepalms. “Of course,” she says. Derek glances up, still a little shocked, but with a bit of interest that hadn’t been there before, like he’s heard something that would actually help. Scott finishes dialing and puts the phone on speaker so Derek won’t have to wait to hear the answer. Sheriff Stilinski picks up a moment later. “Hey, uh, it’s Scott.” He wonders if he can get away with not mentioning the whole ‘Stiles is being held hostage by a monster’ thing. “Quick question. Did Stiles give you a remote to the electric fence around the old Hale house? Not the one we live in, the burned down one.”

“What?” Stilinski sounds so confused that for a moment, Scott’s heart sinks. Then he says, “Yeah, back when he had it made, he gave me his spare. Said knowing him he’d lose it or drop it in the toilet or something. Why?”

“Oh, we kinda need it,” Scott says. “I’ll – ”

Stilinski cuts him off. “Where are you?”

“The hotel that’s hosting the conclave. We – ”

“Where is Stiles?” Stilinski asks, louder, and everyone present winces, even Derek.

“He’s, uh, he – ”

“I’m going to be there in five minutes,” Stilinski says, before Scott can come up with some sort of workable answer. “Don’t go anywhere or I will personally kick your werewolf ass.” He hangs up with a decisive click.

“That could’ve gone better, maybe,” Chris observes.

Julien clears his throat. “While we wait for him to get here, could somebody possibly, maybe, tell me where my son is?”

Allison takes the lead again. “He, Jake, and Wednesday were with us until we left the old Hale house to come here. He said he was going back to my house.” She pauses. “My dad’s house. I gave him my keys.”

“I’m just going to give him a call real quick,” Julien decides. “Given the givens.” He takes out his phone and moves a few steps away.

Chris is looking at the door out to the hallway, where the hunters are undoubtedly spreading rumors about what’s going on. Then he shakes himself a little. “What’s the plan? Do we know where in the house Stiles is going to be?”

“The basement,” Derek says immediately. “I can draw you a map, lay out the room and spaces for you.”

“You won’t . . .” Chris blinks at him. “Won’t you be coming in?”

Derek shakes his head, looking a little sick. He knows that the instant he walks into that house, he’ll be facing Kate, and what’s left of the house will go up in flames, turning into the same death trap it
was before. “No.”

Chris opens his mouth to question, but Allison hastily intervenes. “That’s fine. A smaller party will be better anyway. The real problem is what to do if Peter . . . if he realizes we’re coming.” She doesn’t want to come right out and say ‘if Peter kills Stiles to keep us from rescuing him’, but she knows it’s in all their thoughts.

“There’s no sure way to prevent it,” Chris agrees, “but we can take reasonable precautions. I would actually recommend engaging him directly. He doesn’t know we have the second remote – or will, in a few minutes. We show up, demand to talk to him. Derek can say something to get his attention – ask for more time, or make another condition, whatever. While others sneak in behind the house to get Stiles.”

“I’d have to have Scott with me,” Derek says, not looking at any of them.

“Why?” Scott asks, his brow furrowing. “Stiles might need medical attention, I should go in there.”

Derek wraps his arms around himself and resists the impulse to shift and hide. “Because you’re afraid of Peter. You hate him and you’re afraid of him. The Peter that bit you, the Peter from after the fire . . . I’m afraid of him too. So between the two of us, it would stay in that shape. But if it’s just me . . . it won’t be Peter anymore and the house will burn, and she – ” He cuts himself off so abruptly that his teeth click together.

“We can get Stiles out of the house,” Allison says briskly. “No matter what sort of shape he’s in. Erica and I will handle it.”

“Damn right we will,” Erica says.

Derek nods, giving Allison a profoundly grateful look, which is something he would never have thought he would have cause to do. Before he can say anything else, the door opens and Sheriff Stilinski comes in. He’s in his full uniform and he looks pissed as hell and confused on top of it. “What’s going on out there?” he greets them, gesturing to the hallway. “Are those guys going to have a riot? Because if so, I’m not cleaning it up.”

Erica pipes up with, “They’re all pissed off because ‘oh my fucking God werewolves that don’t want to eat their babies, stop the fucking presses’.”

Chris lets out a snort despite himself.

“I see.” Stilinski clears his throat and surveys the room. “Now which one of you is going to tell me what my son has gotten into now?”

Allison squares her shoulders and sums up. She leaves out some of the worse details, but tells the story in full. By the time she’s two sentences in, Stilinski is standing behind Derek, both hands resting on his shoulders in a gesture designed to give them both comfort. He listens with a blank face until she’s done. Then he takes the remote out of his pocket and says, “Okay. Let’s go get my son.”

~ ~ ~
Peter’s gone. Stiles knows he’s gone, because that’s part of the scenario. Part of the fear. This monster plays by rules. Peter has to close him in and then abandon him, or it isn’t right, it isn’t the nightmare that has plagued Stiles for over a year.

He breathes deeply through his nose, centers himself, tries to stay calm. His pack will be coming to get him soon. This isn’t like what happened with the real Peter, where nobody knew where he was or even that he was missing. His pack knows exactly where he is, and they aren’t going to leave him. All he has to do is stay sane until they can get there.

It’s easier said than done, but hell, he’s prepared for this. The claustrophobia that had come as part and parcel of his PTSD was so severe that using the bathroom, going into a closet to pick out an outfit, looking in the shed for a rake, all of it was panic-inducing. It had taken him almost a year to come to terms with the fact that he wasn’t going to just ‘get over it’ and it was something he would have to work on. So he had.

He might have been reluctant to seek therapy at first, but once he’d been conned into it, he had thrown himself into it full bore. He and Gwen had worked relentlessly on his claustrophobia. Desensitization therapy. Their first attempt had been thirty seconds in the windowless bathroom at her office. He had come out of it pale and shaking. It had taken him over a month to be able to stay inside for a full minute even with the light on. Then they had started working on it with the light off. Five seconds in the dark had nearly had him in hysterics.

But it got better. She taught him tricks to stay centered, stay focused, stay calm. Breathing exercises, meditation mantras. Ways to keep track of the time and hold the panic at bay. This seems as good a time to practice as any.

He sings. It’s a trick he came up with four months into the desensitization therapy. Gwen had taught him to stay focused by memorizing poems or speeches, doing multiplication tables. But singing works better. He rushes through the sonnets and the constitution. Singing has tempo. He memorizes songs and knows approximately how long it takes him to sing them. He can keep track of that and stave off that strange timelessness that accompanies being closed in.

“This was a triumph,” he murmurs through the duct tape. “I’m making a note here, huge success . . .”

All he has to do is hold on and wait for the pack. It won’t take them long to figure out how to get past the fence.

“Take my love, take my land, take me where I cannot stand . . .”

Of course, they will probably kick his ass for managing to get himself hurt like this. Now that there isn’t a lot else to focus on, he hurts everywhere. The cuts on his arms sting, the claw marks on his
back throb, his face and his throat ache. Even his ankles hurt where the fishing line has rubbed them raw, and he’s pretty sure that wrestling on the old wooden floor with Peter has given him some splinters in exceptionally awkward places. He has a feeling that the pack is not going to be pleased with him about his numerous escape attempts.

“I’m malicious, mean, and scary . . .”

He continues to hum and murmur through the duct tape, glad that nobody’s there to hear him. Really, his signing voice is only passable at best. It’s a ‘sing in the shower’ voice. Or apparently a ‘sing in a freezer while his mouth is duct taped shut’ voice.

He’s made it ten minutes now, which is an absolute record for him when it comes to any closet-sized area without lights on. He and Gwen had never really planned for more than five minutes. Five minutes was more than enough time to get in and out of any enclosed space where he needed to be. Really, Gwen wouldn’t have even had him desensitized to being in the dark if he hadn’t specifically asked.

Of course, he thinks to himself, he should have figured it would eventually happen like this. There was no way he would get through the rest of his life without being kidnapped at least one more time. That’s just the way his life is.

There’s the first bubble of panic now, but he swallows it down. He has to stay calm. His pack is coming. There’s nothing to be afraid of. He searches for another song in his repertoire. They scatter in front of him like leaves before a storm. He can’t remember any words.

“Calm down, you can do this,” he says to himself.

No, no I can’t!

“Yes you can,” he replies, and now he’s arguing with himself like Gollum in Lord of the Rings, and there, there’s another song he knows, boy, this one takes him back –

“Frodo of the nine fingers, and the ring of doom – it started with a Hobbit – in –” He can’t, he can’t remember the words, why did he pick this song? Way too many things rhyme with doom, he can’t remember what comes next. It’s a stupid song to pick anyway, when he’s already freaking out, singing about doom. Why doesn’t he know any cheerful songs? He could sing ‘if you’re happy and you know it’ but he can’t clap his hands because the damned things are duct taped behind his back and he realizes abruptly that he’s hyperventilating, which is quite a trick when he can’t even get his mouth open.

Calm, he needs to stay calm. Courage is the mastery of fear. “Calm, repeat, the ninja is calm,” he says to himself. It’s not a song, but it has a certain rhythm to it. “Feel the power and the energy from below . . .”

He can’t even struggle, which is kind of annoying. He wants to pound on the sides of the freezer, but he can’t move his arms as much as an inch. He wants to scream but can’t, he wants out, he needs air, he’s suffocating and the whole world is fragmenting, falling apart. He stopped singing a while ago and he doesn’t know how long ago, and that scares him more than anything else because now he doesn’t know how long he’s been inside the freezer and he doesn’t know how much longer he’ll need to wait. He is screaming now, it’s a high-pitched whine that escapes his mouth, dampened by the duct tape and somehow all the more pitiful for it. He rocks himself back and forth, slamming his whole body against the edge of the freezer in his desperation.

By the time there’s a noise in the basement, footsteps, the familiar heartbeat of one of his pack, he’s
so far gone that he doesn’t even recognize it. He’s still thrashing even as he hears someone say something about bolt cutters and then Erica’s familiar snarl of “fuck that” and suddenly there’s a screeching noise of metal and the freezer’s lid opens.

He bolts upright like some sort of demented jack-in-the-box and practically throws himself in the direction of freedom. It’s awkward and ungainly because his hands are still tied behind his back and he’s basically heading towards a complete face-plant on the floor. But then Erica grabs him, her arms circling him and lifting him out. He flails a little and she nearly overbalances, but then they sink to the floor together and his face is pressed into her hair and he can smell her, the melon shampoo and the jasmine perfume and the underlying scent that’s just Erica. That’s what brings him back to reality with a sharp thud. He leans against her, letting out one shuddering sob after another, not even caring that he’s still tied up, still naked, still covered in blood. She holds him tight and rocks him back and forth until the worst of it has passed. Someone takes the tape off his mouth and he can finally breathe again.

Once he’s calmed down some, Allison crouches down so she’s in his field of vision over Erica’s shoulder. “I’m going to cut you free so we can get you the hell out of here. Try not to move, okay?”

Stiles swallows hard and then manages a nod. Allison moves around behind him now that she’s warned him and slips a knife carefully into the tiny gaps between his skin and the duct tape, and starts slicing. The knife hits the fishing line a moment later. “What the fuck?” She pulls the knife free and tears through the duct tape. It takes her a minute to get it off and see the line underneath. “Well, now I see how you cut yourself up.” She uses the knife to cut through a few strands and starts unwinding it, tugging here and there. That seems safer than sawing at it with the knife.

“I cut myself on the glass,” Stiles says. His voice is hoarse, but at least reasonably steady. He even manages a shaky smile as he says, “That was escape attempt number one.”

“Uh huh,” Allison says, easing his limbs into a more comfortable position. She’d like to take more time, but doesn’t know how much they have.

“You sound like shit.” Erica pulls away enough to look him over, although she doesn’t let go. “Nice bruises.”

“Nice bandaging job, too,” Allison adds. “I know it seems weird to call him an asshole, given the givens, but we had a deal.”

“We-e-e-ell, he actually was fixing me up, but then I used the opportunity to stage escape attempt number two, which –” Stiles’ voice hitches and then steadies out – “didn’t end so well, after which he made me do it myself.”

Erica grins at him despite herself. “That’s what we like about you. Perseverance.”

“You’ll be happy to now that escape number three comes with a blanket,” Allison says, as she moves on to freeing his ankles. “Once we have you out of here, Scott can patch you up properly.”

Stiles nods and tries to think of something to say. At least half a dozen clever, pithy things stroll through his mind, but what makes it out of his mouth is a choked “Okay,” as he leans more heavily against Erica. Circulation is returning to his feet, the cord is digging into his ankles as Allison unwinds it, and everything fucking hurts.

Once Allison has him free of the line, she stands up and shakes the blanket out. They didn’t want to take the time to go back to the house for clothes, but the emergency kit that every pack member’s car carries includes a blanket, and that’s better than nothing. She and Erica wrap it around his shoulders.
“You want to try to walk or should we do the carrying thing?” Erica asks. “Derek’s waiting for you.”

“I’m surprised he isn’t in here,” Stiles says, as the two of them help him to his feet. He’s shaky, and his legs are still partially numb, but he stumbles a few steps forward anyway. For some reason it seems suddenly important that he leave this basement on his own two feet.

“He was afraid that Peter would change and the house would burn down,” Allison informs him, hovering around him. Erica has an arm around his waist to carry as much of his weight as she needs to. “The general idea was that Derek and Scott would distract it while Erica and I came in to get you, but he didn’t make an appearance when they tried to get his attention, which had us more than a little freaked out, I don’t mind telling you.”

“Yeah, he’s not here,” Stiles says. “Probably won’t be back for a while. I don’t think.” He rubs a hand over his face and tries to steady out his breathing. “I don’t – don’t know how long I was in there. I, I tried to keep track, but I . . .”

“Did it happen basically right after we had to leave?” Allison asks, trying desperately to help. Stiles is obviously moving as fast as he can, but she can tell he’s close to panicking, so she tries to distract him. She wishes that Derek or Scott were there. They’re so much better at helping Stiles with this sort of thing.

“I – I think so? Five or ten minutes later maybe. We – we fought.” Stiles’ hand goes to his throat automatically. “I – I was unconscious for a few minutes. He – ” His voice breaks and his knees start to give. “I – I’m sorry, I – ”

Allison and Erica both catch him and lift him up, as smoothly as if they’ve practiced it. “Why are you sorry?” Allison asks. “There are a lot of people who should be sorry, and some of them I’m going to make sorry, but none of them are you.”

Erica keeps them moving forward. “C’mon, Hot Stuff. Let’s get you some daylight.”

Stiles nods and shuffles along with them, moving a little more smoothly as feeling continues to return to his feet. He’s not sure what to say, so he settles for saying nothing but letting them support him as they make their way up the basement stairs. Chris is standing in the lobby, his gun unholstered and in his hand but not pointed at anything. His gaze is on the door, but flicks over to Stiles and the others as they emerge. “You okay?” he asks, his tone as gruff as usual, which is okay. Stiles wouldn’t want it any other way. He gives the hunter a nod as they head for the door. Chris pushes it open and calls over to where Derek is waiting with the others. “That thing isn’t here. You may as well come over if you want.”

Derek doesn’t move, although his gaze is glued to Stiles and it’s clear that he wants to desperately. “Are you sure? It’s fooled us before.”

“Positive.”

Derek is up and over the fence, has crossed the yard, and is pulling Stiles to him in less than ten seconds. Stiles just sinks gratefully into his embrace, letting Derek take all his weight and even pull his feet off the ground a little bit. He feels a bit tight and claustrophobic, but having Derek there is more important that anything else right now. After a moment, he manages a little hiccup and says, “You okay?”

“Better now,” Derek says, picking him up the way he always does. If it sounds like he might start crying, he hopes nobody notices.
Stiles tries to think of something relevant to say. What comes out is, “I’m sorry for not telling you I gave my dad the second remote.”

Derek laughs. It’s breathless and hysterical. “It’s not in case I drop mine in the toilet, is it.”

“I – I figured if anything ever happened to me – you’d come here and, and –” Stiles’ voice breaks. He can’t finish the sentence. Under normal circumstances he might have been able to elaborate more fully on his logic, but as it is he can barely hold himself together. He starts to pull away so he can wipe a hand over his eyes.

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” And it is fine. Because Stiles is right. Derek has no plans to outlive his mate. They’ve even talked about it. But he can see how Stiles, while he might intellectually understand, would emotionally want some sort of failsafe. He lets Stiles pull away from him. “Scott looks like he wants a crack at you.” He hadn’t exactly noticed when Scott had made it over the fence with their incredibly well-stocked first aid kit, but now he’s hovering.

“Oh, geez.” Stiles lets out a wavering breath. “Is that an emergency room in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?”

Scott has a wide smile on his face. “Both!”

The pack bursts into giggles. Stiles’ sound a little unhealthy, but they’re there. Chris clears his throat and says, “Maybe we should get off this property before we get too involved in this.”

“Oh.” Stiles gives a nod, but then looks over his shoulder at the house. He’s been thinking about how they’re going to handle this thing. Now that he’s coherent again, some pieces are beginning to come together. “But I don’t want to go too far.”

“What?” Derek blinks at him. “Even I don’t want to be here right now.”

“Look, it’s going to come back,” Stiles says. “It left because, because that’s what I was afraid of, but it’ll be back in a few hours for you guys to hold up your end of the bargain, reject me and become his pack. This thing plays by rules. It’s started the nightmare and it’ll see it through. If we change things now, we have no way of knowing where it’ll go or what it’ll do.”

“You can tell us whatever crazy scheme you have after I’ve patched you up,” Scott says firmly. “Are we doing that on this side of the fence or the other?”

Stiles looks over to where he can see his father pacing back and forth, out of earshot, unable to climb the fence because of the fact that his shoulder still gives him trouble from time to time, and clearly pissed off and upset about both these things. “Let’s go over the fence and at least get out of sight, in case it comes back early.”

Scott follows his gaze and then nods. This time it’s him and Derek who help Stiles hobble along. When they get to the fence, Derek turns his back to Stiles and says, “Think you’re up to a piggy back ride?”

“Oh, you know me,” Stiles says, with another shaky laugh, as he wraps his arms around Derek’s shoulders. “Just... take it slow.”

“Slow it is.” Derek climbs up, careful not to jostle Stiles too much. Getting over the top is a little more difficult, but he manages. Instead of just dropping down to land in a crouch the way he had before, he climbs all the way down until his feet touch the ground. Then he kneels down and lets Stiles regain his feet.
Once he’s settled, Sheriff Stilinski approaches. He reaches out for Stiles but hesitates, knowing how Stiles doesn’t like feeling trapped when he’s upset. “Can I – ” he starts, before Stiles has wrapped his arms around his father and hugged him hard, oblivious to all the bruises and the blood and anything else.

He hugs Stiles back just as tightly, rocking him back and forth. “God, kid,” he says, and kisses Stiles on the forehead.

“I know,” Stiles mumbles. “Gotta put a stop to all this ‘me nearly getting killed’ stuff. Right there with you, Dad.” He lets out a shuddering breath and rests against the man more fully, but reaches out with one hand to snag Derek by the wrist, not quite willing to let him go entirely. Derek’s hand turns into Stiles’ grip so they’re holding onto each other.

Scott finds himself hovering again, not wanting to interrupt, but at the same time he can smell the blood and those bandages are haphazard at best. Sheriff Stilinski gives his son one more squeeze and then lets go. “C’mon, kid. Let’s get you taken care of.”

“Right,” Stiles says, letting his father and Derek support him until they’ve walked about fifty yards, over a rise so they won’t be visible from the house. They settle down in a clearing, so he doesn’t feel closed in by the trees, and they ease him to the ground.

“We should have brought your camp chair,” Scott jokes, as he settles in and starts peeling back strips of fabric. He uses some water to wet them down where they’ve stuck.

“Very funny, cockbite,” Stiles says. He pushes the blanket back to use his free hand to start searching for splinters in his abdomen.

Scott pauses in what he’s doing. “Dude. You weren’t alone that long.”

“Everyone’s a comedian.” Stiles withdraws a splinter almost an inch long with a hiss of pain and holds it up right in Scott’s face, the tip of it glistening with blood.

“Ew, gross.” Scott jerks his head back. “How’d you get that?”

Stiles rubs his hand over the back of his head. “Is there a way to explain that I was wrestling with Peter on the floor of the old Hale house without any clothes on without it sounding kinky? Because I’m trying, really, but . . .”

Derek makes a sound like he bit down on a lemon.

“Do you have like . . . a lot of splinters?” Scott asks, clearly not sure if he wants to know the answer.

“Uh, I haven’t exactly counted, but I’m thinking a fair number, yeah. You just work on my arms and, and Erica, help me out with the, uh, down below areas.”

“Man, you really went ten rounds with him,” Chris says. He sounds kind of impressed.

Stiles rubs the bruises on his throat and tries not to think about the way Peter shushed him while cutting off his air. “Yeah, and lost twelve,” he says. Derek reaches out blindly for Stiles’ hand again,
because he isn’t watching Erica’s hunt for splinters, but he can hear the increase in Stiles’ heart rate, the strained note in his voice.

“Can someone fish out some Aleve from the medical kit?” Scott asks, as he wipes the claw marks down. “It’ll bring the swelling down.”

Allison moves to do so. “Well, it wouldn’t be the Peter you fear if you could win, right? I mean, do you think that plays into how strong he is? Could we get around that by going after him in a group so he can’t single anyone out?”

“Peter’s an alpha werewolf,” Stiles says flatly. “He doesn’t need my fear to be stronger than me.” He looks at the pills in disgust and says, “Seriously, Aleve is the best you can do? You don’t have any morphine or, or propofol or special K? You are seriously underestimating how bad my day has been.”

“Special K?” Scott repeats, and gives Stiles a light smack upside the head.

“Thank you,” the sheriff says.

“I don’t have anything like that in here,” Scott says, a little more seriously. “If you need something like that, you need a hospital.”

Chris looks them over and then says, “I have some stronger medications.” At the sheriff’s dubious look, he elaborates. “Sometimes the hospital isn’t always an option, and as you’re seeing, we live in a dangerous world.”

“You’re saying that like I don’t already know.” Sheriff Stilinski’s voice is tight and angry. “You’re saying it like my son isn’t always at the center of it. You’re saying it like I’m not well aware that, as usual, you and yours have brought trouble to my town and to my family!”

“Whoa, Dad,” Stiles says, blinking up at his father stupidly.

Chris lifts his hands in surrender. “I apologize. Obviously, you’re aware.” He gives an annoyed huff. “But I didn’t know that these people would be bringing anything with them besides their judgmental attitudes. I would never have knowingly let them deliver danger like this to your doorstep.”

Sheriff Stilinski studies him for a moment. Chris is obviously frustrated, even angry, maybe not as much as Stilinski is personally, but still, he isn’t taking it lightly. The wolves observe this argument without speaking until Allison comes up with the Aleve and Stiles has to choke it down. His throat aches, and he lets out a little involuntary whine, tears stinging at his eyes despite his best efforts.

Derek moves closer, biting back the distressed noise he wants to make.

“Sorry,” Scott says, pausing in what he’s doing. “Sorry, I just don’t want the swelling in your neck and throat to get any worse.” His voice drops a bit. “Maybe we should take you to Chris’ and get you something better. Or even to the hospital –”

“No,” Stiles says. It comes out a little more forcefully than he intended. “No hospital. Jesus. I can’t stand that fucking place. I’ll be okay, I just – I just hurt, that’s all.” He hastily wipes his eyes and repeats it, as if saying it will make it true. “I’m okay.”

Derek shuffles over, curling himself loosely around and behind Stiles as best he can, given the injuries on his back. “Let me help,” he says quietly, and slides a hand across Stiles’ shoulder. He settles his palm at the base of Stiles’ neck with his fingers threaded into Stiles’ short hair. Then he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly to make sure he’s calm and focused enough to do this, before drawing in as much of Stiles’ pain as he can.
“Oh,” Stiles says. “Oh, that feels ni-i-i-ce.” The word slurs out of his mouth and he starts to go boneless, eyes unfocusing and staring dreamily up at the sky.

“Oh, we could go that route,” Scott agrees. Derek just shrugs, looking slightly pleased that he was able to do something that actually helped.

“I think I’ve gotten all the splinters,” Erica declares.

“Wow, that’s somehow one of the most embarrassing phrases I’ve ever heard,” Scott mutters, and helps Stiles lie down in Derek’s lap. Derek winces a little as the shift upsets the zen calm because he can feel the pain as he pulls it in. It just heals quickly enough that he thinks it’s more than worth it.

Stiles looks at Erica with somewhat glassy eyes and says, “You’re the best. I mean that.” He reaches out and tries to ruffle her hair, but really ends up pawing at her face. “Next time you’re down there we’ll both enjoy it.”

Sheriff Stilinski rubs both hands over his face. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that . . .”

Erica catches his hand and rubs her cheek to his palm before play-biting at two of his fingers. Then she tucks his hand and arm in close to his body in Derek’s lap. “That had better be a promise.”

Chris, for his part, is staring at Stiles and Derek, at how the tension had completely eased out of Stiles’ body and the black poisonous lines that are snaking up Derek’s hand through his veins like aconite. It was a little concerning, but nobody else seemed concerned. The poison seems to fade away before even reaching Derek’s elbow. It isn’t clawing for his heart the way wolfsbane would. “What, exactly, is going on here?” he asks cautiously, unsure if anyone will answer.

“It’s something werewolves can do,” Scott says. He’s busy examining the cuts on Stiles’ arms, and forgets to be nervous around Chris the way he usually would. “It has to do with how the healing works. We can’t heal someone else’s injuries, but we can take their pain away.”

“From non-pack-members, too,” Allison adds. “I’ve seen Scott use it at the clinic sometimes.” At this, Scott looks up and gives her a shy, blushing smile. Then he returns his attention to Stiles. “As a side effect, because the body has been producing endorphins, it can make the recipient a little, uh, giddy.”

“High,” Stiles corrects. “The word you are looking for is high. I am so high. My pupils must look like dimes.” He lets out a little snigger. “It’s awesome.”

“All these years and I didn’t know you could do that.” Chris finds himself approving of Scott’s business-like tone. His ability to shut off his nervous behavior towards his girlfriend’s father and perform necessary tasks speaks well of him. Not that he’ll ever admit this to Scott.

“We don’t advertise,” Derek says, his voice clipped. “Especially to hunters,” he adds, giving Chris a pointed look. Chris nods in understanding. He’s being given a chance to earn some of Derek’s trust simply by keeping his mouth shut.

Stiles smiles up at them goofily and says, “I’m glad you two are making friends. Hey, so . . .” He struggles to sit up but then subsides, slumping against Derek’s chest. “Conclave’s over tomorrow, right?”

“Yes . . .” Chris says warily.

“Great. Okay. Cool. Hey, you know what would be awesome? If someone could go get my phone from wherever Peter left it.”
“Already done,” Chris says. “Julien spoke to his son a little while ago. He had your laptop, remember? He went and got it for you on their way back to my place. Do you need it now?”

“Gonna need it soon, I think.” Stiles rubs a hand over his face, trying to focus. “Kay, so . . . fear monster’s gonna be back soon. Gotta plan. ‘S a good plan. But you guys aren’t gonna like it.”

“Then how is it a good plan?” Derek asks, frowning.

“Because all my plans are good,” Stiles replies, with the true confidence of someone who barely knows what words are coming out of their mouth.

“Two words,” Scott says. “Skateboards.”

“That’s one word,” Allison says, her voice quietly amused.

“By the time we were done breaking things, it was two,” Scott says. He pouts a little, then brightens. “Do you still have time to tutor me in English?”

“Pffft, like you learn anything when she ‘tutors’ you,” Stiles says. “Actually you probably learn a lot but I don’t think it has much to do with English.”

Chris clears his throat. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” he says, echoing the Sheriff from earlier. “Stiles, I really don’t think you’re in any condition to be planning anything, given the . . . givens. Let’s take you back to the house. We can deal with this later . . .”

“I think . . . I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but this plan does have a time crunch,” Derek says. He flexes the fingers he has in Stiles’ hair, almost petting but not taking his hands away. “That thing will be coming back soon.”

Chris opens his mouth, but then Stiles manages to sit up. “Okay, everybody just shut up. Let me tell you the plan, and then you can all talk about how incompetent I am or why I should probably be lying down somewhere. Okay?” he asks, and everyone gives a reluctant nod.

He tells them stage one. They stare at him in disbelief.

He tells them stage two. Derek whines like a kicked puppy and Chris’ expression becomes tight and angry.

He tells them stage three. Erica says, “Oh my God, Stiles,” and Sheriff Stilinski pinches the bridge of his nose as if to ward off the impending migraine.

In the telling silence that follows, Stiles says, “I told you that you wouldn’t like it.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance for my own weird sense of humor when I had to give not!Peter a name of his own... I think I was very tired when I wrote that scene..... =D

“I’m writing these lines from inside a lion,” Stiles types into his e-mail, and can’t help but grin a little. Gwen is going to freak-out when she gets his letter. The Shel Silverstein poem seems completely appropriate, although he can only remember the first line of it. If he’s going to be stuck inside a freezer, he might as well at least try to have a sense of humor about it.

The pack, predictably, had not responded well to this idea. It had taken him nearly ten minutes to convince them to go along with it. “I’ll be okay,” he said, multiple times.

Erica was the only one blunt enough to say, “By whose definition? Because I don’t want to embarrass you, but you were not okay when we showed up to rescue you.”

Stiles waved this aside. “It’ll be different. I’ll have my phone to distract me, and I’ll know that you guys are right upstairs, ready to rescue me anytime. I’m not saying I’m going to enjoy it, but I think I can handle it.”

Enjoying it, he definitely is not. But he’s dealing with it. They’ve tied him back up – sort of. They used duct tape but adhered it to itself, so although it looks like it’s secure, he’ll be able to worm his way out of it with relative ease. His hands are tied in front of himself rather than in back. Peter may or may not notice the difference. They’ll just have to take the chance. Even if the pack had been willing to tie him up like that, Stiles wouldn’t have allowed it. If he can’t use his phone, his time in the freezer becomes much more torturous.

As it is, he’s carrying on three separate text conversations. One is with Scott, whose job is to distract him from the fact that he’s closed into the freezer. They’re having an in-depth discussion of the possibility of the new Star Wars movies. Another is with Lydia, who has no idea that he’s currently in any sort of trouble. She’s telling him all about the programs at CalTech that might interest him. That’s where they spent the morning. Now it’s well into afternoon and they’re visiting some state college in which she’s not interested.

The third text conversation is with Derek, and it’s not much of a conversation at all. Every five minutes or so, Derek texts him to make sure he’s still all right. So it’s been going something like this: ‘you ok?’ and Stiles responds ‘yeah, I’m all right’, and then five minutes later, ‘how are you doing’ and he responds with ‘Scott doesn’t think ScarJo would make a good Mara Jade so I need a new best friend now’ and Derek replies, ‘what’s a ScarJo’ and Stiles has to explain why Derek is an uncultured slob.

All in all, things are going about as well as could reasonably be expected. He’s shaky. He knows he’s breathing too fast and is doing his best to control it. If he stops texting for more than about thirty seconds, the darkness starts to close in around him. But he can’t give up. He’s come this far and he’s going to see this through.

The plan is simple, but it’ll work best if ‘Peter’ doesn’t realize Stiles ever got rescued. Convincing
the others to put him back in the freezer with duct tape over his mouth was the most difficult part of
the plan. It’s bad enough that Erica ripped the lid off the freezer and broke the hinges. Stiles tipped it
over so it’s on its side with the lid pressed against the wall. That will hopefully keep Peter from
noticing the damage, and presumably he’ll assume that Stiles knocked it over himself in his struggles
to get free.

He has not only his phone, which Chris ran back to the Argent house to get, but Erica’s. Just in case
his own dies. It’s still got plenty of battery, so it’s pretty unlikely, but the pack insisted and it wasn’t
worth arguing about. He’s also got a knife secured underneath the first layer of bandages around his
forearm. That’s his primary weapon at the moment. Presuming they have time before Peter returns –
and they should – his gun and his baseball bat will be tucked away underneath the stairs for him. But
he’s hoping he won’t need them.

None of them can remember exactly how much time Scott had said they would need. He thinks he
said ‘four or five hours’. Allison just remembers five and Derek doesn’t remember at all. Erica
thought he said ‘a few’. So Peter could come back any time, really. The one thing that Stiles is sure
of is that he will come back to accept the pack’s surrender, presuming that they decide to give it.

He’s got his phone on silent, without even vibrating, because he doesn’t want Peter to hear it. But he
knows when the monster is approaching. He can feel the power creeping in at the edge of his senses.
Then, a few minutes later, footsteps coming down into the basement. He knows that Peter will hear
his heart beat as it ramps up. That’s good. He wants Peter to think he’s afraid. To be fair, he
is afraid. But he’s in control.

Peter lets out a soft snort of laughter when he sees the way the freezer is tipped over and that, that
makes Stiles’ blood run cold. He thinks Peter’s laugh probably always will. Then the freezer is
abruptly turned around and Stiles can hear the key in the lock. He carefully drops his phone down
between his legs so Peter won’t see it. Then he shies away from the light as the lid is opened. The
little noise he makes is only partly an act.

“Enjoying your stay, Stiles?” Peter asks, and reaches out to haul Stiles to his feet. Stiles lets him,
because whether he was in the freezer voluntarily or not, it was small and cramped and his legs will
barely move. There’s also still tape over his mouth, so his response just comes out as a muffled series
of grunts. Not his best comeback ever.

Peter half-drag, half-carries him up the stairs into the first floor, and then gives him a shove so he sits
down abruptly on the floor of the foyer. Stiles darts a glance at the caved in section of the stairs to the
second floor, where his gun and his baseball bat are hidden. He starts to carefully rotate his wrists,
preparing to ease them out of the bonds.

Peter glances down at his watch. “Well, your pack should be showing up any minute,” he says.
“You just sit tight.”

Without much else to do, Stiles nods. “Mmmf mfr,” he says, and reaches up with his hands to take
the tape off his mouth. Peter just lets out another snort of laughter, but doesn’t try to stop him, which
is a relief. Stiles glances up at the stairs. Derek is up there somewhere, lurking. The rest of the pack is
outside the property, but they have the second remote to the fence, so they’ll be able to get in, if
Stiles decides he needs them. Now that he’s out of the freezer, his trembling starts to ease. He’s in
control again.

He can tell because Peter seems a little . . . off. Stiles has trouble putting his finger on a word for it.
He’s not exactly anxious, but tension radiates from the creature with Peter Hale’s face. It’s as if it’s
consciously putting in effort to keep itself together. As the minutes drag by, the feeling only grows
worse.
“They’re not coming,” Peter finally says.

“No,” Stiles agrees.

“I did make the consequences clear, yes?”

“Crystal clear,” Stiles says.

Peter gives that little half-shrug and says, “I guess they’ve abandoned you.”

Stiles smiles at him, that sharp, feral grin. “My pack will never abandon me, and they will never reject me, and you were a fool for thinking that they ever would.”

Peter walks over and puts two fingers underneath Stiles’ chin, tilting it up so Stiles has to look at him. “So you’d prefer for me to turn you?”

“Sure,” Stiles says. “As the kids say these days: bite me. You take my pack from me? I’ll kill you and take it back.”

The monster’s form blurs and dissipates, and this time there’s no quick snap back. It takes several full seconds for Peter’s form to solidify in front of Stiles again, and when it does, there’s an underlying unease in its gaze.

“See, I forgot to tell you something,” Stiles says, getting to his feet. “I’m not afraid of you. Oh, you took me off guard and gave me a nasty shock, sure, I can’t deny that. But Peter Hale is dead. I killed him with my own hands and I know for a solid fact that he can never hurt me again. You may play a good game, but you’re not and never will be what I was afraid of. And actually,” Stiles continues, “I realized this gave me a really good chance to actually talk to Peter. Because there are some things I would have liked to say to him.”

“Like what?” Peter asks, and his voice is strange now, fuzzy, like a radio station that isn’t tuned quite right.

“Like thank you,” Stiles says, looking him in the eye. “For letting me have the pack. I don’t know whether or not Peter realized I would become the alpha. Maybe he did, because he was crazy smart. So in a way, Peter trusted me with the pack, and that’s really huge.”

“Stop it,” Peter snarls.

But Stiles doesn’t. In fact, he approaches Peter, arms out in front of himself, freed from the duct tape, held out in a gesture that’s almost like a welcome. “I’d like to tell you that I wish I could’ve known you, back when you were still you, before Kate killed your family and drove you nuts. Or that Derek still misses you, every day. He wakes up with it, sometimes. I see him just staring off into space and ask what’s wrong and he says nothing, and I know that ‘nothing’ means ‘I miss my family’. And that includes you. We don’t talk about it, because there’s nothing we can really say, but I know that Derek misses you.”

“Cut it out!” Peter says, but his voice is as hazy and indistinct as his face now. Stiles wraps his arms around what’s left of Peter and pulls the vague form into an embrace.

“But really I wish I could tell Peter that I’m sorry. That I had to kill him. That he had to die. I know he did terrible things and I know that he couldn’t be stopped any other way, but I’m sorry it had to end like that. I wish things could have been different.”

Peter says something else, but it’s garbled, it doesn’t make any sense, and then there’s a creak on the
stairs behind Stiles and with a sudden strange shift of reality, Peter’s gone and it’s Kate standing there instead, her body firm and solid in Stiles’ arms. Stiles knows she’s smiling at Derek, who’s standing behind him, because he can both hear and feel Derek’s wave of panic.

“Hey, babe,” Kate says to Derek.

Stiles pulls back and grins at her. “Hi, Kate,” he says, and thrusts the knife deep into her abdomen.

Kate chokes and pulls back. She stares at him in shock. “You son of a – ”

“Oh, you,” Stiles says, his grin sharpening. “Derek may be afraid of you, honey, but I’m not. And if you wanted to avoid a fight, you came to the wrong place, because I’ve been waiting to do this for years,” he adds, and gives the knife a twist as he pulls it free. Blood gushes from the wound, hot and crimson and everywhere, and the smell of it only makes Stiles want more. He’s not a wolf, not entirely, but some of the impulses are there nonetheless, and this is one of them.

Kate staggers back, both hands pressed against the wound, and Stiles grabs the end of the banister in one hand. He swings around it and dives into the crawlspace underneath the stairs. Only a moment has passed before he comes back out with his baseball bat. Kate has started towards Derek, who’s just cringing before her. That’s okay. That’s exactly what Stiles needs. Derek has to stay focused on his fear of Kate, not of what she did, or the entire house will catch fire.

Stiles doesn’t have time to get in front of her, so he just reaches up and grabs her by that long, blonde hair, and pulls. She takes a few steps back and turns on him, and he just swings the bat as hard as he can. Kate ducks to one side and his blow doesn’t connect. She comes in low and fast and he turns with her movement, aiming the bat almost half-heartedly at her knee while his other hand comes out and gives her a sharp jab right where he had stabbed her. She cries out and stumbles forward.

It’s no contest. Kate was a good fighter in life, but it’s not why Derek is afraid of her. In a fair fight, she probably could have beaten Stiles, but this is nowhere near a fair fight, which is just the way Stiles likes it. She’s unarmed and injured, and Stiles is working off the adrenaline of several hours pent-up in a small space. He has her pinned and her struggles are weakening mere minutes later.

“And now,” Stiles says, “Derek knows he doesn’t have to be afraid of you ever again. Because you will never lay a finger on him ever again. Because he’s got me. He belongs to me. Is that clear, you bitch?”

“Y-Yes,” she chokes out.

“Good.” Stiles sits back and lets her up.

She sits, one hand still pressed to the stab wound, although it’s hardly the worst of her injuries at this point. “Aren’t you . . . aren’t you going to kill me?”

“Why, Kate, you misunderstand my intentions,” Stiles says. “I never wanted to kill you. I want to make a deal with you.”

She stares at him, uncomprehending.

“Look,” Stiles says, “am I happy about everything you’ve done here? No. But am I pissed enough to kill you? Also no. I’ve done my research. You’re some sort of monster that feeds off people’s fears. So you showing up, you doing all this stuff, that was just in your nature. Hell, getting mad at you for that is like getting mad at my dad for eating curly fries. Some things just can’t be changed.”

“So . . . what, then?” she asks.
“If you had showed up here of your own volition and gone around fucking with my pack of your
own free will, this would be a very different discussion,” Stiles tells her. “But you didn’t. You were
brought here. You were pointed and aimed at me and mine just like you were a weapon. I have a
beef with the people who did that. But I also can’t strike at them directly, because then I’ll start a
war. And that’s where you come in.”

Kate draws her knees up to her chest. “Then . . . what do you want me to do?”

“First things first?” Stiles says. “Change back into Peter. I know you can do it even though I’m not
afraid of him anymore. You did it earlier. Once you find a form you like, you can change back to it. I
just fucked with your karma earlier. Anyway, change back to Peter and you can heal up those
injuries and then we can talk. Because you’re not going to cause me any more trouble, right?”

Her gaze flickers up to him, then down, and then it’s Peter. He smiles. “No, Stiles,” he says. “I’m not
going to cause you any more trouble. I think you and I are going to be great friends.”

Stiles glances over his shoulder at Derek, sees that some of the tension has gone out of his shoulders.
“Was he always this sassy?” he asks.

The tiniest hint of a smile touches Derek’s face. “Actually kinda yeah,” he says.

“Duly noted.” Stiles holds his hand out to Peter. “The keys and remote,” he says, and Peter hands
them over. Stiles goes underneath the stairs for the rest of what the pack had stashed away for him
there: primarily, his clothes. He pulls on underwear, jeans, and a T-shirt. “What do we call you?”

Peter blinks at him. Then he says, “Nobody’s ever called me anything.”

Stiles tilts his head to one side, thinking about this. He supposes that if the creature can really only
relate to people by taking on the form of what they fear, he’s most likely never had a friend. “That’s
kinda sad,” he says, and Peter just blinks at him. “Well, I can’t keep calling you Peter,” he continues,
“because then I risk forgetting you’re not Peter. Derek, any suggestions?”

Derek plays with his watch for a minute, then looks up and says briskly, “Ian. That was Peter’s
middle name.”

“How about it?” Stiles asks the creature, and it shrugs. “Okay. Ian it is.” He stands up and shrugs
into his leather jacket. “Tell us how the hunters captured you.”

Ian gives a little frown. “It was a long time ago,” he says.

“How long?” Stiles asks.

“I really don’t recall.” Ian taps his finger over his lips. “Several decades, at least.”

Now it’s Stiles who frowns. “So . . . where were you in the interim?”


“Let me get this straight,” Stiles says. “Decades ago, some hunters caught you, probably the same
way I kicked your ass just now. You depend a lot on having the element of surprise. If someone is
prepared to face you, they can master their fear, and that takes a big chunk out of your power. But
rather than killing you, they just . . . put you in a cage. Why?”

“Why not?” Ian asks, somewhat whimsically, with that smile of his. “Apparently they did have a use
for me, in the end.”
“Mm hm,” Stiles says. He’s frowning off into space.

“What is it?” Derek asks. “I know that look.”

“It’s just . . . have you ever wondered something, put it aside because you just didn’t have time or capacity to deal with, and then forgotten all about it?” Stiles asks, and Derek gives a little half-shrug that’s as much a yes as a no. “Back when Gerard Argent had the real Peter Hale in his basement, it had actually occurred to me to wonder how he knew to administer the wolfsbane so exactly that it would incapacitate but not kill him. And it was exact. Down to the hundredth of a milliliter, changing depending on the phase of the moon. So how did he work that out? It couldn’t have been trial and error, because they did it perfectly from the exact moment Peter was captured.”

“They’ve done it to others before,” Derek realizes.

“Yeah. Some of the stuff I learned – like the fact that certain voltages, when applied consistently, will keep wolves from shifting, how silver is really ineffective as a restraint because of its softness – this is the kind of stuff that hunters could have only figured out from years of experimentation. But it just never occurred to me until now to wonder who they were experimenting on.”

Derek’s frown deepens. “I hate to be the one to say this, but . . . maybe we should talk this over with Chris.”

“Yeah, most likely.” Stiles agrees. “In the meantime . . . so when they let you out, did they just dump you in the forest and tell you to try to eat anyone who showed up?”

“They didn’t have to,” Ian said. “I was starving.”

“But you stayed in the preserve,” Derek says. “You didn’t wander into town.”

“I was weak. And my power works best on individuals or small groups. I waited for prey to come to me. It’s how I hunt.”

Stiles gives a little nod. “And when you found me, you fixed on my fear of Peter, and that’s why you followed me,” he says, and Ian nods. “Okey dokey. Then we can’t exactly just bring you to the conclave. We’re going to need to separate the three elders so you can spend a little quality time with them.”

Ian’s eyes glint. “That sounds good to me,” he says.

“Let’s go meet up with the others,” Stiles says, then he hesitates. “Let’s set down some ground rules first. You’re not to go terrorizing any of my pack or anyone under my protection, which includes the Argent family. Is that understood?” he asks, and Ian nods. “You’ll keep that form until we’re done here, unless specifically instructed otherwise by me, and when we’re done here you’re going to leave my territory and never bug me again.”

“Deal,” Ian says.

Stiles rubs at the still-aching injuries on his throat and wishes that they’d built in some time for him to get a break in this plan. Unfortunately, he doesn’t know when that will be. After Chris had gone to get his phone, he and Julien had returned to the hotel to try to do damage control among the hunters. Most of them still didn’t know Stiles’ identity. Freddie and Flossie had been given strict orders not to say anything by their father, who apparently had been able to threaten them into keeping quiet.

While they were doing that, Derek was in the old Hale house with Stiles, and Scott was lurking outside in case of disaster, Allison and Erica went back to the new house to check on Jake’s parents.
Stiles had gotten a few texts from them to indicate that Henry and Cruella were still in the pit, still pissed off about it, and had been fed and given water. It’s a balmy eighty-two degrees out, so they’re fine.

They’ve gotten back by now, although Chris and Julien are still gone, and Stiles’ stomach growls as they climb the fence and leave the property. He realizes that he hasn’t eaten all day and it’s getting close to dinner time. He supposes he should have thought about it earlier, but he really hadn’t been hungry upon his rescue.

“Okay, guys,” he says, as the rest of the pack approaches cautiously. Scott looks particularly apprehensive, for which Stiles can’t blame him. He has his own not-so-fond memories of Peter. Stiles supposes they’re lucky that Lydia isn’t there. “This is Ian. He’s going to be helping us out with the elders.”

“Hi,” Scott says. Allison just eyes him warily.

Erica, for her part, gets right up in his face. “I want to make one thing clear,” she says. “I’m only agreeing to work with you because that’s what Stiles wants to do. If it were up to me, I would rip off your ballsack and cram it down your throat. We clear on that?”

Ian blinks at her. “I . . . yes, that’s extremely, graphically clear.”

“Good.” She gives him a little pat on the cheek and backs off.

Stiles slides an arm around her waist and says, “Glad we’re all in agreement on that, but Erica, you should probably know that this dude has spent the last couple decades in hunter jail.”

Erica narrows her eyes at him. “What for?” she asks.

“Existing,” Ian says.

“Oh,” Erica replies.

“Right, so,” Stiles says, “we have some things we need to do. Primarily we need to check in with Chris and see how things are at the hotel. I need tomorrow’s schedule and I need to know where the elders are going to be, and I’m going to need my laptop and to talk to the hotel staff about the audio-visual presentation that’s going to be at the closing ceremonies.”

Allison frowns. “What audio-visual presentation? I hadn’t heard anything about one.”

“Well, we’re going to put one together,” Stiles says, with a toothy grin. “But before any of that, I need food. Who wants pizza?”

As it turns out, everyone does.

~ ~ ~
Stiles orders enough pizza to feed a small army and gives them the Argent’s address before they head back there. The door is opened by Sam, who looks at Stiles and the newer injuries and says, “Jesus,” before standing back to let them in.

“No, his shtick was walking on water,” Stiles says. This gets Sam to roll his eyes. Jake and Wednesday push past him to see who was at the door, and he greets them casually. The possessive twinge he feels when he’s been separated from a pack member kicks up when he sees Jake, but he squashes it down. It's still Jake’s decision whether or not he wants to join the pack. “Hey, guys.”

“You’re all right.” Jake says, with visible relief.

“Didn’t Chris tell you I was okay when he came back here to get my phone?” Stiles asks.

“Well, he said you were hurt but okay, but that you guys were waiting at the Hale house to capture the alpha monster thing . . .”

Ian lifts a hand. “Hi.”

Jake stares at him with his jaw slightly ajar. “Uh . . .”

“Who’s hungry?” Stiles asks, as he continues into the house, not bothering to offer any explanation for the fact that he’s toting a monster around with him. When he sees that his nonchalant attitude will get him nowhere, he says, “No worries, guys, he won’t make any trouble. I ordered some pizza. Anyone know what’s been going on at the hotel?”

“Uh,” Sam says, and still just stares.

Wednesday gives a little sigh. “We haven’t heard very much,” she says. “Sam’s father texted us a little while ago to let us know that they’d managed to soothe most of the ruffled feathers. Apparently they explained that the alpha had gotten in trouble with some of the party-crashers, so Chris felt it was his responsibility to help out, since if the conclave hadn’t been here, it wouldn’t have happened. They under-played his role in the rescue –”

“Actually, to be fair, my father didn’t play a very big role in the rescue,” Allison says with a shrug. “He came in and covered our backs. It was Papa Stilinski who had a way past the security.”

“So maybe they even told the truth,” Wednesday says with a shrug, as if she couldn’t care less. “The point is, there are enough hunters at the conclave who value honor and integrity that they managed to get the others to back off.”

“Is that going to be the end of it?” Scott asks.
“Maybe,” Sam says. “If it had happened earlier in the conclave, there’d be more time for everyone to ask questions, for emotions to get out of control. But tomorrow’s the last day. Closing ceremonies are at noon. If we can just keep things under wraps until then . . .”

“What are the odds?” Allison asks, gesturing to Stiles, who lets out a little snigger. She gives him a look which clearly conveys how unfunny she thinks he is.

Sam takes a deep breath and lets it out. “What are you planning to do?”

“Before I tell you that,” Stiles says, “can we agree on a thing or two?”

“Shoot,” Sam says, although he looks wary.

“The elder council made a conscious decision to let an extremely dangerous monster roam free on my territory,” Stiles says, “specifically aiming it at a bunch of half-trained teenagers. One or more of us could have been killed or at the very least, seriously injured. It’s clear that the elders have been doing this for quite some time without any repercussions at all. This is not a good thing. Are we agreed on this?”

Sam nods, albeit reluctantly. “Yeah.”

“Then,” Stiles says, “what I intend to do is show them – and through them, the future elders of America – why this is an extremely bad idea.”

“Yeah, but how?” Sam presses.

“By giving them a taste of their own medicine.”

Sam’s lips thin. He shifts from foot to foot and says, “I, I just, I don’t know that I’m comfortable with this. Yeah, okay, they shouldn’t have brought this thing here, let alone released it without warning anyone, but you – you don’t have the right to pass judgment on them, you’re not –”

“Okay, stop,” Stiles says, his eyes flaring red despite himself. It’s been a hell of a long day. “We’re going to run a little thought exercise here. Let’s say you went to, hm, Wyoming. With some buddies. You know there’s a big born wolf family in Wyoming, right? They own half the empty land up there. So let’s say you went up there and you brought some monster-on-a-leash with you, so you and your buddies could release it into the wild and then have fun hunting it down. Then let’s say that it tangled with the local wolves and one of them got pretty seriously hurt. What the fuck do you expect that alpha would do to you?”

Sam swallows. His face has gone pale. “He would rip us apart.”

“Exactly. I’m the fucking alpha of this fucking territory, and the fact that I’m in high school and have a therapist and baked a damned good cookie does not change that. So why should I do any less than any other alpha would do?”

“I, it’s just . . .” Sam rubs his hands over his hair. “You don’t . . . seem like that kind of person.”

“No? Maybe that’s because I only act like this when someone backs me to a wall and forces me to. You think I don’t have the right to pass judgment? That’s exactly my right. Because when it comes to the supernatural side of things, I am the law around here. And furthermore, the elders knew that when they decided to hold the Conclave here. Hell, I’m pretty sure that’s half the reason they picked Chris. Because they wanted to push me. They made a conscious decision to fuck with me and my pack, and now they’re going to pay for it. And if that’s a fucking problem for you, so be it.”
After a long moment, Sam shakes his head. “No,” he says. “No problem.”

“Okay then.” Stiles lets out a breath. He looks at Wednesday. “How about you?”

Wednesday tilts her head to one side and considers him for a few moments. Then, abruptly, she says, “You know how earlier, you mentioned that you didn’t remember meeting my parents?”

“Yeah . . .” Stiles says, not sure what this has to do anything.

“They’re not here. I’m here by myself. My parents were killed a few years ago.” She speaks briskly, and when several people open their mouths to offer condolences, she talks over them. “The Arnelle family is from the Smoky mountains. My family and the local pack had co-existed for a long time. We didn’t really have a truce, but we were content to avoid each other. Then a new wolf came to town, killed the alpha, and took the pack.

“He got the betas to stay with him mostly through brute force and intimidation. Wolves who protested started disappearing. This was a big pack, almost thirty wolves. He could afford to lose a few. And then he started replacing them by turning some people who were living out there. The pack knew if he kept adding members, he could keep getting rid of the troublemakers, so they stopped causing trouble. But some of the younger ones came to my parents and begged them for help. My parents had been trying to figure out what was going on, since people had started being turned, so they agreed. The new alpha killed both of them. I was thirteen.

“About a week went by before one of the betas finally managed to take him down with some silver nitrate my parents had smuggled to him before they were killed. He brought me the alpha’s head. Literally. And told me that he hoped it wouldn’t affect the pack’s relationship with the hunters. So.” Wednesday shrugs. “We have something of a truce with them as well. But I’m no stranger to how brutal things get when someone sticks a toe out of line. Frankly, I don’t care what you do with the elders.”

The entire group is struck somewhat speechless by this story. Then Derek reaches out and wordlessly puts a hand on Wednesday’s shoulder and squeezes. She glances at him, and then nods in silent thanks.

“So . . . you came to the conclave by yourself?” Allison asks.

Wednesday nods. “I live with my grandmother. Her hips aren’t great, and she doesn’t like to travel. So I came to represent the great Arnelle family. You know. All two of us that are left.” Another little shrug. “Grams was all about me trying to find a man here, but . . . that clearly isn’t going to happen.”

“We’re not that bad,” Stiles says, laughing.

Wednesday rolls her eyes. “You’re taken – okay, not in the way I originally thought, but still, not up for grabs. Jake’s been afraid of me since minute one. Jonas is a God damned psychopath and an asshole to boot.” Her gaze travels up and down Sam. “You’d be acceptable from my point of view, but I didn’t get the vibe that you’d be interested.”

Sam’s jaw is slightly ajar. “Uh . . . yeah? Should I apologize?”

“No, that’s okay,” Wednesday says.

Stiles just shakes his head, amused. “Check out your local pack. See if they’ve got any eligible bachelors of around the right age who might be interested in making your truce into something more permanent. Trust me – it’s a great way to set up a firm alliance.”
Wednesday looks at him for a long moment, then nods. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Anyway,” Stiles says, “just so you know, I did ask Ian here not to actually kill the elders. I’m not trying to start a freakin’ war. Just convince the hunters in general that this sort of thing is not a good idea. Especially in Beacon Hills.”

“Does Chris know yet?” Sam asks, but then the pizza arrives. World-ending situations aside, they are a bunch of teenagers, and it pre-empts everything else.

Stiles is ravenous, but one bite into the pizza has him grimacing. Derek sees the look on his face and starts to ask what’s wrong, but then his gaze darts to those dark bruises on Stiles’ neck, and he says nothing. He just reaches over and casually rests a hand on the back of his neck, rubbing small circles there with the tips of his fingers and casting a dark look in Ian’s direction. Ian just gives a little ‘what’s done is done’ shrug, which pleases nobody.

“Derek,” Scott says quietly, “I know you mean well, but just because he can’t feel the pain doesn’t mean he won’t damage his throat by trying to eat solid food. You’re just masking a symptom of a larger problem.”

Derek scowls at Scott and snatches his hand back from Stiles’ neck as if he’s been burned. Stiles sighs and says, “I’m going to go see what the Argents have in their fridge.” When the others hesitate, he says, “Go on, eat. It shouldn’t go to waste.” He stands up and goes to root around in the kitchen. There’s applesauce and yogurt in the fridge. A feast, it isn’t, but it’ll soothe the hunger pangs for the time being.

“To answer your question,” he says, once he’s sat back down with his meal, “no, Chris doesn’t know. And he’s not going to know, because he has enough issues. Anyway, it won’t look like he was involved.” He eats a spoonful of yogurt. “But we’re going to need to be able to smuggle Ian in to see the elders without suspicion.” To the creature, he says, “You can’t take on any form you want, right? I mean, you can take on any form you’ve taken on before, but . . .”

“That’s correct.” Ian is sitting with them at the table, although he isn’t eating anything, and passed on the offer when Scott made it. “Once a form is in my repertoire, so to speak, I can re-assume it any time. But I can’t just take any form I want.”

“So you couldn’t pretend to be, say, Allison,” Stiles says, gesturing.

“Not until I’ve met someone who is truly afraid of her, no.”

Stiles thinks back and a grin crosses over his face. “You know what? I think we could probably arrange that.” He licks off his spoon. “Shame it isn’t necessary. I’d love to scare the shit out of Jonas just for shits and giggles, but I suppose I should at least make some vague sort of attempt to take the high road.” He gives a c’est la vie sort of shrug and asks Allison, “Did you really threaten to cut his dick off?”

“It was more of a promise than a threat,” Allison says.

Stiles smirks. “Wish I could’ve seen it,” he says. “Next time you do something like that, for God’s sake get it on tape.” He finishes off his yogurt and says, “Let’s finish eating. We need to get to the hotel.”
Stiles calls Chris on the way to the hotel to see where he is. The hunter is just finishing up with the last lecture of the day. He sounds tired and grouchy. Stiles feels a little bad, knowing he’s caused Chris a lot of trouble over the past week. “I’ll make it up to you,” he says. “What plans, if any, do you have for tonight?”

“Nothing, really,” Chris says. “Julien and I talked about going to get a beer, but first we have to bring the elders back to my place, since they’re still sleeping there despite my objections.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. “I’ve got a few things to do. Will you keep the elders at your place until I arrive?”

There’s a pause. “What are you planning?” Chris asks.

“Do you really want to know?” Stiles asks.

There’s a click. Chris has hung up.

“Nice talking to you, too,” Stiles says into the blank air, and then tucks his phone away. He’s going to need to charge it soon, and has no idea when he’s going to have time to do that. If everything goes to plan – which seems almost laughably unlikely – he should be able to get back to the house and get a few hours of sleep before the big day. “Hey, Derek, did you get those papers from Kolenberg?”

Derek blinks at him. “I hadn’t checked,” he says, but pulls out his phone. “I’ve had other things to worry about,” he reminds Stiles.

“Hey, I wasn’t judging you,” Stiles says.

Derek taps the screen a few times. “Yes. He’s cautioning that we’ll need at least two witnesses and to get them notarized.”

“No problem,” Stiles says. “We’ll have to get them printed out later.” He whistles a little as he turns the car into the hotel parking lot. It’s just the two of them, Erica, and Ian. Stiles opted to leave the hunters at the Argent household, to make things easier on everyone. Scott and Allison were sent back to the den, ostensibly to check on Jake’s parents, but also so they could have a little private time. Stiles has been seeing them give each other increasingly desperate looks over the past few hours. He doesn’t think they’ve gone so long without having sex ever since they first started. And he knows that having been separated, they’re pushing back their impulse to reaffirm their bond. Besides, they deserve it.

Fortunately, nobody questioned why he was splitting the pack up thusly. To be fair, Erica hardly would have let him out of her sight right now anyway. Which doesn’t help Stiles’ impulses. He’s been watching her nervously chew on her lower lip for the entire drive to the hotel. He gives himself a little shake, brushing those thoughts away. There’s things that need to be done.

“Okay, Ian, time to be inconspicuous,” he says. The creature glances over at him, and then there’s a ripple and the strange popping noise of air rushing in to fill a space that had previously been occupied. Stiles adjusts his gaze downward to see a wasp sitting on the seat of the car. He gives a little shudder despite himself; he’s not a big fan of stinging insects. “Beware of people bearing newspapers,” he says, and gets out of the car. Ian buzzes over and then lands on his shoulder. “Oh, thanks,” Stiles says, but they go into the hotel anyway.

It’s evening now, but there are still plenty of people on duty. He spends half an hour chatting with a nice young woman about what they’re going to need at the closing ceremonies tomorrow. He knows
it can be done because all he really needs is the same setup that they used to display the “memorial for the fallen” at the dinner the second night. So it should be simple. But the woman is nice and very computer-savvy so they wind up striking up a conversation that becomes increasingly difficult to get out of.

Erica finally puts a stop to it when she loops an arm around Stiles’ waist and whines, “Honeeeeeeey, when are we leaving, I’m borrrrrrred,” and bites his ear. The woman they’ve been talking to flushes a shade of delicate pink and hastily makes her exit.

“You’re a terrible person,” Stiles tells Erica as they go back out to the car.

“Me? Bitch was hitting on my man,” Erica says indignantly.

“No way,” Stiles says. “I’m wearing a turtleneck. It is statistically impossible to hit on somebody wearing a turtleneck in the summer.”

Derek lets out a quiet snort of laughter.

“Which reminds me, now that we’re out of the public eye,” Stiles says, and immediately strips the offending garment off, dropping it into the back seat of the Jeep. He rubs absently at the bruises on his neck and then stops himself. That’s a nervous gesture he doesn’t need to add to his collection. “And you, stop trying to rile me up,” he adds to Erica. “It’s hard for me to be focused when you keep reminding me of all the sex we could be having.”

Erica raises her hands in surrender. “We could be having it. That’s all I’m saying. We could be having it right now –”

“I have a feeling that some of the occupants of the car might object,” Stiles says. “Which also reminds me, Ian, shift back to being Peter. I get nervous when I can’t keep an eye on you.”

Moments later, Ian is back in that form and seated in the backseat of the Jeep. He reaches out and puts his seat belt on. “Where to, fearless leader?” he asks.

“Back to the Argent house,” Stiles says. “It’s your time to shine. You remember everything we talked about?”

Ian nods complacently. “It won’t be a problem.”

Stiles worries that even a wasp is a little too noticeable to bring with him into the Argent household, so the creature transforms itself into a centipede and then crawls into his pocket. Stiles makes a mental note to burn this jacket when he’s done with it, because centipedes, ugh. “Can’t you transform into something cute and cuddly?” he asks the pocket. “Someone out there has to be afraid of a dwarf bunny or something, right?”

In response, the centipede makes the creepiest chittering noise that Stiles has ever heard, a noise that he’s pretty sure no real centipede could ever make.

“And I’ll never sleep again,” he says. “Thanks for that. I’m sending you my therapy bills. Seriously.” He kneels down just inside the Argent house. The centipede crawls out of his pocket, across the floor, and underneath the closet door. “Watch your ass, though, because if Victoria finds you, she will squash you like the motherfucking bug you are.”

That being accomplished, he heads into the living room with Erica and Derek behind him. The three elders are arranged in various chairs, drinking tea and talking with each other. Stiles doesn’t bother to ask about what. Chris and Julien are there, as well as the teenagers. Chris’ eyes narrow as Stiles
enters the room. “Where’s Allison?” he asks.

“She and Scott went back to the house for a little while,” Stiles says, and Chris makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. “Don’t worry, I’m sure they’re eating apple pie and playing Parcheesi.”

Derek mutters something that sounds suspiciously like, “Is there such a thing as strip Parcheesi?”

“Apple pie sounds good,” Erica says, perking up.

“What happened to the monster?” Julien asks. “Did everything go according to plan?”

Stiles nods. “As promised. We took care of it.”

Julien looks relieved. Chris looks worried. He knows as well as anybody that the definition of ‘taking care’ of something doesn’t always mean what one thinks it does. When Stiles just gives him an innocent look, he shakes his head and says nothing.

“So,” Stiles says to the elders, “does this mean I get the special gold star for being the most promising of the hunter recruits? Or does the alpha-ness render me ineligible?”

The woman gives him a hard stare. “You may think you’re very clever – ”

“Oh, I know I’m very clever – ”

“But in our world, you’ll find out sooner rather than later that you’ll get what’s coming to you.”

“That’s funny,” Stiles says, “because I was about to say the same thing to you.” He shrugs. “The Conclave is over tomorrow, so I’m not going to worry about it. But if any of the three of you ever set foot on my territory again, we will have an extremely different discussion. And if that means the end of my alliance with Chris, so be it.” It wouldn’t, he’s pretty sure, but he figures that it’ll help Chris if he says that in front of his cousin.

The woman just gives a haughty sniff and rises from her chair. “I’m going to retire for the evening,” she says. “Good night,” she adds, directing this at the two Argent men. When she gets up, the other two elders do as well. A few minutes later, they’ve all gone up the stairs. Stiles breathes a little sigh of relief.

“Now that they’re gone,” he says, keeping his voice low, “I need a little help with something.”

Chris seems somewhat apprehensive at this. Julien, however, gives Stiles a little smile and says, “What do you need?”

Stiles lets some of his confidence melt away. He rubs at the bruises on his throat and looks, for the moment, like a helpless teenager. “When I said I had taken care of it . . . I may have, uh, exaggerated because I didn’t want the elders to know. The truth is that it shifted after I had it cornered and disappeared.”

“So it’s still out there?” Julien asks, his voice rising in alarm.

“Yeah. I think we had better try to find it.”

Chris sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “I guess we always knew there was a possibility it would be able to shift and get out of it. I’m honestly not sure how we could keep it contained. If we tied it up while it was in a human form, it could just change into something else. We don’t even know if it
can be killed, given how many forms it can take . . .”

“First things first,” Julien says. “We have to find it.”

They go out and search the forest for hours. Scott and Allison join them, coming from the den, and Victoria and Julien’s wife Nicole help as well. Stiles makes sure to stick close to Chris and Julien at all times, so they’ll be able to vouch for his whereabouts. The wolves are ranging further out. Derek is a little loath to do so, wanting to keep Stiles right by his side at all times, but he lets Stiles shoo him away a few times for form’s sake. This gives Chris an opportunity to ask him a question that’s obviously bothering him, if the number of sidelong glances the hunter gives him is any indication.

“What is it?” Stiles finally asks, waiting until Julien and Sam have gone to investigate a shadowy clump of trees.

Even now, Chris hesitates. “Earlier, when you were detailing your plan . . . you said something about Kate. Something that . . . bothers me.”

Stiles lets out a breath. So it’s going to be this talk. “Okay. What, specifically?”

“That Derek was afraid of her. Not of what she did to his family, but her. That if he focused on that, things wouldn’t burn.” Chris shakes his head. “They didn’t even know each other.”

“Yes, they did,” Stiles says, and leaves it at that.

“Derek was at school – ”

“Not during the summers. The Hale house fire was in September. It was just after he had left to go back to school. Didn’t you know that?” To this day, Stiles has wondered why Kate didn’t do it during the summer, when everyone was home. He can’t believe she spared Derek out of any sense of compassion or feelings for him. Not after the way she treated him. Presumably, she simply didn’t have enough of the plans put together until after he had left.

“I did, but – ” Chris makes a frustrated noise. “The way you talked about it, it’s like they had some sort of . . . relationship. But that doesn’t make any sense. Derek would have been way too young back then. He was only what, fifteen?”

“That was Derek’s age at the time of the fire, yes,” Stiles states, his voice flat. He neither confirms nor denies any of Chris’ speculations beyond that.

Chris looks at him for a few moments. His face is pale in the moonlight. “Jesus,” he says under his breath. “Jesus, Stiles. Tell me it wasn’t like that. She was my sister, for fuck’s sake.”

Stiles says nothing.

“Jesus.” Chris paces in a small, tight circle. He seems at a complete loss for words. “I always sort of thought she might have had a source on the inside. But, but Derek would have just been a child, and she – ” His voice breaks off abruptly. “I’m amazed he didn’t kill us all.”

“Derek blames himself,” Stiles says. “He always has and maybe he always will. I blame Kate. But Kate’s dead. There’s nothing that any of us can do about it now.” He looks over at Chris, sees the sick, weary expression on his face. He thinks back to his demands for reparation, less than twenty-four hours past now. “Chris, you didn’t know,” he says, trying to keep his voice gentle. “You had no idea, so just . . . please try to forget you ever knew about this. It can’t be changed. And the fewer people that know about it, the less . . . horrible it is for Derek. So don’t say anything to him. Okay?”
After a long moment, Chris nods. He stares into the distance for a minute before gesturing abruptly and saying, “I’m going to go check out that . . .” He doesn’t finish the sentence before walking away, which is obviously because there’s nothing for him to check out and he just wants a minute to compose himself. Stiles lets it go. He just stands there and breathes for a minute before heading over to rejoin Sam and Julien as they search the forest for a monster who won’t be found.

It’s getting close to midnight before Chris finally calls a halt to things. All of them are exhausted; Stiles is swaying on his feet.

The Argent house is dark and silent when they get back. Ian has come and gone. But nobody says anything about checking on the elders; the adults all assume that they’re asleep in their guest rooms. Chris frowns at Stiles and asks, almost reluctantly, “Do you want to stay here tonight?”

“No offense, Chris, but no,” Stiles says. “I’d rather be home.”

Chris nods a little. “I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

Stiles and the pack head back to the den. He’s exhausted, and just wants to get some sleep. First he prints out the documents that Kolenberg sent and heads out to the pit. Derek stays with him, a silent shadow. “Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Argent,” he says, forcing false cheer into his voice. “Had any thoughts about the paperwork I need you to sign?”

“No? All day and not a single thought about the paperwork?” Stiles asks.

Cruella deVille squares her jaw and glares at him. “We can’t let our son go live with a werewolf pack. We’d be a laughingstock!”

“Am I asking you to sign custodial rights to me? No. I’m asking you sign him over to your cousin. Tell everyone that since Allison came out so kick-ass, you’re sending Jake to live with Chris and Victoria to see if they can make some improvements on him. Hell, I don’t care what you tell people. But you’re not getting out of that pit until you sign these.” He rattles the papers at them.

“They’d never hold up in a court of law,” Henry says, through gritted teeth.

“Oh, please,” Stiles says. “What are you going to do, run and tattle to the cops about how I coerced you into signing them? Sue to get custodial rights back? That really would make you a laughingstock.” He takes on a high-pitched, whining tone. “Wahhhh, the mean eighteen-year-old alpha made us sign legal paperwork.”

Henry is slowly turning a dull shade of red. “When we get out of here – ”

“You’re going to what, Argent?” Stiles asks. “You’re on my property. On my territory. There’s two of you and five of us.”

“We’ll tell Chris what you did, and you can kiss your little truce goodbye,” Henry snaps.

“Please. You think Chris doesn’t know exactly where you are?” Stiles says.

This takes the couple aback. “He – he wouldn’t leave us here!”

“Newsflash for you, brain trust – you got yourself into this mess, and Chris doesn’t give enough of a shit about you to get you out of it. Sure, if I was torturing you or planning to kill you, he’d intervene. But all I want to do is get a kid that you don’t even like out of your house before you damage him
more than you already have. A kid that he’s related to, no matter how distantly, and Chris takes family very seriously. You know how fucking awful you’ve been to that kid? Even fucking Julien knows you’re down here and the terms of your release, and he hasn’t said shit to me about letting you go.”

The pair of them are silent.

“No one’s coming to fucking rescue you, jackass,” Stiles says. He rattles the papers again. “These are your only ticket out. Think it over.”

He gets up and heads back towards the house. In truth, it doesn’t bother him a bit that they’re still refusing to sign. He wants to keep them down there until the conclave is officially over. Sure, Chris and Julien know their whereabouts, but that doesn’t mean Stiles wants the two of them riling up all the unrelated hunters with their story. Jake’s parents will be staying in the pit until the rest of the hunters are out of town.

Derek is still behind him as Stiles goes into the house and leans against the wall, exhausted. “Do you want to try to sleep?” Derek asks. He knows Stiles and his coping mechanisms.

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Fuck it, I have to at least try.”

They head upstairs. Scott and Allison are already curled up in the cushions. Erica’s in the shower. She comes out a few minutes later, completely naked, and settles into the pile after shifting into her wolf form. Stiles crawls underneath a blanket and rests his head against the bulk of Derek’s side, with Erica pressed against his back and his arm draped over Allison’s waist.

Almost as soon as he’s closed his eyes, he can feel the suffocation start to set in. His eyes snap back open and he takes a few deep breaths. Derek gives a low rumble, indicating that he’s heard the spike in Stiles’ heart rate. “I’m okay,” Stiles says. “Go to sleep, fuzzbucket.”

Another rumble, almost a growl, but Derek closes his eyes anyway. Stiles lets out a sigh and rolls over, wrapping both arms around Erica so he has something to hold onto. She snuggles closer. He closes his eyes again and starts doing some of the deep breathing exercise Gwen has taught him. About five, maybe ten minutes, pass in silence. The darkness is practically tangible to him, it’s pressing against him so heavily.

“Hey,” he says softly. “Anyone still awake?”

“Mm?” Allison murmurs sleepily, and Stiles can feel Derek’s ears prick up.

“Does – does anyone mind if I turn a lamp on?”

“No, course not,” Allison says, yawning. “Go ahead.”

Stiles squirms out of the pile and heads over to a small lamp that sits in the corner of the room for this exact purpose. It’s got a dark green shade, so it doesn’t cast a lot of light. He turns it on and then crawls back into bed. He can still feel his heart clanging around in his ribcage. Derek’s eyes are still open; he’s obviously concerned. But Stiles is determined to get some sleep. He’s so tired that he can barely keep his eyes open. He doesn’t want to take one of his sleeping pills. They still haven’t found one that allows him to be competent the next day.

So he recites his multiplication tables in his head and stares at the ceiling and does breathing exercises and waits, and waits, and waits. Derek’s breathing eventually becomes slow and even. Stiles is comforted by the rise and fall of his flank, the sound of Derek’s heartbeat right against his ear and Erica’s underneath the palm of his hand. Just as he’s starting to fall asleep, the breeze outside
blows a few leaves into the window and he nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he mutters, and gets up. He can bake for a while. Baking always calms him down, and they’re already out of cookies. Erica had said something about making apple pie. He’s actually not a big fan of it, but he’s got a good apple-cinnamon muffin recipe.

Peeling and chopping apples is methodical and does calm him down somewhat. (He doesn’t use a corer. Those are for wimps. Besides, they waste too much apple, in his opinion, and despite Derek’s platinum credit card, Stiles grew up on a small-town-cop budget and doesn’t like wasting food.) He coats them in cinnamon and sugar and turns to the other ingredients.

His eyes are actually sagging as he measures flour half a cup at a time. But it’s wrong. The dough doesn’t have the right consistency. He’s made them enough times that he’s sure. He got something wrong somewhere. Counted wrong or forgot an ingredient. He rubs both hands over his face and tries to remember what he had done. How much flour did it call for, two and a quarter cups? He tries to recheck the recipe, but his vision is blurry. That’s when he realizes that he’s crying. Little snuffly sobs that are escaping him a little bit at a time.

He presses a hand against his face and tries to get back in control, but he’s just too tired. He’s still just standing there, leaning on the counter and crying, when he hears a noise behind him. Instinctively, he turns and whips the nearest weapon – the spatula he’s holding – at the intruder. Of course, it’s Derek. He catches it in one hand and then sets it on the counter. Derek doesn’t stop to ask if he’s okay, or what’s wrong, questions that have answers that are far too obvious.

“I messed up the muffins,” Stiles chokes out, as if it matters. “I don’t know why I got so upset. I’m just so fucking tired and I can’t sleep – ”

Derek doesn’t say anything, because Derek’s really not a talkative person. He just walks over and wraps his arms around Stiles, lets Stiles press his face into Derek’s shoulder as they both sink to the floor. He pulls Stiles into his lap and cradles him close, like he’s sheltering him from the world. Stiles just leans into him and gets the hysterics out of his system, letting one sob after another out into Derek’s chest. Derek just holds him, rubbing his back and smoothing down his hair.

Finally, he’s gotten past the worst of it. Exhaustion overcomes him again and he leans against Derek, too tired even to move. He thinks he would be quite content to sleep on the kitchen floor. “The apples should go in the fridge,” he mutters.

“Nobody cares,” Derek says. He’s not about to let Stiles get up and start baking again, now that his body is finally relaxed and properly limp against Derek’s shoulder.

“I care,” Stiles replies, and promptly passes out.

Several hours later, he wakes abruptly when his phone rings. He shakes himself awake, realizing that he had indeed fallen soundly asleep on the kitchen floor. Someone else has been up, though, because there’s a blanket draped over himself and Derek. He rubs one hand over his face and looks around. Someone has cleaned up the kitchen. He can smell coffee.

He’s still trying to untangle himself when he hears Allison’s voice. “Hi, Dad . . . no, he’s not up yet.” There’s a long pause. “Uh huh. Okay, well . . . I’ll see if he’s awake.”

She comes into the kitchen, holding onto his phone. Stiles has managed to crawl to his feet at this point and is pouring himself a mug of coffee. He motions for her to wait half a second while he downs the first half of it. Derek is stirring, but not one hundred percent awake. Stiles takes the phone from her and says, “Good morning.”
“The elders are gone,” Chris says without preamble. His voice takes on a sarcastic tone that’s almost caustic as he continues, “I don’t suppose you could possibly know anything about that.”

Stiles yawns. “How could I? I was with you all yesterday night until I came back here. Electric fence was turned on and hasn’t been off since. You can check. The system logs that shit.”

“Stiles . . .” Chris says, in that ‘I’m not joking around’ tone he has.

“What?” Stiles asks. “They brought the monster. When I talked to it yesterday, we had a chat about how it didn’t appreciate being kept in a cage for decades. Seems to me it decided to take some revenge. Independent of anything to do with me.”

“I don’t believe you,” Chris says.

“You don’t have to,” Stiles says. “The important thing is that I’ve set it all up so your hands are clean. I’ll see you at the hotel.”

He hangs up and wobbles to his feet, and checks the clock on the oven. He hadn’t gotten to sleep until around two in the morning. Now it’s seven thirty. Five and a half hours seems downright generous compared to what he’s been averaging lately. He finishes his mug of coffee, pours himself a second one, and takes his Adderall. “Okay, boys and girls,” he says. “Showtime.”

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Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I can't believe this story's almost over. *sobs*

Fun fact: Stiles' little announcement on the bulletin board at the beginning of this chapter is the first thing I wrote for this fic. =D

Upon arriving to the hotel and going to the hallway where the event board has been residing, the hunters find that the list of the day’s events has erased and replaced with a handwritten sign that reads thusly:

9 AM: Why Chris Argent has a Truce with the Local Alpha
A Q&A and Roundtable Discussion
Open minds only – everyone else fuck off
Yes there will be werewolves there
Try to keep your shirt on. (And your pants, ladies.)
No weapons permitted.

12 PM: Closing Ceremonies
Presuming we’re all still alive.

Chris arrives with Julien, Sam, and Jake. He looks at the sign. He looks at Stiles, who’s been waiting outside the lecture room with his pack. Stiles just gives him that innocent grin. “Stiles,” Chris says, “I’m going to throttle you.”

Stiles just rubs his hands together and says, “This is gonna be awesome.”

Everyone else groans. Chris’ glare becomes even more annoyed. He grabs Stiles by the arm and hauls him off to one side. Derek lets out a low growl to protest this treatment, but Chris is unfazed. He shoves Stiles up against a wall and says, “You want me to get up in front of all the hunters and explain why I have a truce with you. Now. When the elders are missing and I have every reason to suspect you’re involved. If I do that, when they don’t show up at the closing ceremonies, we’ll both be lynched.”

“Oh, they’ll be at the closing ceremonies,” Stiles says. “Still in one piece, even. Or three pieces, I guess. Since, you know, there’s three of them.”
“Stiles . . .” Chris says. “I need to know what you did.”

Stiles considers for a few minutes, and then nods and gives Chris a brief summary of what’s happened over the last twenty-four hours, and what’s going to happen over the next several hours. Chris listens in silence and finally says, “You really outdid yourself this time.”

“I’m going to choose to take that as a compliment,” Stiles says. “Now, come on, your adoring public awaits.”

Chris gives him a dirty look but nods and heads for the door. Stiles follows him, joining the others where they’ve been waiting.

“We good?” Derek asks, and Stiles nods.

Sam rubs his hand over the back of his head and says, “I don’t get it. By writing the sign like this, you’re pretty much guaranteeing that all the people who don’t have open minds are going to show up to cause trouble.”

“Of course,” Stiles says. “Why do you think I wrote it that way?”

When Sam just looks vaguely perplexed, Allison pats him on the arm and says, “Sometimes, you’ve just gotta let Stiles be Stiles.”

“If you say so,” Sam says, and they go into the room. Stiles has set everything up in the largest of the panel rooms and made sure that there are enough chairs available for everyone who attended the conclave. That’s a good thing, because it looks like pretty much everyone is there. He even sees Veruca Salt sitting off to the side, filing her nails and looking bored. Voices raise as soon as Chris and the others enter.

There’s a long table up front with four chairs. Chris sighs, pulls one out for Allison, and then sits down next to her. Stiles is next to Allison, with Derek on his other side. Erica takes a seat by the back so she can make sure their exit remains open, and Scott sits down by the side door for the same reason. Everyone is still shouting, so Stiles stands up and raises his hands to try to get attention. The noise dies down to low muttering.

“Okay, guys,” he says, “sorry about the change of schedule. But it looked like we weren’t going to be able to end the Conclave without having this little meet-and-greet. There are questions you guys want answered. And you know what? That seems fair to me. If I were in your shoes, I would have questions, too. So. First things first. My name is Stiles Stilinski, and you’ve all seen me around this week, but what you didn’t know is that I’m the alpha of the Beacon Hills pack.”

Needless to say, there’s a huge uproar at this. Half the people leave their seats, and Stiles has to shout to be heard over everyone. “Let me finish, okay? I promise it’s not as bad as it sounds!”

Enough people in the audience are reasonable that they manage to get things settled down, although the atmosphere crackles with tension. Stiles lets out a breath. “Okay, so,” he says, “as you know, Chris and I have a truce. We’ve helped each other out when bad things come to Beacon Hills. And you’re all a little or a lot wary of that. That’s fair! I realized last night that you guys have every right to be concerned about this because you’re coming in on the tag end of a story that’s been going on for years. Because Chris and I did plenty of circling and snarling when we first met. It’s taken almost two years to get to the point where we actually sort of trust each other, at least most of the time. This isn’t something that happened overnight. So for those of you who are questioning Chris’ judgment – well, I’ll let him defend himself. But for those of you who are wondering why the hell I’m here, the answer is because I’m trying to help out. Because Chris knew that you guys have a lot of incorrect
information in your playbook. He invited me to attend the conclave to see if I could help set the record straight on some things.”

Chris gives Stiles an incredulous look, wondering exactly where this version of events is coming from. Derek rubs a hand over his face and trains his gaze on the notepad he’s started scribbling in.

“And I mean it, I’m good for it, so for a show of faith before we even start this little discussion about truces with werewolves, here are some important facts you got wrong about werewolves! Not all werewolves want to be alphas. In fact, most betas would rather stay that way. It’s for the same basic reason that most humans don’t want to be the president. It’s a fuck of a lot of work, and people are always gunning for you. Plus being an alpha is really, really hard. A lot of people would really suck at it. And if you aren’t a good alpha, you drive your pack away, and then you’re not an alpha at all.”

The crowd is settling down somewhat, since a lot of them are genuinely interested in what he has to say. Some people are still grumbling, but they’re keeping it to themselves, and a few are quietly watchful, waiting for the opportune moment. Stiles is glad he’s wearing his chain mail, although he supposes that it will only protect him so much.

“Packs aren’t always looking to expand. There’s a limit on how much any alpha can handle. Packs of made wolves rarely have more than a dozen people. Born wolf families can be bigger, but often have more than one alpha to compensate. So if you find a pack of ten to twelve werewolves and they all seem to get along relatively well, that’s a pack you can rely on to be relatively stable. A smaller pack is still recruiting. A larger pack is volatile, because an alpha just can’t spread his attention around enough and some members of the pack will start to feel neglected.”

“Small packs where the members don’t get along are the most dangerous, because if they’re looking to expand, there’s going to be disagreement about how to recruit and who to choose. But the good news for you guys is that you can probably rely on a pack like that to implode without any outside assistance, and so you just have to wait around to pick up the pieces. A larger pack with disagreements will splinter, and whoever picks up the scraps, that’s who’s going to want to become an alpha. That’s who you have to watch out for.”

He talks for another five minutes or so before he finally says, “And with that, I’m going to let Chris take over, since this is his party. The floor is yours.”

Chris gives him a look which clearly conveys how much he wants to beat the shit out of Stiles. Stiles just sits back down and then looks over to see what Derek is drawing. It’s a little doodle of Stiles in his red hoodie and a pack of wolves being chased by a bunch of peasants with pitchforks and spades. Stiles can’t help but grin.

“Okay, then . . .” Chris clears his throat. “Yes, Stiles and I have an alliance. It’s a working relationship. A . . . work in progress. And this is not to say that there aren’t times when I’d like to take him out back and shoot him. Like now, for instance,” he says, and there’s a ripple of genuine laughter. “And he’s right in that it’s not an agreement we arrived at overnight. But when something is threatening innocent people, I’m going to take care of it, and . . .” He gives Stiles a look that clearly implies he’s really annoyed that he’s having to say this out loud. “I trust Stiles to have my back while I do so. And vice versa.”

“But them just being here causes trouble,” someone in the audience shouts.

“And me being here causes trouble,” Chris says. “See those bruises he’s sporting? That’s because the conclave brought a monster with it. So yeah, sometimes trouble comes looking for him. Sometimes it comes looking for all of us. Quid pro quo.”
“Even if that’s true,” someone else argues, “there are better ways to deal with a werewolf infestation than making friends with them.”

“Such as what?” Chris asks coldly. “I will remind you that I am an Argent and I follow the Code set down by my ancestors. Stiles may be an obnoxious little shit, but as of yet he hasn’t done anything to merit a death sentence.”

“And hey, if I ever do,” Stiles chips in, “think of how much easier it’ll be for Chris to carry out, being in that I trust him and he knows me and all – well, half – my secrets and stuff.”

“Friends close and enemies closer, hm?” Mikael says from his seat in the front row.

“Exactly,” Stiles says, and Mikael makes a face like he considers this to be a pretty good argument.

“They’re turning others – ” someone protests.

“With consent,” Chris says. “I can’t do anything about that.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Chris gives the audience a cold look. “Won’t.”

A low murmur greets this.

“As long as he only turns people with full consent and he keeps his wolves in line, then nothing he does warrants execution,” Chris says. “And I don’t give a damn what any of you think of that. That’s the Code. I don’t ask all of you to follow it. But I do ask that you respect it when you’re on my territory. And frankly, if any of you would be willing to kill a bunch of teenagers who have never seriously endangered any human just because they’re part a werewolf pack, you can get off my territory right now and never come back.”

“It would be easier to – ”

Chris slams his hand down on the table. “It’s not about what’s easy,” he snaps. “It’s never been about what’s easy. You want easy, go get a job as an accountant somewhere. I don’t give a shit about what’s easy. I will do what’s right. Do you think that I haven’t carefully weighed the consequences of this alliance? Of course I have. But you weren’t here when faeries were stealing children and Stiles and his pack helped me get them back. You weren’t here a sorcerer showed up and put a spell on the residents of this city and Stiles was willing to sacrifice his life to save them. You weren’t here when another alpha showed up and targeted my family because of a decades-old grudge and Stiles’ entire pack took to watching over my house in shifts to make sure we’d be all right. So you can all shut the hell up.”

Stiles is looking at Chris in surprise. “I didn’t know you knew about that,” he says.

“Of course I knew about that,” Chris says. “Do you think I’m an idiot? You were following my wife around town.”

“Well, yeah, but – ” Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his head, embarrassed. “Who would I trade recipes with if something happened to her?”

Chris gives him a narrow-eyed look. “How can someone as smart as you be so stupid?” he asks.

“I’m going to hope that’s a rhetorical question – ”
Derek reaches over and silently puts a hand over Stiles’ mouth.

The audience has watched this display of almost affectionate bickering in something like shock. Chris rubs a hand over his face and says, “Are there any other questions?”

A middle-aged Hispanic man stands up and says, “How can you possibly justify what happened to the alpha pack hunters?”

Chris’ jaw sets in an angry expression, but he takes a deep breath and stays calm. “For two reasons. The first is that, although I assured them that Stiles and his pack had done nothing to deserve the death sentence, they ambushed them in the forest and opened fire with automatic weapons. At that point, what became of them was no longer my concern. They had written their own ending. If I didn’t step in to defend my father from prosecution when he broke the Code, I can’t imagine why they thought I might defend them. Secondly, I warned Vivien very specifically that Stiles had close ties with local law enforcement and a propensity to get people arrested for valid reasons. I told her exactly what he would do if she pulled something like that, and she didn’t heed my warning.”

“Of course, we’ll have to take your word on that,” the man says sarcastically, “since Vivien is dead.”

“I don’t give a damn if you believe me or not,” Chris says. “That’s what happened.”

“As for Vivien being dead,” Stiles says, flicking a glance at Chris, who gives him a nod to continue, “both she and Tyrone were killed by members of the alpha pack, not by anyone in my pack or under my protection. Vivien was killed by Kali, the previous alpha pack leader, and Tyrone was killed by Justin, the current one. Now, I’m not stupid enough to tell you guys not to hunt the alpha pack. They’ve got their reasons for killing, but they are killers. But it’s probably worth pointing out that both Vivien and Tyrone were killed in self-defense. Tyrone pointed a gun at Justin’s lupa, so Justin killed him. And Vivien shot Kali three times before Kali managed to take her down.”

“But again, we’ll have to take your word for it,” the man says.

“Oh, get off it,” Mikael speaks up abruptly, his voice layered with impatience. “If you don’t plan to believe a word that comes out of their mouths, why bother asking them for an explanation at all?”

The man scowls but sits back down, folding his arms over his chest.

“Anything else?” Chris asks.

“Do you seriously think that this is sustainable long-term?” someone calls out.

“I don’t see any reason why not,” Chris says.

He doesn’t elaborate, so Stiles does. “Not only that, but there’s no reason it won’t work in other places. Let’s face it, guys, there are monsters out there. A werewolf makes a damned good ally. We’re tougher than you guys; we can take more damage. That’s not supposed to be an insult; it just is. And there’s no point in making enemies of us. Even for those of you who don’t follow the code – it’s a simple time management issue. If you waste your time going after every werewolf you come across, you won’t have time to get the monsters that are really under the bed.”

“But it won’t work, come on,” someone says. “I mean, the very nature of a werewolf – ”

“Oh, here we go,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes.

“It’s not like they’re going to take orders.”
“Uh, no,” Stiles says. “Are you familiar with the definition of the word ‘alliance’? I’m not saying werewolves are going to be your slaves or your cannon fodder. I’m just saying that a lot of the time, they’ve got as much reason as you to want the monsters on their territory gone.”

“So you’re saying that Chris Argent treats you like an equal?” someone asks, with enough disdain in their voice that it makes Derek shift and snarl quietly. Stiles just sighs and decides to let Chris field that one.

The hunter is frowning at the audience. “Stiles is young and inexperienced,” he says, “but he also has connections I don’t and knowledge of things outside my realm of expertise. So yeah, I wouldn’t say it’s out of the bounds of reason to say I treat him like my equal.”

“But they’re just animals,” someone shouts in a tone of outrage.

“Ohhhh boy,” Stiles says, as every single member of his pack stiffens and tries to hold back their snarls. “Okay, guys. You want to have that discussion? Okay. I’m not going to deny that we have some animal instincts. I can’t exactly not notice it when the big guy here rubs his cheek against my hair six times a day so nobody’ll forget that we belong to each other. Sure. We have some animal behaviors. Big fucking deal. Find me another animal that goes to high school and drives a Jeep and bakes cookies and has to worry about the delicate balance between family and pack. Find me that animal, and I’ll concede that we’re just animals.

“In the meantime, maybe you should just consider the fact that we’re all animals. And then try to figure out why you have such a fucking problem with animals. Are you going to tell me that nobody in this room has ever had a pet cat or gerbil? That none of you use dogs for hunting or tracking? Oh, but apply it to werewolves and it’s suddenly the most derogatory term that you can think of? Oh, no, we’re animals! Say it ain’t so!

“That’s not even to mention the fact that the two – ” Stiles stops and considers. “The three most remorselessly evil people I have ever had the misfortune to know were all one hundred percent down-home humans. Are you going to tell me that none of you have ever known anyone like that? Because I just won’t fucking believe you. Monsters can come in many different skins. So why do you even give a fuck that we have animal behaviors?”

He’s scored valuable points; he knows it because the audience has gone quiet and several of the louder detractors are shifting uncomfortably in their seats. He also knows it because he looks down at Derek’s sketchpad and sees that his lupa is now sketching Stiles with a megaphone on a box labeled ‘soap’. He grins despite himself.

The man who asked about the alpha pack hunters gets up and says angrily, “You all can be brainwashed by this glib asshole if you want, but I’m not having it. I will never work with a werewolf.”

“Oh, sure,” Stiles says. “So you’re saying if you were dangling on the edge of a cliff and a werewolf offered you a hand up, you’d fall to your death instead?”

“That’s a spurious question,” the man sneers, “because no werewolf would ever do that.”

“Well, okay,” Stiles says, “but that’s not because they’re werewolves. It’s just because you’re an asshole.”

Several people burst into startled laughter. Stiles lets it hang for a minute, watching the man turn red. Then he turns and storms out of the room without another word.
Stiles lets him go. “Look, we’re not going to convince all of you. That’s fine. You’re all entitled to your own opinion. But I’m looking at the long game here. Every person I can convince here that maybe, just maybe, not all werewolves are going to eventually lose their shit and start killing people, is a life I might save later down the line. And not just the life of that wolf – but the life of the hunter, too. Because we can work together to take down the bigger monsters. We can.

“And I know a lot of you are thinking that werewolves go after hunters too, and yeah, that’s true. I can’t argue with that. Because we’re all in this mentality now, this mentality where we have to strike first because if we don’t, you guys will. Because we’re all in this kill-or-be-killed mindset, and yeah, we do have some animal instincts, sure. But can you really blame us for wanting to live?”

There’s a very loud silence after this, and then Wednesday starts clapping. Sam quickly joins her, and before long there’s a smattering of applause from the entire audience. Not everyone joins in, but Stiles estimates they have the majority, maybe as much as eighty percent. Stiles flushes a little pink with his success and looks down at the table, glancing over to see how Derek’s sketch is coming along.

Chris clears his throat and says, “If we’ve answered all your questions . . .”

It seems that they have. Chris manages to excuse them without too much more talking. Stiles checks his watch. It’s just about ten o’clock in the morning. Plenty of time. “Okay,” he says, as the pack clusters around the long table up front. “Let’s go rescue the elders.”

“You know where they are?” Julien asks.

Stiles turns to him and delivers the explanation that he had rehearsed. He could tell the truth, but decides against it. He likes Julien – but he doesn’t trust him one hundred percent, not the way he trusts Chris. “The monster had a car. I know that because I woke up in the trunk of it earlier. The Hale house, in addition to the formidable security, also has several exterior cameras. That’s so we can be alerted if anyone shows up to make trouble. So when Chris called me this morning to let me know the elders were missing, I figured he must have used the car to transport them. I pulled the footage and that got me the license plate, so I had my dad put out an APB on the car. He just texted me a few minutes ago to let me know they’d located it.”

Julien looks around somewhat nervously and says, “Shouldn’t we bring, I don’t know, everybody? We’ve got the best hunters in the world here – ”

“If we tell people that the elders are missing, there’ll be a panic,” Chris says, shaking his head. “Plus I doubt they’d appreciate people asking questions about what this monster is, where it came from, and why it wanted them so badly. Let’s keep this under wraps.”

Julien nods, then frowns and shifts uncomfortably. “If you guys all disappear, people might start to ask questions . . . I think I’d better stay, just to make sure no riots break out. Take Sam along with you. He can provide backup.”

Chris studies his cousin, then nods and says, “Okay. We’ll handle this.”

As Stiles heads out to the parking lot with Chris on his heels, he says, “He totally knows, doesn’t he.”

“He at least suspects,” Chris says, “and he’s made a conscious decision that he doesn’t want the details. That if he doesn’t know for sure, he doesn’t have to decide what to do with the information.”

“Fair enough,” Stiles says. “Meet me at the warehouse.”
He hasn’t been to the warehouse much since he killed Sebastian Stone there. Since the house was built and there’s plenty of empty land around it, that’s where they spend the full moons. Derek still owns the building, but there are too many bad memories associated with it now. It stands clean and empty, and so it was an ideal place for this little incident to happen.

“Okay,” Stiles says, crouching outside the door. “Here’s how we’re going to do this. I’ve got Elder Bitchy McBitcherson. Allison, you’ve got Elder Von Trapp. Sam, take Elder . . . whatever. The one that’s left. Our objective is to free them from whatever type of bonds the monster has them in and get them out of the warehouse. Derek, you’ll cover me. Scott, cover Allison; Erica, cover Sam.”

“With pleasure,” Erica says, with a speculative gleam in her eye that makes the older teenager blush bright pink.

“Chris will provide general cover and guard the exit,” Stiles says. He looks at Chris and says, “Does that all sound tactical enough for you?”

Chris grunts. “It’ll do.”

“Once you have your target elder, take them and get out,” Stiles says. “We want this to be quick and clean. Questions?”

Nobody has any. Of course, with the exception of Chris, they’ve all been thoroughly briefed on what’s going to happen when they get inside the warehouse, anyway. Hell, most of them were there when Ian and Stiles planned it. Stiles was just as meticulous about this as he was with any other plan. His biggest concern is that Chris is going to manage to actually shoot Ian somewhere vulnerable, but that’s why Stiles has him guarding the exit. Besides, Ian knows he’ll be coming along; he’ll have to take care of himself.

Stiles eases the door to the warehouse open and peers inside. Ian is nowhere to be seen, so he gestures for everybody else to enter and darts inside.

The three elders are arranged in an outward-facing triangle in the center of the room. All of them are in sturdy metal chairs, tied up with more of the fishing line, cemented by duct tape. Stiles takes a moment to look them over and admire Ian’s handiwork. They’re all visibly injured, but from a quick glance, their injuries appear superficial. Ian hasn’t done anything to them that will prevent them from walking out of the warehouse – or getting on their planes home later that day.

Agnes is the worst off, but it’s not due to injuries – for some reason her head has been shaved, and Ian has written ‘I <3 werewolves’ on her scalp in what looks like red Sharpie. Stiles has to stifle a snort of laughter, but he can see why Ian did it. This woman doesn’t fear death or pain – she fears humiliation. And there’s no way that will be coming off before she has to face the rest of the hunters.

When she sees Stiles, her eyes go wide and she starts struggling against her bonds fiercely. “It’s okay,” Stiles says, deliberately misinterpreting her rage for fear. “We’re here to help.” He tugs his Leatherman out of his pocket and pulls out one of the knives. A quick glance confirms that she’s got at least twice as much duct tape on her as the two men, just as planned.

Just as he begins sawing away at her bonds, while she spits muffled curses at him through the duct tape over her mouth, there’s a crash and a roar on the other side of the warehouse. A small dragon emerges, and Stiles forgets all about what he’s doing and just stops and stares. The monster is bulky enough that it practically takes up a quarter of the warehouse all on its own. It’s covered in glistening black scales, and its wings are tucked up against its back because there are no room for them to expand. Stiles can see the blood red veins in the webbing. The creature’s fangs are at least six inches long, and every drop of saliva that falls from them makes a hissing noise as it hits the ground.
“Holy shit,” Sam says, likewise forgetting about what he’s doing in favor of staring. Elder Greger lets out a muffled scream and starts trying to scoot his chair across the floor, so that answers the question of whose fear is sponsoring this particular beastie. Sam grabs him before he can overbalance and fall, and redirects his attention to the old man’s bonds.

There’s a spatter of gunfire from the direction of the exit. Stiles glances up to see Chris firing with a pistol in each hand. It’s impressive, but doesn’t make any sort of dent in the dragon’s enthusiasm. Its long tail flicks out and smacks Chris across the abdomen, knocking him to the ground.

“Allison’s jaw firms up and she saws at the elder’s bonds with even more fervor. Behind them, Stiles can hear the growling and snapping of wolves. He risks a quick glance to find Scott standing protectively over Chris – that’ll piss him off later – while Derek and Erica run circles around the dragon, nipping at its ankles and its wings where they drag on the floor. It’s too big to maneuver very well, and although it snaps at them, it can’t get close.

There’s a rush of air, a popping noise, and the dragon is gone. It dissolves into a cloud of bats, each one with bright red eyes and tiny fangs. Erica lets out a yip that’s more surprised than anything else, and Sam lets out a hollow cry as the creatures swarm him. He flinches away so violently that he falls on his back, holding both arms up to defend his face. Erica comes to his aid moments later. She’s shifted back to her human form and yanked her shirt over her head, whipping it back and forth to fend the bats off. Sam manages to crawl back to his feet and go back to getting the elder free from the chair.

Allison’s the first to finish, divebombing bats aside. She yanks Elder Dragan to his feet and casts a quick look at Stiles before getting the man’s arm over her shoulders and running for the door, half-dragging him with her. Scott covers her exit, but Stiles hears his quick intake of breath when the hulking shape of alpha Peter jumps in front of him with a snarl.

“Go, I’ve got this!” Chris yells, shoving Scott behind him, in the direction of the door, and Scott takes off without stopping to question. Chris fires another two shots. One misses, but the other hits Ian in the shoulder and spins him around. He comes back twice as fast and knocks Chris into the wall. Derek jumps him, but Ian deflects easily, using his superior alpha’s strength to send Derek flying halfway across the warehouse.

“Derek!” Stiles abandons what he’s doing and starts to jog over to him. Ian sees him leave Agnes’ side and lunges for her. “Fuck!” Stiles says, and literally throws himself at the old woman, shielding her body with his own. He feels the alpha’s claws tear through his leather jacket and clash against the chain mail underneath. There’s a faint clinking noise as several of the rings come free and hit the cement floor. “Oh, you’re gonna pay for that, you bastard!”

He hears the ripping noise of duct tape and looks over to see that Sam has gotten Greger free. “Are you – ” the other teenager begins.

“Go!” Stiles shouts. He’s brought his baseball bat, and gives it a solid swing as Ian charges him. They go back and forth for a minute before Sam has managed to get Greger out of the warehouse, with Erica covering their retreat. Then Derek is back on his feet. He charges forward and takes Ian in a full tackle. The two of them go into a snarling, rolling ball of fur. “Jesus fuck,” Stiles snarls, as the duct tape around Agnes’ feet comes free. He’s beginning to think they should have just picked the entire damned chair up.
There’s a crack and then a yelp and Stiles hears the distinct whoosh of something going up in flames. He half-turns with the words, “God damn it, Ian, I said no fucking fire!” on his lips before he remembers that he can’t say that out loud right now. He turns and sees –

“Okay, no Balrogs, you asshole, that’s not fucking fair!” he chokes out, and the monster just gives an evil grin and snaps his fire whip forward. Derek whimpers, cowering backwards despite himself, and slinks underneath a handy nearby shelving unit. Stiles gives one last desperate wrench to the duct tape on Agnes’ left wrist, and it comes free. He grabs her and hauls her to her feet and starts towards the exit in a flat run, dragging her with him. She stumbles but stays on her feet.

Behind him, he hears another crack, and then that whip fastens itself around his ankle. He lets out a noise that’s as much surprise as pain and is yanked backwards, landing hard, flat on his face. He gives Agnes one last shove forward at Chris as he falls. “Take her and get out of here!” he yells. He sees indecision flicker on Chris’ face, but then he nods, gets his arm around her waist, and steers her towards the exit.

With her gone, he’s suddenly facing alpha Peter again, which is a good thing because the fire whip had burned through his jeans and left several nasty burns around his ankle and calf. The pain is stunning. He’s heard that burns hurt worse than any other injury. He’ll certainly believe that now, and tries to put what it means about the Hale house fire out of his head as he staggers to his feet. He grabs his baseball bat and gives it another swing, aiming high. Ian grabs it in his jaws and crunches downwards, breaking it into splinters.

Moments later, he staggers back, letting out a shrill, high-pitched whine. He falls to the ground, writhing and screaming. “Derek, now!” Stiles yells, and Derek pounces on the prone figure. For one moment, he has him solidly pinned. Then the figure of the alpha dissolves again. “No, God damn it!” Stiles shouts, but it’s over. Ian has gone up in smoke, and vanished. “Fuck!” Stiles swears, twisting his head around. The sudden movement makes the burns on his leg throb. He makes a noise between gritted teeth and starts to fall.

Derek runs over and grabs him before he hits the ground. “Your leg – ”

“I’m okay, just – hurts like a son of a bitch,” Stiles chokes out, and the pain is so bad that a little sob escapes him. Derek pulls him into an embrace, running a hand over his hair and pressing his face into Stiles’ neck, murmuring reassurance.

“C’mon, I’m getting you out of here,” Derek says, and with the werewolf’s arm around his waist, Stiles limps towards the door.

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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

You know, given that Mikael was a character I basically created off the fly without more than a framework, I wound up liking him quite a bit. I enjoy his interactions with Stiles. He's like Chris, but with an even bigger stick up his ass. =D

Outside the warehouse, Chris is having a fierce argument with Agnes. “You will take us back to the hotel this instant!” she insists, nearly shrieking.

Chris holds firm. “Some of the kids need medical attention – ”

“Werewolves!” Agnes shouts.

“Stiles isn’t a werewolf, and his leg could be seriously injured – ” Chris snaps back, the underlying tone clearly adding ‘you selfish bitch’.

“There are more important things to deal with right now than that treasonous little brat and his pack of monsters!”

It looks like Chris might continue to argue, so Stiles speaks up and says, “I’m okay, Chris. We should get them back to the hotel. They have injuries that they should get looked at, too,” he adds, and Chris reluctantly agrees.

“Don’t think I’m fooled by this,” Agnes hisses at Stiles, as Sam helps her towards Chris’ car.

Stiles says nothing. Chris takes the elders and Sam in his SUV, leaving Stiles to fit the five pack members into his Jeep. It’s a tight fit, but they make it, with Stiles squeezing in between Scott and Erica in the back. Derek drives so Scott can take a look at Stiles’ leg. The burn is a nasty, spiral mark that starts at his ankle and goes halfway up his calf. Scott grabs their first aid kit and takes out a few ice packs, pressing them against the skin. Stiles grits his teeth against the pain.

“I thought Ian wasn’t going to do any real damage,” Scott says as he examines the wounds.

Stiles gives a little shrug. “Maybe he thought I’d dodge it. Maybe he thought it wouldn’t burn all the way through my jeans. Maybe he was being an asshole. The possibilities are really endless.”

“We really should take you to have it looked at – ”

“Okay, remember my ‘no hospitals’ policy? That goes double for injuries that cannot possibly be explained without involving supernatural shit. Besides, we don’t dare not be present for whatever Elder Bitch is going to pull once she gets back to the Conclave.” Stiles looks at his watch again. They had left the hotel a little after ten. The drive to and from the warehouse was about twenty minutes, and the fight hadn’t really taken that long at all. But with the closing ceremonies so close, the hunters would still all be gathered. Nobody would have wandered off. Agnes will have no trouble getting them all together.
As it turns out, Elder Agnes has pulled exactly what Stiles has expected she will pull. When the pack gets to the hotel, she’s gotten everyone gathered into the banquet room where the closing ceremonies are to be held and is screaming for Stiles’ head. (She has also, Stiles noticed, somehow found a hat in the intervening minutes.) Chris is standing to one side with a pinched expression on her face while Agnes tells everyone about how the wolves sicced a monster on the elders and held them prisoner.

Stiles has given her a few minutes to whip everyone into a frenzy, primarily so he can change pants to hide his injuries; the Jeep always has a few spare changes of clothes for the wolves, and Scott’s pants fit him well enough. Naturally, when he and the others enter, everyone reacts as if he’s dropped a bomb. “How dare you show your face here?” Elder Greger shouts at them. “After what you did to us –”

“And what, exactly, am I supposed to have done?” Stiles asks. “Besides having saved your life about half an hour ago.”

His face twists into an angry sneer. “That monster was on your leash!”

“I don’t keep monsters on leashes,” Stiles says, “and I certainly don’t release monsters into the forest to test the abilities of teenagers.”

“How dare you –”

“Are you going to deny it?” Stiles asks, raising his voice.

“It – it’s a necessary trial –”

“No.” Mikael speaks up unexpectedly, glaring at his uncle. “It isn’t. My children are well-trained and formidable in their own right, but they are still children, and they were nearly killed by the monster that you brought with you, and this boy –” he stabs a finger in Stiles’ direction – “is the one who saved my daughter’s life. I presume this is a creature you captured some time ago and kept imprisoned until the Conclave arrived, so I see no reason to find it suspicious that it targeted you.”

All three of the elders are gaping at him; hell, so is Stiles. He had hoped that Mikael would at least back him up, but he hadn’t been expecting that level of support.

“It – he was alone with it yesterday –” Greger says, although with noticeably less fervor.

Stiles snaps at this despite all the reminders he’s given himself to stay calm. “Yes, I was. I was alone with it because it broke into my home, smashed my face into a wall –” He points at the dark bruise – “abducted me, put me in a freezer, choked me into unconsciousness –” He gestures to the marks around his neck – “and left me there for dead. That’s what was going on yesterday when my pack came to the hotel to ask Chris for his help. Trust me, I was not having a good time.”

“Besides,” Julien hastily intervenes, “Stiles can’t have been responsible for what happened to you. He and his pack were with Chris and I all evening yesterday, during the entire time you were alone in the Argent house before you went missing. We were in the forest, searching for the creature. It must have just doubled back and gone to the house while we weren’t there.”

Mikael looks at Chris, who nods, but Agnes isn’t derailed. “He and his pack came to where it had us captive and they, they helped it, they’re responsible for these injuries –”

Stiles grins. This gives everyone pause. They’re not used to Stiles, and they don’t recognize his ‘thank you for falling right into my trap’ smile. He raises a hand and says, “Not only is that not true, I can prove it. See, the warehouse that the monster was holding them in is publically owned. It has security cameras inside. I suspected that our dear Elder Agnes would try to pin this on me, so I called
my father – the Sheriff – on our way over here and had him get the footage for me.” He holds up his phone. “I see we still have a projector available. Who’d like to see it?”

Mikael narrows his eyes at Stiles, and then says, “I believe I would.”

“Ohkey dokey.” Stiles walks over and sets his phone down. It takes a minute to get everything set up. Agnes is still blustering in the background about how she can’t believe they won’t take her word on it, that they’re wasting time with this. Stiles gets the footage playing and most of the hunters turn to look. “I don’t know exactly what time they arrived – you know, since I wasn’t involved – so I just had my dad send everything from five PM yesterday, which was about the last time they were seen. I’m going to play through it at high-speed.”

There’s some murmuring in the crowd, but for the most part everyone stays quiet. The footage of the empty warehouse plays for almost an entire minute, even as rapidly as it was playing. Then Ian arrives, in Peter’s form. The video has a time stamp of about ten o’clock. Stiles pauses it and says, “Chris, could you please verify for these fine people that I was in fact with you at this point in time?”

Chris nods and rubs a hand over his face. “We were out in the woods looking for the damned thing until past eleven.”

“Okay then.” Stiles starts the video again. It’s still playing at high speed, but it’s easy enough to verify that nobody comes and goes from the warehouse until his arrival with his pack that morning, a little after ten AM. “Hey, here we are, let’s do this thing,” he says, and presses a button so it plays at normal speed.

The hunters gather around the screen to watch the dramatic rescue. There’s only one camera, so the angle isn’t perfect, but Stiles had told Ian where to be and how to get the best results. The creature, it seems, is something of a showman at heart. There’s another murmur when it transforms from the dragon to the bats, and Sam winces, clearly not proud of his reaction. Things liven up a bit when alpha Peter makes an appearance, and there’s an audible gasp as Stiles throws himself on top of Agnes to protect her. Agnes’ face goes from red to white; she’s absolutely livid.

There’s another noise from the crowd when Stiles gets caught by the fire whip and shoves Agnes over to Chris. Another thirty seconds and the video is done. Stiles grimaces a little as everyone hears him crying over his injured leg. That’s embarrassing. Then again, it serves the purpose he intended. Everyone feels sorry for him now.

When the video is again displaying an empty warehouse, Stiles reaches over and turns it off. The screen goes dark. “Does that sufficiently answer everyone’s questions about what my pack did and did not do?” he asks.

Mikael slowly turns to the elders, his face creased in a frown. “This boy saved your life,” he says to Agnes. “He sustained injuries that could be serious. You would repay that by trying to incriminate him for another’s actions?”

“You – that lying brat, he – you set all this up – ” Agnes is still trying to pull this out. “That was faked – ”

“Easy enough way to verify that,” Wednesday says flatly.

Mikael nods and turns to Stiles. “Would you allow me to look at your leg? It’s an insult to ask, I know. I wouldn’t hold it against you if you refused.”

Stiles has to swallow. “Yeah, just – careful with the merchandise. It’s still pretty tender.” He sits
down in a nearby chair and props his leg up on the table.

Mikael cautiously slides up the leg of his jeans to reveal the ugly burn marks below. He gives them a cursory examination, lightly touching his fingers to the burned skin. “That must be painful,” he says.

“You’re not wrong,” Stiles says, between gritted teeth. He can feel sweat beading on his forehead.

“Has it been seen to?”

“Just some cold packs in the car on the way here,” Stiles says. “I figured my presence was going to be needed sooner rather than later.”

Mikael gives a brief nod and then turns to scan the crowd. “Lena,” he says, and a few moments later, a tall woman with the same blonde hair emerges from the crowd. Mikael speaks to her in another language for a few moments, then turns back to Stiles. “My family possesses some excellent remedies for burns. Lena will take you up to our rooms and see that the wound is treated properly.”

“No offense, but I thought I’d stick around here.”

Mikael frowns and shakes his head. “This is hunter business. Your help has been appreciated, but you have no place in the discussion that is about to follow about what Elder Agnes has done, or this policy of testing the children at a Conclave. I would like to ask you, with respect, to leave without a fuss.”

Stiles considers this for a minute, and then nods. “Yeah, okay.” To tell the truth, he’s glad to leave and get his leg treated. He’ll trust Chris and Julien, and apparently Mikael, to make sure he and his pack survive the deliberations.

“I’m staying,” Allison says firmly. She looks at Mikael in direct challenge. “I’m an Argent and my place is here.”

“Of course,” Mikael says.

Stiles gets to his feet. His leg gives beneath him and he makes a strangled noise between his teeth. Derek catches him and speaks for the first time since they left the warehouse. “Don’t put any weight on that.” It’s almost a snarl. Stiles just sighs and nods, putting his arms around Derek’s neck and allowing his lupa to scoop him up. Derek carries him reverse piggy-back out of the banquet hall. He’s pretty sure he hears a woman’s voice murmur something like ‘okay, now that is just fucking adorable’.

Lena opens up their hotel room and calls out, “Annika? Could you run some cold water in the tub, please?” Her voice is a mellow contralto, which is strangely soothing.

“Sure, Mama,” Annika’s voice returns. She gets off the bed and then blinks at the pack. “What – ”

“Now, please,” Lena says. “Stiles is injured. We’ll explain later.”

“Okay.” Annika ducks her head, tucking her hair behind her ear, and ducks into the bathroom. The events of the past several days seem to have humbled her considerably. They hear water running a moment later.

“Where’s your brother?” Lena asks.

“Sulking in his room,” Annika says.
“Sit down,” Lena says to Stiles, and Derek carefully puts him down on the bed. Stiles shimmies out of the jeans and carefully peels the sock off. “Cold water is the best for burns, but,” she says, examining the marks, “we have some herbal remedies that have been handed down through the generations that will ease the pain and lessen scarring.”

“I’m still human, but being alpha does accelerate my healing,” Stiles says. “It’s hard to say how bad anything will scar. But it won’t be the first scar I have, so no worries.” Since he doesn’t want to take his chain mail into the bath – it’s long enough to reach to his hips, so it would end up in the water – he strips off the leather jacket and then the shirt while he’s waiting.

“That’s a fine make,” Lena says, taking a look at it. “Custom?”

“Yup,” Stiles says. “Worth its weight in gold today. Lost a few rings off the back, though.”

Lena says something polite, and then Derek helps him into the bathroom. The water is a few inches deep now. Lena takes out a briefcase full of different herbs and powders, and mixes some things in. Then she has Stiles sit down in the tub. The cold water hits the burn like a shock, and he makes a strangled noise of pain. Derek twitches, obviously wanting to take some of the pain but not wanting to do so in front of Lena. Stiles squeezes his hand to indicate that he’ll be okay.

After a few minutes, the water starts to feel soothing. He can feel the pain draining away and relaxes against Derek where he’s sitting on the edge of the tub. Derek reaches out and absently strokes his hair. Stiles leans into his touch and closes his eyes, drifting half to sleep. He wakes periodically when Lena has Derek lift him out of the tub so she can run fresh water into it, but he’s not really aware of time passing. The exhaustion is catching up with him.

He’s still dozing when Mikael comes in. He exchanges a few quick words with his wife and then sits down on the closed toilet while Stiles struggles back to full coherency. “How’s your leg feeling?”

“Much better,” Stiles says. “Thanks again for helping out,” he adds, and Mikael just nods. “So, am I allowed to ask what happened downstairs, or will you just say it was hunter business?”

Mikael shrugs and says, “Allison will undoubtedly tell you all about it, so there seems to be no reason to hide it. The highlights is that the elders have been . . . relieved of their responsibilities. After some discussion it was agreed that there would be no single ruling body; the heads of each family will form their own council and make overall decisions together.”

“Sweet,” Stiles says.

“In addition to that, we’ve decided to hold the Conclave every three years instead of every ten,” Mikael says. “The modern world moves so much more quickly. Information – or misinformation – travels fast. It will be better to keep track of each other more thoroughly.”

“Any trouble for Chris?” Stiles asks.

Mikael’s eyes narrow a little, but he says, “No. The elders are responsible for bringing the creature here, so what was done to them is their fault and theirs alone. Chris has assured us that he – and you – will hunt the creature down. Which I’m sure you will.” He folds his hands in his lap and gives Stiles a serious look. “You should know that I actually believe Elder Agnes about your role in things.”

Stiles feels his back tense up. “Yeah? You believe that I intentionally got the shit kicked out of me?”

“I do,” Mikael says. “But not for the reason she thinks. You did it to take care of someone who had trespassed on your territory, endangered the lives of your pack, and had to be dealt with. But you did
it this way to protect Chris. From us.” He frowns a little and says, “It’s not easy, suddenly finding oneself cast in the role of the villain.”

“Boy, do I hear that,” Stiles says with a snort.

“I’ve been doing some research on you the past couple days. I believe you are every bit as intelligent and devious as Elder Agnes makes you out to be. But I don’t think you did things this way to humiliate her, or hunters in general. You did it so nobody would be able to look at what happened and blame Chris Argent for it. For that, you were willing to suffer these injuries. You were honoring your alliance in the truest sense.”

Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his head. “Hey, that’s what friends are for.”

Mikael shakes his head a little. “You’re a good man, Stiles. And a good alpha.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says, trying not to look as embarrassed as he actually is. He’s also wondering if maybe, just maybe, they can have this conversation while he’s somewhere other than in a bathtub in his underwear.

“Annika told me what happened,” Mikael says. “In the forest that night. She says that you’re the one who saved her life. So despite everything else that’s happened . . . I owe you a debt for that.”

“He wasn’t going to kill her,” Stiles says, feeling uncomfortable with this subject.

“He was going to turn her.” Mikael shakes his head a little. “Most hunters, if they’re bitten, will kill themselves before the first shift can set in.”

Stiles blinks at him for a moment. Then he looks up at this intimidating hunter who could probably have him killed before all the hunters leave town and says flatly, “That’s the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever heard.”

Much to his surprise, Mikael doesn’t get offended. In fact, he lets out a snort of laughter. “You may be right. I lost my brother when I was around your age for that reason, and I’ve never quite forgiven him for it.” He gives a little shrug. “I don’t know if this long-term plan you’re proposing is at all feasible . . . but I guess I don’t see any reason not to give it a try.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Stiles says. He starts to rise to his feet and finds that he’s actually capable of it. He gingerly tests his leg and finds that it’ll support his weight with only minor twinges. “That’s some good shit you guys have got,” he says, stepping over the edge of the tub and grabbing a towel. Mikael merely nods agreement. “Hey, so, since we’re just talking. Man to man here.” This gets him a skeptical eyebrow. “Man to teenaged-boy-who-pretends-really-well?” he tries, and Mikael lets out a snort. “No, seriously. Your kids. Jonas especially. They’re, uh, dude, look. They’re friggin’ psycho.”

Derek rubs a hand against his face. “And you call me tactless.”

“Look, if there is a tactful way to say ‘I’m really concerned about your son’s violent urges’, then . . . I guess I just came up with it.” Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his head while Mikael gives him a look that’s becoming more incredulous by the moment. “You don’t see them much, do you.”

Mikael’s jaw sets in an unhappy expression. “I travel a lot, so no, unfortunately. Not as much as I would like.”

“They really, really wanted to impress people this week,” Stiles says, “and I’m guessing that that’s mostly because they really wanted to impress you. And I can tell that you guys don’t really follow
the Code, so to speak, but you seem like a decent guy. So you’d better start explaining to them that
the way they interact with supernatural creatures is going to get them killed. Because they came close
at least half a dozen times this week – and it wasn’t always the big, bad, scary monster who wanted
to kill them. Sometimes it was me. I’ll admit that to you because you already know. Because they
threatened my pack and that’s just not fucking acceptable to me. If I had thought they were actually
capable of doing some of the shit they obviously thought about doing, things would have gotten
messy.”

Mikael is glaring at him, but after a moment he sighs and looks away. “I appreciate your honesty. I
think I’ve been letting them spend a bit too much time with my uncle. That won’t be a problem
anymore. But I will talk to them.” He frowns. “Which reminds me. This talk of you adopting Jake
Argent into your pack.”

“Adopt is really the wrong word,” Stiles says, hanging the towel on one of the hooks now that he’s
dried off. He can’t do anything about his damp underwear, unfortunately. “It started off kind of as a
joke. It would be more accurate to say that I plan to offer Jake a place in my pack. It’s one hundred
percent his choice whether or not he accepts it.”

“He’s only fifteen,” Mikael says, his frown deepening. “A child cannot give informed consent.”

“That’s true,” Stiles says, heading back into the hotel room and picking up his T-shirt, “and most of
our pack members – those who had a choice – were at least a couple years older. I’m sure Chris will
make sure that Jake understands all the consequences before he decides anything – and should he
decide he wants to be a werewolf, which he won’t, that’s something we wouldn’t do until he’s
eighteen. Satisfied?”

Mikael spreads his hands in a ‘what can I do’ sort of gesture. “I find it very strange that Henry
Argent and his wife should miss the closing ceremonies today.”

“Uh huh,” Stiles says, pulling his shirt over his head.

“The last time I saw them, they were leaving Chris’ house to go to your pack’s den, to find their
son.”

Yep,” Stiles says.

Mikael folds his arms over his chest and says, “Before I leave, I’d like to know what happened to
them.”

Stiles looks at him, considers, and then grins suddenly. “You’ll love this,” he says, and then fishes
around for his phone. “Fuck. Where’s my phone?”

“I think it’s in your other pants, in the car,” Scott says, from the corner of the room where he and
Erica have been waiting. “You want to use mine?”

“Did Allison send you the picture?” Stiles asks, and Scott nods, hiding a little grin of his own. Stiles
accepts Scott’s phone and pulls up the photo of the Argents in the pit before handing it over to
Mikael. He studies the picture, his eyebrows going up. “Before you ask, yes, I have a tiger pit, and
everyone who made fun of me for suggesting it feels really stupid now. And yes, they fell into it
trying to break onto my property, and yes, I left them there. They’ve been fed and given water and
even a blanket at night.”

Mikael hands the phone back. “Why are you holding them?”

“Primarily to make them suffer for being assholes,” Stiles says in a forthright tone that causes most of
his pack to groan in despair for his tact. “But also because I want them to sign custody of Jake over

to Chris and Victoria so he can stop thinking he’s a worthless human being just because he doesn’t

enjoy violence unless it’s part of a video game and his contact lenses don’t fit right.”

“Fair enough,” Mikael says, and hands the phone back. Then he shakes his head a little. “A tiger pit.

Really? I’m amazed the two of them have lived this long.”

“You know, everyone has said that,” Stiles says. “Nobody seems to think that maybe having a tiger

pit was just a really awesome idea.”

Several people let out snorts of laughter, and Erica says, “Okay, sweetie, exactly what was in those

herbs that you soaked in?”

Stiles sticks his tongue out at her.

“Hey, don’t stick that out unless you intend to use it,” Erica says.

“Honey, I have so many plans for that, but we’re not going to discuss them in polite company,”

Stiles says, and Erica gives him that sideways smirk of hers that drives him absolutely fucking crazy.

Derek just sighs as if to say ‘why is my alpha such a horndog’ but doesn’t otherwise respond. Stiles

pulls his pants on over the wet underwear, which is uncomfortable to say the least, but they’re going

straight home and he can change there. It seems like he still has a hundred things he needs to do.

Mikael is just shaking his head. “You know,” he says, “I have to admit that it’s a little fascinating to

watch you and your pack.”

“Because we act like normal people?” Stiles asks.

“Yes and no,” Mikael says. “Partly that. But also because . . . humans, we learn to build all these

walls around ourselves, learn all these rules about things we can and can’t share with each other or

say in public. You and your pack are so . . . openly affectionate with each other.”

“Really?” Stiles says. “That’s a news flash to you? That we care about each other?”

“It’s more surprising than you might think,” Mikael says.

“Well,” Stiles says, “you can add that to the next seminar.”

“Maybe I will,” Mikael says. “It’s been a pleasure, Stiles. Until next time.”

~ ~ ~ ~
*collapses* Whoo, it's good to be done with this one! It's been a lot of fun and I've enjoyed every minute, but keeping up my posting schedule with this and Divided We Stand was a lot of hard work. Totally worth it, though. You guys are the best. <3

In other news, I will definitely be writing that Veronica Mars crossover as the next installment in this 'verse. Fear not, though, those of you who are unacquainted with the great VM. I'll make it as accessible for you as possible. If you could manage all the OCs in this fic, you shouldn't have any problem with a couple Veronica Mars characters. ^_^

Thanks for reading, everyone!

Stiles shakes Mikael’s hand and thanks Lena again for treating his wound, and then the group of them head to the door. They find Allison downstairs in the lobby, talking with her father, Julien, Sam, and Jake. She smiles over at them and gives Scott a kiss, which results in Chris’ usual glower. But after a moment, he turns to Stiles and asks grudgingly, “How’s your leg?”

“Not as bad as it could be,” Stiles says. “Probably shouldn’t walk on it too much. I hear things in there went pretty well.”

“Given the givens,” Chris says.

“So, do you happen to know when your cousin Henry is scheduled to depart our fine city?”

Chris’ eyes narrow. Then he says, “I have a copy of his itinerary in my email,” and pulls his phone out of his pocket. He taps away at it for several minutes in that manner of a middle-aged man who is not altogether comfortable with technology, and finally says, “Their plane leaves at three thirty.”

Stiles checks his watch. “Gonna be close,” he says. “They’d better man up and sign the papers. Oh, that reminds me! They need your signature, too. I’d better get them from my car.” Without another word, he trots off.

“What is he talking about?” Chris asks.

“Uh . . .” Scott says.

Allison gives her father an uncertain smile and says, “Stiles told Henry and his wife that he wasn’t going to let them out of the tiger pit until they’d signed paperwork yielding legal custody of Jake to, uhm, to you and Mom.”

Chris blinks at her. He blinks at Jake, who shrinks away. Finally, he says, “Why? I mean, why to me? Since the general ‘why’ is obvious.”

“I think he figured that they wouldn’t agree if it was to sign custody over to Papa Stilinski or some pack-related person,” Erica says, twining a strand of her hair around her finger. “You always wanted
a son, right? You look like the type.”

Chris pushes a hand back through his hair. “Sometimes, I could just throttle that kid.”

“I’m sorry,” Jake says hastily.

“Not you,” Chris says, irritated.

“Look, it’s just a formality,” Scott says. “I mean, he can stay with us. We just had to have someone’s name to put on the paperwork. You don’t have to –”

“No,” Chris says, his voice a little sharper than necessary or perhaps even than he means it, because he gentles it a moment later. “No. That’s okay.” He looks over at Jake and puts a hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I’ll sign whatever I need to sign.”

Jake stares at him for a long moment before he turns away, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. Allison steps up beside him and puts an arm around his waist, pressing the side of her body into his, a gesture of reassurance and comfort that’s mostly pack, but partly family. She smiles up at Stiles as he comes back in with the paperwork. Chris gets a pen from the hotel staff and signs where Stiles tells him to.

“Do you want to come back to the den with us?” Stiles asks Jake. “To see them before they leave?”

Jake hesitates, and then shakes his head. “No. I – I just – they would say something awful, and I, I think they’ve made me feel bad enough for one week.”

Allison gives him a squeeze. “Good thinking,” she says. She looks over at Sam and his father and says, “What about you, when does your plane leave?”

“We actually decided to stay a few more days,” Julien says. “Chris and I wanted some time to catch up without there being crises to attend to or people looking over our shoulder.”

“Cool,” Stiles says. He turns to Sam and says, “You wanna come over tonight? The rest of my pack is going to be back in town by then. You could meet them.”

“I’d like that,” Sam says.

Julien clears his throat and says, “I presume that you guys won’t want to spend any more time with Henry and his wife than absolutely necessary, so . . . why don’t I pick their luggage up from Chris’ house and meet you back at yours? I can give them a ride to the airport.”

“That works,” Stiles says, with a nod. He had been planning to make them walk back to Chris’ to get their stuff, but this will work better. There’s no chance they’ll run into Jake and have an opportunity to make him miserable. And he really doesn’t want them to miss their plane. The longer they’re in town, the more annoyed he’ll be. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem,” Julien says. “He is my cousin, after all. In fact, I think I’ll go visit them in a few months. I haven’t seen Phillip since he was a toddler. It’ll be nice to see how he’s growing up.”

Stiles can read the undertones there, the fact that Julien is offering to keep an eye on Henry and see how he’s raising his son, make sure he’s not being abused or taught that all werewolves are the devil, and explain to the boy why his older brother had to leave. It takes a weight off his shoulders. He knew that Jake had been quietly, privately worried about what his little brother was going to think, what he might say if they met again. He gives Julien a smile and thanks him again. So does Jake, and Julien responds by giving him a hug so tight that he nearly turns purple.
The group of them heads for the exit. They find Wednesday standing outside with a suitcase, waiting for her taxi to arrive. “Let us give you a ride to the airport,” Stiles says.

Derek clears his throat. “We have things we need to do.”

“I guess it probably wouldn’t be polite to make the Argents miss their flight back to whatever black hole they came from,” Stiles says, and sighs. They need to see Ian off, too. That’s likely to be a different sort of can of worms. “Okay, fine.” He holds a hand out to the girl and says, “Lemme see your phone.”

“What for?” she asks, frowning at him.

“’Cause I’m gonna put my number in it, duh,” Stiles says. Wednesday arches her eyebrows at him, and he shrugs. “Just in case you ever need anything. Or if you have questions on how to snag an eligible werewolf bachelor.”

“You would be the person to ask, I suppose,” she says, handing her phone over. Stiles just grins at her and programs his number in before handing it back. She takes it and says, “Well, if you ever happen to be in Kentucky, come say hi.”

“So you do live in Kentucky!” Stiles says, grinning at her.

“Of course I do,” she says, without even a hint of inflection, and then heads over to the taxi that’s pulling up, leaving Stiles chortling behind her.

Allison decides to go with her family back to the house because she thinks Jake might be more comfortable that way, and of course Scott wants to go with her. Chris grudgingly agrees to this, so Stiles heads back to the den with Derek and Erica for company. Which is fine with him. He feels like he can relax and actually breathe for the first time in days. He takes out his phone and calls Lydia.

“Hey, where you at?” he asks when she picks up.

“Long Beach,” she says. “You’re missing some great beach weather.”

“Hey, we have all summer for beaches,” he says. “Just calling to give you guys the all-clear. As far as I know, all the hunters are heading for airports and will be out of here by three or four. If you start heading back now, by the time you get here, they’ll be gone.”

“Sounds good to me,” she says.

“Just so you know, I, uh, may have gotten beat up a little?” Stiles says, and Lydia lets out a growl which is not at all like her. “You know, there was a tournament and stuff, so I’m a little bruised. Don’t freak out when you see me. ‘Kay?”

“We’ll see,” Lydia says, and hangs up.

Derek lets out a snort of laughter as Stiles tucks his phone away, looking disconcerted. “They’re going to kick the shit out of you,” he says.

“I know,” Stiles says, with a sigh. “Maybe I even deserve it.” He frowns into his rearview mirror suddenly, looking at Erica. “How did you and Scott get back here, anyway? Whose car did you steal?”

“Danny’s,” she says, looking somewhat chagrined. “We left a note!”
“Oh, thank God,” Stiles says, “you two will be in more trouble than me.”

“Not after they get a look at your neck,” Erica shoots back.

“She’s right,” Derek says.

Stiles ignores them. “Hey, but anyway, we learned something valuable about the pack bond today. It degrades over distance. They couldn’t tell I was in trouble. We should do some scientific studies on this. You know, to sort out what could happen if we’re split up in the future . . . not that we ever will be,” he says hastily, as Derek and Erica both glare at him. “But like when I go to Fresno to see Gwen, or when the lacrosse team has away games but not everybody wants to come, stuff like that. It would be good to know!”

“I suppose,” Derek grumps.

Stiles just smiles and turns the radio on and heads back to the house. He walks up to the edge of the pit with the papers and a pen in one hand. “Oh, you’re still here?” he says, feigning surprise. “I thought you guys had a plane to catch in . . .” He ostentatiously checks his watch. “A little less than two hours. Man, you like to live dangerously. Doesn’t it take time to check all your guns through security and shit?”

“Just let us out of here, you son of a bitch!” Henry yells.

Stiles holds the papers and pen over the edge and drops them. “As soon as you’ve both signed.”

Henry snatches the pen from the air and then grabs the papers. He scribbles his signature down on the page and then glares at his wife. “What? I’m not going to rot down here for that pathetic brat that you keep swearing is my son. Sign the damned papers!”

Stiles arches his eyebrows and thinks that that’s an interesting dynamic he wishes he had stumbled onto earlier. It would have made this a lot easier. Now he wonders if Jake really is related to the Argents. It doesn’t matter, though. Chris has custody and obviously considers him family, so that makes him an Argent as much as any DNA ever would.

Rose grabs the pen away from him and says, “You can blame me for the way Jake came out all you want, but it’s still your fault that we’re at the bottom of this damned pit!”

“Okay, guys,” Stiles says, “I’m not a marriage counselor. Let’s get this over with.”

Rose glares at him but then scrawls her name down. “Are you happy now, you little shit?”

“Ecstatic,” Stiles says. “It means I can get you off my property and out of my territory.” He gestures to Derek, who’s been tying a rope to a nearby tree. At Stiles’ direction, he tosses it down into the pit. Minutes later, both Henry and Rose are standing next to it, glaring daggers at each other. “Okay, let’s get you on your way,” Stiles says, using his remote to disarm the electric fence and open the panel. He points, and they shove past him and onto the other side. He closes it behind them.

“Wait!” Henry says. “How are we supposed to get to the airport?”

Stiles checks his watch again, then smiles and says, “Not my circus, not my monkey.” And then he turns and walks back towards the house, listening to them fume and protest on the other side of the fence. It’s a glorious feeling.

“I thought Julien was coming to pick them up,” Erica says in an undertone.
Stiles shrugs. “Sure, but they don’t know that. Julien can’t get past the outer fence. They’ll find him when they get that far, waiting for them.”

Erica giggles. “You are the worst,” she says, with a speculative gleam in her eye.

“Do not give me that look right now, I have to change out of these damp clothes and go meet Ian,” Stiles says. “The sooner he’s out of here, the happier we’ll all be. Capisce?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Erica says, and doesn’t even offer to help him change, which is a sure sign that she too wants to get Ian the hell off their territory. Stiles jogs upstairs and strips out of the clothes he’s wearing, then puts on a T-shirt and a pair of denim shorts. He puts his chain mail back on because he doesn’t trust Ian and then heads back downstairs.

“We good to go?” he asks, grabbing his baseball bat from the umbrella stand by the door that holds a variety of weapons.

Erica blinks at it. “I thought you – ”

“Fuck no, I didn’t bring the real one this morning,” Stiles says. “It took me weeks to make this. The one I had earlier was my backup. The wire’s just regular barbed wire and it wasn’t even stapled on.”

“But I thought he reacted like that because he got a mouthful of silver,” Erica says.

“No, he reacted like that because I told him to react like that,” Stiles says. “Pretty much the entire damned fight was choreographed. Except, you know, for the friggin’ fire.”

Derek growls.

“On that note, let’s go,” Stiles says, and heads out the back door. They cross the property, Stiles disarms the fence, and they all climb over. It’s about a ten minute walk to the old Hale house, where they’ve agreed to meet Ian.

He’s waiting for them outside the fence, sitting on the freezer that Stiles had been in earlier. Part of their agreement had been that he would transform into something strong enough to lift the damned thing and get it off their property. Stiles narrows his eyes at Peter’s pleasant smile and says, “You were supposed to take that thing somewhere.”

Ian just shrugs. “I don’t know where the town dump is. Besides, there’s no point in wasting a perfectly good freezer.”

Ian just shrugs. “I don’t know where the town dump is. Besides, there’s no point in wasting a perfectly good freezer.”

Derek looks at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, a smile spreads over his face. He takes a few steps forward and suddenly punches Ian so hard in the face that he falls backwards, literally going head-over-heels and landing hard on his back on the ground. Stiles lets out a snort of laughter as Ian attempts to pick himself up.

“I suppose I deserved that,” Ian says.

“For so, so many reasons,” Stiles agrees. “I mean, seriously, you had one job. No fire.”

Ian shrugs a little. “It’s not my fault the old biddy was afraid of a fire demon.”

Derek growls at him. “You also weren’t supposed to cause any serious injuries.”

“Well, you’re the ones who didn’t define ‘serious’ for me,” Ian says.

“I don’t like this guy,” Stiles says. “He’s too much like me.”
Derek sighs. “He’s too much like Peter.”

Stiles just shakes his head and gestures for Ian to follow him. “C’mon. Things to do and people to see. You remember the details of our agreement, right?”

Ian raises a hand in the Boy Scout salute and says, “I will never set foot on your territory again, and I will never take the form of Peter Hale or Kate Argent ever again, world without end, amen.”

“Okey dokey,” Stiles says.

“Can I send a postcard every once in a while?” Ian asks. “Call you on skype? Nobody’s ever given me a run for my money before.”

Erica lets out a snort of laughter. “I think he’s got a crush, Stiles.”

Stiles just shakes his head, thinking back to the look on Ian’s face when they gave him a name. “I guess I can’t stop you from sending the occasional postcard,” he says. Derek glowers but doesn’t actively protest. They walk through the preserve to where Stiles left his Jeep, and load Ian into it. It’s about a half hour’s drive to the edge of the county. Stiles turns the radio up and rolls the windows down because he doesn’t want to have any sort of conversation. They pull over just past the county line and he gestures. “Get out.”

Ian hops out of the car. “Catch you on the flip side,” he says, and then vanishes.

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By the time Stiles has checked in with his father to assure him that everything went to plan and that all homicidal parties are on their way out of town, then stopped by the grocery store to restock after the hectic week, Scott and Allison have made it back to the house. They haven’t brought the other Argent teens with them. Sam is hanging out with Chris and Julien. Victoria, meanwhile, has taken Jake to go shopping. He’s going to need things like clothes, and it’s doubtful that his parents will send any of his possessions.

“Man, I don’t envy him right now,” Stiles says, thinking of what spending an entire afternoon with Victoria Argent would be like. “No offense, Allison.”

Scott lowers his voice a little and says, “Allison asked him if he wanted us to come with, and he said no, because, and I quote, ‘your mom is really nice’.”

“Holy crap,” Erica says.

Stiles lets out a snort. “I guess compared to his own mother, she would be,” he says, and shakes his head, going into the kitchen. The apples from the muffins he was going to make are okay, since Allison put them in the fridge. He scrapes the messed up dough out of the bowl and dumps it in the sink for Erica to deal with later, and starts over.

Derek comes up behind him and wraps an arm around his waist. He just stands there for a moment, pressing his cheek against Stiles’ ear. “You’re getting too tall,” he gripes after a moment.

“Sorry,” Stiles says, amused. “I come from a family of late bloomers.”
“You’re not allowed to get taller than me,” Derek says.

“Duly noted,” Stiles says, carefully re-reading the recipe before he starts measuring.

Derek’s quiet for a few moments. “You should get some sleep,” he finally says.

“You’re not wrong,” Stiles agrees, “but the pack’s going to be back soon and I’ll sleep better once they’re here. What’s a few more hours? Besides, I had way too much Adderall this morning to sleep right now. That’s why I’m going to bake and cook. If I sat down in front of my computer, I’d have a sixteen page research paper on corporate terrorism written by the time I passed out.”

Derek grumbles and says, “I’m going to clean up some of my stuff and work in my studio for a while. You’ll be okay?”

“Yep,” Stiles says, digging for a teaspoon. “I’ll call you when there’s a spatula for you.”

Derek nods, ruffles Stiles’ hair, and then heads out of the kitchen. Stiles puts on some loud music and gets to work. Presumably, people are going to want dinner, and the pack will be showing up around the dinner hour anyway. He decides to make Mexican food, because that’s labor intensive. Or at least it is when he does it, because he makes his own guacamole and salsa. It’s not something he always does, but when he’s looking to spend a day in the kitchen distracting himself, it works.

Sam and Jake arrive around six thirty. They call from outside the gate and Allison goes out to let them in and walk them down the road. It’s nearly a mile to get all the way to the outer fence, so it takes a little while, but they don’t seem to mind. Jake is dressed in what are obviously new jeans and a T-shirt with a band logo on it. He’s obviously very excited about the shirt. Sam relates that Chris and Julien have decided to go to a bar, and as far as he can tell, they plan to stay there and drink all night. This amuses Stiles. He texts Chris to say ‘let me know if you need a designated driver’. Chris texts him back asking him to politely go to hell.

“That smells really good,” Sam says, watching him push the taco meat around in the skillet. “I’ve been thinking I should learn the basics of cooking. I might be living off campus next year.”

“Oh, yeah?” Stiles says. “Well, this shit is easy. You ever see one of those ‘taco spice’ packets in the grocery?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sam says.

“Okay,” Stiles says. “The first thing you need to do is throw that shit away.”

Sam lets out a snort of laughter despite himself.

“Cooking’s not hard,” Stiles says. “It’s just a matter of a lot of trial, error, and pizza delivery when the errors outweigh the trials.” He grabs a few bags of shredded cheese out of the fridge and starts making everything look pretty. He doesn’t need to set it all up as a buffet, but hey, why not? While he’s in there, he grabs another can of Mountain Dew. He can’t remember the last time he was so caffeinated; it feels awesome.

His hearing isn’t as good as the wolves’, but he knows when his pack is almost there. He’s rocking back and forth on his heels, bouncing, brimming with excitement that nearly overflows. “Are, uh, are you okay?” Sam asks, and then Stiles hears the noise of the fence and he just drops everything and bolts out of the house. Behind him, he hears thuds and clatters as every other pack member joins him.

Lydia pulls through the gap in the gate and brings her car to a halt as soon as it’s all the way inside, rather than driving up to the house the way she normally would. This is because the others are
already getting out of the car and she doesn’t want to run over anyone’s toes. Stiles just launches himself forward and throws himself at the closest person, which happens to be Isaac. He grabs Isaac and hugs tight, letting Isaac cling a little because Isaac’s always been one of the most insecure members of the pack, for reasons that are obvious. The others don’t crowd him, but set about greeting Derek and those who stayed behind (or came back early). When Stiles judges that it’s safe to let go of Isaac without the younger teen feeling rejected, he does so, and grabs Lydia, picking her up around the waist and swinging her around. Then Boyd picks him up from behind and swings him around. Stiles laughs, his feet kicking for purchase. He lands shakily, stumbles forward, and Danny grabs him before he can fall.

Then there’s a group hug with a lot of back-slapping, glomping, and general puppy-piling. They’re all excited to see each other, and they all have plenty of questions for each other about the things that happened while they were gone. Lydia is talking nonstop about colleges despite the fact that everyone else would rather hear about Stiles’ side of things, and several people keep asking why Scott’s limbs are still intact and Stiles can only answer that he presumes it’s because Allison finds certain of his limbs important. He doesn’t indicate which ones.

It’s Danny, who for some reason has the most sensitive nose out of all of them, who first looks up and says, “Hey, we have guests?”

“Yeah, a couple of Allison’s cousins,” Stiles says, and now he finally pulls away long enough for them to get a good look at them. “Or second cousins, I think? Actually it doesn’t matter, the word ‘cousin’ can be used to denote a blood relation of any – ”

“Oh my God, Stiles,” Lydia says. “You said you got ‘a little roughed up’. That is not a little roughed up!”

Stiles gives a chagrined smile and a little shrug, which clearly isn’t going to get him anywhere, what with the fact that one side of his face is still dark with bruises, he’s got a ring of dark blue-purple around his neck, and the fact that it’s too hot for long sleeves means his bandaged forearms are clearly visible. “Yyyyyyeah,” he says, “I may have understated that a little so I could try to explain before you guys flipped out.”

The guests having been completely forgotten, everyone is now demanding explanations, and Stiles holds up his hands to try to stave them off. “It’s a really long story,” he says, “so let’s at least go inside and get some food and then I’ll tell you guys what happened, okay? But first let me introduce you. Mr. Muscles over there is Sam, and the smaller one is Jake.”

He can’t keep the note of possessiveness out of his voice when he points to Jake. All of the others blink, then Isaac says, “Wait, is this an official pack dinner?”

“What? No,” Stiles says, while the two Argents – and Danny, who as of yet hasn’t been there for any official pack inductions – blink at him in confusion. Since it’s obvious that this isn’t going to cut it, Stiles says, “Okay, maybe a little? The long and the very short of it is that Jake’s parents were total dickheads and he wasn’t really cut out to be their kind of hunter, so I swept in like a white knight and rescued him.”

Jake turns red but mutters, “Uh, hi.”

“He used the tiger pit but it was their own fault,” Allison says.

“Okay, wait, no,” Boyd says, shaking his head. “Something about this has to be a lie, because from the way you’re telling it, it sounds like someone actually fell into that stupid tiger pit – ”
Stiles strikes a victory pose.

“And we all know that would never happen.”

“We have a tiger pit?” Danny asks.

Stiles deflates. “Dude, do you actually listen to half the shit that comes out of my mouth?”

“Yeah,” Danny says, “and I ignore the other half because it tends to be stuff like ‘hey, you know what would be awesome? A tiger pit.’”

Stiles makes a face at them. “Anyway, take it easy on this kid. I won’t say ‘behave normally’ because none of us would know how to do that, but try not to scare the crap out of him.” He shakes his head a little as several of the pack members giggle. “Okay, Jake, I’m doing embarrassing you now. So, uh, Jake, Sam, meet the rest of my pack. Isaac’s the tall scarecrow-looking guy, Lydia’s the pretty one, Danny is the other pretty one, and Boyd is the, uh, the . . .”

“Big black dude,” Boyd says, when he sees that Stiles is trying to figure out how to describe him without sounding racist.

Jake laughs a little at Boyd’s self-description. Derek just cracks one of his half-smiles and says, “I think I just heard you slip another half point on the Kinsey Scale, Stiles.”

Danny waggles his eyebrows in a way that was so blatantly suggestive that it’s obviously a joke. “I see my powers of persuasion are working.”

“Trust me, Danny, nobody here is worried about your powers of persuasion,” Lydia says, smiling sweetly up at him. He laughs in response, and Stiles manages to shoo everyone into the house, where they set upon the food. He’s finally able to eat something besides applesauce, and digs in. He notices most of his pack staring at him. They’re trying to be subtle about it, but some of them just don’t have subtlety in their vocabulary.

“Okay, boys and girls,” he says, “the reason I didn’t call you guys to come back was because I was trying to keep you safe. Yes, things got a little out of hand. I won’t argue about that, but . . . it was definitely better, safer, for you guys to be out of town.”

The pack gives him that skeptical look.

“. . . I love you?” Stiles tries.

“That’s special, sweetie,” Lydia says. “Remember that we love you, too, and that we don’t enjoy coming home and finding out you were nearly killed.”

“Okay, do you guys have any interest in being fair at all?” Stiles asks. “Or when I say that the ‘kidnapped and nearly killed thing’ really came out of left field, are y’all just going to shake your heads and look disappointed in me.”

Lydia turns and looks at the rest of the pack, and then folds her arms over her chest. “We’ll hear you out.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, babe,” Stiles says.

Scott shakes his head. “You do realize that once they’ve heard the whole story, they’re only going to be more pissed that you didn’t call them, right?”
Stiles sighs. “Okay, okay. Here’s the story . . .”

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