Fortune’s Fool

by we_remain_together

Summary

Chris Argent was sixteen years old when he moved to Beacon Hills. It was only a pit stop. One more hunt to jot down in the margins of his journal. *Elevated supernatural activity,* Gerard had told him. There was something drawing the supernatural to Beacon Hills. It was just another easy hunt.

What he hadn’t been prepared for was Peter Hale.

The next year and a half would redefine Chris’ entire existence. Lies, passion, devotion, betrayal, heartbreak, and a love that would leave a cascade of blood and fire in its wake.

Or: The story of how Chris Argent met Peter Hale and how they proceeded to fall in love and inadvertently ruin each other’s lives.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: This story has some dark themes and subject matter, so please read the archive warnings and tags carefully. There are also some graphic descriptions of child abuse in this story, which I know is a very sensitive subject. So, I'm planning on posting a warning at the beginning of all chapters that deal heavily with child abuse. But keep in mind, even in chapters where there is nothing graphic described, there are still behaviors and thoughts that could be potentially triggering.

This fic is a (mostly) canon compliant backstory for Peter/Chris and The Hale Fire. It's part one of a series (the second installment taking place post season two), so get ready for a long and bumpy ride, my loves <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chris flipped towards the end of his small notebook, finding his last entry — Chicago, Illinois — and neatly printing the information on Beacon Hills below it.

_Beacon Hills, California. Total area 34 square miles, of which 32.8 square miles is land and 1.2 square miles, or 3.52%, is water. 11,691 people, 4,583 households, and 3,093 families currently in residence._

He had grabbed a few brochures, and a local map, earlier that day when Gerard had stopped at the town’s only gas station, a Citco, which had certainly seen better days. The building itself was two-toned, the paint badly chipped and faded. Half of the station was stained in a flaking brown, the other a crisply painted white, like the owners had attempted to renovate and grown tired of it halfway through.

Beacon Hills was much smaller than what Chris had grown accustomed to in Chicago, but it was a lot more populated than what he dealt with in Maine. Beacon Hills, at least, had a small town center. It was simple, quaint. Consisting of only a grocery store, police station, and a few modest businesses, but it was something.

Most of the land was made up of thick woods. He knew that was part of the reason Gerard had chosen this particular town.

_It'll be a great place to train, Christopher. Lots of space._

Regardless, the main reason they’d come there was something else. Chris didn’t know all the details, he rarely did. Something about elevated supernatural activity? It had obviously piqued Gerard’s interest enough that Chris had come home from school the other day to find their house emptied and all his stuff packed into boxes.

It didn’t really matter to him. This place, that place. It was all the same, really. Katie, however, had thrown a fit that would have had Gerard breaking his knuckles on Chris’ face if it had been him making such a fuss.

As was typical, Gerard had placated her, calling her "sweetheart" and explaining, in detail, how beautiful their new house would be, that her room would be so much bigger and "won't that be
She’d stared back at him with resentful green eyes, her teeth worrying her lower lip, but had relented and settled into the backseat, tucking herself under Chris’ arm. He’d hid his smirks into the curls of her blonde hair as she’d, indiscretely, sent glares at their father every time he glanced back at them. His sister was only seven years old, but she was a fiery little terror already.

When they reached the new house — which even from the outside was noticeably larger than the one in Chicago — Katie had slammed the car door so hard the window rattled.

Fiery. Little. Terror.

Gerard had followed after her, leaving Chris to empty the station wagon and trailer on his own.

The new house was secluded, just on the outskirts of town. So, at least this time he avoided the awkward gawking of neighbors wondering why a sixteen year old boy was carting around so many big-enough-to-fit-a-body sized duffel bags.

As it turned out, his sister’s bedroom was much bigger than her last one, not to mention almost twice the size as his. Katie was always given luxuries that, despite being the oldest, Chris would never be permitted. Their training was very different. Chris was never meant to lead.

He had understood that from an early age.

He was meant to follow instructions, without hesitation. He was a soldier. And if Gerard was a little hard on him sometimes, it was only to keep him alive.

One of Chris’ earliest memories was of his father teaching him how to properly sharpen a blade. In contrast, Katie had only just recently started training with weapons. It had been the fuel to the fire of many temper tantrums.

She had been begging Gerard to allow it for years. Chris could remember an instance, a year or so back, when she’d come pleading to him about it.

*Come on! Just a few shots, Chris. Please! I won’t tell dad, I swear.*

Eventually, he’d caved, as he often did when it involved his baby sister. He had lined a few soda canes across the top of a brick wall behind the house they’d been staying at.

He remembered standing behind her, turning her hips and placing her feet in a proper stance. He remembered wrapping her small hands around his .22 long rifle semi-automatic pistol (lightweight, light trigger pull, low recoil), showing her how to breathe, aim, and lightly placing his finger over hers on the trigger. He remembered the way her face had lit up when they’d blown a whole through the center can.

But mostly, he remembered the rage on Gerard’s face when he’d caught them.

Chris should have known better.

Katie had ran back into the house when Gerard strode purposely across the yard towards him. But seconds later, he had seen her peeking through the blinds of the back window.

He had lowered his eyes to the ground as soon as Gerard approached him, relaxing his grip on the pistol and letting his father take it from his hand. Despite his gaze being averted, he still saw the first blow coming. He could *feel* it before Gerard even connected. His father had beat him with the blunt end of his own gun until his legs collapsed beneath him and he fell to the ground. The last thing he remembered before passing out, besides the pounding of blood rushing to his head, was
the sound of Katie screaming.

When he’d regained consciousness later that day, his father had calmly explained to him the "severity of missteps in early instruction."

Gerard explained how bad habits taught early were very hard to break, and that he was never to involve himself in Kate’s training again. Unless, he’d been instructed to. Because he was too sloppy, too emotional, and teaching his bad habits to Kate could very well get her killed. Needless to say, it was a lesson that took.

Katie had her training. Chris had his.

Which, at that moment, involved disassembling and cleaning the various weapons strewn about his room.

Chris placed his notebook in the top drawer of his bedside table. It was already close to midnight, and this would take hours to finish properly. He picked one at random, dismantling the basic parts of the gun: the frame, the slide, the barrel, and the barrel spring. He placed the disassembled pieces on his bed spread and grabbed the necessary cleaning items from his duffel.

Applying a few drops of cleaner to his bore brush, he ran it back-and-forth through the barrel. He then soaked a handful of Q-tips with cleaning solvent and wiped out all of the little crevices in the frame. Cleaning and caring for the weapons was usually pretty relaxing for Chris, but it was time-consuming, and he was already exhausted.

The next morning was his first day at Beacon Hills High School, the fifth new school he’d attended in the last three years. And he would apparently be starting on little to no sleep, considering the last few nights he had barely slept at all. Not squished in the backseat of the station wagon with a dust-covered box on one side of him and his sister draped across him from the other, her bony elbows digging into his still bruised ribs.

Chris splayed his fingers across the ace-bandage wrapped tightly around his torso.

He and Gerard had put down an entire pack in Chicago. First eliminating the alpha, and later picking off the remaining betas when they came to retaliate. The pack had been utterly rabid, many of them newly bitten, and completely out of control on the full moon. There had been eight human casualties.

Chris had tracked down the last member of the pack on his own, but the beta had momentarily gotten the better of him. He’d been tossed a good ten feet through the air before colliding heavily with a tree. The wolf had been on him in an instant, wild and uncontrolled. The uncoordinated nature of the attack had given him an opening. He had instinctively went for the knife tucked in his belt, thrusting the blade upward, towards the soft flesh under the chin, and drilled it straight through the beta’s head.

Gerard had still been unsatisfied.

He’d told Chris that the reason he’d been injured was his distractibility, and that he needed to learn to focus. They had spent the remainder of that evening going over Chris’ choices, exposing all his missteps, deliberating on what he should have done differently. Gerard had allowed Katie to help Chris wrap his injuries but had still made him sleep on the floor that night.

Chris wiped the gun oil from his hands with an old t-shirt, throwing the soiled Q-tips and cotton swabs into the trash he’d dragged in from the hallway, and began to reassemble the weapon.

One down, fifteen to go.
I'm planning on creating a tumblr where I'll be posting edits of who I've cast for each character, story related gifsets, playlists, etc. I will post a link as soon as I have it set up :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

A special thanks to my wonderful beta Ellen. I adore you!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Beacon Hills High School was a lot bigger than he thought it would be. Gerard had dropped him off out front at exactly 7 o’clock, leaving him thirty minutes to navigate the halls, find his way to the main office, and get his schedule for the day.

As soon as he stepped through the front entrance there were eyes on him. It was late November, almost the middle of the school year. He wasn’t surprised that a new student would attract such attention in a small town like this. Chris readjusted the strap of the backpack on his shoulder and met every pair of eyes that glanced his way. He was far from unaccustomed to being the new kid.

There was a sign posted on the wall next to the stairwell, destinations with arrows pointing in different directions. He took a right down the hallway, walking towards what had been labeled Registration. Bypassing a row of lockers, Chris found his way to a door with the words Guidance Office etched into a bronze plaque.

When he walked inside, he found an attractive middle aged woman, early 40’s, sitting behind a large mahogany desk. She was tapping a pink feather pen on the table’s edge and didn’t look up when he entered. Chris stared at her a moment, wondering how anyone could be so inattentive as to not notice another person in the room with them.

He cleared his throat. “Excuse me, ma’am?”

The woman’s eyes rose immediately. “Hello, yes, sorry, can I help you, honey?”

Chris crossed the room towards her desk, his doc martens squeaking a little on the linoleum floor. “I hope so. My name’s Chris Argent. Today’s my first day. I was, uh, told to come here to get my schedule?”

Her eyes sparked with recognition.

“Oh, yes! Of course, Chris. I have everything you need right here, honey. We’ll need to get you a locker.” She glanced down, rummaging through several papers on her desk. "Ah-ha, good, here it is. Okay, these are your scheduled classes. It seems you’ll be taking Chemistry, English, World History, Algebra, and Gym. There is also a period for study hall, and since you are a sophomore, you’ll need to take a foreign language. According to your transcripts, you were taking French at Quahog High School?”

He nodded and took the sheet of paper she was holding out for him. He had taken French at several of the schools he’d attended, actually. The fact that he was already fluent in French was something he chose to keep to himself. Everyone deserved a bird course.

“Great. We’ll continue on with that here then. Now, this-” She handed him another, smaller, paper that was folded down the middle “-is your locker number and combination.”
He unfolded the piece of paper, squinting his eyes a little to read the messy scrawl.

#376, combination: 34-17-24

Refolding the paper neatly, he slid it into the pocket of his jeans. He’d never have to look at it again, to be honest. His eidetic memory was one of the few things Gerard actually praised him about.

“Thank you, Mrs.?”

Her face split into a wide grin. And Chris noticed, for the first time, how insanely white her teeth were. It was a little creepy.

“It’s Ms. Brooks, honey,” she said. “And you better get going if you want to beat the bell. You let me know if you need anything else, alright?”

He gave her his best charming smile. “I will, thank you for your help, Ms. Brooks.”

She flashed her white teeth at him again as he turned back towards the door.

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Once back in the hallway, it took him a few minutes to find locker #376. He turned the lock (right-34-left-17-right-24) and then pulled down. His locker door was a little dented, and he had to really yank at it before it would open. The halls were practically empty by then, and he groaned internally when he heard the first bell sound off.

The only thing more awkward than walking into the first class of the day in a new school, was walking into the first class of the day in a new school late. There would be the introductions, the usual "Pay attention everyone, we have a new student. Everybody say hello to Chris." Thankfully, he had avoided the parroted back, "Hi, Chris," he’d had to deal with in elementary school for several years now.

Chris stripped off his jacket, the brown leather one that Katie said made him look like a homeless person. It was weathered and worn and had belonged to his grandfather, whom he’d never actually met. It was also the last gift he’d ever gotten from his mother. He treasured it.

He folded back the jackets lapels, hung it on the metal hook in his locker, and swung the door closed, leaning his weight on it until he heard it click.

According to his schedule, Chris’ first class of the day was Algebra, room 101, Mrs. Lucey. When he reached the classroom, he could hear the undercurrent rumble of voices through the doorway. Deliberating for a moment, he simply raised his hand and knocked, twice, on the door frame.

Within seconds a short woman with chalk-white hair was peeking out at him. He smiled sheepishly at her. "Hi, sorry I’m late, I’m-"

She interrupted him mid-sentence, placing her hand on his shoulder and ushering him into the room. “You must be Chris! Welcome! Alright, pay attention everyone, we a have a new student!”

All at once, every head in the room swiveled in his direction.

Oh, God. Here we go.

He couldn't help but snort at the predictability.
The rest of the day was more of the same. The only break in the monotony being his French class, in which Monsieur Carter told the class that **nous avons un nouvel élève.**

He made light conversation with anyone who came up to him, answering all the typical questions of "Where did you move from?" and "How do you like it here so far?"

He was cornered in the hall, after his World History class, by a senior (Stilinski?), who wanted to know if he played any sports. He watched the kid's face fall at his "No, sorry" and was informed that, apparently, the high school basketball team was in dire need this year.

Chris barely had time to sleep with how hard Gerard had been working him lately, let alone extracurricular activities. He wasn't there to make friends, and he wasn't there to socialize. It was pointless. Anytime he let himself settle in, become complacent, he would just be ripped away from everything. No, it was better to just focus on school and training.

So Chris ate his lunch in the library.

He let the school librarian, Mrs. Henry, set him up an account and print him out a library card. The library was pretty impressive. There was a much wider variety of books than he would have expected in a town like this. Chris browsed the shelves for a bit, finally settling on a book about medieval weaponry and warfare. He did a lot of research on historical traps and weapons. It was surprising how often, with a little finesse, they could still be incredibly useful.

When lunch period ended, Chris tucked the book into the front compartment of his backpack and made his way to the last academic class (the next two classes being study hall and gym) of the day.

English, room 212, Ms. Miles.

Chris actually liked English. The curriculum was always more or less the same, regardless of what school he was in, and he liked words. Vocabulary, literature, interpretation. It made your mind sharper.

When he entered room 212 there were only a few other students in the classroom. The teacher, Ms. Miles, was sitting behind her desk, which as opposed to being in the center of the room, was off to the side a bit. There was a large poster on the wall behind her that said, **in literature as in love, we are astonished at what is chosen by others.**

She was young. Maybe mid-twenties? Her black hair was pulled back and braided. When she stood to greet him, he could see the braid ran almost to her waist. Her eyes were nearly as black as her hair.

“Hey there. I assume you’re Chris Argent?”

Chris nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ms. Miles’ dark eyebrows shot up, her left hand raising to her cheek. "Oh my, please don’t call me that! It’s Ms. Miles, or Ms. M, whatever you’re comfortable with.”

She had a real easy smile. He felt himself smiling back in response to it.

“Why don’t you have a seat? We don’t have a textbook in this class, but...” She reached behind her, grabbing a small book from the bookshelf beside her desk. “We’ve been reading entries from this. Just try to follow along the best you can.”
Chris glanced down at the cover of the book, *Pablo Neruda, The captain’s verses*.

Poetry then.

Ms. Miles ran her arm in an arc-like motion towards the rest of the room. “Sit wherever you’d like, Mr. Argent.”

A few more people had entered while he and Ms. Miles had been talking, but there was still only about a dozen people there. It was nearly half the size of all his other classes.

Chris chose a seat in the middle of the room, not too close to the front, but not too far back either. Placing his backpack beside the chair, he sat down and rummaged around in his bag until he found a blank notebook and folder. He set them both on the desk and wrote *English* across the covers with his black sharpie.

When the bell signaling the start of class sounded, Ms. Miles stepped to the center of the room. “OK guys, listen up. As you can see, we have a new victim here today. But let’s not bombard the poor kid with unnecessary questions, understood?”

“Whoa. Your parents moved you to Beacon Hills in the middle of the school year?”

The voice came from the seat behind him. He turned in his chair to see a fair-skinned girl with bright green overalls, black framed glasses and shockingly red hair.

She scrunched up her face when she saw Chris looking at her. “That’s harsh.”

He wasn't sure how to respond to her for a minute.

Thankfully, Ms. Miles’ voice cut through the silence, “Yes, thank you, Miss Goodro, moving on. Who remembers were we left off last Friday?”

A girl he remembered from his chemistry class, Linda, raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss Martin?”

“Page 47, Ms. Miles.”

She pointed her finger at Linda, and nodded her head in recollection. “Yes! That’s it. Why don’t you all open your books to page 47, then we can continue, and Mr. Hale sit *up* and take your feet off that chair. This is not your living room.”

Ms. Miles said the entire sentence in one breath, like it was common place, barely batting an eye. Her gaze had flicked just behind Chris on the word *Hale*, so he turned in his seat again, seeing a boy sat just behind the redheaded girl, lowering his feet from where they’d been resting on her chair.

The boy's hair was a dark brown, it fell just onto his forehead, bangs brushed to the side. The sweater he wore was a deep blue-gray color; it looked expensive. Chris’ mind supplied the word — cashmere, maybe? He couldn't help noticing that the color mirrored the kid’s eyes perfectly.

When the boy (Hale?) noticed Chris’ eyes on him, he tilted his head to the side, and winked.

Chris turned back around.

“I am terribly sorry about that, Ms. M,” Hale said. "It won’t happen again.”
Ms. Miles rolled her eyes. “Uh-huh. How about you turn to page 47 and read aloud to us?”

“Of course I will.” The sound of dramatic-throat-clearing reverberated through the room before Hale began. “I have scarcely left you. When you go in me, crystalline, or trembling, or uneasy, wounded by me. Or overwhelmed with love, as when your eyes close upon the gift of life that without cease I give you. My love, we have found each other, thirsty and we have drunk up all the water and the blood. We found each other hungry, and we bit each other as fire bites, leaving wounds in us. But wait for me, keep for me your sweetness. I will give you too, a rose.”

Ms. Miles’ eyes softened as Hale’s voice faded off. “Very good. Does anyone want to take a stab at what Neruda was talking about here?”

“Well, it’s a love story, right?” Linda, again.

A boy two seats to Chris’ left scoffed a little. “They’re all love stories, Linda. It’s a book of love poems.”

A few people snickered.

“Alright, let’s be constructive please. Anyone else?” Ms. Miles pointed to a dark-skinned girl in the front row. “What do you think, Jessica?”

The girl pursed her lips together. “I think it’s about two people who complete each other.”

“No-no. Not at all,” countered a voice from behind him. It was the redhead, Goodro. “It’s about two people who are damaged. They ruin each other.”

Chris couldn’t help but agree. Damaged and empty. Lost.

“Well, yeah, Livie, they devoured each other, didn’t they?” Chris looked over his shoulder to see Hale lounging back, aborting his attempt of raising his feet onto Goodro’s chair when Ms. Miles cleared her throat. “That’s not really an advertisement for healthy relationships, is it?”

Poetry could be hard to figure out sometimes. But Chris thought it sounded like these two people, whoever they were, thought they’d found what they needed in each other. Yet they’d been so starved for love that they sucked each other dry.

He hesitated a minute, then put his hand up.

Ms. Miles looked positively giddy at his participation. “Yes, Mr. Argent?”

“I think the, um, speaker is leaving. Or, has already left, this other person. Maybe they’d damaged each other too much? Maybe he couldn’t let it happen anymore?” Chris thought that was, more or less, the gist of it.

Hale spoke up again. “Yes, exactly! And even though he’s gone, he still hopes that the, uh-uh-” He looked down towards his open book “-sweetness that he’d loved in her is still there, and that he’ll be able to find it in himself too.”

Ms. Miles voice was noticeably somber when she answered them. “Well, that’s kind of tragic, isn’t it?”

Chris contemplated the words.

We found each other hungry and bit each other as fire bites, leaving wounds in us.
They had read up to page 55 before class ended. Chris could admit that he had been a little interested. He had never given much thought to poetry before. On the other hand, any exercise that showed you one thing but upon closer examination was actually something else had to be good for his instincts, right?

In his study hall, Chris briefly considered taking the poetry book out of his bag and continuing on from where they’d stopped in class, but after much deliberation, he pulled out his library book instead. He turned to the page he’d left off at during lunch and jotted some notes down about tying a decent snare. After all, he couldn't exactly hurl poems at the rabid monsters with claws and fangs that were trying to rip his head off.

Chris stopped by his locker to grab his jacket before heading down to the gym. He wanted to be able to head straight outside when the bell rang. Gerard had told him they had a lot to get done today and that he was to be outside at exactly 2:15.

The Beacon Hills gym looked like… well, every gym he’d ever been in, to be honest. There were bleachers, and basketball hoops, and a cordoned-off area with ropes hanging from the ceiling. The section of the gym with the ropes seemed to be where everyone was congregating.

“You’re late!” a deep voice bellowed.

Chris startled a little, his hand reaching, unconsciously, towards his hip.

There was a large, pug-faced man walking towards him. Chris took in the tight shorts and the silver whistle hanging around the man’s neck, and figured — gym teacher.

“Yes. I’m sorry about that.” He had stopped to grab his jacket. “I was just-

“I don’t care. Do you have anything to change into?”

Chris couldn't help but notice the man spit a little when he talked. He tried to covertly take a step back.

“I’m sorry, I don’t.”

The man made a production of looking him up and down. “Well, if you think you can climb in those boots… I’ll accept it for today. But, just so you know, any other time you come in here without a clothes change, it’s an automatic zero, understood?”

Mr. King, according to Chris’ schedule, had already turned and was walking away before Chris had a chance to answer, so he assumed that was the end of the conversation?

When Chris walked across the gym to the ropes, he noticed Goodro and Hale standing over by a pile of mats. Well, Hale was standing, Goodro was sitting Indian-style on top of them. She was also still wearing her bright green overalls and sneakers, as opposed to Hale, who was now dressed in a Beacon Hills t-shirt and black shorts.

The gym teacher seemed to notice this as well. “Are we not participating today, Goodro?”

She presented him with the same scrunch-face look she’d given Chris in class. “Well, you see, Mr. King. It’s a compatibility thing, really. And me and heights? Is the kind of compatible that’s just, well, not.”
Mr. King frowned in confusion for a minute. “I’ll have to give you a zero.”

“Oh, we’re copacetic, Mr. King.” She flailed her hands around a lot when she talked. It was kind of making Chris dizzy. “I totally understand.”

Chris felt his lip quirking. She was funny.

He glanced up to where Hale had been standing, only to find the other boy was already looking at him. Chris didn't look away this time, but he nearly jumped out of his skin when Mr. King clapped his hands together to get everyone’s attention. And seriously, what the hell was wrong with him?

Their activity of the day was, predictably enough, to climb, two at a time, to the top of the ropes and back down again. It wouldn't be a problem. Chris had done this lots of times before. Despite his lithe appearance, he actually had really good upper body strength. He got in to the line on the left, watching as everyone paired off and ascended the ropes.

Some slower than others. Some not making it at all.

He frowned a little as he overheard a few girls behind him laughing at a heavy-set kid that had failed to even get his feet off the ground. Chris smiled at the boy, Sam, when he walked passed him to sit on the bleachers.

When Chris approached the front of the line he looked to his right to see who he was paired off with.

It was Hale.

Which was odd, because Chris was certain he’d been at least two people back. Had he… asked someone to switch or something? No, that didn't seem right.

Hale smiled at him. “Ready?”

Chris shook all thoughts of the boy’s oddities away and stepped up to the rope, trying to think about it strategically. Hale was an inch or two taller than Chris but they had a similar build, with Hale being just a bit broader in the shoulders. But Chris knew size could be a disadvantage, and he was fast.

He took a deep breath in, held it for three seconds, then let it out, focusing, and launched himself upward the moment he heard Mr. King blow his whistle.

He knew this wasn’t all about upper body strength. You had to use your legs and back too. He held tightly to the rope, putting one hand over the other, and used his legs to grip onto the rope and increase his momentum.

Chris didn’t know why, but for some reason he really wanted to beat this kid.

He fought the urge to look over at Hale and check his progress. Chris could almost hear Gerard’s voice yelling focus in his head. Finally, he reached the red stripe of tape stuck to the top of the rope, and looked to his right. Hale was — already on his way back down?

He had beaten him. That was actually pretty impressive. Chris could feel the tingling in his muscles that told him he exerted a decent amount of effort. Yet, the other boy had still beaten him.

By the time he lowered himself to the ground, Hale was being preened at by a few of the other students. He was making small, dramatic bows. Chris felt something sour settle in his stomach. He
was all for competition, but he was not a fan of grandstanding.

At all.

_Seriously, you don't have to be cocky about it._

He was distracted when Goodro’s voice rang out from across the gym. “You’re lame!”

Chris laughed out loud this time, and he let a little of the sourness he’d felt show in his smile when Hale glanced at him.

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The few students that had been in line behind him took their turns on the rope, without incident, and Mr. King instructed them to hit the lockers around 2:00.

Fifteen minutes before he had to be out front for Gerard.

Chris figured that would be as good a time as any to slip out, so he walked over to the bleachers where he had left his jacket and backpack. When he turned around he saw Hale, back in his sweater and jeans, walking up to him.

“Hey, hold on a second.”

Chris paused with his bag halfway to his shoulder and lifted an eyebrow.

“You’re pretty quick,” Hale said. "You gave me a run for my money there.”

There was a good amount of shock in the boy’s voice, like he was astonished that anyone could actually give him a "run for his money.”

Chris’ eyes narrowed a little at his tone. “Thanks, you still beat me.”

Hale scoffed. “Only barely. So you just moved here, huh?”

Chris prepared himself to drone out the same answers he’d been giving to these questions all day. “Yes," he said. "We just got here yesterday.”

Hale kind of just "hmm’d" at him, but didn't say anything else.

Chris let the silence stretch for a minute, waiting for Hale to elaborate further, but the boy just — looked at him, his head tilted to the side, eyes searching. For some reason Chris couldn’t put his finger on, it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He was just about to excuse himself when Goodro’s head popped up from behind Hale’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said. "He has a personality disorder. He shouldn't be allowed to talk to people at all, actually.”

Hale looked over at her with a fond smile, Chris momentarily forgotten. “I shouldn't be allowed to talk to people, Livie?”

Goodro placed her hand on top of his head, patting him a little. “Not if there’s any sense of propriety needed.”

Chris glanced to the clock on the wall — 2:05. He needed to leave _now._

“I’m sorry, I have to go.”
Neither Hale nor Goodro looked after him as he walked away. Chris would deny having tripped up the stairs a little in his hurry.

When he made it to the front of the school, Gerard was parked in the same spot he’d been when he dropped Chris off that morning. Katie was in the back, and she didn't look happy. He could see her mouth moving rapidly through the window. From the look on Gerard’s face, he wasn’t really listening to a word she was saying.

His sister stopped her tirade when she noticed Chris approaching. She opened the door before he reached the station wagon.

“Hey, Chris! My school sucks!”

He threw his bag onto the seat and climbed in beside her. “I’m sorry?”

Chris looked at the clock on the dash as he fastened his seat belt: 2:11.

“Ha-ha. No, listen, Chris,” she said, her voice insistent. “You’ll never guess what happened to me today.”

Chris leaned back in his seat and let himself relax a little. “Oh yeah? Okay, tell me.”

His sister’s eyes lit up at capturing his full attention, not that she ever settled for anything less, and he felt that swell of affection in his chest that he associated only with Katie.

“Okay, so dad drops me off this morning…”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who is interested, I set up the fic-tumblr. You can find it here

Any thoughts/comments would be much appreciated!! :)
“I just don’t understand the appeal.”

Peter and Olivia had been walking for nearly twenty minutes now, and somehow she was still blabbering on about how she disliked basketball. Which was complete nonsense, anyway. What psychologically sound person didn’t like basketball?

In the spirit of full-disclosure, he’d stopped listening about eighteen minutes ago.

“You run down the court, you run up the court, you throw a big ball in a hole. Lather, rinse, repeat. It’s redundant,” she said.

Peter couldn’t resist the opening. “Kind of like you.”

Olivia scowled at him, pushing her glasses up her nose. “Oh, my. You amaze me with your cleverness, Peter.”

He couldn’t help but notice the way she kept readjusting her sweater, pulling the sleeves down so they covered her hands. It had gotten a lot colder in the last few weeks. The cold had never really bothered Peter. He always ran a little hot — perks of being a werewolf. Truth be told, he was still a little sweaty from practice.

He stripped off his fleece and handed it to her. “Here.”

Olivia pulled it over her head, flicking a few red curls off her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Thanks.” She flopped the collar over her nose, grimacing. “Smells like gym locker.”

Peter bumped his shoulder against hers, laughing a little as she squawked and flailed her arms to keep her balance.

Livie had stayed after school for Peter’s basketball practice again, mostly to shout derogatory comments from the bleachers until Coach snapped and frog-marched her from the gym. He would walk her back to her house, then cut across the cornfield and into the woods to get home. It was something they did often. Still, he knew she hated watching his practices.

She had ulterior motives.

She was a sneaky, meddling vixen, who always saw through his bullshit. Current situation being, he had recently fallen prey to a new distraction. As usual, Olivia had noticed; he was absolutely certain of it.

It wasn’t as if Peter had never felt attraction towards another guy before; he had, more than once, just not in a way that had ever… stuck. He’d never felt inclined to act before. Nevertheless, in the second that kid, Chris, had looked up at him with his thick dark lashes and those bright eyes, so blue, like the base of a fucking candle flame.

Stunning.

There was just something about him — maybe it was because he was new? The last new student
Beacon Hills had acquired was a good five years ago. It could get a little tedious looking at the same faces every day. Someone new was uncharted territory, and Peter had always liked a challenge.

So, that could certainly be part of it.

But still, there was just something about the way he carried himself: controlled, but precise. It made Peter want to poke at him until he got some kind of reaction. He was also intelligent. Peter could already see it, in the way he spoke, in how he articulated himself.

It was attractive. Peter was attracted.

He’d spent the better part of English that day staring at the pale line of Chris’ throat, which was also when he noticed Olivia raising an eyebrow at him in amusement. So, yes, he knew she knew. They were just in a stalemate right now.

Peter frowned, picking at a fleck of dirt he’d noticed under a nail. “Are you coming over for dinner tonight?”

Livie gave a put-upon sigh. “Nah, my mom’s home tonight. She’s all about the mother/daughter bonding lately.”

“He could see the barely restrained twitch at the corner of his friend’s eye, signaling she was seconds away from being characteristically blunt. She stopped walking abruptly and turned towards him, her arms arriving in place a few seconds after the rest of her.

Annd, here it is.

“So,” she said, "are we going to talk about your blatantly obvious infatuation or what?"

“Livie.” He huffed out a breath. To say she was exasperating was an understatement. “For fuck’s sake… what?”

She flashed him the classic Livie scrunch-face. “Oh, are we still pretending I haven’t noticed. Okay, forget I said anything.”

Peter wondered, for the first time, how she was going to react to this. He hadn’t really considered it before. It was 1990, so things were better than they were ten years ago, but people still got weird about it. And what Olivia thought, it mattered. Peter was so used to not giving a fuck what anyone thought that it always threw him off-kilter when he did care.

Something must have shown in his eyes, because Olivia linked her arm through his and started them walking again. “What is this face? I didn’t bail on you for being a werewolf, did I? Do you really think I’m going to, like, shun you or something for having slightly less than heterosexual inclinations?” she said, her mouth quirking up at one corner. “Don’t be a jerk.”

Peter nodded his head, knowing she would pick up on what he was trying to say without him actually having to say it; she was good like that. He felt guilty for even momentarily doubting her.

“What would make you think I have…” He grimaced at her phrasing. “Slightly less than heterosexual inclinations?”

The moment having passed, she stepped away from him and readjusted his fleece. “At the risk of sounding horribly clichéd, you’ve been pulling his proverbial pigtails all week.”
He kind of had, actually. The kid was fun to poke at; his eyes sparked so prettily.

Again, Livie could read the thoughts in his expression. She sighed. “I don’t know why your first instinct with the people you like is to creep all over them. Seriously, it’s not attractive. I really have no idea why everyone likes you.”

They had just rounded the corner onto Pleasant Street. Peter could see the wooden stockade fence that surrounded the Goodro house.

“It’s because of how handsome I am, obviously,” he said, flashing her his most seductive smile, the one that made the majority of girls in his high school blush.

Olivia walked towards the front yard of her house, placing her hand against the wooden fence, and cast him a less-than-impressed look. “And how modest you are, obviously.” She unlatched the lock on the front gate, her fingers tapping against the wood. “You know, maybe you could try actua-”

Yeah, nope. He knew where this was going.

“Just, leave it, Liv.”

“-lly talking to him. Really talking, as in a conversation, sans your usual snark.”

Peter gasped, his hand rising to his chest. “It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

Olivia swung open the gate, wincing a little as it banged against the opposite side of the fence. “Whatever. I know how you are anyway. You obsess for a while and then you lose interest.” She paused, averting her eyes. “Maybe it’s better if you just let it go this time.”

Olivia wasn’t the only one who could be intuitive. “Reverse psychology now, Liv, really?”

She made an exaggerated gagging sound. “See you tomorrow, Peter.”

Peter grabbed her arm before she could walk away, pulling her towards him and laying a purposely obnoxious wet kiss on her cheek.

***

It was just after five o’clock by the time Peter got home, and the Hale house was completely empty. Which in itself was surprising, seeing as there were currently seven of them — his parents, Talia and her husband, Steven, himself, and the puppies — living there. Soon to be nine. Steven’s younger brother, Ben, and his fiancé, Sarah, were making arrangements to move in within the month.

It was better when they all lived under one roof. They were stronger together. Adding two more names to the list of people Peter had to now share a bathroom with, however, was not something he was particularly thrilled about.

Peter took a moment to appreciate the silence and simply meandered about the house a bit.

It was Wednesday night, meaning his parents were out doing… whatever it was they did when they went out together. Dinner, a movie, an evening gallivanting through the woods. Peter had no idea.

Steven and Talia must have taken the kids out somewhere. There weren’t very many places they could have gone, not with Derek, who had about as much control as any two year old wolf, which
was absolutely none. Maybe they’d driven out to Brookfield for the Farmer’s Market, or they’d
gone to pick something up from Deaton. Talia, being the alpha now, was responsible for all
communications between the pack and their emissary.

It was… strange.

His sister was strong, intelligent, assertive. Grounding.

Peter can still remember the night of his first *real* moon, when the pull truly hit him, reaching
inside his chest and dragging to the surface every primal instinct he had. He recalled his then
teenage sister holding him still and carding her fingers through his hair, her soft voice helping him
reclaim symmetry. Anchoring him.

Talia had become his anchor, then, and had remained so for every full moon after that, but she
wasn’t his alpha. At least, she hadn’t been. That had been their grandmother, Elisabeth Hale, who
loved baking and fancy clothes and had taught Peter to appreciate the finer things. She was
elegant and regal, with a sharp wit and a sharper mind. She could stand-tall, superior, among the
most esteemed packs in the country, then come home and crawl around on the floor with her
grandchildren.

She had been dead for five months.

The status of alpha bypassed their father, surprising everyone, and had passed down to Talia. His
sister was different now, more restrained. Straight backed, stiff even. Just different.

It pissed Peter off.

He could feel the power emanating from her every time they were in the same room together,
could feel that familiar magnet-like pull he used to feel towards his grandmother. Even still, their
dynamic had just changed so suddenly that it left him reeling. The parts of her that had simply
been his sister seemed so distant to him now.

Peter rocked-back on his feet a little when he realized where his wandering had taken him. Both
he and Talia had spent a lot of time in that room growing up. Lots of lessons. Hours and hours of
flipping through dusty old books on pack dynamics and supernatural history. He and his sister,
sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, listening to stories and fables, accompanied by the
creak of an old wooden rocking chair.

Peter placed his hand on the brass doorknob and pushed open the door to his grandmother’s
bedroom. No one had even opened the door to this room in months; the smoke-thick smell of dust
made his nose itch. It was lightly coating all the furniture in the room. She would have hated that.
His grandmother was all about order and cleanliness.

All of the furniture were antiques. The bedframe, the bureau, the chairs, mirrors, the wooden chest
by the window, even the music-box that sat upon the bedside table. Peter crossed the room,
stopping by the head of the bed, and ran his finger along the glass casing. If he wound it up, it
would play "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy."

The sound of the front door opening had Peter yanking his hand back with a curse. He was
distracted. He hadn’t even heard Talia’s car pull up the driveway. Peter ground his teeth together.
This was something he had wanted to avoid discussing with Talia. Nevertheless, there was no use
trying to hide it now.

His sister already knew he was in there.

Seconds later, Peter could hear the clumsy ascent of little feet on the staircase — scenting the
barest hint of baby shampoo and crisp autumn leaves — before a flying, fuzzy projectile was launching itself at his kneecaps.

“Uncle Peter! Derek came back!”

Derek still interchanged the "r" sound with the "w" sound, so his name always came out sounding more like "Dewek." It was adorable. Peter was actually dreading the day the kid stopped speaking in the third person.

He peered down at his furry little nephew, amused. “And I am very happy that you did!”

Derek had recently taken to puffing out like a little black fluff ball every time he got excited, or sad, or angry. Or sneezed. It seriously limited the places they could take him. Having your two year old suddenly morph into baby Elvis wasn’t easy to explain. Not that Talia let Peter call him that. Baby Elvis, that is. Regardless of the fact that it was entirely accurate.

No one appreciated his humor.

Peter held back a wince when his nephew started scrambling up his leg, newly minted claws easily piercing through the material of Peter’s jeans. Derek’s fangs hadn’t come in yet, wouldn’t for a few more years still, but the kid’s claws worked just fine. Peter grabbed his wriggling nephew and lifted him into his arms before the pup could do any more damage.

“You have to be careful, pup, remember? Remember what we talked about?”

His nephew placed his chubby little hands on Peter’s face. “Yes ’member. Derek forgot. Sorry, Uncle Peter. But...” Derek leaned forward in Peter's arms until their noses were almost touching; his breath smelled like chocolate covered cherries. “Guess what?”

Peter couldn’t help but snuffle a little against the side of the boy’s face with him so close. He let the scent of baby shampoo, crisp autumn leaves and pup wash over him.

Pack.

Peter held him tighter around the waist as Derek giggled and tried to squirm away.

“I give up,” he said. "What?”

The fur had receded from Derek’s face by then, but his eyes sparked gold again when he said, “Derek carried po-tay-toes!”

Peter’s bark of laughter had Derek giggling again, his pint-size feet kicking on either side of Peter’s hips. “No way! I don’t believe it! Did Momma take you to the Farmer’s Market?”

He had assumed that’s where they had went. Being that it was owned by a neighboring pack, it was one of the only places off their property that they could bring Derek.

His nephew nodded his head, emphatically, in the way only a two year old can. Kind of like a bobble-head dog. “Oh, yes. Momma’s gonna make yummy stuff!”

Peter could honestly say the appalled tone of his voice was completely genuine. “Your momma's going to make yummy stuff? Like what?”

“Like, like french fries!”

Peter knew his sister was lingering in the hallway, had been able to smell her — lilacs and mint —
for the last several minutes.

“Well, maybe you and I should go down and help then? Momma’s not the best cook. We wouldn’t want her to accidentally burn the house down, right?”

His nephew looked horrified, lowering his eyebrows in a very serious frown. He looked so much like Steven for a second it was comical. “Oh, no no no.”

He could almost hear his sister roll her eyes. “Uh, Peter… Why do you have to?”

Peter glanced over to see Talia standing in the doorway, sporting her newly patented "I’m the alpha" expression, her back a stiff-straight line. He waggled his eyebrows at her.

“S’OK, Momma. Derek will help you,” his nephew offered.

Peter could hear the "this-is-serious-business" tone in his voice. It had him snorting and pressing a kiss to the pup’s hairline. Derek lowered his head to Peter’s shoulder for a second, warm breath ghosted against his neck, accompanied by a soft sniff sniff sound that told Peter the boy was taking in his scent. Peter smiled and lowered his nephew to the floor, Derek’s sneakered feet hitting the ground with a thump.

“Derek’s a good helper, Momma.”

Talia’s eyes were all for Derek then, staring down at the boy with barefaced affection. “Yes you are, my angel. Why don’t you go downstairs and help Daddy and Laura for now?”

Derek nodded again, dutifully. “OK, Momma. Bye-bye, Uncle Peter!”

“Goodbye, nephew.”

Peter counted down in his head, waiting for Talia’s usual instruction of "walking feet on the stairs, Derek" as his nephew ricocheted down the hallway. Really, though, walk on the stairs? They were lucky if the kid didn’t vault himself over the railing.

Exhaling noisily, Peter met his sister’s eyes. The silence was stifling, he felt like Derek’s absence had somehow sucked all the oxygen from the room.

“Peter,” Talia said, sighing. She looked tired. “What are you doing in here?”

Peter didn’t like her tone; it sounded like an accusation. “Nothing. I didn’t touch anything.”

Talia held her hands up and took a few steps towards him. “Hey, no, I didn’t mean it like that. I just know it’s been awhile since you’ve been in here.”

He looked at his sister, searchingly... really looked at her. Sure, things had been unsettled between them lately but this was still his Tal. So, he let himself be impulsive and said the first thing that came to his mind when he entered this room; what, most likely, was the reason he made his way up here in the first place.

“Do you think we should box up her things?”

Talia’s dark eyes widened in surprise. “What?”

Peter glanced back at the music box and stepped towards the bed. Lowering both his hands to the comforter, he absently brushed at the dust gathered there. For some reason the dust really bothered him.
“If Ben and Sarah are moving in here, we’ll need the space, right?”

“We have other rooms, Peter.” Talia’s face had twisted-up at his words, but he could hear the softness in her tone.

He didn’t like it. It made him feel exposed.

Peter turned back towards his sister, sitting down in the space he’d cleared on the mattress, and leered. “Yeah, but this one’s much farther away from the kids, isn’t it? Those two, all newly-engaged and cohabiting, we’ll probably want to keep their room as far from the impressionable children as possible.”

Talia crossed the room, stopping just a hair’s breadth from where he sat, and nudged him with her knee. “Peter.”

He looked up into his sister’s eyes, could imagine he saw the fairest hint of red bleeding through. “She wouldn’t want her room to be like this. Like some shrine.” He shuddered at the thought. “She wouldn’t like it. She’d want someone to live here.”

Talia’s shoulders slumped forward, and the metal-freaking-rod that had been shoved into his sister’s spine seemed to give way a bit. “Yeah… You’re probably right.” She lowered herself to the mattress beside him, taking in their surroundings for the first time. “It’s weird, isn’t it?”

Peter glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

“Just...” She made a vague gesture, hand moving in small circles. "Being in here, you know?" Being in there, just the two of them. Without her.

Yes, he knew. “Yeah.”

Silence filled the room again, but it was almost peaceful this time; the air, at least, was a little more breathable.

His sister straightened up beside him, her voice all duty and responsibility again. “We’ll talk to Dad about clearing out the room.”

Peter felt himself bristle. He couldn’t even help it.

“Why? You’re the alpha now.”

Anger flashed in her eyes for an instant, and he found himself hoping she would lash out at him. Yell, scream, anything. The Talia of five months ago certainly would have. But whatever ire he had glimpsed there simmered and then faded, leaving behind only frustration.

“Why? Because she was his mother, Peter.” Talia grabbed his face when he tried to look away, holding tightly to his jawline. “Because he’s our father and I respect him. Because we work together as family and as pack, the same as we always have. That’s why.”

Her eyes burned with conviction. Peter felt that familiar magnet-like pull again; he couldn’t look away.

Sufficiently chastised, he tilted his head, unconsciously baring his throat to her. “No, I know. I know that. I don’t know why I even said that.” He did know why, but he had no inclination of fighting with his sister right now. “I’m just adjusting.”
Talia huffed. “Yeah, you and me both.”

The confusion must have shown on his face, because his sister was suddenly laughing at him.

“What you think this has been easy? I’ve always known there was a possibility I’d be the alpha someday, but I never thought it would be this soon. Now all of a sudden it’s here and—” She laughed again, but it was a self-deprecating sound, hollow. “I’m not sure if I’d ever have been ready for it.”

Peter could scent the sadness on her, the confusion. She was driving herself into the ground. He took in the paleness of her skin, the dark hue under her eyes, and felt an overwhelming instinct to protect claw away at his insides.

packsisteralphaminepack.

He leaned towards her, touching their shoulders together. “You shouldn’t feel like that.”

Talia gave an exaggerated eye roll, snorting in disbelief. It was such a pre-alpha-Talia response. It made Peter’s chest burn.

He hastened to reassure her. “I mean it.”

And he did. Everything else aside, he would watch her in amazement sometimes, completely in awe at the things she could do.

“You’ve been remarkable, Tal.” He hoped she could see the sincerity in his eyes. “It was always going to be you.”

Talia just stared at him, blinking, her breath shaking a bit as she inhaled, and then exhaled. Lips slowly curving upward, she laid her hand on top of where his was still resting on the mattress, her eyes shining. There was something about the way she was looking at him. It made him think back to a few minutes earlier, to how she had gazed, so adoringly, down at Derek.

Peter turned his hand palm up under hers and laced their fingers together.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, a special thanks to my lovely beta Ellen.

Any comments/thoughts would be very much appreciated! Feedback feeds my inspiration!
Peter Hale was infuriating.

Chris liked to get all the facts about a situation before he rushed into any quick judgments. Nevertheless, somehow within the last week, his initial thought that the kid was puzzling had rapidly transmuted to annoying, and then just outright fucking infuriating. The other boy had, literally, taken any and every opportunity to aggravate, annoy, or otherwise irritate Chris — all week long.

Peter Hale was a nuisance.


The previous day, in English class, they had been discussing character points of view and narration. Yet somehow, the two of them had ended up arguing about the difference between "fact" and "truth" for the last twenty minutes of class.

*If someone believes something to be true, then it’s true, right? But that doesn’t actually make it a fact, now does it? Facts are objective, facts are more permanent, truths are temporary.*

**Fine, okay, if that’s true, then who gets to decide which is which?**

He didn’t even actually care. But he’d still found himself leaning forward in his chair, lips pressed together in annoyance. He had allowed himself to be baited, because that was exactly what Peter had been trying to do: bait him. He could still see the boy’s expression, the amusement, the satisfaction. It had made Chris want to fight back harder.

It was just completely ridiculous. The whole thing had been ridiculous.

In the hallway after class, he recalled looking down at his hands and seeing the little half-moon indents from where his fingernails had dug into his palms. Thinking back now, he really had no clue as to why he’d allowed himself to get so worked up about it.

Later that day, it just so happened they were playing volleyball in gym. He and Peter had been on opposing teams. And Chris had no qualms in admitting that every time he got the ball, he was more focused on “accidentally” decking Peter with it than actually scoring any points. The third time the volleyball narrowly missed Peter’s head, Mr. King had blown his little silver whistle at Chris and reminded him that they weren’t, in fact, playing dodge ball.

Peter had just smiled that shit-eating grin of his and seemed totally unfazed by any of it.

Peter Hale’s team had won, despite having Olivia Goodro as one of his teammates, who didn’t so much participate as shriek and cover her face with her arms every time the ball came near her. Peter’s shouted encouragement, "Aw, come on, Livie, you can do better than that! Just pretend its
"Tommy Morton’s face," and Morton’s offended "Hey!" did little to improve her technique.

They’d won anyway, Peter having done most of the work. The boy was very athletic. Revered all-star of the basketball team, or so Chris had been told. He was also extremely popular. There were always people clustered around him, laughing at his loud, and in Chris’ opinion, obnoxious behavior.

On the other hand, Chris had noticed that Peter seemed to spend most of his one-on-one time with Olivia Goodro, who was equally as loud but far less confrontational. With Chris at least. She was, however, unapologetically hostile towards most of the people who tended to flock around Peter.

Chris couldn’t actually blame her for that. He’d overheard enough of their conversations to come to his own conclusions about what kind of people they were.

When gym class ended, Peter had capped off his day of annoyance by "helpfully" grabbing Chris’ backpack from the bleachers and bringing it over to him, only to pull it back at the last minute when Chris went to reach for it. And, just, what?

For the love of god!

It was becoming more and more obvious to him that Peter Hale had the mentality of a fifth grader.

He had tried not to react and then cursed himself internally when he felt his teeth grinding together. Chris had lunged forward, hooking his fingers in one of the bags straps, yanking it, and Peter, towards him. The movement had significantly lessened the space between them, to the point where Chris could smell the spearmint gum the boy had been chewing. Peter had loosened his hold on the bag, chuckling and telling Chris he needed to lighten up.

As he’d walked away though, Chris had felt like he’d just taken 1000 volts to the chest. He could almost feel the electricity under his skin.

***

After the events of the previous day, Chris had assumed things could not possibly get any weirder — he was sorely mistaken.

That morning, Chris had made a pact with himself: He was done responding to Peter Hale. Done. Over. Finished.

He never should have allowed the kid to get under his skin in the first place. He needed to have more self-discipline than that. It was pitiful, really.

Consequently, he purposely kept his mouth shut that day in English. Quietly taking notes and only answering questions when he was called on. He did not turn around and comment when he felt the other boy’s eyes drilling holes through the back of his head. And he did not respond to Peter’s remark that Chris’ analysis on the chapter they were reading was "a bit facile."

Needless to say, he felt sufficiently proud of himself when the period ended and he still had his dignity. The strange thing, though, was Peter’s behavior when they were leaving the classroom. Chris had taken a minute to collect his things, and to congratulate himself on being the bigger person, of course.

But when he’d walked towards the door, Peter was still lingering there, feet shuffling oddly, door braced open with his right shoulder. Chris frowned; he had no idea why Peter was just standing there. A high pitched squeaky sound had him looking past Peter, towards where Olivia was
standing in the hallway, shoulders shaking with barely repressed laughter. Chris turned sideways, sliding through the space between Peter and the opposite door frame, his back just barely grazing the other boy’s chest.

Had Peter just… held the door open for him?

Chris was halfway down the hallway when Peter’s voice bellowed out behind him. “You’re welcome!”

He glanced back over his shoulder to find Peter with that annoying self-satisfied smirk on his face again. Olivia was standing in front of Peter, hands on his chest, and attempting to push him down the hallway in the opposite direction.

Chris felt that electric buzz under his skin again.

He was suddenly very aware of the fleeting contact they’d just had. He could feel it between his shoulder blades, burning, where his back had brushed against Peter.

It was disconcerting, confusing. He felt almost suspicious of the other boy’s motives. He obviously wanted something? To be honest, it was making Chris feel a little edgy.

Peter’s strange behavior continued in gym class.

They were still playing volleyball, but Peter’s prowess from the day before was conveniently absent. Any time Chris shot the ball over the net, Peter would suddenly slip up and allow him the point. This was clearly just another attempt at provoking him.

Chris compartmentalized his aggravation, refusing to give Peter the satisfaction. When class ended, he didn’t bother changing out of his gym clothes, just gathered his things together and hurried from the gym in hopes of avoiding another bizarre incident.

All good intentions aside, Olivia Goodro still managed to catch up with him in the hallway. He could hear her flip-flops clonking on the ground as she jogged up behind him.

“Hey, hi. Got a sec?”

Chris raised his left wrist, checking his watch. He did actually have some time. Gerard had told him he would be a little late picking him up today.

“Yes.” He narrowed his eyes at her, suspicious. His first day aside, she’d never directly spoken to him before. “Why? Do you need something?”

She smiled brightly, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Need something? Nah, not at all. Just thought I’d say hi.”

“You thought you’d say hi?” Chris tilted his head, his brow creasing. “Any particular reason why?”

Olivia’s face twisted up like Chris had just accused her of something awful. “No! Well, kind of. I mean, we’ve never really talked before, have we?”

Chris’ mouth quirked at one corner. “I guess not. I really should get going though. Maybe some other ti-”

Olivia grabbed onto his wrist when he turned to leave, and he had to stuff down the sudden urge to twist out of her grip. He really didn’t like it when people grabbed him like that.
“Wait. Okay, yes, there is a reason I wanted to talk to you.”

Chris looked down at his watch again, sighing. “Does this reason involve Peter Hale?”

“Maybe? Look, I know he can be a little, um, intense. I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea, you know?” There was a touch of irony coloring her words, but her eyes were earnest. “He just thinks you’re interesting.”

That… made absolutely no sense at all.

Chris ran a hand over his eyes; his tone was heavy with skepticism. “Interesting?”

Olivia’s lips twisted in a half-smile. “I kid you not. It’s just, well, you’re not afraid to speak up. And—” She thumped him lightly on the chest with the back of her hand “—you actually contribute in class, like poignant stuff, as in not nonsense. It can get so dull here, and you’re — new.”

Chris was honestly getting a little thrown off by all the touching. He had unconsciously angled his body away from hers a bit. Even still, he couldn’t help but smile at her. She had a very exuberant kind of energy. It was infectious.

“Huh, okay. So you’re telling me he’s been an insufferable pain in the ass because he thinks I’m... interesting?”

“Exactly!” she cried. Chris jumped a little at her volume. “Why? You didn’t pick up on that?”

He still wasn’t completely buying it.

“Not so much.”

Olivia’s eyes sparked at his sarcasm, her hands grabbing at the lapels of his jacket and giving him a slight shake. “Don’t worry, he’s just an alien. I really wouldn’t let it bother you.”

Chris shook his head, laughing, and placed his hands on top of hers, lightly pulling at them until she let him go. “How long have you known him?”

“Since the second grade when he ganked my peanut butter snack pack and then just never went away. Peter’s very persistent, eventually I had to acknowledge him.” She tilted her head suddenly, her eyes amused. “You should be careful, or you’ll get sucked into his orbit too.” There was some underlying meaning in the quirk of her mouth. “Never to escape again.”

Somehow, Chris didn’t see that being an issue.

“I’ll keep that in mind… Livie?”

She shook her head, grumbling softly. “Ugh, it’s just Olivia. ‘Livie’ is an unfortunate childhood nickname that Peter refuses to let go of.”

Chris nodded his head in acknowledgment, and they stood in silence for a few seconds.

Unexpectedly, Olivia’s entire demeanor shifted. She began to fidget awkwardly, her hand raising to fiddle with a gold ring that hung on a chain around her neck.

“So, I was thinking,” she said. "You know Jessica Kane, right? She’s in our English class?"
He gave a noncommittal shrug; he didn’t exactly know her, but Olivia just waved at him dismissively. “Well, anyways, it’s her birthday this weekend and she’s having a little shindig at her house tomorrow night. Peter wants me to go…” Chris felt a flicker of unease at the Cheshire-like grin that stretched across her face. “You should come with.”

Go to a party with her? And Peter Hale? No. Absolutely not. Chris was starting to feel like he had just allowed himself to be ambushed; like this was some kind of deliberate, precalculated, cleverly devised attack.

“I don’t think I can,” he said.

Olivia frowned at him, her lower lip jutting out. “Why not? Are you busy?”

He was, actually. He was right in the middle of a hunt, but he couldn’t exactly tell her that.

Gerard had pointed out to him once that when Chris was lying, he had an obvious tell, that his eyes always flicked to the right, and then down. It was something he’d worked very hard on correcting. For all intents and purposes, he was pretty convincing with his lies now. So, he was a little surprised when he felt himself wilting under Olivia’s scrutiny.

“No.” Chris faltered. “I’m not busy.”

“Then you should come!” She was toying with the ring again, but her expression was open and sincere.

Chris tried another tactic. “I don’t even really know her. I mean, I wasn’t invited.”

“Oh, don’t even worry about that! Neither was I!” She huffed out a laugh when he quirked an eyebrow. “Come on, they totally hate me, but Peter always gets invited to stuff like that. I just tag along as his plus one.”

Her hands had somehow found their way onto Chris’ person again, this time resting on his shoulders. “So you can be my plus one, or Peter’s plus two, since I don’t think a plus one actually gets a plus one.”

Chris didn’t remove her hands this time, just pinched the bridge of his nose and laughed. “I don’t think you’re allowed a plus two, either.”

Olivia stepped back, gesturing wildly, and Chris thanked his quick reflexes when he narrowly escaped catching a flailing limb to the face.

“Oh, whatever. Semantics!” she said, rocking back and forth on her heels. “So will you?”

Yeah... He was wilting alright. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad? It’s not like she could force Chris to stay or anything if he didn’t want to. Besides, the odds of Gerard actually agreeing to let him go were less than slim. Minuscule. Practically nonexistent.

“I guess I could ask Gera – uh – my father about it,” he said.

“Wicked!” Olivia slid her hand into her pocket, pulling out a yellow post-it note, and held it out to him. “This is my phone number. Give me a call if you can go, yeah?”

He hesitated a minute before taking it. “Sure.”

The fact that she just so happened to have a note with her number on it made Chris revisit his being ambushed theory, but Olivia was already turning on her heels and bounding down the
hallway before he could comment on it.

Chris stared after her, bemused.

He really had no idea how she’d just gotten him to agree to that.

***

Chris was reluctant to bring anything up at dinner. The most effective way of getting Gerard to agree to something was to catch him at the right moment.

Shortly after they arrived in town, he and Gerard had heard rumor of some questionable attacks a few towns over. It wasn’t technically in their area, but it was close enough that Gerard took an immediate interest. They were still piecing together the details, but his father was convinced an omega was behind the attacks.

Gerard had been on and off the phone all evening.

Apparently, there was significant evidence backing up his father’s omega theory. According to their contacts, a pair of hunters had been tracking a wolf from Nevada, but had lost sight of it some seventy miles outside of Beacon Hills. This particular wolf had a pattern. Three kills, every third week of the month. Congruently, there had been three "animal attack" victims in their neighboring town. Only one had succumbed to their injuries, but it still seemed to match up.

It was most likely one wolf, traveling alone.

Whatever it was, the evidence was irrefutable. Human blood had been spilled. At this point, all they could do was track it and put it down, as quickly and quietly as possible. It was an easy hunt. Nothing that had to monopolize the entire weekend, at any rate.

And so, Chris poked his fork at his green beans and waited for an opening. His father was currently interrogating an uninterested Katie on her first week at Beacon Hills Elementary.

“Did you make any friends, sweetheart?”

His sister was stabbing at her chicken like maybe it was still alive, and she had to finish it off.

“I guess.”

Gerard hummed softly, nodding his approval, and turned towards Chris. “How about you, Christopher? Things going well?”

He sat up a little straighter in his chair, making sure his elbows weren’t touching the table as he cut into his chicken. “It’s been fine. I’m still trying to get used to the new schedule and everything.”

If he was going to bring anything up, now would be the best opportunity. Gerard seemed relaxed, almost — content. Things had fallen into place with the hunt, which always put his father in a good mood. Katie had recently decided that living here didn’t "totally suck" and had stopped trying to set their father ablaze with her eyes. Not to mention, Gerard was currently working on his second glass of Merlot.

He decided to just go for it.

“I have met a few people. I got invited to something this weekend, actually.”

Gerard wiped his mouth with the white cloth napkin he’d had resting in his lap and laid it on top
of his dinner plate. “Invited to what?”

“Just a party.” Chris hastened to correct himself. “A birthday party. It’s tomorrow night.”

His father steepled his fingers, raising them to tap thoughtfully at his chin. Chris didn’t say anything else, just waited until Gerard looked up at him again. When he did, Chris could already read the “no” in his eyes.

Gerard’s voice was slightly reproachful when he answered him. “I don’t think that would be appropriate right now.” Chris wrapped his feet around the legs of his chair when Gerard leaned forward, eyes narrowed. “We’re in the middle of a hunt, Christopher.”

Chris had figured as much. Gerard was pretty consistent in telling him that he needed to avoid distractions. When they were hunting, everything else took a backseat. He hadn’t seemed too upset by the request though, which was something. His father’s eyes kept darting over to Katie, actually, who for the last several minutes had been attempting to covertly hide her green beans in what was left of her mashed potatoes.

He could play this out a little further.

“Of course. But if we finish up tonight?” Chris asked, purposely keeping his voice light, uninterested.

Gerard exhaled heavily through his nose and turned back towards Chris, his expression clearly communicating that he was done with this conversation. Chris was surprised at the disappointed knot that twisted in his stomach.

“We’ll see.”

We’ll see, Chris knew, was his father’s way of avoiding a direct answer.

Gerard frowned at Katie when she set down her fork and pushed her plate to the middle of the table. His father grabbed the discarded dish and dragged it back on to his sister’s place mat.

“Eat your green beans, Katherine.”

She crinkled her nose, picking up a single bean with her fingers and nibbling on the corner. Her face contorted in disgust like the little green vegetable was some kind of necrotic limb.

Chris chuckled at her theatrics and let the subject drop.

***

After dinner, Chris and Gerard had gone over some last-minute details for the hunt. They had narrowed down the search area, significantly. It was only about 14.48 kilometers of woodland now, give or take. Chris had marked the perimeter of the area on his map with a yellow highlighter.

After Katie was settled in bed, he and his father had packed up the station wagon — infrared heat seeker, double barrel shotgun, 160 feet of snare wire.

Chris had his 9mm Beretta in the holster strapped to his right thigh, a fixed-blade hunting knife tucked into a belt sheath at his waist, and his .38 Smith and Wesson secured to his ankle. He brought his crossbow too, as he always did, but Gerard had told him to leave it in the car.

_Leave that. It will be no good in such a small area._
He was inclined to disagree, but he’d done as he was told.

Chris and his father had entered the search area from opposite sides. They’d cover more ground that way, a lot faster.

It was freezing out tonight; cold enough that his breath puffed out like white smoke. A thin sheet of ice covered the forest floor, it crunched under his boots as he walked. There was no use trying to be quiet. If the omega was there, the wolf would already know it was being hunted.

Chris had been cautious, alert. Taking care to keep an eye on his surroundings and watching the infrared closely for signs of activity.

Everything had happened rather quickly after that.

Chris had just walked through the mouth of a small clearing when a steady beeping sounded from the device in his hand. It had picked up on something, something large, with a higher than average heat signature. He raised it to his eyes to get a better reading of the coordinates but was distracted when a loud cracking noise came from the tree to his left.

Like a branch snapping.

In the moment it took Chris to register it was a friggen raccoon that had made the noise there was a heavy weight barreling into him. The momentum brought both of them to the ground.

It was, of course, the omega.

The man snarled down at him, shifted into his beta form; his eyes were an ice blue. Chris went for his Beretta, firing three shots in quick succession. The wolf howled in pain, his claws digging into Chris’ jacket. Chris could feel his entire body being lifted and then rapidly slammed back down into the base of the tree. The tree's roots smashing into his midsection caused a flare of pain in his still healing ribs.

Chris held tightly to his gun, placing it to the center of the wolf’s chest, and tensed his finger on the trigger. But before he could fire his fourth shot, the bright silver blade of his father’s broadsword was protruding from the omega’s throat. The resulting blood splatter sprayed across Chris’ face like a water balloon.

He watched as the wolf’s head slid off its shoulders, hitting the ground with a wet, hollow sound.

Chris blinked.

Gerard was towering above him, the wolf’s decapitated body sprawled lifelessly at his feet. His father was breathing heavily, teeth bared, eyes blazing. His gaze was fixed on a point just to Chris’ right, where the wolf’s head still lay.

He raised himself up onto his elbows, groaning a little when the movement pulled at his aching ribs.

Gerard’s eyes snapped to him at the sound, seemingly noticing Chris for the first time. In an instant, every emotion drained from his father’s face, his eyes darkening like burning coals.

Chris felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. He stopped moving immediately, muscles in his arms tensing up to hold his position.

Gerard took a step forward, widening his stance so he had a foot on each side of Chris’ outstretched legs. When he spoke, his voice was as hollow as his eyes. “Don’t get up.”
Chris took a deep breath in through his nose, and held it. He tried to release the tension in his muscles. It would be easier if he relaxed; it would be better. When he exhaled, he tried to dispel the rising panic he could feel creeping under his skin.

It didn’t work.

Gerard flipped his sword around, holding it by the blade, and lowered the swords hilt to Chris’ shoulder, pushing him downward. “Lay back down like you were.” His father stepped back, frowning. “Now tell me, what do you think would have happened to you If I hadn’t been here?”

It was a rhetorical question. Chris knew better than to say anything at this point. He just lay still, the tree root underneath him digging painfully into his spine, and tried to force himself to keep eye contact. He took in another shaky breath.

“You’re still favoring your left side, correct? Do you think it would have noticed that?”

Gerard surged forward, face contorting, and kicked him, hard. His father’s steel-toed boot slamming into the heavy ache in his ribs. The pain was excruciating. Nerves sparked outwards, flames licking down his side to the tips of his toes.

Chris didn’t cry out. He choked down the sound, extinguishing it before it could force its way from his throat.

Gerard was looming over him now, lips stretched in a thin line. “No. Maybe not. Omegas, they are pitiful, mindless creatures, aren’t they? Not necessarily known for their skills of observation.”

His father stalked around him, like a lion, like a predator — like a wolf. He was chuckling quietly to himself, his eyes alight with amusement. Chris just tried to breathe, tried to relax. Tried to quell the rising nausea that was churning the contents of his stomach. His vision was still swimming, so he clenched his eyes shut tightly for a moment. When he opened them, Gerard was towering over him again.

“Or maybe…” He raised the broadsword still held tightly in his hand, and lowered the tip to Chris’ throat. “It would have just gone for your throat.”

Chris could feel his hands trembling. He clenched his fists, but the shaky feeling just traveled up to his forearms and then to his shoulders. White lights were flashing at the corner of his eyes.

The tip of the sword was just barely touching his throat, not hard enough to draw blood, but he could still feel it. He could feel the sharp outline pressing into his skin when he swallowed. With just a flick of his wrist, Gerard could tear through his flesh like it was paper.

It ended as quickly as it began. His father lowered the weapon and stepped back. Gerard raised his hand, and his fingers waved in an upward motion. “Stand up.”

Now that the tension had drained from his body, Chris felt like his arms were made out of gelatin. His entire side was throbbing, little pinpricks of agony shooting through his body with every breath. Chris rolled onto his stomach, raising himself slowly onto his knees with shaky hands.

His father’s boot caught him in the face this time, the force of it rocking his body in a backwards arch. Chris hissed sharply at the impact. He bit his tongue on the way down and the thick, coppery taste of blood flooded his mouth.

“Don’t crawl on your hands and knees! Stand up!” Gerard shouted, his hand clenching around the hilt of his sword.
Chris rose up again, lowering his head between his hands, panting harshly, and spat a mouthful of crimson into the dirt. He took a steadying breath and bound to his feet. The trees swayed a bit before his vision balanced out.

When he could focus again, Gerard was right in his face. There was maybe a few inches separating them.

“Do you think you should have been paying closer attention?”

His father had quite a talent for making a sentence sound like both a question and a statement, simultaneously. Chris nodded his head, but his father just narrowed his eyes and leaned in a little closer.

“Yes or no, Christopher.”

Chris wiped at the blood dripping down his chin with the back of his hand, and swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes. I think so too,” Gerard said, his voice deadly low. ”Do you know what your mistake was?”

He responded instantly this time. “Yes, sir.”

Gerard smiled in approval; nevertheless, Chris could see in his father’s eyes that this lesson was far from finished.

“Wonderful, show me.” He raised a hand, pointing to where Chris had first entered the clearing. “Go stand over there. Why don’t you retrace your steps and we’ll see if you can get it right this time.”

***

When he and Gerard got home, it was close to three in the morning. His father had cut the wolf’s body in half — hemicorporectomy — and they’d disposed of it, sinking it to the bottom of the town quarry.

The ride back to the house had been absolutely silent.

Chris gathered together their gear from the backseat and carried it into the house without being asked to. He wanted to put as much space between him and his father as possible, as quickly as possible. His arms felt like dead weight, and there was a raw tearing pain at the juncture of his right shoulder where his arm had been twisted at an odd angle.

He dragged himself up the stairs to the hall bathroom, flicking on the light switch and squinting his eyes at the sudden glare.

Chris turned to look at himself in the mirror. His face looked, well, like shit. There was a vivid red mark running along his jaw. It was already turning a bluish-purple at the edges, but it would be completely black and blue by morning. His lip was split down the center and there was dried blood stuck to the corner of his mouth.

There was nothing he could do about that. His more immediate concern was the crackling he could feel in his chest every time he moved.

Chris grabbed a washcloth from the linen closet and turned on the faucet, soaking the cloth with cold water. Lifting up his shirt, he raised a hand to his rib-cage. There was an actual boot print across his left side. It stood out in stark contrast to the pallor of his skin. He ran his fingers, slowly,
up and down the area, checking for dips or splinters in the bone. Nothing seemed to be broken, maybe a hairline fracture or two, but nothing serious.

He had just raised the cold cloth to dab at his mouth when he heard an inaudible voice coming from the hallway. It had to be his sister. Gerard would be down in the basement for at least the next hour. Chris made his way out of the bathroom and down the hall to Katie’s bedroom door. He smiled softly when her childish voice echoed from beyond the threshold.

The door creaked a bit when he opened it.

“Katie? Hey, it’s late, why are you still awake?”

There was a mound of quilts on his sister’s bed and a flashlight shined red from underneath the blankets. Her voice was muffled through two quilts and an afghan when she answered. “I’m not awake.”

Chris snorted, crossing the room to the bed. “No? It sounds like you are.”

For a moment, there was a rustling sound under his sister’s little blanket mountain, and then her green eyes were peeking over the top of the covers at him. “Maybe you need to get your ears checked.”

Chris rolled his eyes at her, gesturing to the small white book she held in her hand. “What’s that?”

Katie threw off the blankets and sat up, her mouth stretched into a tongue-in-cheek grin. “A book.”

“You don’t say?” he said, tilting his head to glance at the cover. “The Very Busy Spider, huh?”

Katie scrambled to the top of the bed and raised her knees up to her chin. She held the book close to her face, flipping through the pages and sniffing, like she was smelling them. Laying the book down on the sheets, she smacked at the front cover.

She lifted her chin and grinned at Chris. “I like spiders.”

She really did. Katie was always catching different kinds of insects and keeping them for weeks, stored away in pickle jars. She’d had three or four jars with spiders in them at their old house. Gerard had made her leave them behind. He had been pretty adamant that she would not be taking them in the station wagon.

Chris kicked off his shoes and perched on the side of the bed. His sister wiggled over a bit to accommodate him. “Of course you do. You want to read me a little?”

Kate sucked her lower lip between her teeth, worrying at it. Her eyes were hesitant, but she glanced up at Chris through her lashes. “Well, I’m still practicing. Maybe tomorrow?”

Chris nodded his head, smiling, and pushed her backwards until she was lying on the pillows. He climbed further onto the bed and pressed his back to the headboard. His movements were stiff and rigid; it hurt to breathe.

Chris allowed himself to relax back, Katie’s small fingers fiddling with the cuffs of his shirtsleeves, the room still half illuminated by her discarded flashlight. His eyes slid closed.

His sister’s soft voice had him looking down at her. She was worrying her lower lip again, but her eyes were sharp and focused. “I was just waiting for you to get home, is all.”
Chris huffed, his face twisting in a grimace. She had been worried. He hated that this affected her. He hated that she had to be touched by this world at all.

“I know. But we’re back now. Nothing to worry about, Katie.” He tipped her chin up with his forefinger, tapping her lightly on the tip of her nose. “Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.”

Kate’s eyes and nose crinkled when she giggled; he loved that. It made the pounding in his head lessen. All the same, her eyes were still solemn. Far too serious for a child of seven years old. That, he didn’t love.

Katie picked up the flashlight from the bed, shining it directly at him, and pressed her fingertips to the bruises on his jaw. “Do you need me to help you get cleaned up or anything?”

Grabbing her hands, he shushed her, and pushed her back to the pillows again. “No, no, everything’s good. Here, scooch over. How about I read this tonight, and then you can read it to me tomorrow?” Chris lowered himself next to his sister, resting his head down beside hers on the pillow. “But you have to go to sleep right after. Deal?”

The weight from her eyes lifted, and she beamed back at him. “Deal.”

Typically, when they did this, Chris would lie on his side and she would tuck herself under his chin, but when his sister placed her hands on his shirt to pull him forward, a shock wave of pain blasted through his midsection like a gunshot.

Chris hissed, loudly, through his teeth.

Katie pulled her hands back, gasping. “Sorry.”

Looking into the panicked eyes of his little sister did wonders for his self-control. He took a moment to manage his expression, smoothing out the pain lines that had risen between his eyebrows, and spoke to her in a steady, reassuring tone. “S’fine. I just can’t lay on that side right now, okay?”

Katie seemed unconvinced, but she allowed him to settle her down again. He noticed, however, that she was extremely careful to avoid touching him.

“K,” she whispered.

Chris looked down at the book she’d been reading. It was hard covered and had a multicolored cartoonish looking spider on the front. “So, what’s this about?”

“A spider.” Katie snuggled towards him, excitement flashing in her eyes again. “The spider catches a fly in her web at the end.” Her nose wrinkled up in mischief. “Do you think she eats it?”

The booming laugh Chris released had a jolt of pain shooting down his side, but he ignored it. “I don’t know, Katie.”

Pulling the blankets over them both, he opened the book to the first page and took a steadying breath. “The wind blew a spider across the field. A thin silky thread trailed from her body. The spider landed on a fence post near a farm yard...”

Chapter End Notes
A big thank you to my beta Ellen for helping me brainstorm and dealing with my excessive emails. Love ya!

***

Hate it? Love it? Any comments/criticism/thoughts would be much appreciated.

*Feedback feeds my inspiration!*
The sun shining through a crack in the blinds woke Chris the next morning. He was still in Katie’s room, although his sister was no longer lying beside him, meaning she somehow managed to disentangle herself from the mass of blankets they had been twisted up in and crept out of the room undetected.

Chris’ mouth quirked in amusement.

She was decidedly sneaky, his little sister, because creeping around a room without his knowledge was not something many people could pull off. On the other hand, given how dead tired he’d been the night before, it had probably been easy. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep in his sister’s room, and he was definitely regretting it now. Her mattress was much smaller than his. As if his ribs weren’t already killing him, he had to go and add “slept contorted like a pretzel” to his list of ails.

Chris grunted as he struggled to a sitting position. Lowering his feet to the ground, he slowly stood. The pain in his ribs was blinding and immediate. His hands unconsciously rose to clutch at his midsection; a soft “uh” sound forced its way through his clenched teeth.

Yeah, the pain was pretty bad this morning, but it was nothing he couldn’t handle. If he had to scale it, it would be somewhere around a 4 or 5, if that. He'd definitely had worse.

Chris walked out the door into the hallway, grimacing at the deafening volume that was traveling up the stairs from the living room television — Katie watching cartoons, most likely — and hobbled, slowly, down to his room. He had his own personal med-kit; it was tucked away in the emergency travel bag stored under his bed.

Lowering himself to the floor and grabbing the bag wasn’t nearly as painful as attempting to stand back up again. He used the bedside table to steady himself, relying on the muscles in his arms to push himself upright.

When Chris reached the hall-bathroom, he unzipped the smaller front compartment of his bag and pulled out a little plastic case. Resting it on the bathroom sink, he pried the lid off. The kit didn’t hold much, only mediocre supplies for minor injuries: aspirin, bandages, disinfectant, burn treatment and gauze. There was also a small set of tweezers and an ace bandage. Chris grabbed the latter.

He pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it onto the towel rack, before removing the two pins that were holding the ace bandage together. He held the loose end against his side, wrapping the material around, and around, loose enough not to hurt, but tight enough to hold things in place. He was getting pretty good at wrapping his ribs up. Ironically enough, he’d just put this very ace bandage back in the case two days ago. Once the bandage was securely fastened, pins put back in place to hold everything together, Chris glanced at himself in the mirror, and then groaned.

Wonderful.

It looked like someone had hit him in the face with a sledgehammer. A deep black and blue contusion stretched from his jawline up to his cheekbone. Chris growled, grabbing his shirt and pulling it back over his head.
He was suddenly angry.

Angry at the omega from the night before. Angry at his father. But mostly, he was angry at *himself* for being stupid and having put himself in that situation in the first place. He had a sudden irrational urge to slam his fist against the glass of the mirror; he didn’t want to look at his face anymore.

Snapping the lid back onto the med kit, he shoved it roughly into his bag. His sharp movement caused the bag to jerk slightly, a soft rattling sound resonating from somewhere deeper in the front compartment. Chris rifled around a bit until he felt the outline of what was, unmistakably, a pill bottle. He lifted it up to the light, squinting at the label.

*Vicodin 5 mg/300 mg.*

Yes, that’s right. He’d forgotten he still had those. Chris had been written that prescription at an emergency clinic when he’d broken his wrist last year. His eyes skimmed over the label, searching for the expiration date — *January, 1991.*

Perfect.

Chris pushed his palm down on the childproof cap, while turning it to the left. There were still a good twenty pills left. Shrugging, he popped two of the large white pills into his mouth, washing them down with a handful of water from the faucet.

***

After stashing his emergency bag back in its rightful place, Chris made his way downstairs into the living room. His sister was curled up on the couch, laughing as Jerry hit Tom over the head with a wooden hammer. She was sitting with her legs tucked up underneath her, one of their large, ceramic bowls resting in her lap, which upon closer inspection, was overflowing with Cocoa Puffs.

“Think you’ve got enough there?” Chris teased, crossing the room to the coffee table.

She barely spared him a glance, just continued to stare at the television like a drone, absentmindedly shoveling spoonfuls of cereal into her mouth. “For now.”

He grabbed the remote off the table, turning the volume down to a less brain melting frequency. “Try not to spill that everywhere, yeah?”

Katie stuck out her tongue at him. Electing to ignore her, Chris looked around the corner into the kitchen, immediately noticing the absence of their father, who at this time would typically be sat at the kitchen table shuffling through the morning newspaper.

“Where’s Gerard?”

His sister huffed, obviously annoyed at his continued interruptions. Her reply was muffled by a mouthful of cereal. “Infra-gearaawrge.”

Chris frowned. “Huh?”

Katie's throat bobbed as she swallowed. “In. The. Garage,” she said, purposely drawing out the syllables.

He rolled his eyes, stopping to poke at her leg with his foot on his way into the kitchen. She kicked out at him halfheartedly, giggling at Chris’ frown when her movement caused milk to
splash out of her bowl and onto the hardwood floor.

***

Chris entered the garage to find his father crouched over something by the back wall. When Gerard noticed him standing there, his face stretched into an overly bright grin. “Ah! There you are. Good morning, Christopher.”

He gently closed the door behind him, encouraged by his father’s seemingly pleasant mood, and took a few steps into the room. “Good morning, sir.”

“You slept well, I take it?” Gerard’s hands were covered in what looked like grease, which he was trying to wipe off with an old rag.

Gerard wasn’t the type of father who liked to “tinker around” with things in the garage. He was much more likely to delegate such tasks to Chris, even when it came to maintenance of the weapons. So seeing the man soiled in anything other than blood was an oddity in itself. Compiling that with the fact that he’d just legitimately asked Chris if he’d slept well was — a bit odd.

Chris’ face twisted up in confusion. “I — yes, fine, thank you.”

Gerard threw the rag onto a small wooden workbench by the garage door. “Excellent,” he said, crossing the room towards where he’d been crouching when Chris first entered.

It was then that Chris saw exactly what his father had been working on. It was some kind of… bicycle? The bike was a bit worn — definitely used — but still in fairly good condition. It had a sleek silver frame (although the handlebars were speckled with rust) and the letters “BMX” printed across the side.

If his sister had been out there with them she’d have been commenting on Chris’ current expression, saying how he shouldn’t frown so much or his face might get stuck that way.

“Could I ask, uh, what that’s for?” he said, befuddled, his head jerking to where the bike lay.

Gerard grabbed the bike by its handlebars, tilting it upright. “noticed that, did you? That-” He paused, smiling. “-is for you.”

Chris was completely mystified. The last time he had owned a bike was years before his mother died. He couldn’t have been more than seven. To be honest, it wasn’t something he’d ever given much thought to. He was getting his license in a few months, anyway.

He couldn’t help but feel a bit nervous whenever Gerard acted in a way that contradicted his usual behavior. This was not what he’d been expecting. He had expected something small, if anything.

“You got me a bike?” Chris hesitated, guarded. “Why?”

If Gerard was upset with Chris’ lack of enthusiasm, he didn’t show it. “Well, there are still a few months left until you get your license. I figured you would need some way of getting around.” He angled his body towards Chris, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “You’re sixteen years old, son. I doubt you want your old man chauffeuring you everywhere, do you?”

Chris raised an eyebrow when Gerard winked at him.

“It’s not a Mercedes Benz, I’m afraid. But until you get your license, it will just have to do.” His father clasped him on the shoulder, squeezing hard. “Besides, I know you’ve got a nice little savings put aside, once the time comes.”
Chris purposely didn’t flinch when Gerard’s fingers dug into a particularly sensitive spot between his neck and shoulder. He was so focused on hiding how uncomfortable this whole conversation was making him that it took him a second to acknowledge what Gerard had just said.

“You… do?” Chris asked, startled.

He did have a savings. Chris had been putting aside whatever money he could for almost two years now. Whether it was from mowing lawns or the odd job that they actually got paid for. The grand total, as of now, was nearly eight hundred bucks. He just hadn’t been aware his father knew he was doing it.

All things considered, it really shouldn’t surprise him.

Gerard’s smile turned nasty at the edges; his voice had a touch of warning to it. “You’ll find there are very few things I don’t know about, Christopher.”

The cloud that had passed over his father’s face was gone as suddenly as it came. Gerard pushed the bike towards him, expression encouraging, until Chris relented and grabbed onto it. Chris tilted his head, lifting the bike backwards onto one wheel and tentatively spinning the other with his left hand.

He raised his eyes to meet his father’s when Gerard starting speaking again. “I’m proud that you took the initiative. Money management is important, son.”


I’m proud…

He couldn’t help the sudden warmth that filled his chest. It was frustrating and confusing.

He gave his father a tentative grin. “Thank you, sir.”

Gerard returned the smile, but as usual, it didn’t quite reach his eyes. He patted Chris on the shoulder again, nodding his head in satisfaction, like he had set out to accomplish a certain task and was pleased with the outcome. As much as Chris would like to believe otherwise, he wasn’t fooled by his father’s forced lighthearted demeanor.

It wasn’t uncommon for Gerard to act this way with him the day after a rough training session. Gifts and kind words.

Gerard was making his way back into the house when he paused, his hand a hairsbreadth away from the doorknob, and turned back towards him. “Oh, and Christopher?” His father waited until Chris raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment, then continued. “You mentioned something last night, about a party?”

In all honestly, Chris had completely forgotten about that. His mind, as it were, having been redirected to other things. Gerard had been pretty clear in his disapproval on the topic the night before. He’d had no intentions of bringing it up a second time and certainly hadn’t expected his father to.

Chris felt himself getting uneasy again. It was hard, sometimes, to tell whether Gerard was testing him or not. When in doubt, it was better to keep his answers simple and direct, not to overelaborate. “Yes, sir.”
Gerard’s forehead wrinkled up and he tapped a finger against his chin, pretending to consider it. Was he trying to be funny? “You should go,” he said, voice stressing over the word *should*.

Chris’ immediate instinct was to assure him that ’no, he shouldn’t’ and that he had ’more important things to do,’ but before he could give his father what he assumed was the appropriate response, Gerard said, ”I want an address, and you’re to be home no later than eleven o’clock, is that understood?”

Chris gaped at the man, unable to do anything but stare dumbly for several seconds. Gerard, never one to miss an opportunity to find amusement in his son’s discomfort, threw his head back in laughter.

He felt a flash of annoyance burn in his chest — searing, blood boiling. The heat of it snapped him out of his momentary stupor. “Of course,” Chris said. ”Understood.”

Gerard gave him one last departing smile before turning back towards the doorway and disappearing into the house.

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Chris fiddled with the post-it note for a good fifteen minutes. The edges were completely crumbled and frayed. He had made it as far as the kitchen table — phone in hand, thumb still pressed over the hang-up button — before he deemed himself as being pathetic and dialed the number in a rush. He was an Argent, after all.

The phone rang three times before a woman’s voice answered. “Hello?”

Chris startled, then rolled his eyes at his own behavior. Typically, when you dialed someone’s number, if they were there, they were probably going to answer the phone. What had he been expecting? He gave a fleeting thought to hanging up, but barreled on anyways. “Hello, is Olivia there?”

“The woman’s voice was pitched oddly when she responded, like he’d surprised her. “She sure is. May I ask who’s calling?”

“Chris Argent. We go to school together.”

“Oh, okay. Just one second, hon,” she said, voice kind. Chris could hear the sound of movement, rustling — the phone switching hands, maybe? — before the woman hollered, “OLIVIA!”

He winced, jerking his head back from the phone and wriggled a finger in his ear. The woman had obviously neglected to pull the phone away from her mouth before shouting; this *had* to be Olivia’s mother.

Seconds later, Chris heard Olivia’s voice sounding from a very short distance away. He could hear her almost as clearly as he’d heard the woman.

“Good *god*, Ma! I’m literally three feet away from you,” Olivia cried, the shrillness softened with a note of obvious teasing.

The woman laughed. Her voice was thick with amusement. “You have a phone call.”

Olivia’s voice rose an octave, clearly speaking to her anonymous caller. “Tell Peter he knows better than to call me before eleven o’clock on a Saturday morning.” Her words had a slightly hostile bite to them. Chris huffed a breath through his nose.
“It’s someone named Chris, actually.”

“What?” Olivia gasped, clearly surprised. “No way!” A loud scrambling echoed over the line. Hands moving over the receiver, fabric sliding and shifting. Maybe clothing on a couch? And then Olivia’s voice was preening through the phone at him. “Hello, handsome.”

“Hi,” Chris drawled, whatever hesitancy he had about the call disappearing completely. Leaning back in his chair, he twirled his fingers around the phone cord.

“I’m so glad you called! I was sure you were gonna blow us off.” She sounded… bouncy? Could someone sound bouncy? It was a fitting adjective for her, regardless. He could just imagine her sitting on her family’s couch, bouncing up and down with energy. Was it strange that he could picture that so clearly, when he barely knew the girl?

Olivia sounded happy to hear from him, but he also remembered her reprimand to ‘Peter’ about calling on a Saturday morning. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Nah, not at all. I was just veg’n out,” she said. “First thing you should know about me, Chris, is that Saturday mornings are for cartoons.”

As if on cue, his sister’s childish giggling could be heard from the next room. “Yes,” he laughed, fingers running roughly through his hair. The TV was blaring again. Katie had probably turned it back up the second he left the room earlier. Chris rose from the chair he was lounging in and closed the sliding door that separated the living room from the kitchen. The phone cord stretched when he crossed the room, spirals pulled taut in a straight line. Reclaiming his spot by the window, he continued. “My little sister would agree with you there.”

“Aw, you have a little sister, how old?”

Chris’ attention was pulled away when he heard what sounded like a lawnmower backfiring. He scissored his fingers between the blinds, peering into the yard. Their only neighbor was yanking the pull-cord on a rusty old mower, and kicking at it, his mouth forming curses that Chris couldn’t quite make out. “She’s seven,” he said, distractedly.

“Wicked. I’ve always wanted a little sister, or an older sister, or a brother. Any kind of sibling, really. It’d be nice to have someone to talk to besides my overbearing—” Chris smirked when he heard the girl’s mother voicing an admonishing “Olivia” in the background. Without missing a beat, Olivia carried on. “—kind, loving, and beautiful mother who does not look a day over thirty-five.”

“So,” she asked suddenly, her voice full of intent, “did you ask your dad?”

Chris reviewed his earlier conversation with his father in his head. He was still a little confused. “Yes, he’s okay with it. Surprisingly.”

Olivia squealed, causing him to once again jerk his head away from the phone. “Oh, that is awesome, Chris! You seriously won’t regret it.”

He waited a beat, then another, but there was complete silence on the phone for several seconds. Sighing, Chris asked, “Could you maybe give me the address?”

“Oh yeah, duh. Sorry, it’s 3100 Tillery drive.” She hesitated. “Actually though, why don’t you just tell me where you live and we can come pick you up?”

We can come pick you up.
Chris was suddenly reminded that it wouldn’t be just him and Olivia tonight. Yes, the redhead
girl had somehow managed to endear herself to him in less than a week. Peter Hale, on the other
hand, had managed to evoke vastly different emotions in him in less than a week. Less than a day,
really.

Why was he going through with this again?

Either way, being forced to count on them for a ride if things went sour was not a situation he
wanted to be in. “No, that’s alright,” Chris said, a little hastily. “I’ll be fine.”

“Do you even know how to get there?” Even though he couldn’t see her, the tone of Olivia’s
voice made Chris think back to a moment earlier in the week, when she’d been telling Peter to
‘stop being an idiot’ in their English class.

Chris scowled pointlessly at the phone. It wasn’t like she could see him. “I’ll find it,” he assured
her. “I have a map.”

“Seriously? What are you my grandfather?” Olivia teased, her voice pitched high.

She wasn’t the first person to say something like that to him. He heard it a lot actually; most
notably, from his sister. It sparked a defensive response from him. “Hey, maps are very practical!”

Olivia’s laugh echoed through the phone. “Suit yourself,” she said, still chuckling. ”Just try to be
there by eight. There’ll be a lot of people mulling around, so just come out back, okay?”

Simple enough. He nodded his head before remembering that she couldn’t actually see him.
“Alright.”

“Great. I’ll talk to you later, then.”

Chris could hear rustling again as Olivia went to hang up the phone; when a thought suddenly
occurred to him. “Hey!” he shouted, hoping she’d hear him before disconnecting. ”Olivia, wait!”

After a pause, she said, “Yeah?”

Chris moved the phone to his left hand, wiping the sweat off the receiver with the sleeve of his
shirt before lifting it back to his ear. “Did you tell Peter you invited me?”

“Of course! What do you take me for?” Olivia said, her words rushed. He could imagine her
gesturing wildly at this point, the phone clutched between her chin and shoulder. “Hey, sorry, I
gotta go. See you tonight, Chris.”

Before he had the chance to interrupt her, the call disconnected with an ominous click. She’d
gotten the last word again. This was starting to become a disturbing pattern.

Chris stared down at the phone until that annoying beeping started. Standing from his chair, he
hung the phone back on the wall. “Bye.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I am, in fact, still alive. I know it has been FOREVER since I last updated this...life intervened, and I had to take a break from writing. But, my inspiration for this fic is back! I know this is a short chapter, but I just wanted to post something to show
you guys I am actually working on this! To anyone who is still interested in reading this story, please comment below. Xx.

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Hate it? Love it? Any comments/criticism/thoughts would be much appreciated.

*Feedback feeds my inspiration!*
Once he memorized the coordinates to Jessica Kane’s house, it took Chris fifteen minutes to get there, approximately. If he wasn’t still moving so stiffly, he could have made it in a solid ten. Throwing his newly acquired bike in a set of bushes a few blocks down, he traveled the rest of the way on foot.

The house was massive. It was an older Victorian style home; three storeys, high pitched roof, and an expansive wrap around porch. The first thing that came to Chris’ mind, to be honest, was how hard it would be to make a defensive stand in a house with that many windows.

There were at least a half dozen cars parked out front, and Chris could hear music blaring from somewhere behind the house.

_There’ll be a lot of people mulling around, so just come out back_, Olivia had said.

He followed a cobblestone walkway around the side of the house and into the commotion of the backyard. There was a large in-ground swimming pool, surrounded by white folding lounge chairs. A stone-base fire pit burned off to the side of the yard, flames flickering over the edges.

Chris stood back for a moment, observing. The majority of the people there were seniors, he noticed. There was a group of boys from the high school varsity team gathered by a wooden picnic table. Which, unsurprisingly, was where he found Olivia and Peter Hale. They were sitting on a stone bench, heads bent together, red plastic cups in both their hands.

Olivia saw him first and immediately jumped to her feet. “Hey, Chris! Over here!” she said, like he hadn’t already been looking right at them.

At her shout, Peter looked up too. Chris could tell instantly that the other boy was surprised to see him there. Several emotions flashed across Peter's face that, if Chris wasn’t so good at reading such things, he surely would have missed. Surprise. Confusion. Annoyance.

Peter glared at Olivia’s back as she bounded across the yard towards him. Chris took a few tentative steps forward to meet her, his eyes squinting a bit from the glare of the yards flood light.

“How went the — whoa!” she said once she reached him, her eyes widening; reacting, Chris assumed, to the horror show that was his face. “Bad deal, dude. Who’d you piss off?”

He had an entire cache of excuses he used for questions like that. “No one.” Chris kept his eyes locked with hers, his expression honest. “My father and I have been doing some renovations on the house. I just got caught on the wrong side of a two-by-four.” Chris let his eyes lower, seemingly embarrassed by his own clumsiness.

Olivia bought it, instantly. “Ouch.” She scrunched up her nose. “I think you definitely need a drink, then.”

None of Chris’ past experiences with alcohol had been pleasant. He didn’t like the way it dulled his senses, made things less sharp. “That’s alright,” he said, shaking his head.

“Well?” Olivia took a liberal sip from her own cup, grimacing a little in distaste. “What’s the point of going to a party that basically promotes underage drinking, if not to overindulge?”
Chris sighed. “I’m not much for overindulging.”

“You don’t say?” She tilted her head, like a curious bird, eyes playful. “See, I’d never have guessed that about you.”

Chris looked back towards the bench, where several girls had flocked around Peter in Olivia’s absence. He was flashing that egotistical smile of his at all of them. They appeared to find this charming. As opposed to Chris, who found it extremely annoying. He also noticed that Peter was sending inconspicuous death glares at the back of Olivia’s head.

Chris jerked his thumb in Peter's direction. “He doesn’t look like he knew I was coming, Olivia.”

“Who?” she asked.

Chris gave her a death glare of his own.

“Oh, Peter, yeah…” She placed her hands on his shoulders, subtly angling him away from where Peter was sitting. “Don’t you worry yourself over that, cupcake. I’m gonna go get you a drink.”

He groaned, but didn’t even try to stop her when she ventured back towards the house. When he turned to look back at Peter again, he startled a little to find the other boy standing right behind him. Peter had this way of looking at you that was somehow both too intrusive and completely dismissive. It made him edgy.

“Hello,” Chris said halfheartedly, instantly uncomfortable.

Peter just looked at him for a second. “I didn’t realize you knew Jess.”

Chris felt that same strange electricity, just a something nigging under his skin. “I don’t. Olivia just said that—”

Peter took a step towards him, and Chris had to consciously stop himself from taking a step back. What was it about this kid that put him on edge so badly?

“That’s a nice variety of colors you got going on there.” He waved his hand, gesturing to Chris’ entire face. “Got on the wrong side of a two-by-four, did you?” Peter reached towards him, seemingly with the intent of touching his fingertips to the injury on Chris’ jawline. “Looks like it hurts.”

What the fuck?

On instinct, Chris grabbed the other boy’s wrist, pushing his arm away roughly. His voice came out sharper than the 7-inch hunting blade strapped to his ankle. “It’s fine.”

Peter raised both hands and backed away. “Shit, don’t bite my head off! Forgive me for trying to make conversation.”

Peter Hale’s shocking lack of boundaries was something Chris had learned around the second day he’d spent with the kid. He allowed himself to step back then, instantly breathing a little easier at the added space between them. “We’re not exactly friends, Peter.”

“Hmm, well, yes, but we’re not exactly not friends, either.” The mocking glint in Peter’s eyes lifted a little, his mouth curving upwards in a smile that seemed almost genuine. “Look, why don’t you unclench a little and have a drink.”

“I’m not…” Chris cursed himself. Yeah, he walked right into that one. “Clenched.”
Peter threw his head back, laughing. And there was that strange buzzing feeling again. “Good to know.” He stepped towards Chris and tentatively placed a hand on his shoulder. Chris was surprised at himself when he allowed it. “Have a drink, then. As a matter of fact—” Peter raised the plastic cup he still held in his hand “—why don’t you just take this one?”

“No thanks,” Chris said, deadpan; he couldn’t help it.

Peter’s eyes flashed, obviously pleased. “Your hostility honestly wounds me. And here I am trying to be nice.”

To his horror, Chris felt his lips twitching in amusement. “Oh, is that what you’re doing?”

“Just take the drink, Christopher,” Peter said, his voice light.

The almost cordial moment between them snapped like kindling. “Don’t—” Chris could hear the hostility in his voice; he took a breath. Control yourself. “Chris, it’s just Chris.”

“My mistake.” Peter seemed a bit perplexed by his reaction, but continued to hold the cup out to him, in offering. “Take the drink, Chris.” He waggled his eyebrows. The idiot. “I promise I’m not trying to roofie you.”

Chris stepped away from him again, the boy’s hand sliding off his shoulder in the process. “You really never miss an opportunity to be inappropriate, do you?”

Peter was still waving the red, plastic cup at him, liquid sloshing over the side at the motion. “I may have heard something like that before, yes.”

Relenting, he took the drink from the boy’s hand, its shape contorting a bit under his too tight grip. Peter’s entire demeanor shifted; arrogance and triumph at his assumed victory over Chris showing in his posture. Chris chose to ignore it. He would give him this one.

The other boy dipped his head towards him, close enough that Chris could smell the alcohol on his breath. “Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Chris felt the air leave his lungs in a rush. That strange undefinable buzz was like fire under his skin.

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He spent the majority of the next hour trying to fend off Olivia’s apparent mission to plow him with alcohol. At first, he just sipped cautiously at the drink Peter had forced on him. But when the result of that had been the throbbing in his side lessening, he just downed the whole thing. After the third (fourth?) time Olivia had refilled his cup, he noticed his vision was starting to blur at the corners. Some far away thought reminded him that alcohol and pain meds were probably not the best things to mix.

After Peter had flounced off earlier, he had taken to completely ignoring Chris. Instead, leaving Olivia to occupy him. The latter having kept up a steady string of consistent chatter, which had gotten increasingly ridiculous as the night went on.

If 7-Eleven is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, why are there locks on the door?

Why is it that bullets ricochet off of Superman’s chest, but he ducks when the gun is thrown at him?
You ever wonder why they call it quicksand, when it sucks you down slowly?

Chris glanced down at his watch, squinting his eyes when the numbers refused to come into focus. It was nine-thirty. He still had about an hour before he needed to head back home.

And he was listening to her. Still, he couldn’t stop himself from scanning the yard, every so often, to look for Peter. Every time he spotted him, there were flocks of people trailing after him. They would follow him from one side of the yard to the other, then into the house and back out again, like ducklings. Chris snorted into his cup.

Being that it was late November, there were lots of seasonally appropriate decorations hung up around the house. On just about every flat surface Chris had come across, there were large bowls filled with assorted candies. There was one ruby-red glass bowl in particular that Peter kept circling around. It was full of the larger type candy canes that you’d typically see hung on someone’s Christmas tree. Peter had eaten three of them so far. Chris didn’t know why he knew that? But he did. It kept drawing his attention.

Peter flouncing around the yard like he owned it.

Peter preening under everyone’s attention.

Peter’s lips stained red from his third candy cane.

He was nibbling on another one now, the end of it hanging from his mouth. Chris tried to grind his teeth together and then grimaced when all he managed to do was bite his own cheek. He was once again unidentifiably bothered by the other boy’s actions.

He forced his attention back to Olivia. She was talking about… something? No matter how long he watched her, he just couldn’t stop gawking at the rapid-blur-flapping of her hands. He’d never met anyone so consistently animated before. Typically, any quick or unpredictable movements made him uncomfortable, but it was hard to find anything even slightly intimidating about someone so small and unthreatening. And she was a tiny little thing. All big blue eyes and red curls. He had a sudden flashback to a four-year-old Katie and her long since faded Strawberry Shortcake obsession. Olivia could definitely pull off that little pink bonnet.

He was so distracted by thoughts of a pink-bonnet-adorned Olivia dancing around to that god-forsaken ‘Cake Made of Strawberry’ song that it took him a second to notice she was staring at him oddly. “What?”

“Nothing, just — you’ve got this look on your face.” She placed her drink down on a glass end table. “I’m not sure if I should be insulted by it or flattered.”

He had no idea what his face might have been doing at that moment. He was having a bit of trouble feeling his face at all. “What look?”

“Like you think I’m a particularly amusing alien or something.”

He laughed. Her nose was kind of cute when it scrunched up like that. “You are.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Ha! Well, thanks!”

She looked more amused than insulted, but maybe he shouldn’t have said that? He wouldn’t have, typically. “No! It’s a compliment.” He gestured at her with his most recent red-solo-cup (her words, not his) still in hand, then frowned, mystified, when the liquid somehow splashed backwards and over the sleeve of his jacket.
Chris was beyond confused for a moment. He shouldn’t be having such a hard time focusing. “I have no idea what I’m talking about.”

She placed her hands over her mouth, eyes filling with fond amusement. Reaching out with exaggerated slowness, she plucked the cup from his hand. “You might want to slow down a little bit there, handsome. What happened to not overindulging?”

“Good intentions,” Chris said, reclaiming his drink.

Olivia’s eyes twinkled. “Don’t tell me I’m already a bad influence on you? Peter and I never should’ve invited you.”

“Peter didn’t invite me.” Chris could hear the slight slur disfiguring his words. He grimaced. “You invited me.”

Olivia threw her hands up in the air, sighing her defeat. “Alright, alright, yes.”

“I don’t like that… dishonest.” Chris frowned, placing his cup down on the glass table. If he was having this much trouble thinking clearly, maybe slowing down wasn’t such a bad idea. “You shouldn’t be.”

“I wouldn’t call it dishonesty, really. More misleading, if anything.” Her teeth shone brightly. “I’ll make it up to you.”

The two of them had moved back towards the entrance of the house. Chris hadn’t actually gone in the house — and had no intention to — but there was a sliding glass door that everyone seemed to be disappearing in and out of. Olivia was standing just off the side of the entry way when two girls walked around the corner, deep in conversation, and barreled right into her.

“Oh my God! What the fuck, you little spaz?!” the taller of the two girls yelled, her voice annoyingly shrill. "Watch where you’re going for once!"

Chris recognized both of them from his gym class. Mr. King had split their class into two teams the other day for capture the flag. He had written two lists of names on the chalk board. Chris had only read through the lists once, but he could still remember every single name on it.

The tall blonde was Alice. She was also in his study hall. The first day he had met the girl, she spent the entire hour they were together popping her gum, very loudly. Lindsay was the shorter brunette. Objectively, he could admire the fact that the girl was beautiful. She was slight, but not thin, and her eyes were the perfect shade of dark brown for her olive skin. But the girl’s designer dress and pretty doe eyes did nothing to hide the cruelty Chris could see simmering under the surface.

Olivia’s eyes narrowed. “Uh, you walked into me. I know walking and chewing gum at the same time can be tricky. Maybe you should practice more?”

Chris heard Alice’s name called from somewhere in the yard behind them. The blonde ran her hands down the sides of her dress, adjusting and twisting until it fit to her liking. “Whatever, Olivia.”

That seemed to be the end of it. The girl stumbled off, unsteady, her expensive shoes digging into the grass.

Chris felt a sense of dread when Lindsay didn’t immediately follow after her. She was still staring at Olivia, her pretty, delicate features twisted into an ugly frown. “Where’s Peter?”
Chris eyes automatically scanned the yard for Peter, but he wasn’t where Chris had last seen him.

Olivia was already turning her back, dismissive. “Couldn’t tell you, not his keeper.”

Lindsay’s body curled in on itself, subtly. It was barely noticeable, but he picked up on it. There was something vulnerable in the set of her shoulders. “Did he… say anything about me?”

Olivia paused, looking back over her shoulder with a smile, eyes unkind. “Oh, you mean about your little ‘not a date’ last weekend? Nope, not a word.”

Whatever hint of vulnerability Chris may have seen in Lindsay’s expression faded in seconds. She straightened to her full height, which may have been a little more menacing if the girl wasn’t 5’4 — in heels. Even still, Chris could clearly feel her violent hostility. “Like you’d tell me even if he did.”

Olivia huffed out her breath, pinching the bridge of her nose with her index finger and thumb. “Then why are you asking me?”

Lindsay’s eyes narrowed, cold and cunning, and Chris was suddenly recalculating her threat potential. High school girls were blood thirsty, savage. He shuddered to think what his sister would be like at that age.

“Because, everybody knows you follow him around like you’re his groupie or something,” Lindsay said, her voice growing louder when she noticed the array of onlookers that were not-so-subtly watching the exchange. “It’s pathetic.”

“Sounds like you’ve got me all figured out,” Olivia said tiredly, like this wasn’t the first time someone had made such an accusation. She turned her attention back to him with a tight-lipped smile, her fingers closing around his wrist. “Come on.”

The production the girl put on when they began to walk away was ridiculous. Chris imagined she would have been stamping her feet if she could.

“You’re such a freak, Olivia.” Lindsay put her hands on her hips and leaned forward. “But I guess that runs in your family, huh?”

Chris was taken aback by the cruelty in her voice.

As sudden as flicking off a light switch, every ounce of playful energy drained from Olivia’s face. Her eyes seemed to turn a few shades darker, her skin a few shades paler; fingers reaching up, self-consciously, to tug at the ring that always hung around her neck. He didn’t like it. Chris could feel something protective rising up in his chest.

He suddenly didn’t feel so drunk anymore.

Taking a step forward, he placed himself between the two girls. “I think you need to back off.”

Lindsay looked him up and down, her mouth twisted in disgust. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

Olivia forcefully sidestepped him. “Do you want to know what Peter told me, Lindsay?” Her face split into a nasty grin. “He told me that you were surprisingly inflexible for a cheerleader.”

Silence fell over everyone within earshot. At first, it was just a few quiet snickers, followed by loud, unapologetic laughter, which Chris knew without looking had come from the group by the picnic table.
Lindsay’s face turned crimson. She thundered towards Olivia. “You bitch!”

Peter’s voice cut through the sudden commotion in the yard. “Is there a problem?”

The hush that fell around them was immediate. Peter’s presence had apparently knocked all the wind out of Lindsay’s sails because she gave one last scornful look towards Olivia, then simply turned on her heels and stomped back through the sliding door again. Peter crossed the yard to where they were standing, his eyes zeroing in on Olivia.

Something silent passed between them.

Olivia sighed, turning back to Chris, her eyes still crackling with hostility. “Thanks for that — just, don’t do it again, okay?”

Chris hesitated, perplexed, but Olivia was already walking towards the liquor-bottle-riddled folding table that was set up by the side of the pool. She purposefully bumped her shoulder against Peter when she passed him. “I need another drink.”

Chris took a few unconscious steps after her, but Peter strode in front of him, raising both hands in a pacifying gesture. “Nuh-uh. You try to follow her right now, she’s liable to eat your face off.”

Peter contemplated him for a moment, his hand reaching up to swipe the bangs off his forehead. “Did you know, back in Ancient Rome, there were female gladiators who fought in the arenas?” His voice had taken on that swaggering tone it always did when he was trying to outdo Chris in their English class. “It’s true. There’s written records by renowned Roman scholars. Dio Cassius. Tacitus. Petronius.”

Chris rolled his shoulders a bit, the pain in his ribs slowly creeping back in. “I didn’t know that.”

“Believe me,” Peter said, “it’s relevant.”

Chris nodded his head. He had seen the way her eyes lit up — fire and brimstone. Not to mention, the annoyance he had felt from her at his intervention. “She likes to fight her own battles?”

Peter pointed a finger at him in a 'yes, that' type gesture. “She’ll be right back.”

Chris made some kind of noncommittal hum in response. He was sidetracked. His thoughts were still circling around the sudden change he had seen in Olivia. It was… disproportionate. It had been odd. And the girl was odd, that much he’d already figured out. But Chris was curious, and he didn’t like unanswered questions. Lack of knowledge, lack of details, could be dangerous.

Lindsay had clearly said something that struck a nerve with her. Something about her family being freaks? Chris had similar comments hurled at him before. On the rare occasion, when he stayed in one place long enough for people to realize his home situation was — off.

When Chris looked back up at Peter, the boy's eyes were skimming over him, oddly. Chris cocked his head, eyebrows raising in question. Peter just mimicked Chris’ expression, his head tilting in the opposite direction. “Aren’t you glad you decided to come out tonight?”

“It seemed like that was more about you than anything,” Chris said.

Peter clasped his hands behind his back, his chin raising slightly. “What can I say? I provoke a certain reaction in people.”

Chris could have choked on the arrogance pouring off the kid.
Peter was stepping into his space again, trying to box him in. Chris had a sudden *acute* awareness of the numerous concealed weapons he was carrying. He wasn’t sure what it was about Peter Hale that pulled at his instincts so insistently, like the pounding of a bruise, but he wasn’t going to submit to it.

Chris Argent would be intimidated by no one.

“You’re an ass.”

The boy’s eyes were predatory, Chris noticed. It almost made him look like some devious, otherworldly creature. Chris would know; he’d seen his fair share.

Peter looked up at him through his lashes, reaching out to fix the lapels of Chris’ jacket. “Only on the surface, Christopher.”

Chris ran a hand over his face. “Chris.”

Peter winked at him, that fucking candy cane clutched between his teeth, again. Chris couldn’t take it anymore. He just *could not* stand it for another single, solitary second. “Can you just stop that?!?”

Peter’s eyes narrowed. “Stop what?”

He would never — as long as he lived — understand what could have possibly possessed him to do it. Nevertheless, he reached forward, grabbed the curved end, still wrapped in plastic, and yanked it roughly from Peter’s mouth. Before the other boy could splutter out a response, he placed the half-melted candy cane between his own lips. Chris pulled it out of his mouth with a “pop” then sucked it back in again, mimicking the motion Peter had been making all night.

For the first time since they met, Peter Hale was completely speechless.

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“What is your childhood trauma!?” Olivia shrieked at him, reappearing out of nowhere. Peter could barely hear her over the *roaring* between his ears; her voice was coming in-and-out of focus. “—could you possibly have done to him? Is it really so hard for you to just—”

Peter said the only thing, in that moment, that he could think to say. “He sucked on my candy cane.”

“I don’t care! You always… Wait, what?” She paused, her head tilting. “Is that a euphemism?”

Peter was nowhere near being in his right mind enough to truly appreciate the comical twist to her expression, but the flicker of humor in his chest helped him regain a little of his equilibrium. “No! An actual candy cane.”

She just continued to stare at him, stunned.

“As in the cane-shaped hard candy *stick* associated with Christmas,” he said.

Olivia turned away, her face thoughtful, to stare off in the direction where Chris had just disappeared. “Okay…”

Peter placed his hands on either side of her face, gently turning her head back so she was looking at him again. “He took it *out* of my mouth and put it *in* to his mouth, and…” He shivered a little, the moment replaying in his head. “Fuck.”
To be honest, the hysterical laughter that erupted from his friend really shouldn’t have surprised him. In the space of a second, she was completely doubled over, hands clutching at her stomach.

Peter had the sudden urge to kick her feet out from under her.

Meddlesome traitor.

“Are you laughing at me right now?” Peter hissed, wholly and utterly affronted.

“No, erm, no.” Olivia abruptly straightened up, coughing, her face instantly clearing. Her voice, though, still held a slight tremor. “Of course not. This is very serious.”

The obnoxious grin on her face had him answering her with one of his own. “What are you doing to me, Livie? Why did you even invite him here?”

Olivia scoffed at him, irritated, then reached out to jerk him forward by the collar of his shirt. “Why not?” A sudden crash drew their attention. Olivia paused to glance behind them, rolling her eyes at Kevin Richardson, who’d just fallen backwards off the picnic table, somehow managing to take both Ryan Adelson and John Stilinski with him. But when she looked back at him, her eyes were soft and sincere. “I like him.”

To say that Peter was a little disbelieving of her motives would be an understatement. Olivia was basically an endless string of negative commentary, and this applied to everyone — himself included. As much as she liked to reprimand him for being a judgmental asshole, she was just as bad, if not worse, than he was. It was one of the reasons they got along so well. “You like him?”

“I did just say that,” Olivia said. The unspoken “duh” was obvious.

“You don’t like anyone,” Peter reminded her. Olivia simply flapped her hand at him.

A few more people had made their way outside and were now crowding into Peter and Olivia’s area. Not to mention, he could clearly hear the sound of someone retching in a set of bushes along the back of the house. He eyed the general direction the noise was coming from in distaste. The atmosphere was rapidly changing into something he had no interest in.

Steering Oliva off to the side of the house, he pressed her a little further. “And this had absolutely nothing to do with you thinking that I like him?”

Olivia smiled at him, like the meddling traitor she was, and answered with absolute certainty. “You do.”

“Irrelevant!” Peter said, his emotions downshifting from suspicious back to irritated. “You annoying, meddlesome-”

Olivia placed her palm over his mouth, stopping his well-prepared rant before he started. “He’s obviously interested in you, too.”

His words were muffled by her hand when he answered her. “He couldn’t possibly have told you that.”

“No, you just told me,” she said, flicking a strand of hair out of her face. “He was just inadvertently swapping spit with you. That’s not a real friendshippy thing to do, Peter.” She pursed her lips, her eyes clouding in thought. “Besides, he’s got this weird vibe thing going on.”

Peter could admit there was something, something other than the fact that Chris was divine to look at, anyways. He was inarguably attractive, yes. Peter had noticed that almost instantly, but he was
sharp, too. That quick-witted kind of intelligent that never failed to draw Peter’s attention. There was nothing he liked more than a person that could give as good as they got.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you were inviting him, then?” he asked with a sigh.

Olivia snorted at the suggestion. “Because you would have tried to talk me out of it, obviously.”

Olivia just looked at him for a moment, eyes scrutinizing, mouth turned down, then she wrapped her fingers loosely around his wrist and pulled him further away from the crowd gathered behind the house.

“I thought you might be worried about the whole ‘boy on boy’ thing; so, I was just testing the waters for you,” she said, her face turning serious. “Are you mad?”

Peter huffed an amused breath through his nose at her wide owlish expression. “Yes. You’re meddlesome. It’s your least attractive quality.”

Mischief sparked in her eyes again and she placed her small hands against his chest, shoving him playfully. Peter felt whatever leftover agitation he might have felt towards her lift completely. He had never been able to stay upset with her for very long, anyways.

*He’s obviously interested in you, too*

Was he, though? It was seeming more feasible now. Peter tried to push away all thoughts of Chris’ cheeks hollowing, his pink mouth wrapped around something that Peter had just been chewing on, and focused on his other senses. He could remember, clearly, the subtle widening of the boy’s irises when their eyes had locked and, most notably, the rapid *ba-dum-ba-dum* sound of his heartbeat. There had been a stutter in the rhythm. He’d heard it. It had only been a little shudder-glitch, which had lasted just long enough for him to notice it, but he had noticed it.

Peter shook his head, his lips twitching into a knowing grin. “I actually did sense something off him.”

She looked positively thrilled at that. “Ooh, like what? Lust?”

He grabbed the front of her sweatshirt, pulling her closer. “I’m tempted to tell you that you should use your powers for good instead of evil, but my heart just wouldn’t be in it.”

Olivia halfheartedly pushed his face away when he sniffed at the top of her head (lemon and sage), but didn’t bother to put any space between them. She had long since grown accustomed to Peter’s more wolf-like tendencies. Olivia was the only one, outside of his family, of course, that he could release that part of himself with.

She pressed up on her tippy-toes. “He seemed a little freaked though, didn’t he? You think we’ve traumatized him?”

“Probably,” Peter said, lowering his face until they were eye level. “Just so we’re clear, any fallout from this point on is entirely your fault.”

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her hoodie, nodding dutifully. “I can accept that.”

*Chapter End Notes*
Thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter! Hearing feedback from you guys is what inspires me to keep writing! I'm planning on updating this story every two weeks. I will try my best to stick to that. But, as my full time job, I work as a Social Worker. My case load is keeping me VERY busy right now. Still, I have this story completely outlined. And I will see it through to the end!

***

Hate it? Love it? Any comments/criticism/thoughts would be much appreciated.

*Feedback feeds my inspiration!*
The entire next week was some kind of clever mix of avoidance and compartmentalization. After Chris had stumbled away, like an idiot, he just shut his brain off and refused to think about how he made a complete fool of himself. As soon as he got back home, he had instantly jumped into the shower. He’d turned the water on until it was uncomfortably hot and simply stood under the spray, both hands pressed against the shower wall. It wasn’t until the water started to run cold that his traitorous brain started firing on all cylinders again.

Chris hadn’t been able to figure it out, before. He’d been struggling with what it was about Peter that kept drawing him in.

Well, he got it now.

Chris wasn’t an idiot. In that instant when their eyes had locked, he’d finally recognized the feeling in the pit of his stomach: It was attraction. And honestly, he had no idea what to do with that.

It meant nothing, because it couldn’t mean anything.

He wasn’t going to allow himself to freak out about it, at least not any more than he already had. Suddenly, everything he had been feeling made perfect sense. He’d felt compelled to look at Peter so often because he was pleasing to look at.

It was really that simple.

There was an elegance to his movements, something almost graceful. And that strange feeling he would get every time they’d bicker about something obscure and ridiculous? It was because he liked it. It was exhilarating. He actually liked it. And the sparks he’d feel under his skin every time Peter touched him? Yup. He liked that, too.

Chris may have banged his head against the wall, once or twice, at the realization.

The fact that he was feeling attraction towards a boy wasn’t really bothering him. There were worse things to feel, there were worse things to be. It was a little surprising. He had never noticed anyone else in that way before. No one male, that is. To be honest, Chris didn't have much time for it, one way or another. His family never stayed anywhere long enough for him to focus on something as trivial as “relationships.”

He may have experimented… There had been a few occasions with girls that were also in hunter families. Gerard had a lot of contacts, and they would sometimes get together to work on cases, but that was pretty much where it ended. Awkward fumblings, more than anything. It had never really held much weight with Chris. It was just a physical thing.

So, no, he wasn’t bother by the idea of being physically attracted to another boy. His father on the other hand? Gerard would be very bothered by it.

Just like with Katie, there were certain expectations placed on him. His father would train them, Katie would grow up to lead, and Chris would get married and continue on the Argent family name. His father already had potential arrangements in mind for him — he knew that.
That was another reason he didn’t waste his time on things like dating. Hypothetically, if Chris brought some girl home (not that he would ever do such a thing), he could imagine Gerard being fine with it, as long as it didn’t interfere with training and was just to pass the time. Chris could actually picture his father winning the girl over. Katie would probably be unbearable. She had always disliked the idea of anyone taking Chris’ attention. Gerard, though? Gerard would be on his best behavior. All false niceties and fancy speeches. After all, no one put on a better show than his father. But this?

Absolutely not.

Gerard was very black and white. Things were one way or they were another, period. His father would never allow this. He would punish Chris for this.

So, yes, it meant nothing, because it couldn’t mean anything.

Not to mention, Chris was pretty sure he was alone in this. Peter Hale was constantly draped in unfriendly cheerleader, so he was fairly certain the boy didn’t reciprocate… whatever the hell this was. It was better for everyone if he just employed a little self-discipline until the feeling went away. So, he put mental barriers up in his mind — and faked it.

Surprisingly enough, Peter made it pretty easy on him. Chris had been worried that Peter was going to approach him, as was his way, and start hurling accusations, but he had done absolutely nothing.

Chris hadn’t said a word to the kid, and Peter hadn’t pushed him on it. The silence between them left Chris feeling a little disturbed. It was bizarre. He had accepted the fact that he enjoyed their little verbal sparring sessions, but he hadn’t realized just how much until the air between them was crackling with nothing but dead energy. Even Ms. Miles had noticed it. She kept giving Peter strange side-eyed looks during class.

Olivia had taken to passing him notes. Sheets of lined notebook paper folded up into complex little triangles. Chris had some technical difficulties refolding them.

The first day she had walked by and nonchalantly tossed a folded note onto his desk, Chris had assumed there would at least be mention of Peter, but she hadn’t brought anything up either. Instead, she just asked him if he’d gotten home alright. Chris had turned the note around, scrawling a messy "yes," and given it back to her.

Olivia had obviously taken that as an opening to continue writing to him because, by the end of the week, the front compartment of his backpack was full of the little triangles.

Mostly she just talked about random things: school stuff, questions on assignments, asking his opinion on this or that. It was a good way to vent whatever thoughts he had kept locked away — dreading he might unintentionally bait Peter into an argument, or something — during class.

Other times, it was just dumb comments about some of the less-than-pleasant people in their high school. Like how Matt Karen really shouldn’t be so full of himself, because he was an asshole, and he had a T-Rex head. Or how Mr. King’s nostrils always flared when he got irritated.

The only real reference she made to Peter in the notes was how she addressed and signed them. Every single one would begin with “Just Chris” and end with “Just Olivia.”

Had Peter mentioned his... dislike... of being called by his full name? He must have. And Chris could remember her saying how much she hated Peter’s nickname for her. That was the only explanation he could come up with, at least. He hadn’t asked her to clarify it.
Despite the stalemate between him and Peter, Olivia had no qualms about approaching him. Whether it was to toss a note onto his binder as she walked by him in the hallway, or to chuck an orange at him from her brown paper lunch bag (saying that his face still looked like someone had taken a baseball bat to it, and that vitamin C had healing properties, and how it wouldn’t hurt if he had a steak or something too, because he was kind of pasty and obviously needed a little iron).

Chris had been dumbstruck by that one. She made him feel like that a lot.

Peter always hung back when she came up to him. And even though he hadn’t spoken a word to Chris all week, his eyes were constantly on him. Chris hadn’t actually caught Peter looking, but he had a sense for that kind of thing. He could just feel it. And Chris could admit, despite his best intentions, he looked at him, too. No matter what else he was doing, if Peter was in the room, Chris was very aware of it. He was aware of all kinds of things now. Like how the muscles in Peter’s upper back moved under his shirt when he was using the pull-up bar in gym, or how that soft, amused laugh of his actually made Chris’ toes curl inside his boots.

The week had been agonizing, but it wasn’t until late Thursday afternoon that he realized Peter had been playing him.

Chris had put conscience effort into not being in the locker room when Peter was in there. He had a goddamn strategy! All he needed was a little space and that annoying want — that he was now very aware of — would go away. And what did he want to do exactly? It was hard to pinpoint.

But some things were unavoidable, especially when you had someone who was deliberately trying to sabotage you.

They’d been running laps around the track, and he hadn’t meant to stare so transparently when Peter had stripped off his shirt; he really hadn’t, but he was so distracted by a trickle of sweat between the boy’s shoulder blades that he had forgotten for a moment he wasn’t supposed to be looking at him. A soft huffing sound had Chris’ eyes snapping up to the other boy’s face. Peter looked away as soon as their eyes met, seemingly in an attempt to continue their vow of silence.

It was total bullshit, though, because Chris had seen the expression on his face before he had the chance to settle it into indifference. He looked fucking gleeful. Chris felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

Bastard.

He had no idea why he actually thought Peter was being genuine. That maybe he was respecting Chris’ wishes, or letting him down easy, or whatever the hell else.

Chris clenched his hands into fists. He wanted to call him on it, so badly, and if the locker room hadn’t been full of so many people, he would have. He should have known better than to think Peter would be ignored so easily. Chris wanted to charge across the room, grab him by the back of his neck, and do… something? The now familiar electric jolt inside Chris, which had been simmering discontentedly all week, flared back up in full-force.

Honestly, he was completely fucked.
This was originally part of a longer chapter, but it felt better as an interlude. The next chapter is actually almost finished, so I should have that posted soon, XOXO.

***

Hate it? Love it? Any comments/criticism/thoughts would be much appreciated.

*Feedback feeds my inspiration!*
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

At first, Peter hadn’t been sure what he was going to do. He spun the situation around in his head, but he had no actual plan, per se, and that in itself was an unsettling thought. This instantaneously changed on Monday morning when he saw Chris’ behavior. It wasn’t Peter’s fault. He was proud of the restraint he had shown — at least initially — but Chris had left him such a massive opening. Peter just had to exploit it.

He couldn’t help himself.

The moment Peter noticed the rise in anxiety he kept sensing from Chris was always connected to something he was doing, well, he may have over embellished a little. But feeling the oh-so-very-welcome invasion of Chris’ emotions was intoxicating. It gave Peter control back in a situation where he had lost his footing.

In his opinion, it was a brilliant solution, at least until he figured out what his next steps were going to be. Olivia was not being supportive. In between her declarations that he was a horrible person, she mostly just scowled at him and talked to Chris. Which was perfect. The continued back-and-forth between them didn’t bother Peter in the slightest. It created opportunities for him, actually.

Peter knew that he would catch on, sooner or later; clever little thing that he was. Chris had then joined Olivia in casting Peter silent, disapproving glares. Nevertheless, it didn’t stop him from bleeding his emotions all over Peter.


It all just added more flavor to everything else Peter could sense from him. He was a fucking billboard, and Peter could feel every bit of it. He could feel his interest. It was getting harder to ignore. Peter just wanted, and it was always there; this little neon sign in his head flashing the words “I want.”

December 2nd brought the first full moon since Chris Argent had taken up residence in his every waking thought. Admittedly, the last few moons had been somewhat difficult for Peter. He found himself, not exactly struggling, but needing more energy to stay grounded. Things were strained between him and Talia. It all used to come so easily to him, but now, Peter had to cling tighter to the memory of what they had to anchor him. It was slipping… and that was a thought he wasn’t ready to admit to himself yet.

The morning of the full moon brought the same glaring intensity as always — lights brighter, sounds sharper, feelings magnified — and if Peter had to take an extra moment, or two, to center himself, it was nothing he couldn’t handle. Olivia had taken a leave of absence from her annoyance with him. She had been waiting for Peter at their picnic table in front of the school with an extra-large white chocolate latté and a dazzling smile. She stayed close to him throughout the day, allowing him to lay his head on her shoulder, fiddle with the collar of her shirt, and generally hang all over her. It was a comfort. She may not be family, but she was pack. And on days when the blood-red inside Peter tried to claw its way out, things like scent and touch were so unbelievably grounding. Peter had been hard-pressed to leave his house that morning with the “puppy pile” he had been wrapped in (the primary instigator, as usual, being Derek, who was the most hands-on out of all of them).
Everything was just so razor-sharp today. All the damn noise. The fluorescent lights in the school halls. The constant invasion of scent, everywhere. It was like ten dozen fish hooks pulling him in a thousand different directions at once. Too. Much. Peter always had a stronger than average sensitivity to smell, or so his grandmother said. She had told him since he was a child that he would be the pack’s scout someday.

And that, ironically enough, was the catalyst that upended the little game he and Chris had been playing. Peter had long since noticed how good Chris smelled. It was a strange combination. Almond sugar and cinnamon with a touch of something sharp and metallic, like hot metal and struck matches. The scent, like Chris himself, was refreshingly unique.

Peter could easily blame Olivia for what happened next. She had abandoned him in his vulnerable state! They were shooting hoops in gym, which typically, he would be thrilled about, but Couch was pairing them off to play one-on-one and that was a lot more sitting than anything else. Although it was highly entertaining to watch Livie face off against Megan Willits. Coach was screaming instructions at her. “That's a double dribble!”

Peter, naturally, sat behind Chris on the bleachers. He knew the other boy would react to him being so close, and the adrenaline rush was as satisfying as ever. What he hadn’t been prepared for, however, was the increase in Chris’ heart rate making his scent so much more — potent. Peter’s body was angling forward before he even realized what he was doing. He inhaled, breathing deeply through his nose, and then froze. Yeah, he’d undeniably just sniffed him. Indiscreetly. Chris’ whole body went completely rigid. He wasn't even breathing.

Peter had a wild impulse to laugh hysterically at the absurdity of the situation. He choked it down. Somehow, he didn’t see Chris sharing in the comedy of it. Despite how foolish the lapse in his control was, Peter was intrigued to see the boy’s reaction.

Chris kept his eyes facing forward. He said nothing, did nothing, stubbornly ignoring Peter. Even after that! Chris’ continued refusal to break under the pressure was quickly becoming intolerable. Peter scoffed at the back of his head before descended the bleachers, two at a time, easily sidestepping people and discarded backpacks.

Peter crossed the gym in long-legged strides to the empty locker room. He had just sat down to take off his sneakers when Chris barreled through the door behind him. The muscles in his face tightened when he saw Peter. He leaned back on his heels for a moment, eyes lowering to where his hand still rested on the door, like he was thinking about walking back through it.

Drawing a steadying breath, Chris turned to face him again. His scent was sharp with determination. “Do you think I’m a complete idiot?”

“Well in the slightest, actually.” Peter stood slowly from the bench and took a step towards him. The sudden wave of frustration and panic in the air was overwhelming. Chris’ heartbeat quickened, his hands clenched at his side. It was lovely. God, he was lovely. Peter hissed a breath though his teeth, his control slipping. “Look at how worked up you are.”

“I don’t like games.” Chris said, his eyes narrowing.

Peter made a clicking sound with his tongue. “That’s too bad.”

“So stop playing,” Chris said, as if Peter hadn’t spoken. “I don’t have time for it. I don’t have time for you.”

“What do you have time for?” Peter asked, honestly curious. His eyes distractedly tracked a bead of sweat that was forming on Chris’ temple.
“Nothing!” Chris spat, moving his feet apart, squaring up his stance. “So do me a favor, and don’t be a complication.”

There was no complication. Not as far as Peter was concerned. “You’re the one making simple things complicated.”

Chris laughed, a strange hollow sound, like a stone dropping to the bottom of an empty well. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, Peter.”

Peter ran his eyes over him. The hostility in his body language was — almost ridiculous. There was some underlying sense of hostility in every interaction he had with Chris. Peter had been antagonistic. Yes, okay. He could admit that. But he was antagonistic with everyone. And he may have taken advantage of the situation, but Chris had tipped his hand way too early. That wasn’t Peter’s fault.

Even still, none of it warranted this kind of response. No. This was about something else.

“What are you so nervous about?” he asked, trying to penetrate the strange intangible energy surrounding Chris. The kid was a hard nut to crack, but Peter wanted in. The more time he spent around Chris, the more infatuated he was becoming.

Chris’ eyes blazed. Twin sapphires set in snow. “I am not nervous.”

Lie.

“You are.” Peter tilted his head. “Why?”

Chris took two steps forward, even though Peter could read in the lines of his body that he wanted to step back. There was very little space between them. Peter could reach out and grab him, if he wanted to. Chris met his eyes unflinchingly. “You don’t know me.”

“I know your instinct right now is to bolt. But you’re not.” Peter took a deep breath in through his nose, letting his more primal instincts — which were mercilessly striking against the bars of the cage he housed them in — rise to the surface; if only just a little. Peter focused on Chris’ face. On his eyes. In that moment, Peter could almost see something of himself reflected there. Something predatory. Like despite being way out of his comfort zone, the kid would draw blood with teeth and nails if he had to. “You are a rarity, Chris Argent.”

Chris’ eyes lowered unconsciously, but so-very-obviously, to Peter’s mouth, and that was about all he could handle. He curled his hands in the fabric of Chris’ shirt and yanked him forward. Peter hadn’t felt this out of control in years. Without thought, he brought their lips together.

Chris turned to stone under his hands. The influx of scent that assaulted Peter was enough to stagger him. Confusion. Outrage. Hunger.

Chris shoved him. Hard. Peter stumbled back a few steps, breathing heavily, but before he could gather himself enough to apologize, Chris closed the space between them, slammed him up against the wall and kissed him. Peter sighed with relief as he felt the pressure inside him releasing. Finally. He fisted his hand in the tangles of Chris’ hair and kissed him harder.

The little voice in his head was like a mantra. I want. iwantiwantiwant.

It ended as quickly as it began. The distant sound of a door kicking open was what snapped Peter back. Oh, right, they were up against a wall in the boy’s locker room. He only gave it a seconds thought before dismissing it as unimportant, but Chris pulled away from Peter like he’d burned
him.

Chris raised his hands out in front of him, backing away. “Don’t follow me.”

His mouth was swollen and red.

Peter hummed. “Whatever you want, Christopher.”

***

He left the school as soon as the bell rang, skipping practice (which he would definitely be hearing about tomorrow) and dodging Olivia. He couldn't deal with her yet. Peter knew that she would read every detail in his face the second she saw him. And honestly, he needed to take a beat and process everything before he dealt with her over-enthusiasm. Peter’s skin felt like it was vibrating, and the remorseless push-pull of the night’s full moon definitely wasn't helping.

When he got home, his house was bursting with activity. It was a welcome distraction. Laura and Derek were running circles around each other in the living room, which was not an uncommon sight. His niece was spinning, holding tightly to a long red ribbon — from his mother’s sewing kit, most likely. Derek, crouching on all fours, was leaping and trying to snatch it from the air when it arched passed him. But Laura was much faster. She kept pulling it back at the last minute, crowing at her brother in victory, and dancing away again.

“Be nice, Sweets,” Peter said, his voice holding a warning note.

Laura harrumphed in his general direction, but allowed her brother to snatch the flowing ribbon from her hand.

Elisabeth Hale used to say that Laura came out of the womb “alpha-ready.” Personally, he thought the kid was a pint-sized dictator. His niece had been the first pup in his family since Peter himself, subsequently, she’d been spoiled absolutely rotten. The first time Laura had thrown a bowl full of mashed peas across the room and into a plate-glass window, she’d been dubbed his "Veruca Sweetheart," which time had transformed into "Sweets," and as much as he occasionally wanted to trip the kid into a sandbox, he did enjoy her diva-esque persona.

His dad, Peter Sr., and one of their newest house mates, Sarah Lincoln, were sitting at the dining room table. Ben Lincoln was in the kitchen chopping vegetables with his mother. Maeve Hale was far from the accomplished cook — Peter’s grandmother had rarely allowed anyone else in the kitchen, anyway — but whatever they cooked up in there would be far more edible than any of the burnt atrocities his sister created.

Speaking of Talia, both she and Steven were surprisingly absent. The pack usually stayed close together on full moons. The pups weren’t old enough to fully shift yet, but they still felt the pull, specifically his nephew. Derek was very attuned to the pack’s emotions. His sense of empathy was remarkably strong for such a young wolf. If a member of the pack was experiencing a strong feeling, Derek would pick up on it instantly.

Peter needed to calm his mind. His head was so disheveled, he felt like there were little sparklers dancing all over his nerve endings. He needed quiet. He needed control. And so, Peter spent the majority of the evening curled up in his dad’s overstuffed armchair watching “Winnie-the-Pooh” with Derek.

Peter’s mother, of course, sensed that something was bothering him. Attributing it to the full moon, she kept touching him. Peter would feel her hand graze his shoulder as she passed him, her fingers carding through his hair. At one point, she draped the quilt from the master bedroom over
him and Derek, stopping to press a kiss to Peter’s head, then the pup’s.

The strong combined scents of his parents was actually extremely comforting. Peter saw Talia’s discarded sweater thrown across the back of the couch, so he grabbed that too. He laid the soft material over Derek’s footie pajama enclosed legs and brought the quilt up over their heads, creating a little “scent tent.”

The hours darkened the sky, and his parents settled the pups into bed. According to Peter’s dad, Talia was “addressing” something with Deaton. The man refused to elaborate any further, which told Peter nothing and was incredibly annoying, but he was far too preoccupied with other things to really care.

Now that the house was still, Peter’s head was spinning with thoughts. Thoughts of Chris, and his kiss swollen mouth. He felt like he could spiral apart inside, and the awful tug of the moon reaching its apex was already making him unsteady. He needed balance. But in that moment, all he really wanted was to feel the pounding of his feet on the forest floor. Peter tried to dispel some of his energy by restlessly patrolling around the house, which did absolutely nothing, except bring to light how horribly annoying the squeaking of the third step on his staircase was.

Peter and his dad were going to have to fix that.

Around his sixth, or seventh, pass of the upstairs hallway Peter had to lower himself to the floor. He let the pressure of the wall against his back keep him grounded. The moon had reached its highest point, so Peter focused everything he had on the memory of him and Talia as children. It was enough. The edges were tattered, but it was still enough to hold his hands steady.

Safety. Comfort.

Peter exhaled shakily. Things were about to get extremely chaotic. As if on cue, Derek’s distressed wailing sounded from his bedroom at the end of the hall. His nephew was still too young to process what he was feeling. The enormity of it. Every month was the same. Typically, at this point, Talia would simply take the pup from his bed, holding him close, and sing softly until he settled to sleep again, but Talia wasn’t there. Peter’s mother entered Derek’s room in her stead. Maeve’s hair was in a disarray, white cotton bathrobe wrapped around her shoulders.

Peter stayed in his position slumped against the wall and listened. His mother was usually pretty good with Derek, but Peter would go in to help if she had any trouble. A banshee like scream from another room entirely had him springing to his feet so quickly his head spun.

Laura.

He felt what was happening before he even entered the room. She was shifted. Fully shifted. Peter’s hadn’t experienced his first real moon until he was nearly seven. But then again, Laura had always done things on her own time.

His niece was crouched at the foot of the bed, her purple and blue Cinderella comforter and pillows kicked onto the floor. She leaned back on the balls of her feet when she saw him, springing forward. He caught her, mid lunge, and wrestled her to the ground. The commotion attracted his dad. Peter could feel him approaching the room from the hallway. He raised a hand, signaling him to stay back. It would only make things more difficult if they flooded the room with people.

Laura’s claws were digging into the flesh of his upper thigh, he could feel warm blood pooling under her fingertips. Peter pressed his palms flush against the tops of her hands, just holding; if he tried to pull her away now, she would tear a chunk out of his leg. The wounds would heal, and he
didn’t want to scare her.

Laura fought him with everything she had, spitting and hissing, her small body thrashing uncontrollably. Peter held her to him easily. He tried to broadcast feelings of calm — of reassurance.

Leaning down, Peter pressed his face to the side of hers. “Laura, Laura. Shh. Shh, it’s alright,” he said, soft sounds rising from deep within his throat. “Come on, Sweets. Listen to me.”

“LET ME GO!” Her voice was completely distorted.

“What’s that song again?” Peter readjusted himself when he was rocked back by her struggles. She was strong. “The one with the bird?”

Laura suddenly froze. Peter felt some trace of his niece shine through the tendrils that connected them. Pack Bond. She wasn’t all there, but he could feel a spark of recognition. “The mocking bird?”

Peter smiled against the side of her face. “Yes, that’s it.”

“Uncle Peter?” Laura asked, confused, unsure. Her claws were still digging into him, but there was a tremor in her hands.

“Yes, Laura,” Peter whispered. “Tell me the song Momma sings to you. How does it go?”

Laura’s chest was heaving and she was gasping for air. Rapid, wheezing breaths, like her lungs were collapsing. “Hush, little b-baby, don’ say a-a word,” she softly sang, her body curling into his chest purposefully. Deliberately. She was finding balance. Peter could feel it. “Momma’s gonna buy you a m-m-mockingbird.”

Peter loosened his hold on her, sighing when the wounds she gouged in him knit back together. “That’s it, Sweets. Just breathe.”

“And if that mockingbird don’ sing.” Keep going, Laura, just breathe. “Momma’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.”

Peter’s mother entered the room then, her eyes bright. She swept across the floor in seconds and crouched before them. Laura’s eyes shifted back to their natural brown, and she held her hands out towards Maeve, fingers still trembling. Peter allowed his niece to be taken from his arms, watching as his mother wrapped her up in the discarded comforter at the foot of the bed.

Peter couldn’t hear Derek anymore. His mother must have settled him down.

Peter Sr. was standing in the doorway when he turned to leave the room. His dad beamed at him. “Well done.”

Peter had to dig deep, but he gave him a tightlipped smile in return. He was honestly annoyed that he had to do that at all. Talia should have been there.

***

The sound of Derek’s excited shrieking startled Peter awake the next morning. Not that he’d actually slept or anything. In the few hours he did manage, his head was so scrambled up in a confluence of pack dreams — as was typical on full moons — that he honestly felt more exhausted now. The moon tested their control, and there was no more vulnerable a moment then sleep. It wasn’t uncommon for their dreams to bleed into each other. Peter had dreamt of
waterfalls, and cinnamon pretzels. Pink dinosaurs, and a massive field full of sunflowers. But he’d also dreamt of Chris. Of the way he had felt under Peter’s hands, and the steady cadence of his heartbeat.

Peter could only hope no one else picked up on that one.

A glance at the clock told him it was 5:30 — prime Derek time. Peter made his way downstairs, pausing to lift his hand in acknowledgment at his dad’s “Morning, kid.” The man was slumped at the kitchen table, nursing coffee from an unreasonably large mug. If possible, he looked more tired than Peter was.

Opening the sliding glass door, Peter stepped out onto the porch. The chill of the morning air cleared some of the fog from his brain. He could still hear the birds twittering in every tree, and a set of wind chimes jingling from half a mile away; he could hear the worms moving inside the earth, if he really listened, but the frantic pulsing of the full moon had passed. Things were much more bearable today.

Sarah and Derek were running around and playing… something? It could be anything with Derek. He liked to make up games with little story lines where everyone had to participate. Derek had quite the imagination.

Peter smiled at him.

His nephew was still dressed in his dinosaur pajamas. The woman, however, was wearing a blue hand knitted sweater — courtesy of his mother — and a very thick woolen scarf. Her chestnut-brown hair was tied up into a casual bun. Peter could see her breath puffing out in white clouds. It was a cold morning. By human standards, at least. And unlike the rest of them, Sarah was human.

Peter had known Ben Lincoln almost as long as he’d known Steven. Sarah, on the other hand, was new. And Derek had taken to their brand-newest pack member with his typical gusto.

The pair was currently leapfrogging across the yard.

He actually liked Sarah. She was kind, young, attractive, and she always had remarkable shoes, which was something he could appreciate.

Sighing heavily, Peter allowed his sister’s presence in the yard to pull his focus. Talia was sitting on the tree-swing with his niece in her lap. Laura had her thumb in her mouth, which was something Peter hadn’t seen the five-year-old do in years.

When Talia saw him, she lowered Laura to the ground, saying — fully audible to Peter, despite the distance between them — “Go play with your brother.” Peter grumbled under his breath as she approached him.

“Where were you last night?” he said through gritted teeth.

Talia frowned at his tone. “We have a situation. I need you to listen for a second, alright?” She held a finger up when he opened his mouth. “Just listen.”

Peter’s brows bumped together in a scowl, but he stood there silently until she continued.

“You remember when Nan used to talk about the hunters, right?”

“Yes,” he said, momentarily thrown by the non sequitur. “The werewolf hunters?”

Her forehead puckered. “Well, they don’t just hunt werewolves, but yes.”
His sister turned towards Laura, who was now pushing a delighted Derek on the tree-swing. She smiled at them gently, her eyes bright with adoration. Peter just watched her, watching them. There was a bizarre undercurrent pulsing along his bond with Talia. It was… unusual. He couldn’t identify it, but it was making his stomach twist up in knots.

Peter cleared his throat before speaking again. “Is there a reason you’re bringing this up now?”

“There have been others, other hunters,” Talia said, “that’ve passed through Beacon Hills, before. But-”

“What do you mean before?” Peter interrupted, something strange stirring inside him, like a sudden dropping sensation in his chest. “Before what?”

Talia didn’t answer him right away, her attention shifting, again, to the pups. When she finally spoke, her words were calm but precise. “When there’s a paradigm shift as strong as a new alpha, it attracts attention. It will draw-”

“It’ll draw omegas here,” Peter finished, apprehensive. “I know that, Talia.”

“Not just omegas, Peter. Anything supernatural that’s close enough to feel the pull. And it must have-” Talia gave a humorless laugh. “Dammit, I should have thought of this.”

Peter raised his eyebrows.

She leaned slightly forward, like she was about to tell him this huge secret, regardless of the fact that everyone on the property — with the exception of Sarah, of course — could hear them clearly. “Deaton just informed me that a very well-known family of hunters has moved to town.”

The unexpected wave of distress that slammed into Peter had him glancing to the back porch, where his mother sat. She was knitting, her quick nimble fingers fashioning a soft pink sweater out of yarn. Maeve nodded reassuringly at him. He could read the unspoken ‘pay attention’ in her expression. Peter took a breath. “A family of hunters?”

“Yes,” Talia said, her eyes locked with his. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin a fraction. “I’m going to take care of it. I just need you to, look, Deaton says he has two children.”

Peter cocked his head. “He?”

“The hunter. Or, their patriarch. His name is Gerard Argent,” she said, her mouth twisting up oddly. “He’s infamous, Peter. Deaton’s had run-ins with him before. He said there’s a girl, a little older than Laura, maybe? Her name is Kate. And a son, and this is why I wanted to talk to you now, his name is-”

“Chris,” Peter said, his voice a barely audible monotone.

“I — yes,” Talia said, taken aback. “Do you know him? Deaton said he was about your age.”

Everything around him was suddenly moving at an incredible speed, all fragmented and scrambled up, like someone had pressed fast forward on a videotape. Talia was staring expectantly at him. What had she said? Did he know him?

Peter licked his lips. He could almost still taste him there. “We’ve met.”

This couldn’t possibly be true. Except, he could feel that it was. He could feel the raw honestly in every word his sister had spoken. Peter felt a tightness in his throat.
His sister was shifting on her feet, clearly waiting for him to elaborate. She made a “go-on” gesture with her hand.

“He’s in a few of my classes,” Peter added with a sigh.

Talia’s eyes fluttered shut for a moment. She took a deep breath through her nose. “Okay. Just — keep your distance, alright? But also, try and keep an eye on him?” She paused, grabbing him by the tip of his chin, her eyes wide. “Just don’t look like you’re keeping an eye on him.”

Keep your distance? Right… A little late for that one. A sudden heavy dread was settling over him.

Sensing his unease, Talia slid her hand around the back of his neck, gripping tightly. “Peter, it’s alright. Like I said, hunters have passed through here before.” She brought their faces closer together, her eyes intent. “I’m going to handle it, okay? There’s no reason for us to be worried just yet.”

“Okay,” he said, weakly. Talia was watching him carefully. He needed to get away from her.

Peter wrapped his hand around her arm, giving a gentle, and he hoped, reassuring squeeze.

Talia flashed him a relieved smile and stepped back. “Stay away from this kid. You need to be careful.” Her voice was as serious as he’d ever heard it. “This is important, Peter.”

There wasn’t really much Peter could say to her. He couldn’t lie. Not wouldn’t, but couldn’t. She would know if he was being dishonest, and if she caught him in a lie, she’d ask questions. He wouldn’t be able to lie then either. Peter gave half a seconds thought to coming clean but, for whatever reason, he just couldn’t get the words out.

He figured the vaguer his answer was the better. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Peter needed to go back in the house. He needed to go take a shower, where he could freak out about this in the privacy of his own bathroom.

“From a distance!” Talia shouted at his retreating back.

He waved a hand back at her, and tried to ignore the pounding thunderclap hammering at the base of his skull. His feet felt like they were slogging through wet cement. What was he supposed to do now? He hadn’t the slightest fucking idea how he was going to handle this.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took me so long to get this chapter up; life has been hectic! I had so much fun writing this though, so definitely let me know what you guys think! And for anyone who doesn't know, Veruca Salt (Veruca Sweetheart) is a character from Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory. This is also what my father used to call me as a child, LOL.

Hate it? Love it? Any comments/criticism/thoughts would be much appreciated.
Feedback feeds my inspiration!
Chris had every intention of confronting Peter the next morning. He’d prepared himself for all the inappropriate things the boy would undoubtedly say, and he had gotten his head (more or less) clear enough to handle it.

What he hadn’t been prepared for was Peter’s cold dismissal.

It shouldn’t have surprised him. Peter liked to keep him on his toes, after all. But the sudden shift in his behavior was so drastic that it actually caught Chris off guard. Peter was dodging him. He wasn’t even trying to be subtle about it either. He would duck into a classroom or down the opposite hallway every time Chris tried to approach him.

Chris didn’t know where this standoffish behavior was coming from.

Peter had orchestrated this entire situation. He had instigated it. He’d pushed and pushed until Chris couldn’t take it anymore. The previous day, before Chris made his ungraceful exit from the locker room, he had seen Peter’s eyes. He hadn’t been upset, or insulted.

Chris liked to think he was good at reading people, and Peter’s face had clearly advertised his approval of what happened between them. It was part of what drove Chris to take off so quickly.

Peter was just — too intense, in just about everything he did.

There was something threatening about that. Something about him that made Chris’ instincts scream “not safe.” Unfortunately, the rest of his body was saying something very different.

It was frustrating. Every time he felt like he’d figured out this weird dynamic between them, Peter would switch things up and he would be back to square one again.

Chris finally caught up to him mid-morning, after the first bell sounded and the hallways were cleared. Peter had lagged behind and was still standing by his locker. Chris saw an opportunity to corner him, so he took it.

“Peter?” he said, walking up behind him. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Peter looked back over his shoulder, fiddling with the strap on his backpack for a moment. He was almost — fidgeting. Chris may have known him for less than a month, but he knew that was outrageously out of character.

He didn’t say anything, just contemplated Chris silently. He had no idea what Peter was looking for, but he knew when he was being sized up. How had things gotten so awkward this quickly?

Peter opened his mouth, and then closed it again, his eyes scanning the hallway. But whatever he might have said was cut off by the high-pitched ringing that signaled the start of third period. They were standing right under the intercom, so it was earsplitting.

“Can’t talk right now.” Peter said, pointing to the bell sounding above their heads. “Don’t want to be late.”

***
When his attempt at confronting Peter had failed so spectacularly, he turned his attention to Olivia. She was acting odd too, and not in her typical way. He tracked her down in the hall — from what he could remember, she had Algebra now — and sped up his steps a little when she noticed him out of the corner of her eye. He was still getting to know her, but he did know she sucked at subtlety. She had seen him coming, and now she was rushing to get to class before he could approach her. He could see it in her quick, panicky movements.

Chris jogged up to her before she could disappear through the door. “Olivia, hang on.”

She hesitated a beat before answering. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Chris said quietly. She had the same cagey look about her as Peter did; like she didn’t want to talk to him, and it bothered him more than he would’ve thought. “Did I do something to upset you?”

“Upset me?” she asked. “No. What makes you say that?”

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Her eyes widened. “Have I?”

Chris felt a knot of frustration tighten in his chest. “Is this about what happened with Peter?” he asked. “I don’t know what he told you, but I tried to talk to him earlier and—”

She exhaled slowly. “No, it’s not that.”

“It’s not that?” Chris asked. “Something else then?”

“It’s not anything, Chris!” She ran a hand over her face. “I’m just having an off day. Can’t I have an off day? Because you are just way off, all the time, like off on another reservation somewhere.”

She was rambling and overly gesturing, but he had enough exposure to her at this point that those things no longer distracted him.

“Come on, Olivia. I know he talked to you. I don’t know how he tried to spin it, but I’m sure he made it out like it was my fault or something.” Chris paused, stooping down until their eyes were at the same level. “For the record, it wasn’t. He’s just trying to twist things up. This is why I don’t like him.”

Olivia snorted. She placed her hands on his chest and pushed him back a step. “He didn’t say anything was your fault, stop being paranoid,” she hesitated, then spoke again, her voice cautious, “and you do like him.”

Chris had to choke down his defensive response. He wanted to get in her face and deny it, but as dignified as making a “nu-uh” proclamation would be, it probably wasn’t the best way to find out why neither of them were talking to him.

“Maybe,” he admitted heavily, “but I don’t know why.”

She smiled. “I can relate to that.”

Something flashed in Olivia’s eyes, something heavy and regretful, but he didn’t comment on it. Chris felt — almost sad. Whatever this was that was dimming her usually exuberant energy, he didn’t care for it.

He shifted beneath the weight of her stare. “I hope I’m not wrong about you, Chris,” she said.
Chris was getting more confused by the minute. “Should I know what that means?”

She patted him gently on the shoulder. “See you in English.”

But he didn’t see her in English, neither of them. Both Peter and Olivia had been conveniently absent. Ms. Miles had actually asked Chris about it, like they were friends or something, and maybe they were? He had privately been using that word to label it in his head, with Olivia anyway, but now he wasn’t so sure.

***

After that, Chris had no desire to "actively participate" in gym. He didn’t want to be the idiot sitting around waiting for Peter to show up. He needed to get some air, clear his head, so he ducked out just before his study period.

Chris grabbed his jacket from his locker and then just walked around outside. He couldn't go home yet, because his father was there.

Chris tried to use the time to center his thoughts. He was an idiot; he felt like such an idiot. He was berating himself for the stupidity of allowing such a situation in the first place. Nothing good ever came from letting feelings mess your head up.

This was why Chris didn’t like attachments.

They were messy and time consuming and distracting, which were not things he could afford to get mixed up in, but he couldn’t help how slighted he felt.

In all honestly, he hadn’t been actively looking for Peter, but he wasn’t exactly unhappy when he stumbled across him. Chris had made his way around to the front of the school, where he had left his bike that morning, when he spotted him. Peter was sitting at the picnic table where he and Olivia always congregated in the mornings. The top button of his collared shirt was undone, his hair slightly mussed by the breeze. It was freezing today; Chris shivered just looking at him.

Chris did a little back-and-forth dance on the balls of his feet, uncertain. Part of him wanted to march over there and demand an explanation, but the other part wanted him to stick his head in the sand like an ostrich. Again, he was an idiot.

All the same, without his permission, his legs began moving him in Peter’s direction.

Peter huffed a little as Chris approached him, shaking his head. He gestured down to the weather-worn picnic table. “You want to sit down, or…”

Chris hesitated a moment before sitting across from him — on the opposite side, of course — the splintered tabletop acting as a barrier between them.

“What are you doing out here? You weren’t looking for me were you?” Peter asked. “Because I shouldn’t be out here either.”

“Where should you be?”

Peter picked at a loose nail on the table’s edge. “In Chemistry.”

“I wasn’t looking for you, no.” Chris said, gesturing to where his tarnished BMX was wedged into the bike rack. “Just checking to see if it was still here. I don’t have a bike chain yet.” Chris gave a short, humorless laugh. “Not that anyone would actually want to take that.”
“You ride a bike to school?”

It was a rhetorical question. Or at least, Chris thought it was? He’d seen Peter watching him in the mornings, from this very bench, more than half a dozen times already. Peter was fond of his games though, and Chris could admit, begrudgingly, that he found most of Peter’s quirks (irritatingly) endearing, but *that* he did not like.

“Yes. But you already knew that,” Chris said, not bothering to hide the annoyance in his voice. “It’s better than getting dropped off and picked up every day,” he added, “and I took Drivers Ed last year, so I can go for my road test soon.”

Peter tilted his head. “When was your birthday?”

Chris thought about turfing the question off, before deciding he didn’t *want* to. It was a simple inquiry and there was no reason for him to lie, so he answered honestly. “In July.”

“July?” Peter pried.

“30th,” Chris said, taking a very subtle calming breath before meeting Peter’s eyes. The other boy was talking to him now, so he should try to be reciprocal, right? At least… he thinks he should? This wasn’t a situation he had ever actually been in before. “Yours?”

“August 12th. You’re older than me.” Peter said with a laugh, shifting on the bench and turning his full attention on Chris, like he *just* noticed he was sitting there. “What class did you say you have now?”

Chris was being scrutinized again; he could feel the prickle of it under his skin, so he let his sarcasm rise to the surface. “I didn’t.”

Peter smiled. “Here three weeks and he’s already skipping — tsk, tsk.”

“I’m not skipping. I have study right now and I have nothing to study,” he said, the magnetism of Peter’s focus pulling him closer. “Why aren’t you in Chemistry?”

Peter’s lip curled in an almost-snarl, his head cocking to the side in the way it always did when he was about to get riled up about something. “Mr. Sumner’s had it out for me since freshman year. It’s not my fault the man’s a complete idiot. If he didn’t make mistakes so often then I wouldn’t have to point them out all the time,” he said, chest all puffed out with self-importance.

Chris smiled despite himself.

Peter zeroed in on his face, making a pleased sound under his breath before continuing. “I didn’t go to class yesterday, and he says he’ll fail me if I don’t show up again.”

“And you’re still not going?”

Peter looked decidedly unconcerned. “Looks that way.”

Chris remembered one of the seniors on the high school varsity team talking about grade point average. Minimum requirements, maybe? He had never been on a sports team before, but he knew there were rules you had to follow. “Won’t that affect your basketball thing?”

“My basketball *thing*?” Peter said, leaning backwards and *away* from Chris, like he had just told him to go fuck himself or something.

Chris bridged the distance by leaning forward. “There’s guidelines for you to play on the team,
“Of course, but that doesn’t apply to me,” Peter said, like it was obvious, and he was an idiot for even asking such a thing.

Chris gave a short laugh, shaking his head. “Of course not.”

“Oh, come on! Coach would never allow it. They’d be lost without me.”

“You’ll still get an F.” Chris said, brows knitted together. He couldn’t imagine bringing a failing grade home to his father. Gerard would be livid. “Your parents won’t care about that?”

Peter waved a hand at him, lifting his feet up and resting them on Chris’ side of the bench. “He won’t go through with it. I’m just calling his bluff.”

The outside of Peter’s leg was touching Chris’ hip and he was so aware of it. It was just a barely-there pressure, but he could feel it. Chris wanted to press back; he wanted to rest his hand across Peter’s ankle, and it was the most bizarre thing. He had to force himself to focus on the conversation. “So this is you standing on principle then?”

“Yes, well, never give in, right?”

“Except to convictions of honor and good sense,” Chris said automatically, his voice void of any inflection.

Peter blinked.

“It’s, uh, Winston Churchill.” Chris shook his head, laughing at his own expense. “Sorry, my father’s fond of his proverbs.”

“Your father,” Peter said, his voice pitched oddly. “Where did you say you moved from again?”

Chris’ lips twitched and he gave the same response as minutes earlier. “I didn’t.”

Peter stared at him. “Is this going to be a thing?”

Fondness swelled in Chris’ chest, the corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement. “Why do you want to know?”

“I can’t ask questions?” Peter rested his elbows on the table. “Maybe I just want to get to know you better.”

He smiled widely, and Chris felt his stomach flip.

Peter’s fucking face was too distracting, that’s what it was. The fact that he was very aware of the affect he had on Chris was equal parts infuriating and captivating. It was just one more thing to add to the ever growing list of reasons why this was a horrible idea.

Not Safe.

Chris felt compelled to answer him regardless. “We moved here from Chicago, but before that we lived in Maine for a while.”

“Move around a lot, do you?”

“A bit,” Chris said. “My father has to travel for work, so…”
“What does he do?”

Chris had told this lie so many times he didn’t even have to think about it. “He’s a consultant.”

“Consultant for what?” Peter said, without missing a beat.

“Different things.”

A flurry of emotions flashed across Peter’s face, too fast to read. Even for Chris. “What about your mother?” he asked.

Chris hesitated, caught off guard. He flexed out his fingers when he realized his hands had clenched to bloodless fists under the table. “My mother’s dead.”

“Sorry,” Peter said, and the words rang true, but he only paused for a second before asking, “Have any siblings? Brother? Sister?”

“Jesus, Peter,” Chris said, holding up his hand, palm out. “What is this an interrogation? Why don’t you tell me about your family then?”

Peter’s entire demeanor shifted, his body angling away, shoulders stiff. “I should get to Chemistry class.”

And just like that, whatever progress they made in the last few minutes burned up like dry leaves. Chris was getting whiplash. “You just said you weren’t going.”

“No, I probably should. Livie won’t know what to do with herself if I’m not there, and she can’t really afford anymore detentions right now.”

“That’s very generous of you,” he said, still confused, but unwilling to let the opportunity to take a shot at Peter’s ego pass him by.

Some life flashed in Peter’s eyes again. “And yet, I can’t help but think you don’t mean that.”

“I’ll see you later?” Chris said, nearly wincing at how pathetically hopeful he sounded.

“Yeah.” Peter’s lips turned up at the corners, but his voice was strangely somber. “Goodbye, Chris.”

Chris tried not to stare after Peter as he walked away, but he couldn’t help himself.

***

When he got home that day, Katie was sitting at the kitchen table, her notebook open in front of her, the tip of her tongue peeking out of the corner of her mouth as she scribbled. Chris hung his backpack on a coat rack in the hallway and walked into the kitchen. His father was cooking something in the crock pot; he could smell it. Chili powder and melted cheese. Chris had skipped lunch, and he hadn’t realized until that moment how hungry he was.

His sister gave him a small hum of acknowledgment as he walked towards the sink, grabbing a bowl and spoon from the dish rack. Chris thought he might have grunted something back at her, but he was running more on automation than anything. His head was still full to bursting with all of the strange conversations he’d had that day.

Olivia. Peter.
He couldn’t figure out what could have possibly changed so suddenly. Maybe he had done something? Chris went over his own behavior, but he couldn’t think of anything that explained it. It just didn’t make sense. He’d been trying to shake Peter off for weeks. Now, all of a sudden, when Chris decides he might actually enjoy having him around, Peter starts acting all weird and distant? It made no sense. The last few weeks Peter had been absolutely everywhere. Chris couldn’t get away from him. Just the day before, Peter had literally been breathing down his neck!

He was yanked out of his musings by his sister’s voice. “Hey, Chris?” she said. “You good?”

“I’m fine.” he said, twisting the cap off the milk he’d grabbed from the fridge. “Why?”

She gestured to the countertop he was standing over, her lips twitching with barely suppressed laughter, which was when Chris realized he had just poured milk into a bowl full of Cheez-its. In his defense, the box of Cheez-its was right next to the cereal.

He ran a hand through his hair, blowing out a breath.

Katie was laughing at him, of course. “Dad’s making chili anyway,” she said, still giggling.

Chris grumbled, crossing the room in wide strides to empty the contents of his bowl into the trash can. Katie made no further comments, just sat there silently as he washed the bowl out in the sink and placed it back on the dish rack.

His sister was rarely quiet, unless she wanted something. Chris glanced back towards the table and was unsurprised to find her staring at him, saucer-eyed and expectant. “Dad taught me how to use the cattle prod today.”

Gerard had been working with Katie a lot lately. He was finally showing her how to handle weapons (which his sister was downright ecstatic about) and teaching her basic self-defense. Chris was glad because she needed to know those things, but he also hated it because he didn’t want her to.

Attempting to redirect her attention, he tapped a finger to the book she was flipping through. “What’s that?”

“Spelling homework,” she said, not even bothering to glance down. “He says I’m a natural.”

Chris stared into his sister’s wide unblinking eyes for a moment, before heaving a resigned sigh and pulling a chair up to the table beside hers. “What did you practice on?”

“A pork shoulder,” she said, thrilled at his interest. “Dad hung it from a hook in the basement.” She drummed her fingers on the tabletop, her eyes overly bright, almost manic. “We fried it.”

Chris pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s great, Katie.”

“He’s been on the phone all day,” she added, chewing on her pen cap.

Chris felt the first stirrings of annoyance. “What did he keep you home from school or something?”

His sister’s eyebrows drew together, the smallest crease appearing on her forehead. “Yeah, so?”

He ground his teeth together. Chris didn’t know why he bothered. Gerard would do whatever he wanted with her, it didn’t actually matter what he thought. “What was he talking on the phone about?”
Katie looked back down at her homework. “Same old stuff. Blah blah, recent findings. Blah blah, animal attacks, blah.” She ripped a page out her notebook, crumbled it and threw it in the trash can. It sailed right into the bin, not even bouncing off the edges. “You should go down there.”

“Did he ask you to tell me that?”

Katie shook her head.

It was only a matter of time before Gerard called him down there, and he wasn't going to subject himself to that a second sooner than he had to. “Then no. He’ll call for me when he wants me down there.”

But the universe hated him, and seconds after the words left his mouth, his father’s voice echoed up the basement steps. “Christopher? Come down here, please.”

His sister glanced up at him with a grin. “Told you so.”

“Be right there,” Chris shouted back, turning to jab a finger in the direction of Katie’s self-satisfied face. “Finish your homework.”

She mimicked his motion, gesturing back at him with her pen. “You got it, Mom.”

***

Chris walked through the open doorway and down the wooden steps into the basement. There was a slight coiling of anxiety in the pit of his stomach. Not just now, but always. The basement was easily his least favorite room in the house, in any house. Whenever Gerard had a lesson for him that was particularly intense – something that was going to take time— he would bring Chris down to the basement. Chris didn’t have very many positive basement associations. It wasn’t always like that, but the Technicolor memories in his head were far too vivid for him to not feel a prickle of uneasiness whenever he felt the atmospheric shift of “in the house” to “in the basement.”

His father had an informal office space set up down there, as well as a few scattered tables and shelves that were littered with books and weapons. There were training mats lining the floor by the back wall. The floor itself was a solid stone — cold and charcoal gray. The room was illuminated by a single pull string light, but the washed-out yellow bulb did little to brighten the thick, oppressive gloom that was every basement, ever.

Gerard beckoned Chris over to the center table he was working from. On the table, Chris noticed, there were several books haphazardly piled on top of each other and a dozen loose-leaf papers fanning out of an open manila file folder.

New hunt.

Gerard turned one of the larger books towards him and pointed to an entry; it was written in a language Chris didn’t recognize. Symbols. Chinese, maybe?

“This is a bakeneko,” Gerard said. “Although your mother used to call it ‘le démon du chat.’”

“The cat demon?”

His father graced him with a slight smile. “Yes. Its Japanese in origin. Head of a cat, body of a man, feeds on human flesh. According to legend they have the power to reanimate and control the dead. Isn’t that fascinating?”
Only Gerard could look *that* enthusiastic about a cat-faced thing that ate people, but still, Chris schooled his expression and said, “Sure.”

Gerard dragged his X-Acto blade around a small section of the map. “All the recent reports have centered on this area. There were no human casualties until a few nights ago,” he said, pausing to slide a colored photograph across the table. “Megan Collins and her thirteen year old daughter, Jamie.”

It was a crime scene photo. Chris’ eyes only skimmed over it for a moment before he picked it up by the corners and placed it face down on the table.

He nodded. “Okay. How do we kill it?”

Gerard grabbed a small box from the shelf behind them, opening the lid to reveal a row of bullets. They were strangely cut and a deep coal-like black.

“Put one of these,” Gerard tapped a finger on Chris’ forehead, right between his eyes, “here.”

“Just a head shot?”

His father picked up a bullet, holding it gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. “These bullets are pure iron, Christopher. Makes all the difference.”

Chris could see the cogs turning in Gerard’s head. Thoughts, ideas, scenarios. His father gave a sharp nod, then smacked his hand on the cover of a book titled “Japanese to English translation.”

“Read through this.” Gerard dropped the larger book, the one with the entry on ‘Bakeneko,’ onto Chris’ lap. “I’ll be back to quiz you in an hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chris waited until his father walked up the stairs before opening the translation dictionary. Awesome… The room felt a little less suffocating after Gerard left it, but only a little. He would rather do this upstairs, but if he was allowed to do that his father would have mentioned it. Sighing, he picked up one of Gerard’s discarded notebooks and flipped to a blank page. One hour? He’d have to work quickly.

Thoughts of Peter would have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my lovely beta Ellen. I'm so glad we're back working together again. Love ya!

***

Hate it? Love it? Any comments/criticism/thoughts would be much appreciated.

*Feedback feeds my inspiration!*
The first thing Peter had done after finding out about Chris was tell Olivia. He grabbed her as she was walking down the hallway and pulled her into a storage closet, his eyes most likely wide and panicky. She flailed her hands at him, squawking, “Whoa, accosting!”

Olivia thought he was lying, at first, but he’d watched her eyes grow increasingly somber as he reiterated everything his sister had told him.

It was bothersome to her, too. Peter knew she was oddly fond of Chris.

Regardless, Olivia had followed his lead without hesitation. Not that he had any doubt. Olivia was a bit flighty and distractible, but her devotion to Peter was unwavering. It was one of the few areas of his life where he felt absolute certainty.

Peter played the part of being a social creature very well, but even he could admit that it was completely superficial. People responded well to him. They showered him with praise and attention, and he thrived on that, but it was hollow. Olivia was the only person outside of his family that he’d ever felt a real connection with.

It had been just the two of them for years, ever since Peter first started school. After what happened with her father, the delightful citizens of Beacon Hills treated Olivia like a leper.

People didn’t forget things like that.

Olivia’s father had been dead for years by the time Peter met her, but she was still completely ostracized. Even now people kept their distance from her, like she had something they could catch. As a child, Peter noticed right away how isolated she was. It intrigued him. He had wanted to know why.

No one saw Olivia’s worth the way that he did, but that just meant she was his — and only his. To be honest, it wasn’t a feeling he disliked.

Peter somehow managed to keep his “big secret” from her until halfway through 5th grade. It was a particularly trying full moon, and he had allowed himself to get worked up. He couldn’t even remember what triggered it anymore — something trivial — but his eyes had shifted and she’d seen it. Peter had rambled out some kind of explanation, aware, for the first time, how deeply his strange friend had embedded herself in his heart. His grandmother had warned him that outsiders would struggle to understand what they were. That people might fear them.

But she hadn’t been afraid. Olivia had simply touched her fingertips to the corner of his eyes, her face fractured open with wonder and childish acceptance.

When he had gone home that day and told his parents about it, they had been understandably concerned. Peter’s father rebuked him for being careless, telling his mother they had sent him to school too early and he wasn’t ready, but his grandmother had taken control of the situation. She reminded Peter’s father of a very similar incident that happened in his own childhood and asked Peter to invite Olivia over for dinner. End of argument, end of discussion.

Elisabeth Hale could see how weary Peter still was from the events of the day, so they spent the
rest of that evening in the kitchen, elbows deep in cookie batter.

She always understood Peter in a way nobody else did. As opposed to everyone else, including his Tal, that seemed to love Peter despite his many quirks, his grandmother tended to dote on those aspects of his personality. She always praised Peter for being so very clever, and his father would balk and splutter and ask her to stop encouraging him.

It hadn’t been anything remarkable that killed his grandmother. She had simply grown old and died in her sleep. As werewolves, they lived longer than the average human, but they were far from immortal. Peter watched her decline in the last few weeks before her death. Her eyes would glaze over, a lot — her mind tired and lost — and Peter would give her his arm to lean on as they walked through the preserve together. She would tuck her hand into the crook of his elbow and call him her darling, like she always had.

Peter was her favorite, by far, and he had absolutely reveled in that.

Elisabeth Hale spent the majority of her last week in wolf form. It was a rare ability. Not every alpha could shift into a true-wolf like that. She found the form calming, he knew. She would shift late at night, curling up by the living room hearth, the flickering light from the fireplace casting a subtle glimmer on her stark-white fur.

The violent snap of the tether between them had torn apart so abruptly that Peter had woken up screaming. Everything happened so quickly after that; he still didn’t have a very clear memory of it. The commotion, the grief, his father’s frantic voice, and his sister — howling — falling to her knees and staring up at him with alpha-red eyes.

The memory gave him a sharp pain in his chest, like it always did. In some ways, he felt as if he’d lost the two most important people in the world to him that night.

Because Talia was not the same.

The way his sister was handling this Argent situation was not good enough. From what she’d explained to Peter, the plan was basically to do nothing and hope for the best. Maybe she hadn’t said those exact words, but still.

His grandmother would never have stood for that; she was very preemptive. Our actions today might help save us tomorrow, she would have said.

Peter missed her. His Nan.

He could have gone to her for guidance about this — about Chris.

Chris…

It was insane but it made sense. The way his grandmother explained hunters to him — the training, the conditioning — it all lined up so perfectly. Chris’ behavior, his strange reactions to certain things, it just fit. Peter felt like a complete fool for not noticing it earlier.

He had just been so… and he would not use the word “obsessed,” as Olivia likely would. He may “think intensely” about certain things, but there was a difference between obsession and captivation. And he was captivated. No one had ever gotten their hooks in him so deeply before.

There had always been girls interested in him. Girls from school — older and younger (and the occasional substitute teacher). Peter had a few one-night-stand(ish) situations, in the last year or so, and he felt like things were still fairly amicable between them. He definitely respected them in the morning, at least. Even still, he had no interest in any repeat encounters. Peter had no negative
feelings towards any of them. The truth of it was, he didn’t really feel anything for them at all. Maybe that made him cruel, but it wasn’t his intention.

This felt different somehow. Chris felt different somehow.

If the situation hadn’t been so dire, Olivia would most likely be commenting on how ironic it was that Peter had finally found someone who held his interest longer than a few days, but he just-so-happened to be a fucking werewolf hunter.

Instead, she just toddled along next to Peter silently. Neither of them had spoken more than a few words since they left her house. Olivia was spending the weekend at Peter’s, so they had stopped by there on the way home from school to pack a few things.

They were taking a shortcut through a less traveled path in the woods. Olivia had her backpack slung over one shoulder, and her bright pink duffel over the other. Her steps were a little uncoordinated as she tried to keep them balanced.

“I feel like such a bitch,” she announced suddenly, her eyes downcast.

“Well…” he bumped his shoulder against hers, “that’s not really a–”

She scowled at him. “Shut up. I’m serious, Peter. This sucks.”

Peter sighed and stepped away from her. “It’s called being smart, Livie.”

He pulled back a branch so she could step under it.

After a few beats of silence, Olivia continued, “So, what, we’re just not going to English class — ever again? Explain to me how that’s gonna work?” She stepped over a tree root awkwardly, holding the trunk for support. “We can’t just avoid him forever. This is Beacon-freakin-Hills! You can’t go to the grocery store without bumping into eight people from our high school.”

She stopped walking abruptly and turned back to him. “Plus, it’s just shifty. I feel shifty,” she said, readjusting her backpack for the umpteenth time. “It’s like that time in freshman year when you slept with Selene Diaz from the video store, and then I wasn’t allowed to go in there anymore ‘cause—”

Peter huffed and grabbed her backpack, swinging it over his own shoulder. “This is a slightly different situation.”

“Yeah, I actually like Chris,” she said with a sour smile.

Yes, well, so did Peter, but that was irrelevant. He went from trying to be patient to being completely done, in a millisecond. “Fine, by all means, keep talking to him, then,” he said, turning away from her and continuing down the trail. “Don’t let the potential slaughter of my family stop you.”

He could her the rapid scurry-shuffle of her feet as Olivia rushed to keep up with him. She grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him back around. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

Peter sighed. “I don’t know, Liv. I’ve never really met a hunter before.”

“It just seems so surreal to me.”

“It’s true. I trust my sister,” he said, bearing no argument, “and now that I know what to look for it’s obvious. I can smell it on him, even.”
Olivia’s face scrunched up. “How’s that now?”

“It’s hard to explain, Livie. There’s just this sharpness to his scent. I couldn’t put my finger on it before, but—” Peter frowned, the word tumbling around in his head for a second before he could say it. “I think it’s gunpowder.”

“Seriously?”

“No, I’m joking.” Peter exhaled noisily, impatient. He racked his brain for a description that would make sense to her. “During deer season, in the woods, sometimes there’s this smell in the air, like after you blow out birthday candles?” he said, gesturing vaguely. “It’s really subtle, but I can always scent that off him. I just didn’t see the connection before.”

“All the time?”

“All the time,” he said, grinning at the barefaced fascination in her expression. Olivia always showed such an interest in his werewolf abilities — it was refreshing. “It’s like it absorbed into his skin or something,” he added.

“Wow,” she said, eyes wide, “what a metaphor.”

“But I’ve never sensed anything hostile from him.” Peter paused, frowning. Okay, so maybe that wasn’t entirely accurate. Chris had been, more or less, sparking at Peter like a fucking livewire since the day they met. “Alright, slight hostility,” he amended, “but not, like, maliciously so? Does that make sense?”

“No, I get it,” she said. “I don’t think he knows anything.” Olivia’s eyebrows pulled together and her mouth turned down. Her concern smelt like burnt sugar. “I mean, you’d be able to pick up on that, right?”

“He doesn’t know,” Peter assured her, “or he doesn’t care.”

He couldn’t be certain on what secrets Chris was keeping, but he didn’t have bad intentions. Peter would have sensed something off him and there’d been nothing. And he was certain of that. “Tal told me to ‘keep my distance,’ but that’s ridiculous, we need to find out why they’re here.”

Olivia gave an enthusiastic nod. Obviously trying to make up for her lack of a solution by being overly supportive. “Sure, sure, but — do you really think he’s going to tell you that?”


Olivia wrung her hands together, sighing. “Maybe you should just talk to Talia about this.”

Peter held up a hand. “Absolutely not. She’ll overreact. We can handle it for now.”

“Why? Because we’re just that awesome at espionage?” she said, a touch of hysteria creeping into her voice. “I’m about as subtle as a brick to the face, Peter. You know this! Embrace my flaws, please!”

Peter grabbed her by the shoulders, giving her a slight shake. “Can you fucking relax!?” he said. “My head is enough of a convoluted mess right now, stop adding to it!”

She just continued to stare at him, her lower lip jutting out — petulant.

Peter sighed. “I’ll figure something out. I’d never put you in an unsafe situation, Livie, you know that.”
She nodded, her eyes softening. “Well, yeah.”

They’d gotten close enough to the house now that Peter could smell smoke from the grill. His mother probably had Steven out there. “Once we get to the house, we can’t talk about this anymore.”

“Obviously, Peter,” she said, frowning again. “This sucks.”

***

Derek and Laura were playing tag (from the looks of it) when they exited the trail into the clearing of Peter’s front yard, but his nephew ran off in their direction as soon as he spotted them.

“Hi, Livie!” Derek yelled, launching himself in the general direction of Olivia’s knees.

She gave a little *oomph* when he barreled into her. “Hey hi, Der!”

Derek encircled her legs in a tight hold, looking up at her through dark eyelashes and resting his chin on her thigh. “Derek help Gamma make’a salad,” he announced.

Her face splitt into a wide grin. Peter’s nephew tended to have that effect on people. “Get outta town!”

Laura made her way over to them, too. Although, with slightly less enthusiasm. Peter had noticed a bit of change in her movements lately. She seemed more... controlled, like Talia.

“All he did was wash the lettuce,” Laura said, her fingers twirling a loose strand of hair that had fallen out of her ponytail. “I got to chop a tomato.”

Derek stuck out his tongue at her.

Peter’s mother walked up behind them, stopping to tuck the piece of hair Laura had been fiddling with behind her ear. “Hello, Olivia.”

“Hey, Mrs. H,” Olivia said, shaking her leg a little and smiling when Derek laughed and held on tighter.

“I defrosted some chicken for you this afternoon,” Maeve said, gesturing across the yard to where Steven — wearing his ridiculous ‘Grill Master: The Man, The Myth, The Legend’ apron — was wielding a pair of tongs. “Steven’s putting it on the grill.”

Peter’s mother knew Olivia didn’t eat “red meat,” not since the pig roast incident in 6th grade.

“You’re too good to me, Mrs. H,” Olivia said.

Maeve smiled, gently patting the side of Olivia’s face, then turned to Peter. “Go and grab the extra blankets from the dryer, Peter.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mother.”

Peter stooped down to give Derek’s hair a quick ruffle, before crossing the yard and heading toward the house. The screen door was propped open, so he just walked inside.

Peter tossed their backpacks onto the couch as he passed it, walking through the kitchen and into the laundry room near back of the house. He grabbed the patchwork quilt they used for guests (not that they ever had any) out of the dryer, shaking it a few times to remove any leftover lint.
Maeve would have set up the foldout cot in Peter’s room already. When Peter and Livie were kids, they just did the whole head-to-feet thing, but his mother hauled the cot up there now. Which was fine with Peter because Olivia kicked and, he’s not ashamed to admit, she’d kicked him in the face more than once. Even in her sleep, his friend couldn’t stop moving.

He took the stairs two at a time and walked down the hallway to his bedroom, smiling to himself as he tossed the quilt on the ancient metal cot his mother had kitty-cornered by the window.

When he went back into the hallway, he could hear the shuffling of his sister's feet on the carpet of their dad's study. They were both in there. Talia and his dad. Peter could sense their exact positions inside the room. Peter Sr. was closer to the door, in the chair by the bookcase, maybe? Talia was on her feet — pacing — by the window.

Peter was about to turn on his heels and leave them to it, but he paused when he heard his sister’s voice. “They wipe out the whole pack. It’s what they do,” she said.

“Out of control packs, yes,” Peter Sr. said. “I did some digging, Talia. The Argents have a code of conduct and they have no reason to target us.”

“Then why are they here, Dad?” Talia asked, apprehension lending a sharpness to her voice. “Deaton told me about Gerard Argent the other night. He sounds like a lunatic.”

Peter felt something sour settle in his stomach at that. He knew nothing of the man that was Chris’ father, but he heard the uptick in his sister’s heartbeat when she spoke the name, and it was deeply unsettling.

“We’ll find out why they’re here. It could just be a coincidence. It doesn’t seem like they know about us,” Peter Sr. said, his voice calm and steady as ever. “They’ve already been here a month.”

“No, I know, you’re right. From what I could find out they travel around for hunts.” Talia spat the word like it was a curse. Peter could imagine her expression: forehead puckered, lip curling in disgust. “A few months here, a few months there,” she said.

“That’s right, they could just be passing through,” his dad soothed. Peter felt his hackles rise on Talia’s behalf at the man’s pacifying tone. Personally, he hated it when their father did that. “We knew omegas would be drawn here, Talia. It makes sense that a hunter would notice it, too.”

“Okay,” Talia said. “So, we’ll just keep an eye out and not draw suspicion?”

“And, if anything changes, you have the loyalty of all the neighboring packs. You can handle this,” his dad said, and despite Peter’s dislike of this whole ‘sit and do nothing’ plan, he found himself nodding along. She could handle this. “We just need to remain calm, alert, and focused.”

“Of course,” Talia finally said, all traces of doubt and indecision gone from her voice. “Nothing to worry about.”

Their father’s response was instantaneous. “Nothing at all.”

After several beats of silence, Peter walked back down the hall towards his room. His shoes thumped loudly on the floor. It didn’t matter. Talia and his dad already knew he was listening. There were no secrets in this house. If they wanted that conversation to be private, they would have had it somewhere else.
Peter thought again of his grandmother and how she never would have stood for this inaction. His thoughts then travelled to his sister (who feared nothing) and how her heartbeat stuttered over the name Gerard Argent, and that pretty much settled it.

There wasn’t much of a choice at all, really.

If he needed to trail around after Chris in order to find out what he was up to, then so be it. Peter had a pretty good lock on Chris’ scent, at this point, he could easily track it. He could follow him home, even.

Just wait there and listen.

There was no harm in at least attempting to investigate, instead of just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Let his father and sister sit on their hands with their diplomatic passivity. If no one else was going to do anything, then Peter would do it himself.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you to my lovely beta Ellen. You are wonderful, my friend <3

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Hate it? Love it? Any comments/criticism/thoughts would be much appreciated.

Feedback feeds my inspiration!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

**Warning:** This chapter contains child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gerard kept Chris home from school the following week so they could “take inventory” of all the facts they had about the hunt. He would have to scramble to catch up on school work, as usual, but at least he’d have winter break to work on assignments.

It was December 15th, just a little over a week before Christmas.

Gerard wasn’t too big on the holidays; they were far from the typical Hallmark family. But his father would make something overly elaborate for dinner and there would be a present, or two. He typically got Chris a weapon of some kind.

They had taken a break from their research to pick up a Christmas tree. More for Katie’s benefit than anything; though, the older she got, the less she seemed to care about such things.

It was the first time Chris had occasion to really venture around downtown.

The three of them stopped at a diner, The Top Hat, for lunch that afternoon. When they crossed the street, he found himself unconsciously reaching down for his sister’s hand. She had slapped his hand away and groaned, “Ugh, Chris, stop!”

Chris had smiled sheepishly at her; it was a hard habit to break.

It was always his job to look after Katie.

The first time Chris met his little sister — small and pink and swaddled in a soft baby blanket — his mother had rested Katie in his lap, telling him “C’est ta petite sœur” and that he had to look out for her.

Chris used to take her from her crib in the morning, scoop her up into his arms and get her cleaned up and dressed for the day. Katie’s very first word had been his name, or a variation of his name. *Kiss*, she would say. Which would typically prompt him to lean forward and place a kiss to her forehead, even after he realized she was talking about him. She loved it. She would smile and giggle and wave her little arms.

Katie had been so carefree, so joyful, then.

The day she was born, it was like someone had finally shown mercy on Chris and given him this gift; because, that’s what she was: a gift. She was lightness and innocence, and those were things Chris had never known. At least, not that he could remember.

She was *his* responsibility. His mother had said so.

The older Katie got, the more she reminded him of their mother. She had the same complexion, the same curve to her jaw, the same honey blonde hair. But Chris had their mother’s eyes.
Gerard saw that, too. Or at least, Chris thought he did. His father was fairly consistent in instructing him to make eye contact. But sometimes, when Chris made a mistake and needed to be punished, Gerard would force him to look down, like looking at Chris’ eyes bothered him.

Gerard had loved his mother. Chris knew that. His parents were an arranged marriage, but they’d thrived together. She was the cunning to his father’s initiative. They were as similar as they were opposite and together they’d been formidable and lethal.

Chris’ mother had only lived in the United States for a handful of years before they married. She never completely lost her accent, either. There was always a touch of French to her words, just a little twist in the way her voice would rise and fall on certain syllables.

She was a hunter, first and foremost, but she loved her children fiercely. She had not doted upon them, nor was she overtly affectionate, but she was kind. She always spoke softly to Chris, and she used to sing him and Katie to sleep at night with Édith Piaf’s “La Vie En Rose.”

There was a patience in her explanations, her teachings, that was so remarkably absent in all of his interactions with Gerard.

She was the one that taught Chris to shoot a bow. It was never a skill his father could perfect, but his mother made it an art form. She was a deadly weapon of precision.

Even still, Chris wasn’t fool enough to believe his mother was unaware of the things Gerard did to him. More often than not, it was her that would come to Chris, afterwards. She would straighten his clothes and tell him he needed to be strong; softly humming La Vie En Rose under her breath as she wiped the blood from his face, then sent him on his way. Their family was matriarchal, after all. But she was his mother, and he’d loved her completely.

Before she’d married his father, she was Allison Lemoine, but she’d died as Allison Argent.

The last night Chris spent with her just happened to coincide with the night he killed his first alpha. He was eleven. And he had shot an arrow through its head from 30 yards back, but not soon enough.

Chris remembered the burning smell of disinfectant as he’d dabbed the bite mark on his mother’s neck with an alcohol soaked cloth. Gerard had been silent. No corrections, no reprimands, no instructions. Just silence.

Chris knew what the bite meant. His father taught him that lesson years earlier. But his mother had told him not to worry, that everything would be fine, so, the next morning, Chris had left his sister on the couch with a sippy cup full of apple juice and gone to school.

When he came home later that day, his yard was flooded with people. Police, fire trucks. An ambulance. It was pulled up onto the lawn near the front door. They had already loaded his mother into the back, by then, but Chris didn’t need to see her. He already knew.

Gerard was handcuffed in the backseat of a police car, silent and still. He didn’t even glance up when Chris walked passed him.

Chris had heard Katie before he saw her. Crying, screaming, terrified. She was still in the same dress he’d left her in that morning: white lace with little yellow flowers, but the material was soaked through and bright red.

It was blood.
Chris knew on some level that it was their mother’s blood, but he had to look past it. He couldn’t look at it. Chris had shoved the image into the little box in his head (the one where he put all the bad things) and focused on his sister’s small fists striking the chest of the man holding her.

The man was trying to place a struggling Katie into the back seat of a white passenger van. The logo on his shirt labeled him as Department of Social Services.

Chris remembered the sharp and sudden rush of adrenaline coursing through his body; burning, pulsing, like there was acid in his blood.

He had turned his back on the ambulance that housed his dead mother and charged across the yard. “Stop it! Where are you taking her??”

At that point, he was running on instinct, so when he felt someone’s hand close around his wrist — It’s alright, kid — he’d fought.

The world had broken into fragments; blurry lines, upside-down, back to front. There’d been hands grabbing at him, everywhere; rapid-fire voices. Jesus Christ! Easy, easy! He remembered the snap of someone’s finger and a grunt of pain as something gave way beneath the pressure of his foot. Chris had been thrown, face down, on the hood of one of the many vehicles parked in front of his house. He didn’t know which one, he didn’t know anything. Chris had growled and struggled and yelled his sister’s name. He remembered saying please — Please, don’t, please, don’t. Please, don’t take her — which was odd, because he wasn’t allowed to say that. That was begging. Gerard didn’t allow that.

Chris had felt a sharp pinch in his shoulder and then everything was light and hazy. He had watched through drug-fogged eyes as strangers took away his baby sister, and he’d been absolutely powerless.

They’d been separated. At least, for a while.

Katie was placed with a foster family. Some young couple with big hearts and a lot of unoccupied bedrooms. Chris, on the other hand, was put into a group home for boys.

It hadn’t taken Chris long to find out where Katie was being kept. All the information about their “case” was stored in a large white binder, which was locked away in a filing cabinet inside of a locked office. But Chris had never met a lock he couldn’t pick.

As soon as he had the address, he’d been climbing out the window and down a drain pipe.

It wasn’t exactly an intuitive leap for them to figure out where Chris had run off to. The police had beaten him there and taken him back, six times. Chris remembered the group home’s case manager reprimanding her underlings on their inability to keep tabs on an eleven-year-old kid.

The seventh trip Chris made to 127 Carolina Avenue had been his last one. He climbed out the window just before midnight, while the evening staff was still in shift change. It had given him just enough of a head start that he actually made it there.

Chris had heard his sister crying from the street and, in that moment, the entire Boston Police Department couldn’t have kept him from charging through the front door and up the stairs.

She was in the first room on the left. All the noise had attracted Mr. and Mrs. Freer, his sister’s foster parents, too, but it hadn’t mattered. Chris had crossed the room to her in seconds.

He remembered the way she stared up at him, eyes puffy and wet. And when her arms encircled
his neck, it was like the broken inside Chris knitted itself back together again, if only for just a moment.

Katie had tucked her head beneath his chin, her soft tuffs of hair tickling his nose. She’d clutched at him so tightly. Chris had just rocked her, back and forth, humming their mother’s lullaby.

*C’est lui pour moi, moi pour lui dans la vie*

They hadn’t forced him back to the group home, after that.

Chris and Katie were in placement for exactly fourteen days before Gerard came for them. The investigation into Allison Argent’s death had come back “inconclusive.” Most likely a suicide, they’d said, even though their house had looked like a war zone. Broken windows, furniture in disarray, clear signs of a struggle. But the Argents had a lot of contacts, many of which were in law enforcement, and Chris would expect nothing less.

It took him nearly six months to work up enough courage to ask Gerard if he’d killed her. He had simply looked Chris dead in the face, his eyes black and empty as a starless sky and said, “Yes.” Just like that. Like it was nothing. He told Chris their mother had been rabid, out of control, and that she was better off now.

“It had to be done,” his father had said. “It’s what she wanted.”

Things had never been good, not for them, but after that it was so much worse.

And his sister... Katie may have only been two at the time, but that joy and lightness Chris had loved so much never came back.

But that had been years earlier, when his sister was more likely to be seen playing with a stuffed animal or a Tonka truck (she had never been one for dolls). Five years later, though, she was sitting across the kitchen table from Chris and sharpening knives with a pumice stone.

All while riffling through half a dozen packets of fruit snacks, of course. She always did that. She would tear them all open, then pick out the flavors she liked and toss the rest. The trash can would be littered with green, yellow, and orange fruit snacks by the time she was done.

Gerard was in rare form. The hunt was not going well. They’d been scouting the area, watching for any indicators that the bakeneko was close by, but there’d been nothing. No new attacks, either. So they were kind of pointlessly circling, which always put his father in a foul mood.

Eventually, he was going to turn his agitation on Chris. It was unavoidable.

Chris was trying to proactively anticipate what Gerard might want from him. It was better to just *do it*, as opposed to Gerard having to *ask him*. That would involve conversation, and the less they interacted the better. So far, he had been successful.

At that moment, he was reading through another one of his father’s books. There was some good stuff about migration and hunting patterns in there. It could be helpful.

But Katie kept pulling his focus. She was tossing fruit snacks towards the trash can. Some of them sailed right in, but others were sticking to the side of the can. The back and forth motion of the knife she was working on had knocked a few wrappers onto the floor, too.

Chris sighed. “Could you maybe try not to make such a mess?” he asked. “Just *try*. Minimal effort. I’m not asking for any miracles here, Katie.” Chris glanced at the pile of crumpled
wrappers, his eyebrows lowering. “I’m the one who’s going to have to clean that up.”

Katie leaned towards him, lifting her chin. “If you’re gonna clean it up, why should I worry about it, then?” She smiled sweetly as she purposefully flicked another fruit snack onto the floor.

Chris rolled his eyes. Brat. He waited until she looked back down towards the table then lunged for her, grabbing her around the middle and wriggled his fingers into her side, just below her rib cage. She yelped and twisted away from him.

He smiled and held on tighter, asking her “What was that?” and laughing as she squirmed and giggled and tried to kick her foot into his shin.

Chris was distracted. So he hadn’t noticed it when Gerard peered around the corner to check on them, but he heard the sound of the man’s shoes on the floor as he crossed the room to the table.

In a quick brutal motion, his father grabbed him by the wrist and twisted it. Little sparks of pain travelled down his arm, forcing him to angle his body forward. “Is there not something else you should be doing?” Gerard asked, glancing over Chris’ shoulder at the open book he’d been flipping through. “Have you found anything useful?”

Chris steadied his voice with a shaky breath before answering. “Nothing useful, sir.”

“Maybe because you’re wasting time playing games with Katherine, which not only distracts her from what she’s doing, but impedes us from making any progress,” his father said, each word punctuated by a slight jerk to Chris’ wrist. “Do you want to be the reason this thing kills again before we can locate it?”

Chris shook his head, forcing out a choked “No, sir,” when his father twisted his wrist so hard Chris’ thumb was pointing in the opposite direction. Gerard would twist until it snapped, if he felt so inclined, he’d done it before.

Gerard sneered, grabbing the back of his head and smashing his face down into the table. A thin stream of blood dripped from Chris’ nose at the impact.

“I want you to patrol the south side of the preserve tonight,” Gerard said. “And I don’t want to see you back here until morning. Is that understood?”

Chris wiped the back of his hand under his nose, blood smearing across his upper lip. “Yes, sir.”

He waited until after Gerard left the room to pinch the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger; sniffing a few times to clear his sinuses of blood.

Katie was still and quiet beside him, as always.

He ran a hand over his face, then turned to reassure her, but she gave a quick shake of her head. Scooping up her little pile of red and blue fruit snacks, she placed them in front of Chris on the table.

Chris felt a surge of warmth fill his chest. He separated the pile into two halves. “Split it?”

Katie’s eyes were sad, but she smiled at him anyways. “Deal.”

***

It took Chris almost two hours to walk from his house to the Beacon Hills Preserve. It shouldn’t have taken that long, but he had to detour. The most direct route was far too populated. And it was
a little hard to be discreet when he had a crossbow slung over his shoulder. He knew his father wasn’t going to drive him, and he hadn’t been allowed to take his bike. Chris would honestly be surprised if he got to sleep in the house the next day. Gerard would most likely make him sleep in the basement… or the yard. Gerard was very fond of that particular punishment, especially when they lived in an area with unpredictable weather patterns — like Maine, for example — where it would get so fucking cold that Chris felt like he could snap his own toes off.

That wouldn’t be a problem in California, though. There was actually a little cluster of bushes in his yard that he could sleep under, if he had to. At least that way the neighbor wouldn’t see him. Gerard would throw a fit if he had to explain to the neighbor why Chris was out there.

Once he crossed the borders into the preserve — *No Entry After Dark* — he focused all of his senses on his surroundings. He needed to pay attention. Something was just… off.

The last few days had been strange. When they’d been in town, and even the previous few nights, when they’d been patrolling and scouting the area, Chris had felt a strange prickle, just an itch at the back of his neck. He’d thought maybe it was the bakeneko. Maybe it knew they were tracking it? They’d been discreet, but it was still possible.

He took his little flashlight out of his pocket. There wasn't a single light for miles. The all-encompassing blackness of the woods: it swallowed up everything.

Chris stayed close to the river, because, despite its famed feline appearance, the bakeneko was rumored to favor areas near the water. It liked to feed on dead things too, and there was bound to be some rotting fish floating around the edges of the river.

It was just a hunch, but it didn’t surprise him in the least that the moment he was alone and isolated would be when the creature decided to show itself.

He found it bent over a deer carcass, the animal long dead and bloated. As soon as Chris rounded the corner, the bakeneko’s head snapped up to him, bloody entrails dripping from its mouth and hanging from its claws.

It was female, clearly humanoid in shape, but there was nothing human about its features. The eyes were narrow slits, remarkably cat like, but they glowed an otherworldly violet. Patches of thick black fur covered its flat, misshapen face.

Chris didn’t hesitate. The arrow left his bow with a *whoosh*. The bakeneko was quick, but the bolt embedded itself deep within its shoulder. Chris flinched at the high pitched shriek that followed.

The creature’s movements were like a blur; streaks of color and sound, then it was knocking the crossbow from his hands. Chris countered just as fast. With his right hand, he grabbed the bakeneko's wrist and spun, using his weight and momentum to throw the creature off balance. It worked. And Chris took the second’s advantage to plunge his knife into the thing’s chest — once, twice, three times. Blood ran, warm and sticky, over his knuckles.

The creature blinked its feline eyes at him, completely unaffected, then struck its palm against Chris’ chest. He staggered backwards with the force of the blow. The bakeneko charged him, baring its blood-stained teeth. *Just a head shot,* he thought. He needed to put a bullet in its head.

Chris pulled his IMI Desert Eagle — already fully loaded with iron laced bullets — from its holster, driving his knee upward into the creature’s stomach and then bringing the heel of his boot down hard on its leg.

The bakeneko’s eyes shined bright with intelligence. It grabbed his arm at the elbow, forcing his
gun down and away. Chris head-butted the thing directly in its fucking face when he felt claws scrape the skin of his throat.

Unexpectedly, just as quickly as the creature had pounced on him, it was flying backwards through the air.

The bakeneko crashed to the ground with a thud scrambling onto all fours instantly. Chris watched its eyes flit around, sizing up the threat, then it was taking off in the opposite direction.

He aimed his gun and fired. Only twice. The bakeneko was retreating; its shape was already distorted and far too fast for Chris’ shots to be accurate. Don’t waste the bullets.

“Let her go,” a voice echoed from behind him.

Rage contorted Chris’ face. He had already seen him, standing off to the side after he’d torn the creature away from Chris.

He spun back around to find Peter’s eyes still shining brightly.

Werewolf.

Chris felt several things at once. Anger (flickering hot and moving under his skin like fire ants) and confusion, but also like the last piece of the oddity that was Peter Hale had finally slotted itself into place. Chris had known. He’d known there was something. Every instinct in his body had been screaming it.

How long had Peter been following him? Had he been trying to get information out of Chris? Is that what everything was about?

Chris’ hand involuntarily went to his chest to rub the tightening he felt there. It was an unfamiliar feeling. He took a calming breath, refocusing, as the sensation traveled upward from his chest to his throat.

His mind was rapidly assessing the situation. Peter’s eyes had shined gold, not blue. Chris knew what that meant, the significance, which was the only reason he aimed his gun at Peter’s chest and not his head.

Peter’s lip curled back, but he held his hands outstretched to the side. When he spoke, his voice held the same note of teasing as it always did. “A thank you might be more appropriate. I did just save your life.”

Chris was snapping back a retort before he could stop himself. “I had it under control.”

The silence stretched on — one beat, then another. Chris could hear the soft cry of a nightingale echo off the trees that surrounded them.

“What were you born or bitten?” he finally asked.

Peter was standing very still, his eyes tracking Chris’ every move. “Does that matter?”

For some people, the bite could be maddening. So many of the wolves Chris had put down over the years had been bitten. Born wolves were less of a problem, at least, typically. “Sometimes.”

Peter raised his hands up a little higher. “Look,” he said, his voice soft and cautious, like Chris was a wild horse he was trying not to spook.
Given the circumstance, it was outrageously insulting.

Chris needed to leave, he needed to be away. He couldn’t be out here with him, he had to go. But when Chris tried to step around him, Peter moved to his left, in front of Chris, blocking his exit.

His blood ran cold.

Don’t do that, don’t do that.

Chris leveled his gun at Peter’s head. He could put a bullet between his eyes; it would be easy. “You don’t want to do that.”

Peter must have sensed that his movement was perceived as a threat, because he stepped back, opening up a space for Chris to pass him if he wanted to, but not moving completely. “You’re right, I don’t,” he said, “but I can’t let you leave until I know you’re not a threat.”

Chris scoffed. “I’m sorry, what?” He felt such confliction. He wanted to lower his gun, but he also wanted to shoot holes through Peter’s kneecaps. It was making his vision swim. “Until you know I’m not a threat?”

“That’s what I said.” Peter took a harsh breath in through his nose, clearly displeased with Chris’ reaction. “If you’re planning on running off and telling your father, then we have a serious problem.”

“What do you know about my father?”

Peter gave a short bark of laughter. “More than I’d like.”

“Is that what your little game of twenty questions was about?” Chris asked, outraged and confused. “Trying to get information out of me, Peter?”

Peter looked almost apologetic. “I needed to know if you were a danger to us.”

“Us?” Chris asked, and the implication snapped everything back into focus. He slowly lowered his gun. “Your family…”

Peter’s eyes widened at his slipup. He dropped his hands and strode towards Chris, but there was nothing threatening in his actions; he looked cornered. “My family has lived here peacefully for over a century. We’ve always been here,” he said. “We don’t bother anyone, we’ve never hurt anyone.”

“And I’m supposed to just,” he gestured at Peter with the gun still held loosely in his hand, “take your word on that?”

Peter’s mouth turned down. “Why did you come here? What do you want from us?”

“Nothing,” Chris said. “I didn’t even know there was a pack living here. My father never mentioned it.”

“Does he know?” Peter asked, his head tilting.

Chris could feel the familiar burn of Peter’s scrutiny under his skin. “I don’t know. Like I said, he hasn’t mentioned it.”

“But he would tell you if he did?”

It wasn’t uncommon for Gerard to hold back certain details from him. But if his father knew there
was an entire pack living in Beacon Hills, he would have mentioned it by now.

“Most likely.”

Peter heaved out a relieved sigh, but he didn’t look away from Chris’ eyes. “Then why are you here?”

“Elevated supernatural activity,” Chris said, parroting his father’s exact words. “That’s all he told me.”

“I want you to look me in the face and tell me what you’re going to do about this,” Peter said, his eyes so very bright with determination — with resolve. It was staggering. “Are you going to tell him?”

Chris felt an odd burning sensation in his throat. “Why? So you can listen to my heartbeat and tell me if I’m lying?”

“Yes,” Peter said, unashamed and without hesitation. “Are you going to tell your father?” The wolf paused a moment before stepping forward, hands rising cautiously to the side again. “Chris, please,” he added, his voice a soft rumble. “Are you?”

Chris wanted so badly to look away from his eyes, so he forced himself not to. “No.”

“Can you, just—” Peter’s face twisted up; worry and dark amusement. “I need you to say the whole sentence out loud.”

There was something about the raw sincerity in Peter’s expression that made him feel like the ground might spilt open and swallow him whole.

Chris hissed a breath in through his teeth; completely enthralled. That sense of urgency from moments earlier resurfaced; he needed to go.

“I’m not going to tell my father,” Chris finally said, moving to push past Peter again, but this time, the wolf didn’t try to stop him. “Just stay the hell away from me, Peter.”

Chris was walking away; he had turned his back to Peter. He should be alert, he should be cautious, but he felt nothing but a strange numbness.

As he was walking back onto the road, Peter’s voice trailed off behind him. “Whatever you want,” he said.

Chris deliberated for a second then glanced back over his shoulder, but Peter was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you to my lovely beta Ellen.

"C'est ta petite soeur" means: This is your little sister. Also, to anyone who is interested, I made a Chris/Peter playlist for the story. You can find it here.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Peter was less than surprised when he went into English class on Monday to discover Chris had moved his seat to the back of the classroom. No one had assigned seats in that class. You could sit wherever you wanted. And if that was the worst Chris was planning to do, then Peter supposed he could live with it. Then again, now he had to pretend to care about school nonsense while Chris’ eyes burned a hole into the back of his head. It wasn’t just in class either, but everywhere. Peter could sense his anger, his resentment. It almost felt like being hunted. Which given the situation should be alarming, but it wasn’t.

He should probably be concerned that Chris’ status as a hunter wasn’t really affecting this overwhelming need he had to just... do things to him... but he couldn’t be bothered to care. Fuck it. Peter never claimed to be a saint, and unless it was the urge to rip someone’s head off, he was never much for restraint either. When he wanted something, he took it. He’d just never come across a situation where the object he coveted was “unattainable” to him.

In all honesty, he hadn’t meant to reveal himself the other night. He had been there to observe, nothing more. By that point, he had already been watching Chris for days.

Chris hadn’t shown up for school the previous week, and it had thrown a wrench into Peter’s carefully devised plan. He couldn’t exactly track the kid’s scent if he never fucking came around, now could he?

The hunter was absent on Monday (and then Tuesday, and then Wednesday). If it wasn’t for the incessant buzzing of Peter’s entire household, he might have thought the Argents left town.

Ironically enough it was Chris that came to him, wandering in the woods with his father, entirely too close to the Hale house for comfort.

Peter had followed the two of them to their old station wagon. They were obviously searching for something. His mouth had fallen open when he glimpsed the arsenal in their trunk.

After that, he just trailed them home. Peter already knew the neighborhood. It was a dead end street, and Chris lived in the pale blue Cape Cod style house with the black shutters. There was only one other house on the road, which Peter knew was occupied by Mr. Ronald Straub from the hardware store. The man had sold Peter’s dad a lot of power tools in the last ten years or so.

He watched as their car pulled into the garage, and that was that. Once he knew where Chris was staying, then he could come and go at his own leisure.

Much to Peter’s annoyance, he found out little to nothing about the Argent’s purpose in Beacon Hills; nevertheless, his trips to Chris’ house became a bit of a pattern.

There was something almost cathartic about watching Chris when he was unaware of it. Peter would go later in the evenings, after the pups were asleep and his house had quieted down.

He watched as Chris’ father placed a hand on his shoulder, a little too roughly for Peter’s taste. He watched Chris with his sister; their light and good-natured teasing. He watched Chris’ silhouette through the window as he turned the pages of a large tomb-like book.

And so, on Saturday night, when Chris stumbled across that shifter, Peter just watched him once
again.

He’d never seen a human fight like that before. Quick, deadly movements like the stir of a coiling snake. It was glorious.

It wasn’t until that female… whatever the fuck she was… started clawing at Chris’ throat that Peter reacted. She hadn’t broken the skin, but she’d marked him. He was almost surprised at the outraged cry from the wolf inside him. Peter had seen blood well up beneath the skin, and then he was lunging for her.

Peter told Talia about the female shifter as soon as he got home; he had to. He just left out a few minor details, is all. Namely, Christopher Argent.

He’d given his sister a description, stopping to make corrections as she scribbled the shifters likeness onto a notepad. “Like this?” she had asked, after nearly an hour.

Peter had looked her drawing over with a critical eye, and smirked. “Nah, the eyes are a little closer together.”

Talia simply huffed and smacked him in the back of his head.

Peter hadn’t told Olivia about his daily detours to the Argent residence, either. There was no point. But he told her about the shifter and, of course, that Chris knew he was a werewolf. He had to pound her on the back a little when she inhaled half a milk carton. There had been a lot of flailing and high pitched noises, but he could tell she was relieved. He caught her looking at Chris, more than once, her face all scrunched up and puzzled.

Peter told her what was said between them. Chris wasn’t going to tell his father. His heart had told Peter so. Every rock-steady beat of it, and he believed him. Otherwise, he never would have allowed Chris to leave. He would have stopped him. He would have gotten Talia, but he was glad it didn’t come to that.

Peter could tell Olivia had questions. She was curious. By Tuesday morning, she was asking him if her “Chris restrictions” could be lifted. Peter glared daggers at her but allowed it. By the end of the day, she and Chris were back to passing notes again.

Olivia happily informed him that Chris asked her if she was a werewolf too. Peter could tell by the echo of amusement in his friend’s eyes that she had laughed in his face. It was a small comfort, but Peter was still irritated.

This forced distance between them apparently didn’t include Olivia, because Chris talked to her. Or wrote to her, at least. Listening to the endless scratch-scratch sound of No. 2 pencil was like being prodded with hot knitting needles. It made all kinds of unpleasant feelings twist around inside him. Peter was jealous. He was self-aware enough to recognize that. It just wasn’t a feeling he’d ever associated with Olivia before.

He wanted to know what they were talking about.

He could make things simple and just ask Livie. She would tell him if he asked, but that would mean admitting that it bothered him, and he’d lost enough ground on this already.

It was making the atmosphere in their English class noticeably uncomfortable. Ms. Miles had been handling Peter with kid gloves all week. Understandably so. From an outsider’s perspective, his behavior was all over the place.

After class on Wednesday, she called him back with a “Just a second, Mr. Hale.”
Peter could sense her concern, but she edged around things at first. After a few generic questions about the chapter they were reading, she started talking about his grandmother.

“We missed your Grandma’s oatmeal raisin cookies at the Christmas bake sale this year,” she said, her mouth turning upwards in a sad smile.

He just blinked at her, but she saved him from having to respond by saying, “I know it’s been hard on you.” She sighed. “I just want you to know, if you ever want to talk or anything…”

Peter got lots of comments like that after his grandmother first died, and he detested it. Whenever someone approached him — had the nerve to ask “Are you alright?” — he got this overwhelming urge to just blurt everything out and tell them what was really wrong (like on full moons when he got lost in daydreams of tearing into someone’s ribcage), if only just to see their reaction.

But Peter actually liked Ms. M, so he mustered up the fakest of his fake smiles and said, “Thanks.”

She didn’t really know Peter, very few people did, so she smiled back at him, confident in the belief that she’d offered him some sort of comfort. It was foolish. Humans didn’t understand real loss.

Not to mention, that wasn’t even his most pressing issue at the moment.

After leaving the classroom, he let his feet take him were they wanted to. Chris was at his locker, getting his stuff ready for his next class. Peter peeked his head around the corner and watched him.

Chris knew he was a werewolf. He knew Chris was a hunter. It was all out in the open, no more secrets, and it changed absolutely nothing.

It didn’t change the fact that there were still hunters in Peter’s town. And it didn’t change the fact that there was some unknown shifter running around in the woods eating decaying woodland creatures.

But, most of all, it didn’t change how he felt about Chris.

He would liken the situation to being a child, spying a toy high-up on a shelf — some inaccessible shiny thing — just out of reach. Peter never reacted well to being told “you can’t have,” so that would definitely make things easier. Unfortunately for him, he was dreadful at lying to himself.

There was more to it than that.

He tried to focus on the shifter. Talia had been unable to identify her, not yet, anyways — but Chris knew. The Argents had to know what they were hunting.

Peter wasn’t sure if it was his curious nature, or the other thing, that drove him forward, but he crossed the hall and irritably asked, “What was she?”

Chris didn’t even spare him a glance, but Peter could give a fuck less at this point. He stepped further into Chris’ space and just continued talking to the back of his head. “She’s going to be a problem,” he said. “The homicidal ones have a very specific stench to them.” His nose wrinkled up at the memory. Sour, decaying, repulsive. The deer guts stuck under her fingernails hadn’t helped. “Not even the smell of rotting innards could cover that up.”

“You don’t need to worry about it,” Chris said, his voice cold.
Peter ground his teeth together. “I don’t need to worry about it? She’s in my territory. I think I’ll worry about it.” He took a calming breath. “We can work together on this, Chris.” Peter leaned a little closer, his voice lowering. “I’ve got her scent now. I can help you track her.”

Chris glanced back at him then, his face without expression — empty, detached. “Like you ‘tracked’ me?”

“That was for a very singular purpose,” Peter said, and he tried to insert an apology into his tone, but he wasn’t sorry, so he doubted it was successful. “One that’s no longer applicable to our situation.”

“What does that even mean?” Chris said, his eyes flashing with something like life again. There you are.

Peter let his voice soften in a way he hoped wasn’t condescending. “Let me help you.”

“You don’t get told no very often, do you?” Chris asked, a harsh smile twisting his face. “Don’t push me, Peter.”

 ***

Peter had a basketball game on Friday night, but he didn’t mention it to the pack. His dad liked to go to his games, and sometimes his mother. Talia came a lot too. More so before the pups were born.

But his grandmother… she had never missed a game. She would always be there, waving some ridiculous sign, which he claimed to hate but secretly loved. They would all go out for pizza or something, afterwards.

The whole ritual felt pointless now.

Besides, a quiet night on the town seemed a bit unreasonable. Not with all the shit that they were dealing with. The Argents. The random unidentified supernatural creatures. Not to mention, the backlash of his niece dealing with her first shift.

Peter had come home a few times in the last week to find his dad sitting by the koi pond with Laura. He was teaching her meditation. The man tried that one with Peter too, when he first started shifting, but it hadn’t took. Peter always saw it as a waste of time, but maybe it would help with Laura? What the hell did he know?

Either way, he hadn’t mentioned his game to them, but it wasn’t because of any “threat of exposure” concerns or anything. Maybe it should have been, but that hadn’t even occurred to him. Mostly, because he never in a million years thought Chris would be there, sitting on the bleachers with his turncoat best friend.

He was so taken aback that he openly gaped at them for a second. When Olivia saw him looking, she gave him a little thumbs up. She was definitely up to something. Livie could never leave well enough alone; she always had to get involved.

She held up a small piece of notebook paper. Upon closer inspection, he saw “Go Peter!” was written across it in purple sharpie. She was smiling like an idiot. Peter shook his head, his mouth twitching into an answering grin.

Every ounce of amusement was siphoned out of him when he looked over at Chris. To be perfectly honest, Chris looked like he wanted to throw a knife at Peter’s head. He had no idea
what kind of mind games Olivia played to get Chris there, but the status quo didn’t seem to have changed any. He didn’t break eye-contact with Peter when their gazes locked. He might have, a few weeks ago, before the big “werewolf reveal,” which in and of itself was interesting, but at that moment, he was steady as a rock.

Once again, Chris had him feeling at a disadvantage.

Peter could easily manipulate most people. He could distract them with his flash and his flare, twist their heads up with his words, and hide his real motive. Chris, though? He was an unknown variable. Chris’ reactions to things were inconsistent, and that left Peter feeling uncertain in a way he’d never really experienced before.

Just knowing that Chris was watching him was so goddamn distracting that he couldn’t focus on the game. He kept making stupid mistakes. A missed pass here, a slipup there. Blood was probably going to start spewing from Coach’s mouth if he kept screaming like that.

Chris’ eyes never left him. Peter didn’t need to look at him; he could feel it. It was like flames licking across his skin.

With his cornflower blue eyes and perfectly shaped mouth. The fucker.

Peter couldn’t sense half of the things he’d been picking up from Chris two weeks ago. His heartbeat was steadier. His emotions less erratic, more controlled. Peter didn’t know if there was some kind of hunter conditioning that taught them to regulate those things, but the impressions he was getting from Chris felt completely different.

Scowling, he threw the ball into the air and watched as it soared right past the hoop. It didn't even hit the backboard.

He clearly heard Chris’ voice from across the gym. “Does he usually suck this bad?"

“Not so much,” Livie responded, the traitor, but her face was twisted into a concerned frown when Peter glanced at her.

Peter heard a scraping sound and looked down in surprise to see his claws descended. Well, shit. He instantly dropped the ball and walked off the court.


Peter took a breath, his claws easily retracting with a little focus, and walked over to him. “I need to take five,” he said.

Coach’s nostrils flared. “You can take two.”

***

Peter paced across the locker room floor, walking from the bench to the window, and then back again.

He had no desire to go back out there. Stalking back over to his locker, he stripped off his shirt and threw it on the bench. He gave a brief thought to the number of suicides Coach was going to make him run for bailing in the middle of a game, but whatever. That was another day’s problem.

When the locker room door swung open, he half expected a red-faced Coach to be standing there. But it wasn’t.
Chris’ eyes danced over him for a moment before he said, “It's called a bakeneko.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. He was a bit surprised Chris had given that up.

He took about a millisecond to gather himself, then Peter picked up his button-down shirt from where it was folded on top of his gym bag and slid his arms through the sleeves. “OK, how do you kill her?” he asked. “Because she seemed a bit unfazed when you plunged a knife into her chest.”

Chris let the door close behind him and walked further into the room. “With iron.”

He nodded, recalling the strange smell in the air after Chris had fired his gun. There had been something different about the bullets. “Iron bullets?” he asked.

“All right. As long as the brain is penetrated,” Chris said, and then paused. Peter watched him glance towards the illuminated Exit sign over the back door, and then to each of the room’s windows. “Why were you following me?”

Peter wasn’t sure if that was a rhetorical question or not, but he felt like they had that pretty well covered already. “I told you. We didn’t know why you were here.”

“And that was up to you to find out? Why?” Chris asked, and the cloying scent of inspection hung in the air like blackberries. “You’re not the alpha.”

The words pulled a surprised laugh out of Peter, but the sudden agitation he felt was startling. “I most certainly am not.”

“Who is, then?”

Peter saw Talia’s face in his head. Her soft brown eyes, and the little dimple in her left cheek that only came out when she really smiled. “I’m not telling you that.”

“How many of you are there?” Chris asked.

What the fuck was this?

Peter scowled. “I’m not telling you that either.”

Chris threw his hands up in the air. “Alright, fine. Tell me why I should trust you?” he asked. “When you won’t even attempt to work with me?”

“How is handing out details about my family working with you, exactly?” Peter asked, turning back to his gym bag and grabbing his jeans. “This would be a mutually beneficial partnership, Christopher,” he added, stripping off his shorts and throwing them on the bench beside his jersey.

Peter stepped into his jeans and pulled up the zipper. The resounding ziiiiip that echoed through the room probably wasn’t as loud as it seemed.

The look on Chris’ face had Peter revisiting his earlier musings of the hunter throwing knives at him. “Chris,” he said, and Peter could hear his teeth grinding together. “And no thanks. I don’t need help from a werewolf.”

The words almost stung, but Peter just smirked and said, “Could have fooled me. That she-kitty almost took your head off the other night.”

Chris shook his head. “Hardly. I didn’t need you. I can handle myself just fine.”
Peter thought back to the show Chris had put on in the woods. Graceful and agile and deadly quick. He was lovely. “Yes, you can,” Peter admitted. “I didn’t hate watching it, if we’re being honest.”

“Stop it.”

Peter growled and drew in a breath, slowly releasing it before speaking. “What now?”

“Stop acting like nothing’s changed!” Chris said, his face lined with strain. “This,” he made a vague back-and-forth gesture between them, “was never going to happen! It couldn’t have happened before and it sure as fuck can’t happen now!”

Peter tilted his head. “Why couldn’t it have happened before?”

Chris took a few rapid breaths, his hands balled up tight into fists. “Why do you ask so many questions?!”

“Because I’m inquisitive,” he said, flippant. “Why couldn’t it have happened before?”

That otherworldly pull Peter felt around Chris was driving him forward again, but Peter hadn’t even realized he was approaching the other boy until he saw him react to it.

A muscle jumped in Chris’ jaw. “It would be foolish on your part to think I’m unarmed right now.”

Peter gave a soft, delighted laugh. “You are a feisty thing,” he said. “Come on, Chris… Tell me why.”

“Well, I hate you. So there’s that,” Chris said, his voice pitched low.

“You don’t,” Peter said, and it was true. There was a connection between them that was undeniable. Chris wanted him, and even if it was only in the most base of ways, as long as that was true, then Peter still had the upper hand. “See, I’m kind of liking this whole ‘no secrets, no lies’ thing we’ve got going on here.” he added, moving closer. “No more holding back. I can call you on things now, can’t I?”

Peter felt like they were back on equal footing again. It was a little salve to his ego, if nothing else. But everything inside him still felt so jumbled. No, that wasn’t right… Frantic.

“Stay the fuck back, Peter, I mean it,” Chris said, but Peter detected the slightest hint of uncertainty in his eyes, a waver in his voice.

It made him want to crow his fucking victory up to the Gods. A few more seconds of Chris’ non-reactions and Peter may have lost his mind. “But you don’t want me to,” he said, taking a heavy breath in through his nose. “I can smell it on you. You must realize that?”

Chris took Peter off guard when he stepped right up to him, leaning forwards until their faces were only inches apart. “You don’t know what I am,” he spat, the words biting and cruel, but Peter had an inkling his disgust was pointed inward. “You think you know me?”

Never one to be cowed by anything, or anyone, he ignored the very obvious warning signs Chris was sending off and dipped his head forward, his eyes lowering to the hunter’s mouth. “Not
nearly as well as I’d like to.”

Chris’ face twisted-up. He placed his hands on Peter’s chest and pushed him backwards. “Fuck you!”

Peter easily used his reflexes to balance himself. No more holding back. “It doesn’t have to be like this,” he said, releasing his breath in a huff.

“No, I’m pretty sure it does.”

“I don’t want to fight you,” Peter said, his voice quiet. “If you don’t believe anything else, believe that.”

The creases at the corners of Chris’ eyes smoothed out. “I told you to stay away from me,” he said, and there was something nearly pleading in the cadence of his words.

Which was downright ridiculous, given the fact that Chris was the architect of this whole encounter. Chris sought him out.

Peter scoffed, sudden irritation slamming into him. “And now we’re back to that again. When you’re the one who went out of their way to come to my game tonight.”

“That wasn’t for-”

He raised his voice a little louder, drowning out whatever explanation Chris was trying to splutter out. “And you’re the one who’s all chummy with my best friend,” he said, his chest heaving.

“You followed me in here — again!” The frantic inside him was as merciless and cruel as the pull of the moon. “With the exception of our five second conversation the other day, I have been staying away from you!”

“What do you want from me?” Chris asked, and he looked so horribly confused that Peter couldn’t help the sympathetic twist he felt in his stomach.

What did he want? In that instant, he wanted to run his knuckles down the side of Chris' face, but honestly, it depended on the moment. “I thought that was pretty well established at this point.”

Chris’ eyes narrowed. “Are you really that crazy?”

“Debatable.”

“Can you shut up for a second?!” Chris’ eyes dropped to the floor, he clenched his fists tightly, again, then flexed his fingers. “I’m not telling Gerard about you,” he said, looking up. “I won’t. But do really think that gives you some kind of anonymity? You want to know what the threat is?” he asked, and Peter could see it; the ghost of so many horrors. It was both terrifying and breathtaking. “There’s your threat. You do not want him to find out about your family.”

The statement hung heavy in the air between them. Inside, his wolf stirred, restless. “So what should we do?”

“Practice a little discretion, for starters. You grew up in a family of werewolves, didn’t you? Don’t you know what it means to keep a low profile?” Chris asked, some of the strain lifting from his voice. “Look, we never stay anywhere for long. As soon as things slow down around here, we’ll leave.” He gave Peter a long, significant look. “It would be helpful to know why this place has become such a hot spot lately.”

Peter took in Chris’ wide eyes, the lines of his shoulders. He looked sincere, and if Chris wasn’t
their enemy, then maybe he could help them. “New alpha,” he said.

“What?”

Peter ran a hand through his hair. “Someone else rose to alpha status. That’s why.”

“Right, alright. That makes sense,” Chris said with a nod. “How long ago?”

“About six months,” he answered. “Something like that causes a ripple. It’s like a supernatural magnet.”

“I know that.” Chris’ brows knitted together. “It doesn’t last long though, right?”

Peter was surprised it had lasted this long. “It should already be fading.”

“There you go then,” Chris said. “We finish up this hunt, then maybe one or two more. Eventually, my father will get bored and we’ll move on. Gerard hates sitting idle.” His eyes became unfocused for a second, as if he was lost in thought. “Now that I know about your pack, I can try to… redirect his attention.”

The frantic settled down to something a little more bearable, and the agonizing fondness Peter felt, in that moment, had his face stretching into a rare, genuine smile. “You trying to protect me, Chris?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Chris said, one corner of his mouth quirking upwards.

It made Peter ache.

“And this is why I need to stay away from you?” Peter asked, because he could see that it wasn’t.

He saw the tiniest of cracks in the cast-iron walls Chris built up around himself. And anything that could crack was not impenetrable.

“Part of it,” Chris said, and he didn’t tense up, or look away, or step back. He just stared unflinchingly into Peter’s face.

He could feel a wave of something undefinable and soft coming from Chris. It just barely missed the mark of being labeled as affection, but it was close. Close enough that Peter was encouraged to take a cautious step forward. “What’s the other part?”

Chris sighed and raised a hand. “Let it go, Peter,” he said, and the warning in his tone was unmistakable. “I’m a threat to you. Maybe not in the way you first thought, but I am a threat.” He was moving backwards, towards the door, and for the first time since this whole thing started, Peter heard his heartbeat falter. “Just let it go.”

The only thing he could think, as the hunter disappeared through the doorway, was how tired he was of watching Chris walk away from him.

***

Peter found Talia in their father’s study. She was sitting at the desk, her nose buried in one of Nan’s more impressively large encyclopedias. He cleared his throat. “A bakeneko.”

Talia glanced up at him. “Huh?”

“The female shifter.”
She gently closed the book and stood. “Did you find her in Nan’s records? Because I couldn’t find anything.”

“No, I couldn’t find anything either,” he said. “I did some research at school.”

“At… school? What like at the library?” Talia asked, her forehead puckering in a little frown.

Peter gave an amused hum. “You’d be surprised at the books in that library,” he said, focusing on the truth in the statement. That place had far too much supernatural-esque material to be normal.

Talia mirrored his bemused expression, shaking her head a little before asking, “Alright, what else did you find out?”

Peter walked over to the desk, running his finger along the spine of one of the books piled there. There were dozens. Talia must have been in there all day. “How to kill her,” he said. “An iron pipe through the head should do it.”

Talia’s face turned to stone. “There’s no guarantee we have to kill anyone, Peter.”

“It’s still good to know,” he said, just barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

She stared hard at him for a moment. “Still good to know.”

Talia turned suddenly and crossed the room to their father’s wing backed chair, grabbing her navy-blue Peacoat. “Well done,” she said, pushing her arms into her coat sleeves. “Would you mind helping out with Laura and Derek’s bedtime routines tonight? Steven and I should go out and—”

The bottom dropped out of Peter’s stomach. “No.”

Talia paused her hurried movements, her eyebrows raising. “What do you mean no? This needs to be addressed.”

“What about the Argents? Odds are they’re already on the hunt, right?” he asked, keeping his voice light. “Maybe we should just… wait it out? See if they handle it?”

“This is our territory.” Blood-red filled his sister’s eyes. “It’s my job to handle it.”

“I know, but—”

“I’ll be careful, kiddo. Okay?” she said, brushing a few stray locks of hair from his forehead. “You’ll help mom with the pups?”

He sighed. “Of course.”

Talia smiled at him, straightening the collar of his shirt, then patted him on his chest.

Peter lightly grabbed onto her wrist before she could turn to leave. “Wait, Tal. If the Argents are out there tonight, just, don’t engage them or anything.” Wait, Tal. If the Argents are out there tonight, just, don’t engage them or anything.” There’s your threat, Chris’ voice said in his head. Peter shivered. “Just leave.”

Talia’s eyes flit across his face, feeling everything inside him like the fear was her own. “I promise,” she said.

Peter didn’t resist when she pulled out of his grip, but the sound of the door closing behind her felt as loud as a gunshot.
**UPDATE:** OK guys, I've given it a lot of thought, and I've decided that I'm not going to post anymore chapters until the story is finished. I feel like I'll complete this sooner if I'm focusing on the story as a whole, as opposed to one chapter at a time. So, needless to say, that means I won't be updating for a while. You guys can always message me [here](#) and ask questions about updates, my progress, etc. Once the story is fully written, I plan on posting one chapter a day. Thanks for sticking with me, and I promise I'm going to work my ass off to get this fic completed as soon as I can. I love you all!!
December 21st was the last day of school before Christmas break. Chris was slammed with make-up assignments, as he suspected he would be, but Olivia offered to help get him back on track.

Before Chris left his house that morning, he had told Gerard he was going to the library after school to research. His father simply waved a hand at him, completely uninterested. Gerard could care less at the moment. Chris was just a weapon his father assembled and dissembled as he saw fit. The man could go from controlling every single step Chris took, to not even directly speaking to him for days. It was inconsistent and unsettling. The unpredictability of it left Chris in a constant state of awareness; he never knew what to expect.

Gerard had the focus of an M-24 Sniper Rifle. And as of late, he only had eyes for Katie. They had been running drills or practicing with weapons almost every day for the last two weeks. Chris couldn’t say he was thrilled about it, but it gave him a little reprieve from being Gerard’s primary focus.

So when Olivia invited him over to her house, he saw no reason to refuse her. He did need to the help, after all.

Things were still strange between them.

After his encounter with Peter in the woods, Chris wasn’t exactly shocked when she reached out to him; she was painfully forward. At first, he had every intention of shutting things down between them, but it was the following through part where he was having a little trouble. Olivia with her big, earnest eyes. It was hard to say no to her.

Maybe it was about keeping an eye on Peter? A preliminary survey to gain information… or something?

In the past, there had been werewolves which were deemed harmless and released. Nous chassons ceux qui nous chassent. Chris knew they weren't all killers.

The thing of it was, he never had an opportunity to observe a wolf with no… predispositions? He hadn’t known Peter was a werewolf. Maybe on some level he recognized the signs but he hadn’t been consciously aware of it. Chris had the chance to get to know him first, and that was something he’d never experienced before.

Gerard had given him assignments that required him to monitor a wolf over several weeks (reconnaissance), getting to know their habits, schedules, behaviors. But never like this.

Chris had watched Peter with his overconfidence and his intelligent eyes. His brazen humor and his self-importance. But Chris had seen a kindness there, too, with Olivia and how blatantly he adored her. Even with Chris.

Peter had that protective nature which was so common among wolves as well. Chris saw that in the woods at the perceived threat to his family. Peter's eyes had been so very intense, but when weren’t they? Chris hadn’t realized it, but he’d never really looked at a werewolf and saw them as a person, someone with idiosyncrasies and emotions that were complex and mattered. It was a foreign concept to him.
That’s not what he had been taught.

To be honest, he didn’t know what his motivation was. His head was all twisted up and he was clueless on how to sort through any of it.

Olivia had ulterior motives, obviously. He wasn’t an idiot. But he had allowed her to be puppet master to his marionette for a while. He let her talk him into going to Peter’s game because he wanted to force an interaction between them. At least on some level.

Something about being around Peter made him feel more… awake, which even in his own head sounded stupid, but it was the only way he could think of to describe it.

So he accepted Olivia’s “let me help you with homework” invitation, but once they left the safety net of school property, he felt the unavoidable strain of their situation.

It had been more or less silent the entire time; he was unsure of her. At that point, he was unsure of himself, but he could tell by her behavior that she was picking up on it.

Olivia was a few paces in front of him. Chris kept falling back a bit because he didn’t want her walking behind him, which was beyond ridiculous. He was actually aware of that. This went on for about five minutes before she stopped.

She threw her hands up in the air and spun back around. “OK, that’s it, look…” She took a slow breath. “I like you. And that’s kind of a weird thing for me.”

Chris frowned. “What? That you like me?”

“I generally think the human race as a whole is pretty overrated,” she said, “but I’m not gonna stand here and pretend I don’t see your side-eyed little looks, alright?” She pointed a finger at him. “We’re either friends or we’re not, but don’t waste my time. No games.”

“No games, huh? Not sure how you’ve lasted so long with Peter, then.”

The soft edges of her face transformed into something sharp and unforgiving, like a switchblade. “Peter is my family. If that somehow got lost in translation then we need to clear things up right now.”

“No, it’s been clear,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by that. I’m sorry.”

Olivia gave him a hard, searching look. “I won’t even pretend to get your situation, Chris. On some level, I guess I knew there were hunters. Peter’s probably mentioned it before but it didn’t really register.” Her mouth turned down. “Peter talks about a lot of things, it’s kind of hard to keep track of all of it,” she added, words rushed. “The point is, I see why everyone’s wiggin’ out a little.” Olivia lifted her hand to rest it on his arm. He tensed up; he couldn’t help it. She pursed her lips and dropped it back to her side instead. “I just hope you realize that–”

Chris sighed, grabbing her hand and placing it on his shoulder. He really did like her. “Please don’t start listing off Peter’s positive traits again,” he said, trying to keep things light. “I think I’ve got it.”

Olivia’s face lit up. “Wicked.” She pointed to a large white house at the end of the street. “That one’s mine.”

***

The Goodro home had a lot of wicker; that was honestly his first thought. Wicker chairs, wicker
couches, wicker patio furniture. When they entered the house, Olivia’s mother was stuffing a large stack of papers into a leather briefcase. She was well dressed. Nice clothes, nice shoes. Chris never asked Olivia what her mother did, but she was obviously a business woman of some kind.

The woman’s hair was the same shade of red as her daughter’s. She also had the same fair complexion and, well, height. Olivia was five-foot-nothing, which was clearly something she inherited from her mother. Their eyes were different, though. Olivia’s were a darker blue, whereas her mother’s eyes were a deep hazel.

“Oh hey, Chicken,” the woman said, not looking up from where she was struggling with the zipper on her briefcase. “Glad you’re home. I’m just about to head out. There’s some lasagna wrapped up for you in the fridge.” She made a triumphant sound when the bag zipped shut. “We can do breakfast tomorrow, but-

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“We have company,” Olivia said.

The woman’s eyes rose. “Oh, sorry,” she said, clearly taken aback. She recovered quickly. “Hi, I’m Cindy. Sorry to ramble at you like that, I didn’t see you there.”

She held out a hand.

Chris stepped forward, taking her hand in his. “No problem at all. I’m Chris Argent. It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Goodro.”

Mrs. Goodro’s eyes sparkled. “Uh-oh, you’re one of those.” She winked at him. “Cindy will do just fine, kid. We don’t do formalities in this house.”

Chris’ mouth curved upwards.

“Ma!” Olivia grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him back a step. “Can you just not?”

The woman retrieved her discarded briefcase off the table. “It was nice to meet you, Chris Argent.”

“You too, Ms. Cindy.”

“Ha! Alright then, I’ll take it.” She turned to Olivia, pressing a quick kiss to her daughter’s cheek. “See you in the morning, Chicken.”

“With waffles?” Olivia asked.

Ms. Cindy gave her a thumbs up as she made her way out the front door.

***

They spend the next few hours sitting at Olivia’s kitchen table. The kitchen was full of bright colors: pictures, and plants, and a florescent green table cloth. There was also one of those big wooden spoon and fork things crisscrossed on the wall over the counter.

They went through all of his makeup work, Olivia giving him a quick rundown of what he had missed. Although, Chris ended up spending nearly twenty minutes teaching her how to properly calculate percentages. He was good with numbers; it was part of the memory thing.
Olivia talked the entire time. Little jokes, random offhanded comments, and stories. Lots and lots of stories.

Almost all of them included Peter.

Chris didn’t think she was trying to mess with his head or anything by continuing to mention him. It wasn’t intentional. It was obvious the two had been close friends since forever.

*Peter is my family.*

He wasn’t lying when he said he understood that.

Chris would have been content to stay there all night, if he could, but Katie or no, if he didn’t show his face back at the house soon, Gerard was bound to notice. They were still on a hunt.

“I should get going,” he said, resigned.

Olivia glanced up from her chemistry book. “Awe, why? It’s only six-thirty. What time is your curfew?”

“I don’t really have one, but we’re–” He cut himself off, on instinct. But he didn’t need to lie her anymore. “We’re in the middle of hunt right now.”

Olivia gave a jerky nod. “Right…” she said, voice slightly guarded. “Well, did you tell your dad you wouldn’t be home after school?”

“Of course. I told him I was going to the library. He’s been real busy with my sister, though. Training stuff.”

“Training stuff?” Olivia echoed, dubious. Her face scrunched up. “Didn’t you say your sister was like six?”

Chris raised an eyebrow. “She’s seven. What does that matter?”

Olivia’s eyes widened a little, but she just shook her head. “Nothing, forget it,” she said, closing her book and rising to her feet. “Come on, I’ll walk you.”

“That’s not necessary, thanks.”

“Why not?” she asked. “You live down by Ridgewood Avenue, right?”

“Right.”

“Perfect! ‘Cause I’m going to Peter’s house, so I can cut through the woods over there by the–” She caught her lip between her teeth.

Chris sighed. “If I wanted his address, all I’d have to do is break into the school’s files.”

The easy atmosphere of the last several hours vaporized in an instant, like steam from a skillet.

Olivia grabbed her knitted hat from the counter and put it on. “Wicked, thanks. That’s totally reassuring,” she said. “I don’t–” She pulled the hat down over her eyes with a groan. “I don’t even know what it means to… do what you do. A hunter? So, what, does that mean you kill people? Peter says it’s not really like that but I have no friggin’ idea.”

“No,” he said, trying not to take offence. “We have a code. I’ve never hurt anyone that didn’t hurt someone else first. We only hunt killers.”
Olivia leveled him with a hard look. “The Hales don’t hurt people.”

“So I’ve heard,” he said, pushing his chair back from the table.

*My family has lived here peacefully for over a century,* Peter had told him.

Chris knew it was true. The Hales didn’t hurt people.

***

The walk back was quiet but not uncomfortable. Olivia said she’d walk him halfway, but they were sticking close to the tree line of the woods. Peter’s family must live on the preserve somewhere.

Most of the werewolf packs he encountered stayed someplace cutoff and secluded. No prying eyes, no questions. Chris had already assumed that’s where the Hale pack lived. The location made sense, tactically.

But Olivia was walking him towards their house, or somewhere in the direction of their house, at least. She was trusting him with that. Personally, he struggled with the concept of trusting anyone. There were a few people he held close to his heart, but he couldn’t even say he trusted them fully. Even his baby sister would serve him up to Gerard on a platter if she felt like it was for his own good. But **Olivia** was trusting him, and it wasn’t misplaced.

He didn’t want to hurt Peter.

They walked along at an unhurried pace. The sun was setting but it wasn’t dark yet, the sky still held streaks of pink and orange. Olivia had an overnight bag slung over her shoulder. She paused every so often to kick at a stray rock or step over a crack in the road, but they didn’t talk. It was the longest the two of them had ever shared each other’s company in silence.

The air around them was easy, peaceful, and he was attuned enough into that to feel the moment things shifted.

As soon as he felt it, a prickle at the back of his neck, he dropped his backpack, loosening the knife strapped to his forearm and spun around.

It was the bakeneko.

It went straight for Chris, thankfully, bypassing Olivia completely and crashing right into him instead. As it threw him to the ground, he tried to rotate to save himself from the impact but it was so fast. Chris’ back collided with the asphalt, his head smacking back against concrete hard enough to dizzy him. He fought through the fog of it, letting instinct move his body until his wits came back.

It had him pinned. He slashed and stabbed at it with his knife, knowing it was useless. He might as well spit at the fucking thing.

Chris lost track of Olivia when the bakeneko took him to the ground. Looking up though, he glimpsed her over its shoulder, wielding a large tree branch like a baseball bat. **No, no, no.** He wanted to signal her to stop, but the bakeneko was trying to rip his throat out. He slammed his fist into its ribs over and over, until he felt a snap. Seconds later, Olivia brought the tree branch down hard on its head, like a spike maul on a railroad spike. It snarled at her, but didn’t turn.

Chris reached for the gun tucked into the back of his jeans.
It wasn’t there. “Ah, shit.”

He had other guns on him, but that one was loaded with iron bullets. It must have slid out when he fell to the ground.

Chris kicked upwards, pushing the creature away from him with all his strength. Olivia swung her branch again, this time catching the thing in its temple. With a roar, the bakeneko finally turned on her. The moment the pressure lifted off his chest, Chris was scrambling backwards, eyes darting across the ground until he found it.

_There._

The gun had only slid a few feet. Olivia must have literally stepped right over it to get to them.

Chris sprung up onto the balls of his feet, rolling forward and snatching the gun in one fluid motion. But he couldn’t get a clear shot. When he rolled off to the side, he positioned it so Olivia was _between_ him and the creature.

“Move! Now! Get down!”

But Olivia just stood there, clutching the tree branch for dear life. She was scared, he could see it, and she couldn’t react quickly enough.

Not willing to let the opportunity pass, he fired anyway, wide, the bullets passing harmlessly by Olivia and embedding themselves in the bakeneko’s shoulder. The creature howled out in something like genuine distress. Chris was covered in the things blood, but those wounds had healed as soon as he made them. This time, he saw something thick and black well up where the bullets had struck flesh. Chris’ face twisted into a wild grin.

_I’ve got you now._

Olivia dropped to the ground. But just like before, the bakeneko disappeared in a flurry of streaks and blur. It moved so much faster than any werewolf he had ever hunted.

“This fucking thing,” he growled under his breath. At least he knew the bullets worked.

He looked off in the direction it disappeared, for a moment, until he was satisfied it wasn’t going to double back on them. Then he turned to Olivia. She was sitting on the ground, dazed, her tree branch resting on top of her raised knees.

Chris tucked his gun back into the waistband of his jeans and walked over to her. “Olivia? Are you alright?”

She took his hand, letting him pull her to her feet. “Whoa, yeah. I’m… holy shit.” She touched the side of Chris’ head. It smarted a little. “Are you alright?”

Chris gently ran a hand along the area where his head had struck the pavement. Blood coated his fingertips when he pulled his hand away. It was nothing, though: a cut.

“I’m fine. Head wounds bleed a lot, it’s nothing to worry about.”

Olivia didn’t look like she believed him, but she dropped it.

“Did you not see the gun?” he asked.

“No, I saw it. I just…” she trailed off, shrugging. “Guns kind of freak me out.”
Chris’ mouth twitched. “So you armed yourself with a tree branch instead?”

She shrugged again.

_Fair enough._

“Not that I’m ungrateful,” he said, “but you could have –”

He stopped, thinking about it for a minute. The bakeneko had a lock on her scent now, so it might target her when she was alone.

Shaking his head, Chris bent down, grabbing the gun stashed in his left boot. He held it out to her. “Here.”

She raised her hands, palms out. “No, I don’t like guns, Chris,” she said, backing away like he was trying to hand her an explosive.

“That’s even more reason why you should take it,” he said. “Letting fear control you puts you at risk.”

Olivia shook her head. “I’ll just tell Peter about it.”

“And you should,” he said. “But you can’t rely on other people to protect you.” Chris placed the weapon in her hand, closing her fingers around it. “Take it.”

Her mouth pressed into a thin line, but she relented. She cradled the gun awkwardly. “I wouldn’t even know what to do with this. I don’t know how to use it.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll show you how,” Chris said, his thoughts elsewhere.

He and Gerard had been tracking the bakeneko for weeks. Chris had maps and charts and hunting patterns hung up all over the basement wall. But even after all their research, he still couldn’t narrow down an exact location. And yet this thing had found him, easily.

The bakeneko had an advantage over him, but only one. It was able to track him by _scent._ Chris couldn’t allow that, not when he had a way to even the playing field.

He looked into Olivia’s eyes, decision made. “Can you get a message to Peter for me?”

Chapter End Notes

My loves!!! I’m back! More or less. I had intended to finish the entire story before I started posting again, but I experienced a really horrible tragedy in my personal life and it threw everything off for me. Even still, the story is about 75% completed right now. I can’t post everything at once like I wanted to, but I can give you guys something. You’ve waited long enough! I actually plan to post a second chapter later tonight, or tomorrow night, and then I will begin posting sporadically (but at least once a week) as I finish editing the chapters. Thank you so much to those of you who have stuck with me through this. Your support means everything!! Love to love ya, my darlings!

**NEXT CHAPTER:** Christmas shenanigans with the Hale pack, and Peter and
Chris' first hunt together...
Chapter 14

It was December 25, 1990.

And just like the previous year, Peter was ripped from a blissfully dreamless sleep by a very excited werewolf pup diving into his bed.

Peter harrumphed a bit, but he couldn’t help but smile at the cheesy grin stretched across his nephew’s face.

“It’s my birthday!” Derek announced, bouncing up-and-down on his knees. He held up three fingers. “Now I’m this many.”

Peter squinted, eyes still adjusting to the light. “I know! Happy Birthday.”

It was Derek’s birthday but also Christmas, meaning the entire household would already be awake and bustling. Someone was cooking breakfast downstairs — he could smell it — and from the telltale overdone aroma that clung to the air, he’d wager a guess it was his sister.

Peter turned to the clock on his bedside table — 6 a.m. — then stood up, grabbing a t-shirt out of his dresser and pulling it over his head. “Let’s go see how badly your momma burned the pancakes this morning, shall we?”

Derek hopped down from where he was perched on Peter’s bed. “I like the black ones.”

Peter couldn’t help but pout at the pup’s use of the first person singular. He stopped trying to make Derek regress back to the “Derek want” stage about a week ago, after being thoroughly reprimanded by his mother, father, and sister. Steven was on his side, at least. The other day he heard his brother-in-law prompting Derek to say “chalk-it” instead of “chocolate,” which was another adorable mispronunciation that his nephew had now outgrown.

Peter took Derek by the hand and walked him out into the hallway. “That works out well for you then, pup.”

When they reached the stairs, Peter looked down at his nephew, his eyes flashing mischief.

Derek giggled and nodded his head.

“Ready, set…” Peter whispered, watching as Derek lowered himself into a crouch. “Go!”

Derek launched himself forward like he had springs in his feet; the kid really was getting faster.

Peter snorted, descending the staircase, albeit a bit slower than his pint-sized counterpart. He heard a chorus of both Talia and his mother’s voices from the kitchen. “Peter!”

“Come on, it’s his birthday,” he shouted back. “Let him slide down the banister if he wants to.”

Peter trailed behind Derek, wrinkling his nose when he entered the kitchen. The burnt smell was a lot worse downstairs.

His nephew was already in his booster seat, Steven piling a few pancakes onto a small plastic
plate. Derek’s father was wearing a red and green elf’s hat with jingle bells hanging off the end.

Peter flicked one of the bells as he walked past him. “Nice.”

“Yes, my hat is nice. Thank you, Peter,” Steven said, showing his teeth in that half glower/half amusement way of his. Peter had never seen anyone else replicate it.

“Very nice,” Talia added from the sink, where she was stirring ingredients into a large mixing bowl. “But also sexy.”

Peter made a gagging sound, walking up behind his sister and peering over her shoulder. Talia had a recipe book open on the kitchen counter. She was trying to make their grandmother’s pecan rolls, which was one of Peter’s all-time favorites.

He looked on in horror as she went to pour a heaping cup of salt into the bowl. Reaching out at the last minute, he grabbed onto the sleeve of her bathrobe. “No, Tal, that’s way too much. You’ll ruin it.”

“It’s not too much, Peter,” she said, dismissive. “I followed the recipe, exactly.”

Peter gently moved her hand away when she tried to upend the contents of the cup into the mixing bowl. “Of the two of us, which one spent the most time with Nan in the kitchen?”

Talia sighed. “You.”

“Yes, very good,” Peter said, voice smug and heavy with teasing. “That’s too much.”

With an exaggerated smile, Talia emptied half the salt into the sink. She held the cup out to Peter for his inspection. “Better?”

“Mmhm.”

Peter bumped his nose into her shoulder, *sniff-sniffing* softly before turning away.

He could see the notably large pile of presents through the glass doors that led into the living room. Peter’s instinct was to go investigate — he never really outgrew the urge to shake the presents under the tree — but he crossed the room to where his mother sat instead, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “Merry Christmas.”

“And happy birthday!” Derek added from the table, his words distorted by a mouthful of pancake.

Maeve smiled softly at Peter, grasping his chin between her thumb and forefinger. “Merry Christmas, honey,” she said. “There’s hot chocolate on the stove. I’m surprised you haven’t noticed it already.”

“There’s just enough left for one cup, though,” Steven said, eyebrows drawing together.

Sarah, who was sitting on one of the stools by the kitchen counter, grabbed a coffee mug from the cabinet, filled it to the brim with the last of the hot chocolate and crossed the room to Peter.

*Bless* her.

But just as Peter was reaching for the steaming hot mug, his dad peeked his head in through the backdoor, Laura loitering a few steps behind him. “Oh, good, you’re up,” he said. “I need your help out here.”

Peter groaned.
They had a bonfire out back every Christmas. Later in the day when the sun started setting, the whole pack would sit out there together. Peter Sr. most likely wanted help chopping firewood, which Peter hated with a fucking passion.

“Yeah, alright,” he said, resigned. He took the mug from Sarah and walked towards the door.

His dad clicked his tongue. “No, Peter, leave that. You need both hands right now.”

Peter sighed, placing the mug on the counter. “Yeah, alright.”

“Don’t worry, pal,” Steven said from the table. “I’ll guard it with my life.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I bet.”

***

The rest of the day was more of the same. They opened presents, most of which were for Derek.

But it was Christmas, so Peter got several things too. Sneakers, a new basketball, half a dozen books, two handmade sweaters from his mother, and a new jacket, which was both gorgeous and practical. He may never take it off.

Given how off things had been, the tradition of it was extremely comforting. They ran through the motions of the day, same as always, down to him and his sister fighting over the last of the sweet potatoes.

“State your case,” Peter told her, fork resting protectively over the bowl she was trying to pull away. “Why should you get it?”

“Because,” she said, almost petulant.

“That’s not an answer,” Peter said with a grin, pleased to see some remanence of Talia’s pre-alpha lightheartedness. “Because, why?”

“Because–” She smiled, her eyes flashing red. “I’m the alpha.”

“Ha!” Peter shouted. “Is that going to be your excuse for everything now?” His voice rose an octave, in imitation of his sister. “I’m the alpha. I’m the alpha now.”

After cake, and pie, and other assorted baked goods it was close to 5 o’clock. They lit the pyre that Peter and his dad built and huddled around with sticks for roasting marshmallow. Well, the pups did. Peter stayed back, sitting on one of the wooden benches that Steven had made a few summers before when he decided to try his hand at being a carpenter. His brother-in-law went through these strange, short-lived phases. He would learn and perfect a new trade, then move on. The most recent one was masonry. Steven just randomly re-laid all the bricks in the walkway leading up to their house, in one afternoon.

By the fire, Laura was trying to show Derek how to assemble a s’more, properly.

“Graham cracker, chocolate, then marshmallow,” she instructed, matter-of-fact as ever, but with a patience in her words that was for Derek, and only Derek.

Peter was content watching them. He never cared much for the flickering heat of the bonfire; it made his eyes burn.
Talia was looking at him; she had been stealing glances at him all day. Stepping away from her children, she crossed the yard to his bench, adorned in one of their mother’s soft, knitted sweaters. After a moment or two, she softly tapped a finger to his temple. “What’s going on in that diabolical little head of yours?”

“Nothing,” Peter said, still watching the pups.

Talia nudged him with her foot until he made room for her on the bench. “OK,” she said, “but if you decide maybe there is something...” She gestured down at herself. “Here I am.”

Peter glanced to the back porch, where their grandmother always sat. “I miss her,” he said, knowing the words would ring true because he did miss her. The loss just didn’t spark as brightly any longer.

And that wasn’t what was bothering him at the moment.

Olivia had called him a few days ago, telling him all about her encounter with the bakeneko. She was screechy and panicked and said about two hundred words in under a minute, but Peter considered himself an expert in “Livie-speak” and he had gotten the gist of it. Blood and knives and guns and a lot of other things he wasn’t happy she’d been exposed to. But she also told him something else: Chris was willing to work with him on the hunt.

Since Peter hadn’t been there to read him, it was hard to know what the hunter’s intentions might be. But allegedly, he wanted Peter to help him track it.

“You know, he’s hip to the whole werewolf smell thing. He probably just wants you to sniff her out,” Livie had said.

Chris was starting to make a habit of doing the exact opposite of what Peter expected him to.

He was agitated and interested and frustrated. Not to mention, the full moon was less than a week away. That always made him feel a little reckless. So when Olivia told him Chris wanted to meet as soon as possible, Peter agreed to it. He trusted Livie implicitly and, God-fucking-help-him, but the idea of being with Chris in such a private, uncontrolled situation was far too enticing to refuse.

Peter forced his attention back to his sister, who was gazing at him with sad, solemn eyes. He was manipulating her, but he didn’t feel badly for it.

Talia’s gaze turned to their grandmother's favorite chair. Forever vacant. “I miss her, too.”

***

The very next night, Peter met Chris behind the school by the entrance to the woods. The hunter was dressed the same as always. Jeans and a t-shirt, black combat boots, and his weatherworn, brown leather jacket. A touch out of the ordinary, however, was the weapons he was carrying. Gun in a thigh holster, crossbow slung over his shoulder, solid-black hunting knife strapped to his ankle.

Peter knew Chris always carried something, even in school, but he’d never seen it displayed so brazenly before. If he ever needed visible proof of how volatile their situation was, this was it.

Chris was as much a predator as he was.

That should put him on guard, it really should, but honestly, all he could do was admire how obscenely fucking hot the thigh holster was. It just drew Peter’s attention to how well Chris’ jeans
always fit, which was far from a new observation.

Peter made as much noise as possible as he approached him. Arms scuffing against his sides as he walked, foot landing on a dried-out twig so it would snap under the pressure.

Chris tensed a bit but he didn’t point his gun at him or anything, which Peter chose to see as an improvement.

“I don’t want to talk about anything,” Chris said, readjusting the crossbow on his shoulder.

*Of course you don’t.* Peter held up his right hand, letting his claws extend. “Well, I’m as armed and ready as you are. Do I get to know what we’re doing, or should I just trail behind you and be silent?”

“Are you even capable of being silent?”

Peter grinned. “With the right incentive.”

Chris huffed a breath through his nose. “We’ve narrowed the search area down to about five square miles. Its been circling around the same locations, to hunt.”

Peter made a wry face. “Eating already dead animals is far from hunting. She could at least put a little effort in.”

“To feed, then. And its done a lot more than that. This thing has killed two people already,” Chris said, eyes flashing. “If you’re not going to take this seriously then you’re useless to me.”

*Useless,* huh? Peter almost made a comment on Chris’ ability to sweet-talk a guy, but he was getting well acquainted with the hunter’s stubborn streak. He needed to reel Chris back in, and fast. “Sorry… look, I’m here, aren’t I? I told you this is my territory. If I can help you, then let me help.”

Chris’ eyes drilled into him and Peter didn’t shy away from it. After satiating his ever distrustful nature, the hunter nodded. “From what we’ve seen, it likes to hunt at night. You and I can scout inside the search grid. You find it, I kill it, and then we both go home,” he said, leaning forward on the balls of his feet. “Think you can do that?”

Yes, easily. But Peter’s mind kept circling around a single thought: *Why is he alone?*

“Do you usually do this by yourself?”

“What, hunt?”

“Yes. Alone,” Peter said, confused by the thought of it. Strength in numbers was one of the first things he’d been taught. *We do as pack.* “Shouldn’t your dad be with you? Do hunters not… hunt in numbers?”

Chris shifted his shoulders. “My father sent me to scout the area.”

“By yourself.” Peter felt something sour settle in his stomach. “To search for something that’s already killed people.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Chris said, oddly, like he was reciting someone else’s words. “Are you going to help or not?”

“Yes,” Peter said, “I can do that.”
They spent the next hour walking along the east side of the Beacon River. Peter followed along behind him, comforted that Chris would acquiesce to such a thing. He was starting to trust Peter… or he just didn’t view him as a threat. Either option was progress, in Peter’s opinion.

He could smell the bakeneko, clearly. She had traveled this path more than once. As the earth shifted beneath their feet, the sour-rotten scent of her drifted upwards from the forest floor. But he could detect nothing close. No heartbeats, no impressions. Only echoes.

Every so often, Chris would pause and crouch down, examining a broken stick or tree stump, then start forward again. After the third time he did this, Peter couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“Is there something specific you’re looking for?”

Chris glanced back over his shoulder. “Don’t you see?”

He looked at the muddy trail Chris was inspecting. Peter’s mouth turned down. “See what now?”

Chris gave him an almost fond look, turning his body so Peter could see the trail beneath him. “Look, see this.” He ran his hand across a slightly raised pattern in the trail. “And this,” he added, gesturing to a flattened area in the center. “Something ran through here. Then it dragged something else out.”

Peter tilted his head, but he only saw dirt, no matter how hard he looked. “Why do you need me again?”

Chris laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

God, he was adorable.

Peter smiled softly back at him. He was besotted. He was utterly besotted. He wasn’t even trying to deny it at this point.

Too much of Peter’s admiration must have shown on his face, because Chris shook himself and rose to his feet again.

The hunter cleared his throat. “These tracks are fresh. The way they’re spaced out tells me it was something walking on two feet. We should keep moving.”

“Excellent,” Peter dryly said. “You don’t need my permission. I’m just the blood hound, right?”

Chris huffed out an amused breath but kept his eyes focused on the path ahead of them. He likes me, Peter thought, delighted by how hard Chris was trying to fight it.

He decided to redirect the conversation back to what was becoming their neutral ground: Olivia.

“So… Livie says you want to teach her how to shoot. Good luck with that.”

Chris glanced over at him. They were walking side-by-side now. “What do you mean?”

“She hates guns,” Peter said, letting their shoulders brush together. “She won’t even go near my three-year-old nephew’s Nerf gun. Not after what happened with her dad, you know?”

It took Peter about two seconds to remember Chris didn’t know about that, but the damage was already done. Chris didn’t immediately pounce on it though, so Peter gave him points for restraint.
After nearly a minute, he asked, “What did happen to her father?”

Peter was so accustomed to Livie’s dad being the town’s boogeyman that he didn’t know if telling Chris was a break of confidence or not. But then again… what was it that Chris had said? *Tell me why I should trust you… when you won’t even attempt to work with me?*

Yes, he would give him this. Better he heard the actual story from Peter than whatever fucked up version he would hear at school.

“He was sick,” Peter said.

Chris frowned. “What do you mean sick? Like cancer?”

“No, I mean,” Peter pointed a finger to the side of his head, “he was sick.”

Chris gave him a curious look.

“You know that little antique shop downtown, Lillian’s?” Peter waited until Chris nodded his head. “It used to be a breakfast place called Crystal Springs. They had the best pancakes in the state apparently. I never actually went there. It was long closed by the time I was… allowed to go places.”

Chris held up his hand — *stop* — leaning down to peer at a zigzag groove in the low-hanging limb of a sycamore tree. But he straightened back up, like before, and turned to Peter again.

Peter carried on like there was no interruption “Livie’s dad used to go,” he said, his mouth twitching into a bittersweet smile. Olivia loved to tell stories about her dad. “She says he would be there every morning at 7:15, like clockwork. He always ordered the same thing, too. Eggs over medium. Whatever the hell that means.”

“So what happened?”

“He did a few stints in our local nuthouse over the years, but he held up appearances most of the time,” Peter said. “Liv told me he spent most of his bad days at this cabin their family owns so he could write.”

Chris’ eyebrows drew together. “Write?”

“He was a writer,” Peter said, his ironic tone lost on Chris. “There’s a few of his books in our library. I don’t think the school realizes. He wrote under a pseudonym, so…”

“So he would write at their cabin?”

“Not always. On one of his bad days, he went to Crystal Springs instead. He got his eggs and sat at his usual table. It was no different than any other day,” Peter said. “Until he took out a gun and killed every person in there.”

Chris’ face did that thing it did. The thing where all his emotions drained away in a fucking millisecond. “Did he go to prison?”

“No. He killed himself right after.”

“How many people?” Chris asked.

“Seven,” Peter said. “Two of them were under ten.”

“That’s why people call her a… freak.” Chris struggled over the word, like it was rancid in his
Peter felt several impressions at once: anger, resentment, compassion. Sudden and swift and powerful, like waves crashing against the rocks. It was a feeling he could relate to, and having someone besides him react so strongly in Olivia’s defense was... completely alien, but not unwelcome.

“Maybe they think you can inherit the homicidal gene. Who cares?” Peter said, years of distain making his voice sharp. “They’re sheep.”

“But not you?”

“No, Christopher.” Peter let just a touch of the predator inside him rise to the surface. “I’m a wolf.”

He half expected Chris to recoil at the reminder. But the hunter just looked at him like he was the most perplexing thing he’d ever seen before, like he couldn’t quite puzzle him out.

Peter understood the feeling.

They had stopped walking in a small clearing by the river, the moon’s light reflecting off the surface of the water. The air between them felt like static. As usual.

Chris took a breath and his lips parted, drawing Peter’s attention. The hunter’s eyes looked brighter at night, he noticed. The planes and angles of his face sharper, like he belonged out there. Like calls to like.

Without thought, Peter reached out, touching Chris’ face with the back of his hand. His thumb brushed over the hunter’s lower lip. He was surprised when Chris leaned forward, his emotions shifting in a way Peter recognized as him becoming agreeable.

There was a high probability that Chris was going to smack the shit out of him, or shoot him, more likely, but Peter wanted to bridge the gap between them, to taste him again.

He was so focused on the uneven rhythm of Chris’ breathing that he almost didn’t hear it. A third heartbeat, the sound of bare feet — agile and quick — traveling at a high speed.

Peter’s eyes shifted gold, on instinct. “I hear her,” he said, stepping back.

Chris was all business again in seconds. “Which direction?” He pulled out a gun that was tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

Peter pointed off to their left, through a thicket of bushes. “There.”

“Alright, be ready. It comes up fast.”

“You be ready,” Peter said. “Try not to miss this time.”

Chris cocked his gun, one corner of his mouth curving upwards. “I don’t miss.”

Peter felt a little shiver of anticipation. He rarely came across situations that allowed him to exert himself like this. There was no violence, only restraint. Restraint, restraint, restraint. But the full moon was close enough now that he wanted to tear his claws through flesh. A part of him always wanted that.

The bakeneko gave a high-pitched call before it crashed through the bushes. It was a strange
sound. Not so much a growl as a screech, almost like a hawk.

He could scent bloodlust, and rage. There was no doubt in his mind that she meant to kill them.

Peter let himself fully shift. He lowered down into a crouch, and growled. The shifter hissed back at him, her eyes sharp. She came at them quickly but before he could spring forward, Chris was firing shots off beside him. One struck her in the stomach, two more in the chest. She staggered a bit, but didn’t stop.

Peter growled again. “Shoot her in the head!”

“I only have two of those rounds left. We need to slow her down first!”

At his voice, the bakeneko’s eyes turned to Chris. She let out another of those birdlike cries before she leapt at him.

Peter pushed off with his feet and lunged forward to meet her, their body’s crashing together midair. They rolled around on the ground for a moment. The push and pull of it made something spur to life inside him. Peter’s claws tore a hole in her throat, but it closed right up, so he dug them into her ribcage. Her teeth snapped at him, catching him in his right shoulder.

Chris was shouting. “Hold on to it! Hold it!”

The shifter was fast, but Peter was stronger. She couldn’t get away from him once he got his hands on her. Peter hoisted her up, caught her wrists in his hands and pulled them across her chest. She hissed and spit and struggled in his hold. It took some effort, but he held on to her.

Her cries turned panicked but Peter didn’t care. She killed people, she killed in his territory, she attacked Olivia. She tried to kill Chris.

She needed to die.

Chris crossed over to them and pulled a second gun from his holster. Peter leaned to the side a bit, angling his body away from hers. The bakeneko gave a sharp and sudden kick, her foot striking Chris square in the face. Peter tightened his hold until he felt her bones splinter.

Without hesitation, Chris pressed the gun between her eyes and fired, twice. The bakeneko’s body jerked and she cried out, shrill and desperate, like the last song of a dying rabbit. Peter loosened his grip when he felt the body go limp beneath his hands and she dropped to the ground. Dark veins stretched across her ashen face, squirming under the skin. Within seconds she began to liquefy, the body transforming into a thick, blood-like substance that was black as a raven’s wing. It absorbed into the ground until there was nothing left of her at all.

Chris made a soft noise in his throat. “Huh. That works,” he said, his eyes full of dark amusement. “No messy cleanup.”

Peter said nothing, could say nothing; he just stood there, chest heaving, fingers twitching at his sides. He was able to drop the shift, but his eyes still burned gold. He couldn’t shake it. The adrenaline surging through him was making his wolf pace and shiver and wine. It was too close to the full moon, and he had too much pent up frustration. Allowing himself to give in to an instinct like that was such a sweet release.

He didn’t want it to stop.

It didn’t take Chris long to notice Peter’s disheveled state; he was quick on the uptake. He was such a lovely thing.
Peter looked to Chris’ face. He had blood on his mouth — just a touch of it.

*Lovely, lovely, lovely.*

“If I kiss you,” Peter said, rough and unsteady. Was that really his voice? “Will you shoot me?”

Chris’ heartbeat jumped like a needle on an old vinyl record. “I don’t know.”

Peter’s reservations from earlier were gone. He wasn’t sure how it happened, exactly, but one moment he was watching Chris from a few paces away and the next his hands were fisted in the hunter’s hair, his teeth scraping over Chris’ bottom lip.

Chris stood frozen, hands held out to the side — but only for a moment, then he was all over Peter. His hands ran up Peter’s chest and over his shoulders. Tugging and twisting and pulling.

*Zero to 60,* Peter thought. *Nothing or everything.*

Chris groaned into his mouth, yanking Peter so hard by the collar that their teeth knocked together. He tasted like blood and raw honey. Peter ran the back of his hand down the side of Chris’ face, feather light. A sharp contrast to how violently their bodies were crashing against each other.

He slid his knee between Chris’ legs, without thought. He hadn’t done it on purpose, but Chris rocked his hips into the slight pressure. Peter hissed, pulling back from Chris’ mouth.

Just… *yes*, he could get on board with that. Peter lightly pushed his knee forward again, deliberately this time. Chris made a soft “*uh*” sound in the back of his throat. Peter grabbed onto Chris’ jacket and pulled him forward so their chests were pressed together. He brought his lips to the hunter’s neck, trailing light kisses at first, then letting his teeth nip softly against the skin. Chris fisted a hand in Peter’s hair and pulled his head back.

Peter just looked at him. Chris’ eyes were half-lidded with pupils blown wide and, for once, he didn’t look like he wanted to run. He didn’t look like he was going to tell Peter to stop, either.

He wanted to *touch* him; he needed to. The desperation of it was dizzying.

Peter’s fingers came to rest just above the hunter’s belt line. He felt Chris’ stomach tighten. “Can I?” Peter asked, and his voice was low, pleading. His fingertips dipped beneath the waistband of Chris’ jeans. “Can I?”

Chris didn’t say anything. But after a second, he gave a quick nod of his head.

*Good enough.*

Peter walked him backwards, towards the tree behind them, and he let Peter push him back against it. His fingers made quick work of Chris’ belt buckle, unfastening it and unsnapping his jeans. Peter let his hand drift lower, settling it around the base of the hunter’s cock. Chris made that noise again, his head falling forward to rest on Peter’s shoulder.

Peter hummed his approval.

He started off in a slow, steady rhythm. Moving his hand upwards and rubbing his thumb over the head, then sliding his hand back down again. Chris’ breath came in great, quick, uneven gasps. He nuzzled against Peter’s neck, his lips trailing hot and careless kisses along the line of his throat.

Peter moved his hand faster, twisting his wrist. Chris groaned and clutched at Peter’s shoulders, so he repeated the movement again, and then again. And then again.
Chris cried out, his hips bucking into Peter’s hand. “Uh, fuck, *Peter*, fuck.”

Peter held him close, working him hard and fast until Chris was coming over his hand with a soft, muffled cry. Chris slumped against him, his breathing ragged. Peter ran his fingers through Chris’ hair while he gathered himself. The hunter’s heart sounded like it was going to pound out of his chest.

After nearly a minute, Chris’ whole body tensed up. “I have to go.” He put his hand on Peter’s chest.

Peter stepped back and let him pass.

Chris refastened his jeans with unsteady hands and walked towards the river, to his discarded crossbow. The hunter’s usual agility was a little off, he noticed. Chris bent down, grabbing the weapon by the handle and slung it back over his shoulder.

Peter had a persistent, un-seen-to *ache* of his own, but he wasn’t going to press.

Now that his head had cleared, he wasn’t sure if that had been... wise, or not. He most likely made things worse. But fuck… Peter made him come. That just happened. He could still *feel* it, sticky between his fingers. Jesus, fuck. He was paralyzed by it.

Chris was gathering his stuff together and the heavy lines of his shoulders told Peter he was in emergency evacuation mode. He was running away again.

Peter wasn’t going to make a fuss about it, because he finally understood. Things happened between them and Chris would run off to process, but he always circled back around in the end.

Peter could be patient. All the same, he couldn’t leave things completely open ended.

“Christopher, wait,” he called after him, watching as Chris halted his steps and glanced back. He was so startled by Chris’ response to the name that he found himself staring dumbly for several seconds. *Pull yourself together.* Peter took a breath. “Are we good?”

He could see the usual rapid sequence of thoughts on Chris’ face, even at this distance. “Yes,” Chris said, his mouth stretching into a smile that was fucking breathtaking. “We’re good.”

He watched Chris’ retreating back until he disappeared around the corner. Peter felt dazed and blissful and light. But worst of all, he felt hopeful.

Chapter End Notes

So there it is. Our boys are finally making progress! I should have the next chapter up soon, XO.

Please let me know what your thoughts are. Feedback is always appreciated!
They started back to school on a Tuesday.

Chris hadn’t seen or spoken to Peter since the hunt. Olivia called a few times, but it was hard to talk to her when his father was home. Lately, he always seemed to be home. After the third or fourth time Chris had answered the phone to her voice, he told her to stop calling him. Gerard was going to start asking questions if he kept getting phone calls from the same girl.

“Just let me call you,” he’d whispered, rushing to end the call before Gerard came into the kitchen.

“Yeah, yeah, alright. Don’t wig out, Chris.”

So far, he was successful in keeping Olivia’s existence from his father, but Katie intercepted one of her calls once. Her face had twisted up in confusion, then hostility. She’d held the phone out to him, clearly irritated. “It’s some girl.”

Katie was a bit possessive of his attention. She didn’t even like it when Chris spent too much time with their twelve-year-old cousin, Elliot, who was the only child of Chris’ last surviving uncle. The last time they worked a hunt with their uncle, Katie tried to pour dish soap into Elliot’s orange juice while the poor kid was in the bathroom.

At present, though, she hadn’t mentioned Olivia to their father, so he was grateful for that. His little sister could be very temperamental, but she was loyal, to Chris, at least, even though she and Gerard had been attached at the hip lately.

Katie’s training was in full swing: self-defense, weapons training, study material on supernatural creatures, quizzes, exams. It made him strangely reminiscent of their mother. In the beginning, Allison Argent had been the one to teach Chris such things.

Gerard was even letting him work with Katie.

He hated exposing his sister to this world, but honestly, she was fully immersed in it already. Chris remembered the first time his father dragged a beta down to the basement, years ago. Gerard had secured the werewolf’s arms and legs to the wall with chains and “questioned” him. The werewolf had screamed and screamed. Chris recalled glancing up the stairs to see his baby sister watching from the doorway. Katie was always watching.

Chris would much rather be working with her on homework, yes, but he did enjoy teaching her things; she really was a natural. So when he came downstairs one morning to overhear Gerard explaining how to cut between the bones when “breaking a body down for disposal,” he choked down his heartbreak and told himself this was always going to happen.

It was difficult for him to admit, but with no new hunts and Gerard’s focus turned to his sister, he could almost let himself breathe a little.

Gerard was pleased to hear about the bakeneko. He had listened to Chris’ (partial) retelling of the hunt, his eyes rapt and riveted when Chris spoke of the body’s rapid decomposition.

“How interesting,” his father had said. “I wonder why that’s never been documented before.”

Things since then had been fairly quiet. Chris found a good spot in the woods for target practice, far enough from town that a gunshot wouldn’t be overheard, though he still preferred to practice with his crossbow. He went there every day around noon, working for a few hours before heading
home. Chris usually avoided any predictable routines, that’s what he was taught to do, but part of him kept hoping Peter might show up.

He hadn’t. Chris could easily contact him through Olivia, but he wasn’t going to do that.

It’s not like it was the first time anyone ever did that to Chris, but all of his (minimal) past encounters paled in comparison. The whole thing had added up to a lot of cold showers and not a small amount of confusion. It was because it was Peter. He couldn’t deny that. Chris didn’t think he truly grasped how much he wanted him until the werewolf’s fingertips were tucking into his jeans.

He was extremely relieved when Peter had offered, because if he hadn’t, Chris might have done something regrettable, like asked for it. It had been right on the tip of his tongue.

Peter had occupied enough of his thoughts before, but now he could think of nothing else. Chris’ head was full of him.

He tried so hard to convince himself that he first noticed Peter because he was a werewolf, that there was some deeper instinct which made him recognize the signs of a predator. It was complete bullshit, though. It wasn’t Peter’s wolf-like traits that had drawn Chris to him. It were the traits that made him Peter.

He was obnoxious and loud and a little irritating, but Chris liked all that. He liked that Peter was smart (borderline genius, even) and how sarcastic and clever he was. He liked the way it felt when they argued with each other, the thrill of it, and how Peter leveled almost everything with his intensity, his passion. Every time the werewolf walked into a room it felt like the atmosphere shifted to make space for him. It was intoxicating just being around him. His face, his mouth, his hands. It was all too much. Chris didn’t know what to do with such a feeling.

Nevertheless, Christmas break came and went, and he found himself pushing through the double doors of Beacon Hills High once again.

Chris wanted to see him, to talk to him, but he couldn’t help but recognize how risky it might be for them to interact too much at school. It was unlikely his father had anyone looking in on him; there was no reason for that, but it wasn’t impossible. They shouldn’t talk there. It wasn’t safe. Chris could talk to him after school, and he would tell him that when an opportunity presented itself.

He got through first, second and third period without incident. He didn’t even see Peter in the hallway. After his French class, he tried to go the library for lunch but as he walked past the lunchroom, he was caught out by a redhead.

“Chris, c’mere!” Olivia said, bouncing over to him. “Come and sit with us.” She grabbed him by his shirtsleeve, pulling him past the threshold and into the room.

He didn’t need to look to know Peter was sitting at their usual lunch table.

Chris stepped back and shook his head. “I shouldn’t.” He gave a quick glance over her shoulder to the werewolf who was pretending not to listen. “I would. I want to,” Chris said, to Peter, not her, though he held eye contact with her through every word. “But we need to start being careful now.”

At the table, Peter gave an almost imperceptible nod. Chris tried not to visibly react to it.

Olivia bit her lip. “Yeah, alright. That’s, uh, I…” She pushed one of her curls off her forehead. “Actually, no, that sucks,” she said. “But I get it.” She stuck her hand in her lunch bag and pulled
out an apple. “Eat this while you’re hiding out in the library. It’s not good to skip lunch, ya know.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her mouth stretched into a grin. “My mom’s right. That is annoying.”

Chris took the proffered apple and smiled back at her.

He purposely didn’t look in Peter’s direction as he left the lunch room. There were a lot of people in there. Maybe he was being paranoid, but his caution had served him well in the past.

He made his way to English after lunch, which went better than he expected. Before Christmas break, the only thing he wanted to do during English class was smash a chair over Peter’s head, or maybe stab a knife into his kneecap. Now though, he tried to act the same as he did before all that, when he didn’t know Peter was a werewolf. Alright, maybe he toned it down a little bit, but the way he and Peter interacted before was… too much. Chris wanted to paint a picture of normalcy between them, nothing that stood out or attracted attention, or drew suspicion.

They knew each other, yes. They talked in class sometimes, sure. That was all. They weren’t friends, and they weren’t enemies. They just knew each other. Plausible deniability.

Gym went well, too. For once, Peter was letting things happen as they needed to and not trying to push anything.

Mr. King took the class out behind the school; they played football. Two people were elected as team captains. Peter was (as usual) one of them. He actually did choose Chris for his team, but he didn’t choose him first, or last. Olivia played horribly and fell down a lot. Peter laughed at her and responded with his usual glib remarks. It was all very typical and uneventful.

Chris felt like he and Peter were working with each other — in sync — for the first time ever.

At the end of the day, Chris purposely lagged behind. Olivia had mentioned in one of her ill-advised calls to his house that her mother was picking her up from school that day. He also knew Peter walked Olivia home when he didn’t have practice, which meant he would be alone.

The first place Chris looked for him was out behind the school where they had met for the hunt.

Peter was there, leaning back against a tree, backpack lying in the grass at his feet, looking thoroughly unsurprised to see him. He had been waiting.

Chris walked over to him. His feet felt both heavy and light. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he echoed.

Chris gestured to the trail behind them. “Can I walk with you?”

Peter smiled, grabbing his backpack off the ground and brushing the dirt from the bottom of it. “Half way.”

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They were going in circles, Chris realized; he had a great sense of direction. You could drop him anywhere and he would acclimate himself, sooner or later, so he could tell Peter was headed nowhere in particular. They were just walking.
Chris had no obligations at the moment, no hunt, no responsibilities, and no need to rush. It would be so easy to let himself relax… he just couldn’t. Even though they were miles from Chris’ house, a part of him was still waiting for Gerard to appear out of thin air and catch them, because that’s what his father did. He could never relax.

Peter was the exact opposite. There was a lightness in him that Chris couldn’t help but envy. He might be a werewolf, but he was also just a boy from a small town, who was loved by his family and revered by his peers. The trophy display case at their high school might as well be an ode to Peter Hale. All that left its mark. The werewolf had been shaped by his circumstances, but so had Chris. And stability, consistency, love? Chris knew nothing of those things.

Peter hadn’t brought up the hunt yet. He hadn’t brought up the fact that he’d jerked Chris off against a tree, either. He didn’t know if Peter was giving him space on purpose or not, but either way, he appreciated it.

He smiled to himself as he watched Peter sidestep a mud-puddle. Peter liked his expensive things. The werewolf’s shoes probably cost more than Chris’ IMI Desert Eagle.

He was wearing a new jacket too, one of those nice wool ones with the larger buttons. Things like that were pretty insignificant to Chris, usually, but it looked really fucking good on him. He never thought he’d label another guy as “beautiful,” it just didn’t seem to fit in most cases.

Peter was, though. Chris stopped trying to deny that months ago.

“New jacket?” he asked, then mentally kicked himself.

Peter made a pleased sound, pushing his shoulders back, like a peacock displaying its feathers. “Why yes, how nice of you to notice.”

Chris shook his head, not taking the bait. Instead, he asked, “So you live on the preserve?”

Peter’s smile dulled a little. “Nearby.”

“Was that intentional? It’s better to live someplace secluded, right?”

“My family built that house,” Peter said. “I told you we’ve been here for a while.” He slide his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “But yes, there’s less noise out here, less commotion. It’s easier.”

Chris gave a quick nod. It was a lot quieter out there. Living in town with heightened senses would make anyone crazy.

“Is that all?” Peter asked, tilting his head to the side. It was inarguably wolf-like.

“All of what?”

“I was just expecting more questions.”

Chris flashed him a slight smile. “I think you overestimate my interest in you.”

“No,” he said, catching his lip between his teeth. “I don’t think I do.”

Chris shifted uncomfortably under the weight of his stare. He ran a hand down his forearm, feeling the knife there, like a security blanket.

A slight breeze chilled him and he closed the zipper on his jacket. It was a cold day, but not
intolerable. “I like that it doesn’t get so cold here. We lived in Maine last winter and it was miserable.”

“Really, Chris?” Peter let out a bark of laughter. “Are we going to talk about the weather now?”

Sudden heat filled his chest. “Don’t be an asshole, Peter.”

“Right, sorry. Habit. Let’s try that again.” He didn’t look sorry, just amused at Chris’ expense — as usual. “Were you there for a while?”

Chris gave an irritated sigh. “In Maine?”

“Yes.”

“We don’t stay anywhere for long,” he said, his lips pressed in a firm line. “I told you that.”

“How long, generally?”

Chris threw his hands out to the side. “I don’t know.” There wasn’t exactly a set schedule. “A few months, maybe. It depends on the hunt.”

“You’ve already been here for a few months.” Peter’s brows knitted in a little frown. “So you could leave at any time?”

“I rarely get a heads up when we’re leaving, Peter,” he admitted, and he should have felt relief at the prospect of being elsewhere (it was far better for the Hale’s if he left town), but it just made his throat feel tight. “We leave when my father wants us to leave.”

Some small animal scurried through the brush behind them. Peter took advantage of the distraction and looked away. Chris watched as the werewolf’s jaw tightened, and he felt a sudden urge to apologize to him. He wasn’t irritated at all anymore. It was amazing how many different emotions Peter could pull out of him in a single conversation.

“Gerard’s been working with my sister a lot,” Chris told him. “And she doesn’t seem to hate it here, which is rare. Trust me. I think we might stay for a while still.”

“Your sister. Kate, right?”

Chris’ gaze snapped to Peter’s face. “How do you know that?”

“Your family’s a bit infamous, Christopher,” he said, straight-faced. “Or didn’t you realize?”

Chris bit the inside of his cheek, struggling to quell that knee-jerk instinct to protect his sister. Relax, he didn’t mean anything by that.

Peter was quick to catch on to his discomfort. “I have a sister, too,” he offered. “Her name’s Talia.”

He let his shoulders relax a little, recognizing that for what it was: good faith. “She’s your older sister.”

Peter chuckled. “What makes you say that?”

Because you’re spoiled and entitled and kind of a brat, Chris thought. “It’s very obvious to me that you’re the younger sibling.”

Peter’s eyes were bright with humor again. “Yes, my older sister,” he said through a grin.
“Though she acts like she’s my mother most of the time. Talia and my parents can be very like-minded, actually.”

“Are you saying they gang up on you?”

The wolf’s lower lip jutted out in a pout no one over the age of six should attempt. “Unjustly so.”

Chris mouth twiched into a smile. He felt a strange lightness in his steps as they walked. No destination, no purpose. It was peaceful.

“So it’s just the four of you, then?” he asked, without thought.

Peter’s face abruptly closed off, like shutters coming down over his eyes. “There’s a few of us.”

Chris frowned. It took him a second to understand the reaction. Did Peter still think he was… gathering intel? For fuck’s sake, it wasn’t like he was trying to pry details out of him, although it may have come off that way. He wasn’t good at casual conversation. Give him some kind of objective and he would excel at it, but this? He had nothing to offer.

He wracked his brain on how to backpedal.

Peter ran a hand through his hair and turned to reassure him. “No, Chris, it’s fine,” he said, his eyes honest. “You’re not the only one who has no idea what they’re doing, alright? You need to relax a little. It’s not good for your heart.” He looked down at Chris’ chest, his face mildly alarmed, like he could hear Chris’ heart beating, which he could. “Take a vacation or something.”

He didn’t like that Peter could sense so much of what he was feeling. It was troubling, and it made him feel something like panic, but he chose to ignore it. “We already travel a lot. Mexico, Italy, France,” he said. “We hunted a ghoul in Hawaii last summer.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “How about a not-hunt-related destination.”

Chris gave a startled laugh at the irony. In his head, he saw a sudden flash of the previous summer: Malachi Finnegan in his vibrant yellow Hawaiian t-shirt, grouching about the heat and how they never go anyplace “not-hunt-related.”

*If I have to fry my ass on a volcano, I should at least get one afternoon to enjoy the beauty that is the coconut bikini.*

“Yeah, Finn says that too,” Chris said.

“Finn?”

Chris thought about it for a moment, but there was no reason not to tell him. “He’s a friend,” he said, then hastened to correct himself. “My closest friend.” His eyebrows drew together. “He might qualify as my only friend.”

Peter’s mouth turned down. “I resent that.”

“We’re not friends, Peter.”

The werewolf grabbed the sleeve of his jacket, making him stop. “No,” he said, his expression turning serious. “I guess we’re not.”

Peter was holding onto his backpack, his thumb absent-mindedly moving across the strap. The
motion drew Chris’ eyes to his hands, which was probably his intention. The bastard.

The air around them felt thinner all of a sudden, like the two months he and Gerard had spent hunting that pack in Leadville, Colorado.

*High altitude sickness.*

Peter was still clutching his sleeve, so Chris turned his wrist slightly and rested his hand on the werewolf’s forearm. “I’m not sure if we should be seen together,” he said, unsure, still so unsure.

“Seen by who?” Peter asked, his voice both playful and sincere, like he was trying to reassure Chris without being obvious about it. “No one can see us right now.”

Chris had edged closer to him while he was talking; he wasn’t sure how that happened, but Peter made that little humming sound of his, the one he made whenever Chris did something he found favorable.

Peter closed the distance between them and kissed him, just a soft brush of lips against his.

*Not enough. Nowhere near enough.*

Chris slid a hand into the werewolf’s hair and deepened the kiss. After a moment, Peter pulled back with a laugh, briefly pressing their foreheads together. His hand settled on the back of Chris’ neck, gripping tightly.

His eyes were gold again, because he was a werewolf. He was a fucking *werewolf* and, somehow, Chris didn't care.

When he leaned back in, Peter kissed him proper this time. Chris smiled against his mouth, carelessly tossing his backpack into a patch of grass behind them. He yanked at the lapels of Peter’s expensive jacket. *Yes, this.* Electricity shot down his spine. Chris couldn’t have stopped himself if he wanted to, even if Gerard suddenly jumped out of a bush like a jack-in-the-box.

There was no backing out of this now. They were fucked.
The next month passed in a blink and a blur.

Gerard’s continued fixation on Katie gave Chris a taste of what freedom could be: not coming straight home after school, going out for an afternoon during the weekends. It still wasn’t normal, but Chris had never felt more like a person in his life.

He went for his driving test, got his license, and bought an old junker from the local dealership. A 1962 Chevy pickup truck in faded bumblebee yellow (accented with rust in all the right places). It was hideous, which made him love it all the more.

The bonus of the entire experience was showing it to Peter, who favored his nice things and turned his nose up at Chris’ ancient leather jacket and dirt encrusted boots.

You’re lucky you’re pretty, Christopher.

Fuck off, Peter. This jacket has sentimental value.

He had brought Peter and Olivia outside after the school parking lot emptied and happily presented them his new old truck.

Peter was visibly appalled. “That is the ugliest goddamn thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Chris had smiled, with pride, but before he could say anything, Olivia was shrieking and throwing an arm around his shoulder. “Oh my God, Chris, it’s repulsive. I love it!”

She had wrenched open the truck door — No, you really have to yank at it — and settled herself into the passenger seat.

“You see?” he’d said, turning to Peter. “This is why she’s my favorite.”

Peter had simply shook his head, like he thought they were both idiots, but his eyes were indulgent and kind.

Chris had wanted to touch him, then, to slide a hand around the back of his neck, but people might see, so he couldn’t. He had to keep reminding himself of that.

Every day that went by it got a little harder.

They kept things low-key in school and never went into town together, but they were still being reckless. Chris thought about him too much. At school, in the five other classes Peter wasn’t in, all he did was watch the clock.

Peter was so much worse. Incorrigible even.
The first time the werewolf randomly pulled him into a storage closet, he had twisted Peter’s arm behind his back and pushed him, face first, against the door. It was just a reflex, but the wolf had found this hysterical.

Chris had released him, stepping back. “You’re lucky I didn’t just stab you in the neck, asshole. I was going to class,” he told him, which was a lie. He was planning to go look for Peter and suggest they skip gym.

Peter had hooked his fingers in Chris’ belt loops and drew him closer. “Let’s not talk crazy now.”

After that… they ended up stumbling into that storage closet at least twice a day.

It was tricky to find time together at school, but the weekends gave them a little more freedom. Chris had taken to spending his Saturdays at Olivia’s house. Ms. Cindy went on a lot of business trips, sometimes for days at a time — not that he didn’t enjoy her company. Olivia had clearly inherited most of her eccentricities from her mother, which endeared the woman to him fairly quickly, but it was just another set of eyes on him and Peter. When Ms. Cindy was gone, they could be alone.

And being alone with Peter at Olivia’s felt different.

It wasn’t like their stolen moments during the week, ducking into some random closet or empty class room (always watchful, always rushing, never enough time) or being on a hunt together, which felt more like a massive spotlight shining on all the reasons this was impossible. At Olivia’s, things were calm and peaceful and light. They spent a lot of time doing simple, normal things, like sitting on the couch and watching movies together, because that’s what teenagers were supposed to do.


It had taken Chris nearly an hour to convince them that, no, he really hadn’t seen it before. They didn’t exactly have “movie nights” in the Argent family.

Olivia would sit sprawled-out in her most preferred corner of the couch, a giant bowl of popcorn in her lap. She would empty a box of Junior Mints into the bowl before eating it, every time.

Peter preferred to sprawl across Chris.

Chris hadn’t experienced a lot of contact in his life, at least not the kind that didn’t hurt. So, it felt a bit foreign to him, but he also kind of… wanted it? Like everything else with Peter, it was horribly confusing at best.

Peter would shift their position on the couch, turning them sideways and pulling Chris back against his chest. Either that, or he would just arrange himself across Chris’ lap, haphazardly and usually without warning.

Being a werewolf and all, the fact that Peter was tactile wasn’t exactly a shock. He knew enough about wolf behaviors and habits to have some idea of what to expect from him.

Peter touched his face a lot, and he liked to play with his hair, specifically at the base of his neck. Chris tried his best to tolerate it. He still pulled away, sometimes, but that felt too much like a weakness for his liking, so he worked on it. Every so often, he would get a little shiver under his skin that told him he needed to push the werewolf off, but he would just draw in a breath and count to five, let it out, then repeat, until he got the feeling under control. Counts of five. Like his mother had taught him.
Things went on like that straight through the month of January and into February.

He still had training, daily, and there were a few omegas that came into town. He and his father had taken care of one of them, Katie tagging along to observe. Gerard had let her do most of the tracking, asking her to identify a pattern in the dirt or a claw mark on a tree. She did well. His sister had a great eye for detail. When they found the omega — a woman, mid-thirties, with jet black hair and the blue eyes of a killer — she was easy to put down. The wolf had tried to run at first, but Chris shot an arrow through the back of her head, without effort. They weighted the body and dumped it in the quarry.

But the strange peace he had been living in came to a sudden halt, about a week later, when he tracked a second omega with Peter.

Olivia was the tag along this time; or more accurately, she went for the ride with them and then voiced her opinion on being left behind in the truck, very loudly.

This werewolf was just as easy to find as the last one, especially with Peter’s heightened senses acting as an assist. It was a middle-aged black man, very thin, his clothes threadbare and poorly mended.

The wolf’s frail appearance took Peter off-guard, at least that’s what it looked like. He stuttered to a stop, head tilting as he looked at the omega oddly.

But the wolf’s eyes shined blue. It had taken an innocent life, and that was all the incentive Chris had ever needed. Peter made no moves to help him — not that there was any need. The omega didn’t put up much of a fight.

Chris ended it quickly with a shot to the back of the omega’s head.

Peter stood back a few paces. After a beat of silence, he asked, “What do you do with the bodies?”

“Burn them if we can,” Chris said, not unaware of Peter’s sudden discomfort. “Dump them or bury them if we’re too close to civilization.”

Peter gave a short, jerky nod, his gaze fixed on the man’s slack face. The omega’s eyes were still open, but that supernatural blue was washed-out and faded, like an old quartz stone.

Chris watched him, watching the omega. Something about the look on Peter’s face just wasn’t right. It didn’t sit well with Chris. It felt wrong.

Maybe he shouldn’t have brought him.

This thing between them was clouding his mind up and making him stupid. Going back over it now, he could acknowledge that taking Peter on a werewolf hunt might have been a little… insensitive? But the thought hadn’t even occurred to him before, and Peter had agreed to come.

Chris didn’t know how to integrate their lives together; it just seemed so impossible.

At this point in a hunt, he needed to dispose of the body, and soon. They had to stay under the radar at all times.

A fire in this part of the woods might attract attention, but he didn’t want to transport the body either. If Gerard was there, he would tell Chris to cut the body in half and bury the halves, separately. If it wasn’t all buried in one place, there was less chance of the smell attracting a
scavenger animal to dig things up. It was their safest option. It’s what his father would want him to do. All the same, he wasn’t about to ask Peter to do that.

Chris clearly hadn’t thought this through. “We’ll burn it,” he said, uneasy. “I have a gas can in the back of the truck, and some rope. Could you grab it for me?”

“Sure,” Peter said, voice pitched low, and he walked off without looking back.

Chris’ shoulders rose and fell on a heavy breath. Gerard wouldn’t be happy with him if he found out about this. He was taking a risk here, but if he bound the body tight enough and really doused it down, it should burn up rather quickly. They would just have to watch the smoke. If anyone happened by, Chris would handle it.

Everything would be fine.

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It took about three and a half hours for the body to burn to ash.

Peter didn’t stay the whole time. After about twenty minutes, he went and got Olivia from the truck and walked her back to her house.

Chris waited until the last of the fire died out before he headed home. It was just after 3 a.m. when he pulled into his driveway.

He stumbled up the stairs, collapsing onto his bed, and was asleep before he even took his boots off. Regardless, his internal clock woke him a few hours later: 5:15 a.m. Gerard had once put him through what he liked to call a “regimented sleep training.” Chris was conditioned to wake up at that time now.

He stood from the bed, rolling his head from side to side to stretch out the kinks in his neck. There was dirt all over the front of his t-shirt, he noticed. He hadn’t even seen that before.

Chris glanced over at the mess he had made of his bedspread. Whatever, he could deal with that later.

Grabbing a clean shirt off his desk, he made his way into the hallway, pausing to toss his dirty shirt into a laundry basket by the stairs. The house was quiet, which meant his sister was still sleeping. Elementary school didn’t start until quarter past eight, so she’d be asleep for at least another hour.

Chris walked down the stairs and into the kitchen.

His father was in there, leaning against the counter and sipping a cup of coffee. The man was fully dressed, and his jacket was slung over a chair at the table. He had his boots on.

“Are you going somewhere?” Chris asked.

“No,” Gerard said, eyeing him over the rim of his cup. “Just got back from somewhere.”

Chris crossed the room to the coffee pot. “Were you looking for the omega?” he asked, grabbing a mug from the dish rack. “Because I put it down last night.”

“Yes.” Gerard’s mouth stretched into a tight-lipped smile. “Yes, I know.”

Chris felt a sudden chill, something about the tone of his father’s voice setting alarms off in his
head. He busied himself by filling his mug. “I would have told you earlier, but I got in pretty late.”

Gerard stared at him, unblinking, then set down his coffee. He unfastened the strap of the holster around his waist (which held a .45 and a large fixed-blade hunting knife) and tossed it on the table. Leaning forward, he pulled the knife from its sheath and placed it on the countertop, next to the stove.

“I went out this morning,” Gerard said, his fingers giving a slight push to the knife’s handle. It spun in a circle. “Because I thought perhaps I could find the omega and capture it.”

Chris was aware that there was a wall directly behind him. He turned a little so his back was to the open doorway instead. “Capture it? Why?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Gerard said, his voice calm. “I was searching inside the grid we discussed yesterday, when I found this.” His father pulled something from his pocket, something small, silver, and polished.

Chris squinted at the item until he recognized it as his lighter. He slid a hand into the empty pocket of his jeans — had he… dropped that?

“You should take better care of your things, Christopher,” his father added, his expression still open, still kind, like he was offering a helpful suggestion. “That was very careless of you.”

_He knows_, Chris thought, little pinpricks racing up and down the backs of his legs, like when he slept on his arm wrong and it fell asleep. “It seemed like the best option at the time.”

Gerard’s eyebrows shot up. “Did it?”

“I didn’t leave anything behind,” he said, insistent. “I cleared everything up first.”

“Yes, I suppose I wouldn’t have noticed the pyre if I hadn’t been looking for it. You did a very good job at cleaning things up. I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

Chris nodded his head, taking a few steps back towards the door. “Thank you, sir. I should go get—”

Gerard caught his wrist before he could leave the room. “Just a moment, son. One last question,” he said, and there was a quiet rage bleeding through his words now. “I couldn’t help but notice how close to town that was. So, what if someone saw the smoke and called the fire department?”

Chris dug his nails into his own palm, until the flesh stung. “They wouldn’t have saw me there. I would have left as soon as I heard the sirens.”

“Of course you would. Leaving behind a body, on fire, that to the naked eye looks like a human being. That would be a murder investigation,” Gerard said, his eyes black. The harsh fluorescent lighting of the kitchen made the bones in his face stand out. “Do you think that would complicate things for us?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes. An unnecessary complication indeed.” Gerard gestured to the table. “Sit.”

Chris crossed the room, his legs stiff, and did as he was told. He curled his fingers around the edges of the chair arms… and that’s when he heard it. The _click, click, hiss_ of the burner lighting on the stove.
Gerard grabbed the discarded knife off the kitchen counter and laid it across the flame.

And, just like that, reality was back again. Chris felt like he had just been roused from a very deep sleep by a bucket of ice water.

His father’s eyes were cold and clinical, and focused. Chris knew what that meant.

Nearly two months of good, but the crash was unavoidable. He imagined it was like falling from a great height — those few seconds of freedom, of exhilaration — until your body hits the ground and breaks. He could go off with Peter and Olivia and pretend this wasn’t his life, but make believe was for children.

Gerard looked at him, the anger draining from his face — only apathy remained. “Roll up your sleeve and put your arm on the table.”

Chris felt a sharp jolt in his chest, like a shudder, or a flinch. It took him a moment to identify the feeling as fear. He was afraid.

He was cautious around his father, always, but when things got bad, really bad, he could lock himself away if he needed to. He could go to that little box in his head and hide in there until it was safe to come out again. But lately… he had felt so awake, so grounded. He was all firing nerve endings and tingling skin. He was present, and he was here.

For the first time since he was a small child, Chris felt an old familiar tension in his muscles: He wanted to run.

Gerard wrapped a dish towel around his hand, and grabbed the blades handle. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Chris could hear the promise of worse things to come if he didn’t follow instructions, so he rolled up his shirtsleeve and laid his arm out, palm up, on the table.

The blade of his father’s knife almost shimmered. It wasn’t heated red — that would take much longer — but the edges were a bright, vibrant orange.

He sensed so much, too much, all at once. The uneven sound of his own breathing, the smell of the gas from the still lit stove, the feel of Gerard’s fingers wrapping around his wrist. It was all coming at him, loud and unfiltered.

Chris dug and dug and dug as deep and as fast as he could, scrambling to find that box in his head. He didn’t want to go there; he didn’t want to, but cutting himself off was so much better than being here. So, he let the cotton-like fog of disconnect settle over him.

He felt the heat of it before the blade even touched him, like steam from a kettle. Oddly enough, an ice-cold feeling was the first thing he registered, but it didn’t last.

The pain came on quickly — deep and blinding. A bottomless, searing ache. It felt like it went all the way to the bone. It hurt. It was agony, but he didn’t scream; he wouldn’t. And his eyes burned, but he didn’t cry. He wasn’t even sure if he could cry anymore. It had been years.

Chris counted the seconds in his head… 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11… It was over in far less than a minute, but his lungs were heaving painful, labored breaths when Gerard finally pulled away from him.

He curled in on himself, sweat pouring down the back of his neck and sticking the cotton of his shirt between his shoulder blades.
Gerard still loomed over him, but Chris kept his eyes on the table.

A sharp and sudden blow snapped his head to the side. “Eyes up, Christopher.”

Chris’ eyes snapped up and the room spun, outlines and shapes bleeding together like water colors. The only thing he could focus on was his father’s empty face, inches from his own.

Gerard stared at him for a moment, or two, and then said, “Go see to that.”

It was clearly a dismissal. They were done here.

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Chris soaked the wound in cold water, smothering the area with a liberal amount of antibiotic ointment, then loosely wrapped it in a gauze.

He still had to go to school, of course, but before he left, Gerard told him to ready himself a place to sleep in the yard because he would be staying out there, all night. Chris was told he needed to use the time to think on his “lack of foresight.” He was still being punished. Sleeping inside, in a bed, was a privilege, and privileges were earned.

Chris threw his blanket in a cluster of bushes behind the house, rearranging the branches a little to hide it the best he could. It was better than nothing.

He felt empty headed as he jumped into his truck, driving the backroads to school in a strange fog. It felt like the world had dulled out. His arm was itching, already. The creepy-crawly tingling of it made him want to tear his skin off.

The wound had bled a little, earlier, but it was mostly stopped by then. He wanted to take the bandage off. It was irritating.

The second he got to school, he walked to the closest bathroom, scanning the room for people before rolling up his sleeve. He picked at the edges of the white surgical tape until he had a good enough grip to pull it off. His whole arm was throbbing, like the pulsing of a heartbeat, but the cool air felt soothing on his blistered skin.

Chris rolled his sleeve back down, and sighed.

This wasn’t the first time his father had burned him, although he’d never done it quite like that before. When Chris was a kid, Gerard would sometimes force him to put his feet in hot water. He could remember how hard it was to walk around, afterwards. Injuries on the feet were horrible.

But, the experience in itself was nothing new. Gerard wasn’t his biggest problem at the moment… it was Peter. Chris had no idea how he was going to hide this from him.

Peter wouldn’t get it. He would make a fuss, which was the last thing Chris needed.

He would just have to avoid him.

The problem of it was, the werewolf was impossible to ignore, even on a good day, and they had left things pretty open-ended the night before with the hunt and everything. Peter was going to come to him so they could talk about it. Luckily for Chris, they purposely didn’t talk to each other at school. Peter wouldn’t have many opportunities to get him alone.

It was Friday, so if he could just make it through the day…
He would have to skip their usual Saturday afternoon at Olivia’s house. The thought of it made his chest feel a little heavy, but he could do it.

He just needed a little time to figure out how to spin this and make it believable. How the hell he was going to lie to a werewolf, at all, was another problem. Chris had been taught how to control his heartbeat and regulate it so it was harder to read. He wasn’t as good at that as his father was, not by half, but he managed well enough.

He would just have to wing it and hope for the best.

Throughout the day, Chris avoided the more heavily frequented closets and classrooms he and Peter liked to sneak into. He wouldn’t let himself be caught off guard.

Later on, he kept his head down in English. Towards the end of class, though, Peter asked Ms. Miles for the hall pass and, for the first time ever, tossed a note onto Chris’ desk as he walked past him and into the hallway.

He waited a minute or so before he unfolded the note, and held it out under his desk so he could read it.

*Are you alright?*

Chris glanced to the front of the classroom, where Ms. Miles was paraphrasing Shakespeare with animated hand gestures, and then uncapped his pen.

*I’m fine. Just tired. I slept like shit last night. And don’t write to me. You should just rip this up after you read it.*

When he heard the sound of Peter’s shoes scuffling outside the door, he placed his hand on the corner of his desk, holding the note between two fingers. Peter snatched it on his way by.

He watched as Peter read the note, under his desk, like Chris had.

The werewolf shook his head and smiled, locking eyes with Chris as he ripped the paper down the center, folded it, then ripped it again.

Ms. Miles was still talking. “So,” she said, “what would you say Macbeth’s most obvious downfall is?”

Peter leaned back in his chair, raising a hand, and spoke before she could call on him. “I think Macbeth is hopelessly paranoid.”

Chris rolled his eyes, because Peter would expect him to, but his heart wasn’t in it.

Ms. Miles held up a finger. “Yes, that’s very true. You can see it from the start by the way he…” She went on, and on, and then on some more, but he listened to none of it.

Peter was looking at him without looking at him; translation: he was stealing quick, periodic glances, but only glances, because they weren’t allowed. None of this was allowed.

Chris felt like his lungs were filling with water.

Why did it have to be this way?
He skipped his last class. His arm was killing him and there was far too much lag time during gym. He and Peter could easily have a cordial “we’re not friends, but we talk sometimes” chat. They did it a lot.

He wasn’t going to go home yet, but he could drive out to his spot in the woods for a little target practice. Chris had a 9mm Beretta in his backpack, and a box of rounds.

Chris was rushing. So, when he walked past the storage closet by the boiler room, he didn’t even notice Peter until the werewolf’s hand shot out and caught onto his backpack strap, yanking him inside.

This time, he didn’t fight down the instinct to push Peter away.

“Easy!” Peter settled his hands on Chris’ shoulders. “It’s just me.”

The bulb in that closet was blown; they had discovered that when they were in there a few days earlier. There was a small amount of light shining under the door from the hallway, but the space was far from well-lit. He could barely make out Peter’s face, but the wolf, of course, could see him clearly.

Chris rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, and gave one last-ditch effort. “I can’t talk right now.”

“Why not?” Peter asked, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

Chris turned away from him and grabbed onto the door handle, hoping his body language would convey the message — just, stop — but Peter wasn’t one to be ignored, or avoided, especially not after the last month.

Peter rested his palm on the doorframe, stopping him from opening it. “Hey, wait a second, Chris. What’s going on with you?” he asked, reaching out, and Peter could have touched him anywhere else and it would have been fine, but this was Chris’ life, and he always got stuck with the worst case scenario.

Peter’s hand closed around his right arm, fingers unintentionally digging into the raw ache of the burn. Chris hissed at the contact; he couldn’t help it.

Peter’s eyes grew wide. He yanked his hand back with a hiss of his own. “What? What is that?”

“It’s fine,” Chris said. His eyes had adjusted enough to the dim lighting of the closet, by then, that he could see the color drain from Peter’s face.

Just stop, he thought, don’t push, but that wasn’t in the werewolf’s nature. “What the fuck is that, Christopher?” Peter took a step forward, but Chris stopped him with a hand to his chest.

They had been in each other’s space too much. He had let the boundaries drop, and he didn’t know how to put them back up again.

In a blink, Peter’s hand shot out, gripping Chris’ sleeve and pulling it up to his elbow.

Chris’ jaw went slack for a second. With the exception of their first hunt, Peter never used his enhanced abilities like that. At least not on him.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Peter,” he said, pulling his arm back. “You can never just stop, can you?” He yanked his sleeve back down with a frustrated growl, but the damage was done; Peter had seen it.
The skin was still red and blistered but no longer bleeding, and the burn was set in a perfectly straight line. Because Chris was a good soldier, so he stayed still.

The location and pattern of the injury clearly said: *Someone did this on purpose.*

Peter could see that, too. Chris could tell by the look on his face. “Chris… what?”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing,” Chris said, struggling to think of some feasible explanation. *It was a hunt. It happened on a hunt.*

“That is not nothing,” Peter’s voice was firm. “And that didn’t happen yesterday. Did something else come into town?” he asked. “Something you didn’t tell me about?”

*Yes,* Chris thought, say yes. “No.”

“Did your…” Flecks of gold shone in Peter’s eyes. “Did your father do that?”

Chris recognized the look on Peter’s face; he had seen it before, in the eyes of every doctor, police officer, or goddamn social worker that spoke to him after his mother was killed. It was the look that said Chris was something weak that needed to be saved, that needed to be protected.

He wasn’t. He *wasn’t.* “I don’t need your pity. It’s fine. I’m fine.” Chris pinched the bridge of his nose. “I can take care of myself.”

Peter stared at him with sad eyes. It made Chris feel like the wolf could see inside of his brain. He couldn’t even decipher his own thoughts, most of the time, so the idea of someone else riffling around his subconscious was more than he could deal with.

What if Peter… told someone?

He could see it all in his head: They would come, just like before, faceless, with their sad eyes and their apologies, to take away his sister.

It took Chris a second to realize his breathing had turned sharp, uneven.

Peter’s expression twisted in alarm. He reached a hand out towards Chris’ face. “Hey, it’s alright.”

Chris felt a spike of panic. It wasn’t directed at Peter, but he felt it all the same. All he saw was a hand coming at his face, and he was dissociated enough in that second that his brain just reacted to it.

He flinched.

Peter’s entire body jerked, like Chris had just clocked him. “I’m not... I wouldn’t,” he stuttered. He crossed his arms over his chest, then uncrossed them, a soft, distressed sound catching in his throat. He looked so unbearably out of his element that Chris felt a coil of remorse for his actions. The jolt of it was enough of a motivator that he pulled his shit together, at any rate.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Peter said, his jaw set.

Chris gave a short, mirthless laugh. “That’s not it.”

“Then what?”

More questions. Peter always had more questions, but there was nothing Chris could say to him. There was no possible explanation he could give that would satisfy him, because Peter wouldn’t
be able to understand it. He couldn’t possibly understand it.

Chris could clearly hear his father’s voice: *You’re too soft, boy. It’s going to get you killed someday.* It made his vision turn red around the edges.

All the emotions he had locked down the night before were stirring back to life again, and the one feeling he never ran out of was anger. Chris had so much rage locked up inside him that it could rattle his bones to dust.

It was unfair to unleash that on Peter when he hadn’t done anything, but he was a safe outlet.

“You want me to be blunt?” he asked through gritted teeth. “Gerard put a sword through my mother’s heart. She was bitten by an alpha, so he killed her,” he said, some distant part of his brain telling him he needed to shut his mouth, now. Chris had never spoken those words out loud before, not to anyone. “They wouldn’t even put my father away for murder. You think they’ll punish him for being a little rough with me?”

“A little rough?” Peter asked, incredulous, his lip curling back.

Chris clapped his hands together once, sharply. “You’re not listening to me, as usual. He has law enforcement in his pocket. They won’t do anything.”

“Is that a fact?” he asked, and Chris could see the tips of his fangs peeking out of his half-opened mouth. "Somehow going to the police wasn’t my first thought.”

“Oh, what? Are you going to approach him?” Chris scoffed. “He would kill you.”

“Not if he didn’t see me coming.”

“Be serious, Peter.” Chris stepped right up to him, close enough that he felt Peter’s breath on his face when the werewolf exhaled. “Have you ever taken someone’s life?” he asked, remembering the look on Peter’s face after the omega had been killed: sympathy. “I know from the color of your eyes you’ve never killed an innocent, but have you ever killed anything? Have you ever watched someone’s light fade away knowing your hands are what snuffed it out?”

There was only silence for several seconds. Peter held his eyes, with his chin jutted out. He wasn’t giving Chris an inch on this one.

The stupid, obstinate fool.

It cracked the shell on his anger, and he let out a heavy breath. “Listen to me, Peter. This is my father. It’s his job to guide us, to teach us. I would be dead a thousand times over if it wasn’t for him. You couldn’t possibly understand that,” he said, very slowly. “He’s my father, and if you care about me, at all.” *Just listen. For once, just listen.* “You’ll leave this be.”

A muscle jumped in Peter’s jaw but Chris turned away from him, opened the door, and walked out into the hallway.

He wanted the werewolf to stay put. All the same, a part of him still felt a flash of disappointment when Peter didn’t follow after him.
Please let me know what your thoughts are!

On a side note: this is Chris’ ugly truck.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter couldn’t sleep.

He had been lying in bed and staring at the ceiling for hours. It must have been around three o’clock in the morning — not that he cared enough to check the clock.

*If you care about me… You’ll leave this be…*

What kind of non sequitur bullshit was that?

To an extent, he had suspected. Chris behaved so oddly sometimes. The closer they got to each other, the clearer it became to him. It was just little things, like Chris’ strange aversion to touch, or the detached way he always spoke of his father. Not to mention, how lost he could get in his own head. It would happen at the most bizarre moments. Chris’ eyes would just glaze over, as if he wasn’t even really there.

There was no one incident that led Peter to this conclusion, it was just… how Chris talked about himself. All these things added together spoke more to abuse than being raised as a hunter.

And so, Peter couldn’t sleep.

*Gerard put a sword through my mother’s heart… She was bitten by an alpha, so he killed her…*

What the hell was he supposed to do with that?

This man murdered his own wife in cold blood because she was becoming a werewolf. He killed the mother of his children. What did that mean for Peter’s family? He would be a fool not to think about it.

Chris had asked him if he’d ever taken a life before. He hadn’t. Their pack was peaceful; they didn’t hurt people.

When he saw that omega the other night, he couldn’t bring himself to attack the man. Omegas were a tragedy all on their own; no place and no pack, but this man had taken pathetic to a whole new level, and the only reason he had been drawn to Beacon Hills, at all, was Peter’s sister.

The omega's eyes had been blue, so he’d killed before, but that could mean anything. Chris saw things in such absolutes but the world wasn’t black and white. Accidents happened. They lost control sometimes. That didn’t mean they deserved to die for it.

Even still, the sadness he’d felt in that moment wasn’t for the omega — it was for Chris, because that was his whole life, and he wasn’t *capable* of looking at that man and seeing the things that Peter did.

When Chris killed the omega, Peter hadn’t stepped in, because there was no reason to; the poor bastard never stood a chance. But if he had, Peter would have ripped his head off without blinking. That wolf had been nothing to him. Feeling pity for the man and putting value on his life were two very different things. So, no, he had never killed before, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t capable of it. He was a predator, and he would protect his own.
His parents, Talia, the pups, Steven, Sarah and Ben. Olivia, always.

And now, Chris. The ferocity of the claim he felt over him was remarkable. **MINE.** It was like nothing he had ever felt before. The thought of someone laying their hands on him to hurt; Peter couldn’t bare it. It rocked his control in a way nothing else ever had. He wanted Gerard Argent dead. He wanted to tear the skin from his body, despite Chris’ lack of confidence in Peter’s ability to do so.

*Are you going to approach him...? He would kill you...*

Peter’s sudden growl ricocheted off the walls of his bedroom. He threw back his blankets and sat up. It was pointless to just lay there; sleep wouldn’t come tonight.

The telltale creak of his parents’ bedroom door sounded from the hallway. Footsteps, a heartbeat, the smell of coffee grounds and cigar smoke — it was his father.

Peter gave a resigned sigh. He must have made more noise than he realized.

His dad knocked twice on the door, entering without waiting for an invitation. “Everything alright in here?” He turned on the light.

“Jesus, Dad,” Peter said, covering his eyes and peering through spread fingers. “Yes, everything’s fine.”

“Sorry, kid,” his dad said, switching the light back off again. “Can I come in?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You’re already in, you realize?”

“Good point. Can I stay a minute, then?”

Peter rested back against his headboard with an uncaring shrug.

The man nodded, closed the door, and crossed the room to stand by his bedside. “What’s going on, Peter?”

“Euthyphro dilemma.”

“What’s that?” his dad asked, squinty-eyed.

*Good and bad,* Peter thought, but he felt like being difficult, so he made his answer vague. “Plato and Socrates.”

“Peter...” he sighed, voice heavy with that oh-so-often-heard tone, like a part of him wanted to grab Peter by the shoulders and shake him.

It made Peter’s mouth lift in a barely-there smile. He really did enjoy irritating people. “I’m just pondering morality, Dad,” he said. “You know... what’s right, what’s wrong?”

Peter Sr. looked to the clock on his bedside table. “At four in the morning? It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Peter said. He touched a finger to his temple. “My heads kind of full right now.”

“Anything you want to share?”

“No, no. It’s just different things,” he said, wondering how the man would react if he was honest with him; if he just up and told him *Hey Dad, I want to slash into someone’s throat and rip out
their windpipe.’ It wouldn’t be the first time (or the tenth) they needed to have that kind of conversation, but he didn’t want his dad to ask him anything. “I was thinking about the pack, and the hunters.” Peter let some of his inner conflict show on his face. “And why people do the things they do.”

“We’re all a product of our environment, Peter. They do the things they do because that’s all they know. Same as us,” his dad said, and Peter could feel tendrils of worry and reassurance pulsing across the bond between them.

He sent back some reassurances of his own.

Peter Sr. graced him with a kind smile and sat down on the bed, by Peter’s feet. “You have to weigh it: morality. You think of the impact of both decisions and the number of people it will hurt, or help. At the end of the day, we need to be able to stand and look into our own eyes in the mirror. People with skewed beliefs can do horrible things and live with themselves because they don’t believe what they’re doing is wrong.”

“So that excuses it?”

“No.” The man settled a hand across Peter’s ankle. “Of course not, but we can’t control the choices of others, only our own. We take care of each other, we look out for each other, and we protect the pack. That’s the code we live by.”

“Protect the pack,” Peter echoed. “Then why haven’t we made a move against the Argent patriarch?”

“Because he’s not a threat to us right now,” he said, like the answer was obvious. “You don’t start a war without cause.”

Peter recoiled, white-hot anger boiling his insides. “So we should wait until he is a threat!? We’re predators. We’re not meant to be hunted!” he said, baring his teeth.

And, that, right there, was the reason the alpha status bypassed their father for Talia. Passivity didn’t stop the war.

His dad made a calming sound in his throat. “Peter, control yourself,” he said. “We are predators, yes, but we don’t have to be killers. Not if there’s another way.” The grip on Peter’s ankle turned almost painful. “Do you understand that?”

This wasn’t the first time his father had said those words to him, and Peter understood the distinction; he did. He just struggled to care. If it was for the good of the pack, wasn’t any sacrifice worth it?

He still nodded his head. “I understand.”

“Try to get some sleep.” His dad grabbed the discarded blanket Peter had kicked off earlier and pulled it up to his chest. “Talia’s been an alpha for a while now. The omegas won’t be drawn here for much longer. Don’t worry so much about the Argents, kid. They’ll be gone soon.”

Peter had to choke down the sob that rose in his throat. That was the worst thing his father could have said to him. “Goodnight, Dad.”

Peter Sr. gave him an odd look, and he felt another wave of comfort pass between them. It helped a little.

The man gave his leg one last pat, then stood from the bed. “Night, kid.”
After his dad had left, Peter actually managed to doze off for a while. It was close to noon by the time he woke up.

For the last month and a half, Saturday had been the day he spent with Chris at Olivia’s house. Peter would normally jump in the shower and head right over there, but what was the point? Chris wasn’t going to be there.

The entire pack was home that afternoon. But Peter was in a rotten fucking mood, and he didn’t care much for the idea of pretending otherwise. He took out his copy of "The Histories" by Herodotus and read up to page 250, which was when the growling in his stomach became irritating enough that he discarded his book and walked down to the kitchen.

There was a pile of muffins on the counter — apple cinnamon, by the smell of it — which looked edible enough, so he grabbed two of them and turned back to the stairs.

Ben’s voice called after him. “What are you so grouchy about?”

“I’m not,” Peter said, sidestepping Steven’s giant, blue tackle box; he apparently wanted to be a fisherman this week.

Ben and Sarah were curled up on the living room couch, an afghan sprawled across their intertwined legs. Sarah pushed up onto her elbows and peered over the couch arm. “Yes, you are. I don’t have to be a werewolf to pick up on that. What’s up, doll?”

“Not a thing.” Peter said, turning his back on them and climbing the stairs. “Maybe I’m just annoyed that there’s never any hot water left after your hour-and-a-half long showers every morning.”

“That’s an exaggeration!”

Peter ignored her. He grabbed some clean clothes out of his bedroom dresser, and a towel from the hall closet, absentmindedly nibbling at the larger of the two muffins.

The laundry basket in the bathroom was overflowing, even though his mom had just done the laundry two days before. Having the whole pack in one house felt a bit like living with a traveling circus sometimes.

When he got into the shower, he had to turn the handle all the way to the left and the water still came out lukewarm. Dammit, Sarah. Sighing, Peter turned the handle back to the right a little, letting the cold water shock his senses. He showered, got dressed, and finished the second muffin, the actions mechanical. His head was still mixed up. Sleep hadn’t helped, at all.

Peter grabbed his book off the bedside table and sat at his desk by the window.

Derek and Laura were playing outside — laughing and teasing and full of life. They were filthy, covered from head-to-toe with mud and clay. Steven was out there too, filling up a hole the pups had dug with water from the hose.

It was commonplace, all of them being together. Peter didn’t think he ever truly acknowledged how lucky he was to have them. He was a pain in the ass and his family would wholeheartedly agree with that, but they loved him.

It made him feel such empathy for Chris. For one delusional moment, Peter imagined a world
where he could steal Chris away from the hunters and bring him back there, to keep. It was a ridiculous, fanciful notion. Even if his family would accept a hunter into the pack, which they wouldn’t, Chris would never agree to it. And that left Peter in the same place he had been in since the start of all this: without a solution. He wouldn’t go after Gerard Argent, not right now, and it wasn’t because Chris had asked him not to, at least that wasn’t the only reason.

Peter looked down at his niece and nephew making mud pies. He couldn’t risk it. He couldn’t risk them, not when there were so many unknowns and “what ifs.”

Grumbling softly to himself, he dog-eared page 257 and set down his book. Chair legs scraped the hardwood floor as he pushed back from the desk.

He wasn’t going to sit there all day and fester.

Peter grabbed his jacket out of the closet and walked downstairs, calling out (to no one in particular) “I’m going to Livie’s” before heading out the front door.

***

Peter ran through the preserve, the brown and green of the trees blurring by as his feet picked up speed. He needed the release of it, to be honest, so he really pushed himself. As an added bonus, he scared the shit out of a deer while crashing through a set of branches, and that was always fun.

He made it to Olivia’s in under six minutes, unlatching the gate and ambling up the walkway until his ears picked up on a familiar “ba-dum-ba-dum” sound coming from inside the house.

Peter recognized the heartbeat before he saw Chris’ truck in the driveway. He could distinguish it from Olivia’s, very easily. Shaking off his disbelief, he started walking again, widening his steps slightly so he could get to the house faster — without outright sprinting. They had just seen each other yesterday, for fuck’s sake. There was no reason for Peter to go charging in there like they’d been apart for a month. He needed to find control over this.

Given that Peter had a key to the front door, he unlocked the deadbolt and walked into the house without knocking. Olivia’s mother had given him a key years ago, after she caught him climbing through the window once or twice — or a dozen times, but who’s counting?

Peter walked down the hallway towards the kitchen, and he could hear Chris’ voice rumble through the thin walls. “Someone’s here.”

There was a sudden hush followed by the clonk-clonk of Olivia’s uncoordinated footsteps, then her face was peeking out into the hall. “Oh, hey, hi,” she said, a big smile appearing on her face. “There you are. We were about to send out a search party.”

Peter walked around the corner to find Chris sitting at the kitchen table, a text book open in front of him and a pencil in his hand. Chris made an aborted move to stand up, visibly second guessing himself, and Peter felt a wave of some strange impression coming from him. It was gone before he could identify it, which was something that happened a lot.

Peter frowned, watching Chris’ eyes flicker as he thought. He turned to Olivia. “Has he—” Peter stopped, looking back at Chris again. They didn’t need a mediator. “Have you been here all day?”

Chris set the pencil down and flexed his fingers. “Since this morning.”

_Dammit._

“I would have come earlier,” Peter said, taking a step towards the table. “I didn’t think you’d be
A few seconds of silence passed as their eyes locked.

Livie cleared her throat. “Yeeeah, so…” she said, wringing her hands together. “I’m gonna go pack a bag.”

Peter watched her with narrowed eyes as she bounced down the hall to her bedroom. “Pack a bag?” he called after her. To Chris, he asked, “Is she going somewhere?”

“Her father’s cabin, I guess? She told me the two of you go out there sometimes,” he said. “She wants to take us.”

“Us?”

“Yes, ‘us.’” Chris said, deadpan. “You, me, Olivia.”

Peter frowned. “For the night?”

“Looks that way,” he said, like Peter was being deliberately thickheaded. “Do you not want to?”

Peter shook his head, confusion and not a small amount of worry creeping into his expression. “No, I do, but — how are you able to stay out all night? Is there a hunt or something?”

Chris glanced down at the table, took a quick breath in through his nose, and then stood. “No, there’s no hunt right now.”

“Then what did you tell your father?”

“Nothing, Peter,” he said, voice terse. The ‘just drop it’ was unspoken. “He gave me a few days.”

The hunter didn’t like it when Peter asked too many questions, but he could give a fuck less. “A few days to what?”

“To be elsewhere.”

Peter crossed the kitchen in three strides. “You mean he threw you out?!”

“No, it’s temporary,” Chris said, waving him off. “It’s not a big deal.”

“How is that not—” Peter’s mouth snapped shut when Livie rounded the corner into the kitchen.

“OK, we’re leaving,” she announced.

Peter held up a hand. “Livie, hang on.”

“Nope, hush,” she said, eyes snapping to Peter’s face. She smoothed out the worry lines on his forehead with her thumb. “We’re going to the cabin, now.”

Peter eyed the over-sized bag she was carrying. “For a week?”

She unzipped the bag, holding it open for their inspection. Inside, there were clothes and assorted snacks (the shrimp flavored Ramen Noodles were definitely for Peter. Thanks, Liv.) And a bottle of bourbon. “These are provisions, my friend.”

Peter felt Livie’s presence ease some of the tension inside him. She was like his own personal mood stabilizer. He pointed to the bottle. “It’s not nice to steal from your mother, Olivia Jean.”
“Easy now, Peter Francis Hale Jr,” she said, poking a finger into his chest. “It’s reappropriating, not stealing. This has been sitting in the cabinet for like six months.”

The keys to Chris’ truck were sitting in a large, plastic bowl on the counter. Livie picked them up between her fingers. “I’ll drive.”

“Ha!” Chris said, snatching them back instantly. “I don’t think so.”

She stuck out her lower lip. “Why not?”

“Because you can’t drive a stick.” Chris curled his hand into a fist around the keys, holding them to his chest. “And you don’t have a license.”

Livie gave him a playful shove. “Are you worried about me breaking the law, or that I’ll hurt your truck?”

“The truck.”

Peter laughed at their antics and, for the time being, let it go.

***

Peter road in the back of the truck. The trail there was a tad bumpy, to say the least; calling it “off-roading” would be understating it. Once or twice while they were driving, Chris brought the truck to a sudden stop before accelerating again, quickly. It took Peter off guard the first time he did it. In fact, it knocked him on his ass. Peter ignored Olivia’s howling laughter and glared at the rearview mirror. Chris was staring back at him, eyes all crinkled-up and bright with amusement. Then he did it again.

Peter smirked; he was playing with him. Chris tried his best to knock Peter around back there until they pulled up to the Goodro’s cabin.

The cabin was miles into the woods; farther out than Peter’s house, even. The place was a complete death trap — very small and poorly constructed. It was made up of thin logs, which sat upon an unbalanced, stone base, and there was a miniature porch with a few rocking chairs. Peter privately thought the cabin looked like some serial killer’s "just past the Canadian border" hideout. He never shared this with Olivia, of course, considering her dad legitimately slaughtered a diner full of innocent people and then blew his own brains out.

Chris turned off the trucks engine, grabbing Livie’s bag from the passenger seat before opening his door. “Oh, wow, this place is great.”

Peter snorted. “Yeah, you would think that.”

The inside of the cabin was even worse than the outside. It was essentially just one big room. There was a closet-sized bathroom with a shower stall, sink, and a poorly functioning toilet. Most of the items scattered about had belonged to Livie’s father: old trinkets and books, three chairs, a round table and a desk, a metal-frame bed, and a dark maroon area rug that was laid out in front of a non-working fireplace. The microwave and mini refrigerator were Peter and Livie’s newer additions.

After upending the contents of Livie’s bag onto the table, they spent the next several hours playing cards, burning popcorn in the microwave, and steadily emptying Cindy Goodro’s bottle of bourbon. Chris laughed and joked and beat Peter at poker, but it was a pretense. He was putting on an act, and Peter hated it.
If Olivia had guessed at what was going on between them, she didn’t mention it. She knew Peter very well, so she suspected, otherwise she wouldn’t have dragged them up there in the first place. It was a ploy. But she wasn’t drawing attention to it.

Mostly, she just ate popcorn and drank.

Nose scrunched up, she slowly sipped the harsh, brown liquor from a glass mug, unlike Chris, who was taking pulls straight from the bottle. Chris set the bourbon on the table, pushing it across the granite with his fingertips, towards Peter.

Peter lifted the bottle to his lips, taking a deep swallow.

“Alcohol is wasted on him,” Livie said, her words slurring. “He can’t get drunk at all. Believe me, we’ve tried.”

Chris’ eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Ah, come on, no one ever mentioned that in any of your fancy hunter journals?” Peter asked, taking another sip. He liked the taste of it, even if he didn’t feel anything.

“No,” Chris said, with a smirk, “but I guess that makes sense. Your system must burn it up before you can feel any effects.”

Peter held the bottle out to him. “Something like that.”

When Chris reached for it, his sleeve slid up, and Peter hid a scowl as he watched him yank it back down.

He’s still hiding it.

Peter wanted to check his arm again, so badly. His fingers were twitching with the restraint of not checking it. The burn had been uncovered the day before. Peter wasn’t human, but he knew they were susceptible to things like… infection. Chris could get sick or something. He should take care of it, properly. The hunter incessantly declared his self-reliance, but his actions contradicted that. In Peter’s opinion, Chris was complete shit at taking care of himself.

Half the bottle was emptied when they finally lost Olivia. She was passed out on the bed, snoring softly, her leg randomly striking out at invisible foes.

Chris huffed a silent laugh as he watched Livie kick out in her sleep again — she was like a bunny, or a donkey.

“Try being on the receiving end of that,” Peter said, remembering the cheap shots he suffered through when they still shared a bed as children.

His eyes ran over Chris’ face. The alcohol had visibly relaxed him, but he wasn’t drunk yet. “You want to go outside?”

Chris stared at him for one long moment, then nodded. “Let’s go on the roof.”

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They climbed onto the roof of the cabin. Chris had to scale a tree, which he did with ease, but Peter just leapt up there from the ground. He could hear the creaking of old wood and rusted nails beneath his feet. It was probably going to fall down at any moment and crush poor Olivia to death. Rickety, ancient, piece-of-shit cabin.

“I can’t promise you this roofs not going to collapse.”
Chris leaned his weight on one foot. “Seems stable enough,” he said, settling himself on the roof’s edge and letting his legs dangle off the side. “It’s quiet here.”

Peter sat down beside him.

It wasn’t quiet. The noises out there were very different than the artificial, mechanical clang in town, but there was still so much of it. There were the bullfrogs down by the river, and the scurrying of mice in a crawlspace under the cabin. A light breeze stirring — a breeze that moved the higher branches of the trees. The screeching of an owl and the wingbeats of a dozen or so birds, and crickets — so many crickets. For Peter, it felt like the earth was breathing.

“Not to me.”

Chris glanced over at him with a half-smile. Peter wanted to pull him closer, but he wasn’t sure if he was allowed that yet. The hunter was difficult to read, and he didn’t want to push too hard, because Chris would shut down and nothing would get accomplished. They needed to talk about this.

Peter wasn’t going off on a murderous rampage to kill Chris’ father, even though he desperately wanted to.

Regardless, he wasn’t going to just let this go.

Chris had no one, and it was so clear to Peter. The hunter could handle himself against any supernatural creature that came at him; he was lethal. Peter had seen that with his own eyes, multiple times, but he didn’t take care of himself. No one else took care of him, either. No one looked after him, or looked out for him. There was no one that cared to.

Chris’ mother was dead and his father was a monster. The only other person he even talked about was that hunter, Malachi Finnegan, who was several years older than them. Chris claimed him as his closest and oldest friend, but the more Peter heard about this “Finn,” the more he formulated his own opinion on the man: He was just as useless as the rest of them.

Chris didn’t have anyone, at least not in the past, but it wasn’t like that anymore. Peter would look after him, even if he had to be underhanded about it.

He could start by putting Chris’ mind at ease on this situation with his father. Peter wanted to be honest with him, which was a new experience in itself.

“I was watching my niece and nephew today. They’re my sister’s children,” he said, voice soft. “Their father’s name is Steven. He and Talia were younger than us when they first met. He’s like a brother to me.” Peter glanced off to the side, a wide smile spreading across his face. “And then there’s my mom. She likes to knit, and cook, even though she’s no good at it. My grandmother was the cook in our family. She took care of us.”

Chris was still and silent beside him.

“We thought the alpha status would pass to my dad when my grandmother died,” Peter added. “He takes care of us, too, but sometimes he’s just so...” He gave a frustrated growl. “My sister’s the alpha now. She’s not the same. She changed a lot, but she’s still... mine. They all are.” Peter turned back to Chris; he needed to make him listen and understand, but the hunter’s eyes were already locked on him, sharp and attentive. “I would do anything to prote—”

Chris curled a hand around Peter’s wrist. “Stop. You don’t have to explain anything to me,” he said, relief clear in his voice. He turned to crawl back a few paces, away from the edge, tugging at
Peter’s wrist until he followed after him.

“Actually—” Peter started, but Chris gave him another sharp tug, pulling him off-center and pushing him, flat on his back, against the roof.

He moved so quickly for a human.

Chris crawled on top of him, legs straddled on either side of Peter’s waist. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Peter tried to release his frustration on an exhale. “We haven’t talked about it at all,” he said, pushing up onto his elbows.

Chris pulled away like he was going to climb off of him. Peter didn’t want that, so he settled his hands on Chris’ waist and held him in place, fingers digging in — a little too hard. Chris took in a sharp breath.

He could see the moment Chris’ defenses faltered; no more pretenses, no more deflection. “I don’t know what to do with you, Peter.”

Peter relaxed his grip so his hands were just resting there. “I could give you a few suggestions,” he said, waggling his eyebrows when Chris’ lips twisted up at the corners.

He slid his thumb under Chris’ shirt, rubbing a small circle against the skin there. This was all he wanted. Them, like this, all the time. Feeling Chris as a solid weight in his lap, he didn’t have to worry about him anymore, because he was right there — close enough to touch, close enough for Peter to hold onto him, even if just for a while.

Chris made a soft, sighing sound, and Peter felt a brief wave of affection and uncertainty before Chris was leaning down and catching his mouth in a bruising kiss. Peter instantly kissed him back, deeper and longer, taking everything Chris had to offer and reflecting it, tenfold; they said more to each other like this than they ever could with words.

Chris pressed kisses down his throat, stopping to suck a bruise just above his collarbone. It faded in seconds. “I want to try something,” Chris said, out of breath. He slid a hand down, settling it between Peter’s legs. “Just don’t move. Stay still.”

Peter pressed up into Chris’ hand before his words registered.

The hunter shoved him flat on his back again. “Stay still, Peter, or I’ll stop,” he said, crawling down Peter’s body until he was eye-level with the zipper on his jeans.

It took him a second to realize what Chris was doing, but when he did, he shivered so hard it rattled his teeth. “Sure, whatever you want.”

Chris grasped his zipper between two fingers, drawing it downwards, and Peter raised his hips a little so the hunter could pull his jeans and boxers down to his knees. He felt Chris’ breath against his skin, and shuttered, fingers clawing at the rough surface of the cabin’s roof. Peter’s cock was straining and dripping pre-come, already.

He had thought of this. Since the moment Chris wrapped his perfect mouth around Peter’s candy cane, all those months ago, he had thought of this. Vividly and often. Dreamt of it, even.

Without preamble, Chris curled a hand around the base of Peter’s cock, moving his hand up-and-down a few times before simply taking the head into his mouth. He swiped his tongue across the slit, then slowly lowered down.
Peter sighed, his eyes sliding closed.

Chris’ head bobbed shallowly at first, experimenting, finding a rhythm. He slid back up, leaving Peter’s cock with a soft, wet sound, then slid down again, hand still moving, wrist twisting in time with the motion of his mouth. Sparks of pleasure shot through Peter like an electrical current, all the way down to his toes.

He tried to do what Chris told him to: stay still, but it was just too good. Involuntarily, Peter’s hips bucked upwards — too much, too quickly. Chris choked a little and pulled back. He dug his fingernails into the soft flesh of Peter’s upper thigh in retribution, but the added sting just made it better.

On an exhale, Peter said, “S-sorry.”

Chris scowled at him but didn’t stop; if anything, his brow creased up with determination.

This may have been the first time Chris had ever done this, but he was a quick study, with everything. Peter felt Chris’ throat relaxing as he swallowed, taking more of his cock, down and down until his nose was pressed to Peter’s pubic bone. When he slid back up again, sucking hard enough it was nearly painful, Peter’s eyes rolled back. Chris repeated the movement a few times before grabbing Peter’s hand and placing it on top of his head. Then, gripping onto Peter’s waist, Chris pulled his hips upward.

Peter groaned, his head falling backwards. “Jesus, fuck.”

When it came to things like this, Chris liked to set the pace, and he had absolutely no problem with that. If Chris wanted to encourage Peter to fuck up into his mouth, who was he to refuse such an offer?

Peter tangled his fingers in the hunter’s close-cropped hair, slowly guiding his head, Chris’ tongue working the underside as his lips slid up and then down — over and over and over.

Wet, and heat, and God.

He ran the fingers of his free hand along Chris’ jawline, pressing his thumb into the hollow of his cheek. “Perfect. You’re perfect.”

He couldn’t stop the noises that were falling from his mouth. Fuck, just like that. Peter felt a flash of warmth, followed by another, then another; it slowly built-up inside him as he watched Chris’ pink lips moving over his cock.

He tapped a finger against the side of Chris’ face, in warning, but he smacked Peter’s hand away, making a soft humming sound in the back of his throat. The vibrations of it was enough to tip Peter over the edge — shuddershudder, crash. Still guiding Chris’ head up and down, Peter came into the wet heat of his mouth.

He was suddenly very thankful they were in the middle of nowhere.

When his vision cleared, Chris was knelt between his legs and staring up at him, dark lashes casting shadows across his cheekbones. His mouth was a little swollen too, and wet, and even though Peter had just come seconds earlier, he felt blood rushing between his legs again. God bless werewolf stamina.

Peter threw an arm over his face and groaned.
Chris rested his hands on Peter’s thighs. “You alright?” he asked, amused and wicked, showing his teeth. He grabbed Peter by the collar of his shirt and pulled him back upwards.

Most of the girls Peter had done this with would shy away from kissing him after, but not Chris. He could taste himself on Chris’ tongue. “That is obscene,” he said, his voice still lust-drunk and heavy with admiration.

Peter pulled his pants up, tucking everything back in its place. He settled his hands on Chris’ waist again, letting the parts of himself that made him other rise to the surface. Peter reversed their positions, in an instant.

Chris’ laugh was a low, deep rumble. He let his hands fall to the sides, looking up at Peter with those sinful fucking eyes of his. The panic and secrecy of the previous day was gone, and the hunter had a relaxed, almost contented glow about him. Peter wanted to make it last; he didn’t like it when Chris was unhappy.

They could turn the evening into something better than it was. They could do that. They could do whatever they wanted.

He gave Chris a wicked smile of his own. “My turn.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I intended to post this days ago, but the chapter took on a life of its own. I'm sorry it took me so long to get this up for you guys. I hope you enjoyed it! Let me know what your thoughts are <3
Chapter 18

Warning: This chapter contains dark themes and disturbing imagery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Life didn’t necessarily get better after Peter found out about Gerard, but it tore down another barrier between them. Chris didn’t have to hide things as much anymore. And whenever he tried to, the werewolf usually called him on it.

It was close to the middle of March. Nearly a month since their last hunt. Gerard didn’t seem restless, yet, but Chris was waiting for it. One of these days he was going to come home and their house would be emptied; Katie would be shouting and throwing things and slamming doors, just like every other time. Chris had grown used to it over the years. It never mattered before. His father wouldn’t consult him and there would be no warning — they would just go. The thought of it kept him awake most nights because things were different this time. It did matter now. He didn’t want to go, but he couldn’t stop it. He had no control at all. Chris’ entire life had already been mapped out for him.

His choices were not his own.

Peter knew this too, but they didn’t talk about it, not ever. Instead, Chris tried to take advantage of the time they did have. Because in a blink, it would all be over.

For the last two weeks Olivia had been staying after-school for tutoring. She was failing almost all of her classes. Tutoring never ran any later than 3:30, so Chris tried to hang around and wait for her, when he could. But Ms. Cindy was out of town that week, which meant the Goodro house was unoccupied… and Peter had a key.

Any situation that involved the two of them being alone (in a house where they didn’t have to control their volume) made Chris’ priorities shift a little.

Olivia would be fine, and she did need the extra help, even if Peter kept making snide little remarks about it. She struggled academically. Chris would sit and go over homework with her — Chemistry, English, Algebra, History — for over an hour, and she would still fail the test. Unlike Peter, who could not study for a test at all and then ace it. The werewolf excelled at everything he tried, and he needed to stop getting frustrated with people when they weren’t perfect. Chris told him this, often. He once got Peter to admit, out loud, that he was a condescending asshole. Chris may have been kneeling on the porcelain tile of Olivia’s bathroom floor at the time, but he still took it as a win.

In the beginning of their… relationship (for lack of a better word, but what the fuck did labels matter anyhow?), Peter had been the insatiable one. But lately, it was Chris who struggled to keep his hands to himself — not that he ever got any complaints. He just wanted to touch him, all the time; it was like this strange compulsion that made his fingertips itch and his skin feel too tight. Chris couldn’t get enough of him.

But through all the things they did together, he was always left wanting more.
He and Peter would skip lunch every so often so they could go down to the gym and sneak into the locker room (because no one was ever there, and because Peter said he liked the room’s acoustics). On one day in particular, while Peter’s mouth was otherwise occupied, the werewolf had slid one of his hands further back between Chris’ legs and then up. Peter had pressed two fingers inside him, moving and twisting them in such a way that it had Chris coming harder than he ever had — in his life. He thought about it for days afterwards.

The next time the werewolf’s head was bobbing between Chris’ thighs, he had let his legs fall open a little wider, encouraging him to do it again. Thankfully, Peter was getting better at reading his nonverbal cues, not that that one was particularly subtle.

So, yes, he wanted more. But it wasn’t that simple.

For starters, Chris had never actually been with anyone before. Female or otherwise. It just never came up… so to speak. They moved around a lot. He wasn’t one to make friends, mostly because it was pointless, and his interactions with people were kind of disconnected and formally cordial; again, because anything else was pointless. It was much harder to leave someone behind when he allowed himself to get attached to them. Case in point: their current situation.

He had fooled around with a couple girls in the past, but nothing serious. He never really had the opportunity.

There was also the part where Peter had already slept with most of the female population at their high school. Peter told him this was an “outrageous exaggeration,” but if even half of the rumors circulating around school were true, it wasn’t much of one.

He didn’t like it; the idea of it. The thought of anyone else touching Peter at all made him want to put his fist through a wall. It was the first time he had ever felt true jealousy. If he dug deep enough, he could admit that he was a little jealous of Katie at times, but that wasn’t even close to the same kind of feeling.

But above everything else, it was the level of trust something like that involved. Trust and a loss of control. Chris wasn’t so good at either of those things. He almost wished he had just slept with some random girl at some random school because the connection he felt with Peter made the whole idea of losing control all the more distressing.

Peter knew that the things they did together were the furthest he had ever gone with anyone. When Chris first admitted this to him, the werewolf had gaped for a good twenty seconds before some strange self-conscious feeling had Chris grinding his teeth together and asking, “What the fuck are you looking at?”

Peter had shook himself and said, “Your face, mostly. Just trying to understand. I refuse to believe I’m the only one who’s ever tried to take advantage of you before.”

They had bickered back-and-forth for a while, but it made the situation feel a little lighter. Peter had this way of provoking him until Chris got so irritated that he forgot he was uncomfortable about something. It was a pretty effective technique.

Peter never pressed the issue any further; if anything, it was Chris that took the lead when they were together. He wanted more. They both did. Chris just needed to work himself up to it.

Currently, he and Peter were sprawled out on the living room couch. There was some World War II documentary on that the wolf was completely engrossed in; he loved his history. He often had his nose in a book on some ancient something or other and would go off on little tangents at times; spouting out random facts and tidbits on the things he had read and how it applied to whatever
situation they were in. Olivia would just roll her eyes at him, but Chris kind of liked it. He read a lot, too, typically about things that were related to hunting. Knowledge was a powerful thing.

Chris wasn’t really watching the television, though. To be honest, he was feeling kind of hazy. There was a guest bedroom down in the basement that he and Peter had put to good use — for nearly an hour. His toes still felt numb.

Peter’s head was resting in his lap, and he was moving his thumb in lazy circles against Chris’ knee, or running his fingertips along the inside of Chris’ arm, or fiddling with the edges of his t-shirt. Tactile. The werewolf’s body temperature seemed to run a little higher than the average human. It was relaxing.

Chris lightly scratched his fingernails through Peter’s hair, amused by the little hums of contentment the act was producing. In some ways, Peter was more like a very large cat than a wolf.

He felt more peaceful in these little moments of respite they had together than he did anywhere else. When he was with Peter, he could let go a little. He could stop for a minute, and breathe. There was no other place that made him feel this way. Not even his own house, or sleeping in his own bed, where there was the very real possibility of Gerard waking him up in some unpleasant way, like with a bucket of ice water.

Chris took advantage of the lightness he felt in his body and let his eyes shut.

He was just starting to doze off when he heard the front door swing open. Olivia. She would most likely rummage around in the kitchen for a while before coming in to talk to them. Chris didn’t even bother to open his eyes.

He instantly regretted this when she stomped into the living room and hurled her backpack at his head.

Peter caught the thing, mid-flight. “What the fuck, Livie?!”

Chris couldn’t help but agree. That languid feeling fizzled out like a lit candle extinguished with the pinch of two fingers.

“We need to powwow, cupcake,” she said, looking at Chris. She put her hands on her hips. “If you were gonna tell people we were fake dating, you at least could have told me!”

Uh-oh. He didn’t think that would circulate so quickly. But this was Beacon Hills, so he really shouldn’t be surprised.

There had been a lot of close calls lately: people glimpsing him talking with Peter, or seeing them walking together. Someone had made an offhand comment about it, nothing concerning, just an observation. But Chris panicked, and his instincts had him spinning a story to explain it. Lies, lies, lies. It was the most reasonable explanation he could think of on the spot, and it made sense. He had to protect their secret. To be honest, he hadn’t given much thought to how Olivia might feel about it.

Peter was looking at him strangely. “What now?”

“About that…” Chris said with a slight grimace. He probably should have said something.

Olivia continued to glare at him, huffing a breath through her nose as she plopped down on the opposite end of the couch. “Yeah, uh-huh. So Leah Meade starts talking to me after school today about how interesting you are, and she’s all—” She altered her voice, making it whiny and high-
pitched. “‘Is he always so quiet? ‘Cause he’s got, like, that whole mysterious out-of-towner thing going on and he’s totally hot. You’re so lucky.’”

Peter tilted his head. “Why would she-”

Olivia threw her hands in the air. “Shh! I’m still talking!” she said. “Anyways… I was wiggin out because I have no idea what the loony’s talking about. I’m pretty sure she’s never even directly spoken to me before. Like ever. I almost said that I didn’t even know you, which is stupid. People know that I know you.”

She tried to inch a little closer to where they were sitting, but Peter’s legs were still stretched out across the couch. She pushed at his feet until he made space for her. “Instead, I just stare at her like an idiot for at least twenty-eight seconds. Eventually she starts apologizing for being too forward or whatever, and I must have said ‘what?’ or something because she starts telling me how you said we are, and I quote, ‘in a relationship.’ ”

“When did you tell her this?”

Chris looked to Peter. “This morning,” he told him before turning his attention back to Olivia. “What did you say to her?”

“What was I supposed to say?! I went along with it. You made me look like a total moron, you jerk.”

“Alright, Liv, that’s enough,” Peter said with a touch of warning in his voice, but Chris gave a dismissive wave of his hand.

Chris made this choice on his own, and he would explain it on his own. “It seemed like a sound idea at the time. You know, strategically.”

“Roger that, Robocop. I get it,” Olivia said. After a moment, she shook her head, her mouth twisting in an ironic little smile. She was still annoyed with him, but he could tell by the humor in her eyes that he was forgiven. “A heads up would have been nice, is all.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” he said, then settled his eyes on Peter. “I’m sorry.”

Peter looked at him for a few seconds, nodded, then reclaimed his previous position; sprawling across Chris and resting his sock-covered feet in Olivia’s lap. “It’s a good idea.”

“Yes, for you guys!” She pushed at Peter’s feet again. “This just means I can’t actually date anyone for real, because I’m too busy playing the beard for the two of you.”

That caused a little spark of irritation in Chris. He wasn’t ashamed of Peter… Alright, maybe sometimes, but that’s because the werewolf was ridiculous, not because they were both guys.

“Wait a minute, no, that’s not what this is about.”

Peter reached up, absentmindedly patting the side of Chris’ face. “She’s joking, Christopher. Simmer down.”

Condescending, Chris thought. He turned his head to nip at the inside of Peter’s wrist.

“Easy now,” Peter said, pulling his hand back. His mouth twitched. “Watch the teeth.”

Olivia gave a dramatic groan from her place on the couch beside them. “You guys are super gross.”
The following weekend he took Olivia out to his favorite spot in the woods for target practice. He had been working with her out there for months. At first, every time she fired the gun, she would immediately drop it into the dirt and flap her hands around like she was a bird trying to take flight. It had taken a lot of effort on his part to make her stop that. She didn’t do it anymore, but she hadn’t gotten any better at hitting the target. She may have gotten worse, if that was even possible.

It took about five or six shots for Olivia to actually hit a tree, of course it was about three trees to the left of where she was aiming.

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “I suck at this.”

“That’s because you keep closing your eyes when you fire.”

“I can’t help it!”

He walked up behind her, gently taking the gun and switching on the safety before handing it back. She almost shot a hole in his leg a few weeks earlier. They had very carefully reviewed the concept of gun safety, after that. “You can. Listen, you’re psyching yourself out. Just remember what I told you: Get a good grip and set your feet shoulder width apart so you can manage the recoil. And don’t pull the trigger, squeeze it,” he said, modeling the motion with two fingers. “Aim for something small. It minimizes the chance of error.” Chris picked up the crossbow lying in the grass beside them and leveled it at their makeshift target. “Like this.”

The sound of an arrow leaving a bow was always satisfying to him. It zipped through the air, the sharp silver tip embedding itself in the intersecting lines of the “X” he had carved into a tree.

Olivia raised an eyebrow. “Easy, Robin Hood. Nobody likes a show off.”

“Says Peter Hale’s best friend,” he said, a corner of his mouth lifting.

“Says Peter Hale’s boyfriend.”

Chris’ smile faded. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“Uh-oh,” Olivia said. She pressed a hand to her cheek. “Have we regressed back to the denial stage again?”

“No,” he said, “I just don’t like that word.”

“What, ‘boyfriend’?”

“Yes, that. It just doesn’t feel…” He lifted his shoulder in a half shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t like it. It’s juvenile.”

“Why?” she asked. “Is it a little too ‘Will you be my boyfriend. Please circle yes or no’ for ya?” She gave a slightly lopsided grin at his noncommittal grunt. “Sure, sure, I can dig that. What would you call him, then?”

“I usually call him ‘Peter.’”

“Come on, Chris.” She turned to face him fully, gun still grasped loosely in her left hand. “Seriously.”

“I don’t know,” he said, and his voice was harsh, irritated, but it wasn’t directed at her. His
inability to put his own feelings into words was endlessly frustrating. “Just not that. It’s not good enough.”

If he was being honest, Peter was… more, but he didn’t know how to communicate that. At least not out loud.

He ran a hand over his face. “I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

Olivia scrutinized him for a moment before giving a single jerky nod. “Okey-dokey. Can I call him your life-partner, then? Wait, wait, no. Lover?” Her eyes sparkled. “Yes, that’s bitchen! Let’s go with that!”

She was waving the gun around with all of her gesturing. Chris grasped onto it, switching off the safety with his thumb. “Shoot the damn target, Olivia.”

She made a soft grouchy sound as she turned back towards the tree, widening her stance a little, the tip of her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth as she concentrated. But when she fired the gun, the shot was still about a foot off its mark.

He snorted. “You really do suck.”

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Chris dropped Olivia off around six and headed straight home. Gerard was out of town, and as much as he would rather spend the night at her house, or better yet, at the cabin with Peter, he couldn’t leave Katie all alone. Not overnight.

His sister had spent the day at a friend’s house — Tiffany Cohen, 156 Miller Street — but Mrs. Cohen was supposed to bring her back at five o’clock. That morning, Chris had told his sister to get washed up and ready for bed once she was dropped off and he would be home shortly after. They could order a pizza or something.

He was kind of looking forward to it. With all the training expectations their father was putting on her, she and Chris weren’t spending as much time together. That was partly because he spent every possible free moment he had with Peter, but still.

Chris pulled into his driveway, grabbing the duffel bag full of weapons and ammunition from the back of his truck. It wasn’t until he unlocked his front door and entered the house that he noticed Gerard’s things spread out across the kitchen table. His father must have parked in the garage.

Chris heaved his duffel onto the counter as disappointment settled over him.

Blink-blink-blink. He looked up at the chandelier, his mouth twisting in a frown. Excellent, what a way to end the day.

Chris walked across the hall to the doorway which led down to his least favorite room in the house. Gerard was home, but the telltale flicker of lights told him they had company in the basement.

He felt that atmospheric shift of bad things as he walked across the threshold and descended the stairs. The air was thick with the smell of blood and charred flesh. Whoever Gerard held captive, he must have had them down there for a while.

Katie was sitting on the bottom step. She was wearing a dark red t-shirt — the one that went down past her knees — and her feet were bare. Her pajamas. She had gotten ready for bed on her own like Chris had asked her to.
Gerard was standing by the back wall, partially obstructing Chris’ view of the wolf that was hanging from the ceiling. There was a tarp laid out beneath them, which was never a good sign.

The werewolf couldn’t have been much older than Chris. Mid-twenties, at most. He was hanging limply from the chains, shoulders twisted oddly — *dislocated*, Chris thought. There was clearly no fight left in him. No more will. No more hope. Chris had seen it a hundred times before. They all got reduced to that in the end.

The hum of Gerard’s favorite torture device was like a steady vibration beneath Chris’ feet. There were leads attached to the werewolf’s chest, intermittently sending out painful shocks as his father saw fit. The gag fastened to the wolf’s mouth would have muffled the screams, but he was barely even conscious anymore.

Chris sidestepped Katie and walked to the center of the room, placing himself between her and the bloody, broken mess that was hanging from their ceiling. “Gerard?”

“Stay back, please,” their father said, fisting a hand in his captive’s hair and yanking the head back. The wolf’s eyes were blue. “Do you know what this means, Katherine?”

Chris turned to look back at his sister, still perched on the stairs.

Her answer was as much a reflex as his would have been. “It’s a killer.”

“That’s right. They’re all killers,” Gerard said. “But this one is an omega. The lowest of the low.” He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned forward. “Do you know what *that* means, Katherine?”

“That it’s alone.”

“Yes! Very good. That’s a death sentence for their kind.”

Chris didn’t like the way Gerard was looking at his sister. It was making him nervous. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like this. “I didn’t realize there was another omega in town,” he said, taking a step to the left, into his father’s line of sight.

Gerard was visibly annoyed by the interruption. “That’s because there wasn’t. I had to search for this one.”

“Where did you find it?” Chris asked, almost… forcefully. He wanted to refocus the man’s attention.

Gerard’s eyes flashed but his mouth curved into a smile. “That doesn’t matter right now, boy.” He grasped onto Chris’ shoulders, none-too-gently guiding him off to the side. There was blood under his fingernails. “Last question, sweetheart,” he said to Katie. He jerked his thumb towards the electrical device at the werewolf’s feet. “Do you know why we use that?”

Katie stood from her step, the oversized t-shirt she wore making her look even younger than her measly seven years. “It makes them weak.”

“Right again! Three for three!” Gerard said, his voice heartfelt and kind. “Very well done.” He held out a hand to her. “Come here, Katherine.”

Katie placed her small hand in his, looking up at him with trust in her eyes. In the space of that second, Chris realized what their father’s intentions were.
“You can’t fire a weapon down here,” he said, desperate, trying to think of some way to stop this from happening. “It’ll make too much noise.”

Gerard gave him a derisive glance. “I’m aware of that. Now be silent.”

Their father guided her by the hand towards the captive werewolf, who had finally lost his battle with consciousness. When Gerard unshackled his wrists, the body fell to the ground like a bag of rocks.

There was a small, silver table set up by the back wall. It was littered with various blades and other sharp implements. Gerard grabbed a double-edged knife, already red with blood, and handed it to Katie.

He then lowered himself to the ground and yanked the wolf’s head back once again, exposing the throat. “Right here under the chin,” he said, “as hard as you can. No hesitation. No mercy. They wouldn’t give you the same courtesy.”

Chris inched forward. “Gerard…”

“Silent,” his father said. He moved his face closer to Katie’s, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. His fingertips left a streak of blood on her cheekbone. “Daddy’s going to help you this time, sweetheart. On three, alright?” he said, so softly, like he was trying to teach her how to ride a bike.

Katie stared at their father with large, owlish eyes before nodding her head. Gerard smiled and wrapped his hand around hers on the knife. “Ready, Katherine? Here we go. One… two…” He turned her wrist slightly, angling the tip of the blade so it pressed against the softest, most vulnerable part of the werewolf’s throat. “Three!” Chris rocked on the balls of his feet, a shrill high-pitched ringing between his ears, and it felt like the deepest betrayal, but he couldn’t watch it — he looked away.

That familiar wet, squelching sound of a blade being pushed through flesh seemed louder than ever. And then, silence. One beat, another. The clang-clatter of the knife hitting the ground brought Chris’ eyes back to his sister.

Gerard was helping her to her feet, his hand still tightly grasping hers. Katie’s face had lost all color and there were dark patches spread across the front of her t-shirt. Blood spatter, he thought. Although the red of the shirt she wore hid it well.

The young werewolf had been discarded in a careless heap across the light blue tarp: body broken from hours of torture, blood spilling from a hole in his throat. He was very dead.

Their father ripped off the leads still attached to the werewolf’s chest and switched the machine off. His mouth split in a wide grin. “And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

Gerard released his sister’s hand and Chris was across the room in a flash. He gripped her by the elbow, pulling her back and away from the blood that was pooling at her feet.

She yanked her arm out of his grip. “Leave me alone.”

Behind them, their father gave a mocking laugh. “Deal with that, Christopher,” he said, gesturing to the werewolf’s body, “and get it ready to be moved.”

***

After Gerard disappeared up the stairs, Chris sent his sister outside to grab the polyester rope out of his truck. There was actually some twine in one of their storage chests that would do the job
Chris retrieved his father’s broadsword from its usual place in the weapons cabinet and walked up to the body. He didn’t focus on the man’s face, or his hair color, or the shoes that he wore. He didn’t focus on anything at all; just his own hands and the sharp edges of the blade. In one quick swing, he cut the body in half — detached and clinical, like he had been taught. Blood ran in thick rivulets off the edges of the tarp, forming a sizable puddle that would most likely stain the basement floor. By the time Katie came back down the stairs, the body was wrapped up in the tarp and ready to be tied off.

Chris walked over to her. “Thanks,” he said, taking the rope from her outstretched hand. He unraveled a few feet of it, cutting off three sections that were equal in length and moved back towards the body again.

Katie tugged at his sleeve. “Wait, Chris, let me do it.” She gripped onto the ends of the rope and lightly pulled until he released it. Then, kneeling down, she wrapped one section of the rope around the upper portion of the tarp.

Her hands were shaking.

Katie, his Katie. Chris crouched beside her and tried to take the rope from her hands. “Katie…”

“Stop, I got it,” she said, pushing hard at his shoulder. “I can tie a good knot.”

“Yes, you can.”

He just looked at her a moment: her small face and childlike hands. She had grown up in the last few years but she was still such a kid, and she looked so much like their mother that sometimes it felt as if his chest might split down the center. It should have been Allison Argent who was crouched on the ground with his sister, but their mother was dead. All Katie had was Chris.

“We have a responsibility,” he said.

His sister’s hair hung like a curtain over her face as she bent across the tarp, fingers still working at the rope. She didn’t look up. “I know.”

“And we do what we have to do.”

“I know.”

Chris placed his bloodstained hands on her tiny shoulders, stilling her movements. “You shouldn’t feel bad about it.”

Katie looked up at him then, and he froze. His sister’s eyes were like two empty holes in her face, dull and lifeless, like a mannequin’s. She drew in a steady breath. “I don’t.”

As always, any feedback would be much appreciated. The comments you guys leave are like little shots of adrenaline to me. Seriously, you guys are the best! XO!
The omega that his sister killed was the last one they saw for a while. Days turned into weeks. It had been seven-and-a-half months since they first moved to Beacon Hills.

Katie had carried on after her first werewolf kill as if nothing happened at all. In fact, she and Gerard were closer than ever. Chris had been a year or so younger than her when he made his first kill, but he had been in an open field and used a gun. The weight of killing someone face-to-face like that was all-consuming, or at least it should be.

He could recall how he had struggled with it. The images in his head, creeping and crawling like cockroaches, invading his sleep.

Chris had never slept well. Because, all those little thoughts and memories that he so carefully controlled during the day? They ran unchecked inside his dreams.

He hadn’t slept a full night in over a month.

He was paranoid, and it was only getting worse. As always, the root of the problem was his father. Chris was afraid that he would find out about the Hales, about Peter. The thought sat in the back of his mind all the time. But when he was asleep, it manifested itself in excruciating detail.

Gerard could never find out about them, because if he did, the fact that Chris cared about Peter wouldn’t matter. If anything, it would make him all the more ruthless. The longer they stayed in Beacon Hills, the greater the risk was.

Luckily, the man was too focused on other things. He was still going on hunts. So far, all the hunts were close enough for him to travel there and then come back. He had left Chris behind the last two times, taking Katie instead. Chris liked it when they were away because he could move around more freely. He could come and go as he pleased. He could spend time with Peter without having to watch the clock every second.

What he should have been doing was breaking things off between them. He needed to stop this. It was a mistake. But as much as he tried, he couldn’t stay away from him.

As ever, their neutral ground was the Goodro house. That and the cabin were the only safe places they had.

Chris spent more time at Olivia’s house than he did at his own. Recently, his friend had taken up baking, which had been… interesting. Although, she didn’t set things on fire nearly as often as she used to.

After a while, he found himself becoming the guinea pig to her creations: little cakes and pastries that looked horrifying but somehow tasted good. “Chris, try this real quick and tell me if it’s awful,” Olivia would say. She never bothered asking Peter, because he would just wrinkle his
nose up and shake his head. He was *fussy,* and he liked things the way he liked them. There wasn’t much room for negotiation on that. You would think he was some kind of royalty in a past life with the way he acted at times. Like a pretty bird, preening its feathers.

Chris took joy in pointing out those moments when they happened. Anything to ruffle those oh-so-pristine metaphorical feathers of his.

One Saturday, while Peter was sitting on one of the stools at Olivia’s kitchen counter, frowning his distaste as she stirred eggs into her second batch of pumpkin muffins (the first having come out a little deformed, and in a slightly off-putting color), Chris pulled out the stool next to his and sat down beside him.

“Don’t be such a pretty bird, Peter,” he said, leaning closer so their shoulders touched.

The wolf glanced at him, lifting an eyebrow. “A *what?*

“You heard me: a bird. A pretty, pretty bird,” he said, a smile stretching across his face at Peter’s slighted pout. “You’re like a peacock.”

Olivia put down the mixing bowl she was holding, batter spilling over the side in the process. “Ha! You so are!” Her voice took on the note of someone addressing their caged parakeet. “Pretty, pretty bird.”

Peter picked up a lumpy muffin from the plate on the counter and chucked it at her. It hit her right in the forehead. She squeaked a little, taking the large wooden spoon out of the bowl and purposely flicking batter at Peter, who dodged it easily.

Peter laughed and turned to Chris, grabbing Chris’ chin between his thumb and forefinger. He closed the space between them enough to lightly bump their noses together. “Say cock again.”

Chris rolled his eyes. He put his palm on the center of Peter's face and pushed him back so hard the werewolf nearly fell off his stool. Peter held onto Chris' shoulders, steadying himself, then leaned back in to catch his mouth in a hard kiss. Chris kissed him back.

He always did.

Things went on like that for a while. Things were good. Things were good again. During the day at least, when Chris could control his thoughts and fears and insecurities. Still, he felt like he was dangling off the edge of a cliff, clinging desperately to a fraying rope and waiting for it to snap.

They went out to the cabin, a lot. Sometimes during the day. Sometimes at night. They never had to be quiet when they were out there. It was a singular kind of peace.

Chris and Olivia, downing half a bottle of cognac. Him and Peter, sitting together in the back of his truck or up on the roof, talking and talking and talking, while Olivia did cartwheels across the cabin’s front lawn.

There were no street lights there. No houses. No buildings or businesses, just clear skies and bright stars.

Stars, so many stars.

Chris knew his constellations well. It was a great navigation skill. He would point one out, his mind soaked in alcohol and blissfully calm.

“That's Pollux,” he told Peter one night, voice slurred, covering the brighter star with his thumb.
They were up on the roof again. “And Castor. And that one is—”


It was blissful. It was peace.

But it wouldn’t last, because nothing lasted. Nothing but Gerard. He was the only thing in Chris’ life that remained one-hundred percent unalterable and unchanged, always. They still ran drills that made his muscles ache for days. They still poured over texts on supernatural creatures, weapons, witches, traps and hunting techniques, which he would then be tested on. His father’s moods still changed at the drop of a hat and without warning, and Chris was still the focus of his ire when things went badly.

For the first time ever, he found himself looking forward to the nights when Gerard would kick him out. Because, then, he could go stay at Olivia’s.

It all started out very simply. One night, after asking Chris to make himself scarce (nothing new there), his father had taken his keys away, telling him that he wasn’t allowed to sleep in the truck. So, left with the options of going to Olivia’s or trekking fifteen miles through the woods to the cabin, he had chosen the former. Of course it was three in the morning at the time, so he couldn’t exactly walk up to her front door and ring the doorbell.

He ended up picking the rusty old lock on a shed in her backyard and crashing in there. Later on that morning, though, he woke up to find Ms. Cindy standing over him. Fortunately for everyone, he recognized her before he did anything regrettable. Like stab her in the leg.

She raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at him. “Let’s go. In the house.”

Chris trailed silently behind her, shoulders hunched, like a scolded puppy.

She brought him straight into the kitchen, where Olivia was cooking breakfast on the stove. His friend gave a little wave when she saw him there. “Hey, hi. When did you get here?”

“Oh, he’s been here all night,” Ms. Cindy said, pulling a chair back from the kitchen table and pointing down at it. Chris lowered himself into the chair without comment.

Olivia’s face scrunched up. “Huh?”

“I found him sleeping in the shed.”

“Right,” she said, waving a spatula around in the air, “that was… because, um, because—”

“You’re burning the eggs, Olivia Jean.” Ms. Cindy placed a hand flat on the table, leaning forward so she and Chris’ eyes were at the same level. There was a softness in her expression. “And you are staying for breakfast,” she said. Then, turning on her heels, she exited the kitchen and walked down the hall, her shoes clonking on the hardwood floor.

Olivia moved the frying pan to an unlit burner and turned off the stove. She waited until her mother was out of earshot, then said, “For the love of God, Chris. Why didn’t you knock on my window?”

“I don’t know.” He hadn’t even considered that. “It was three in the morning?”

Chris had stayed for eggs and pancakes. He then spent the remainder of the day hanging around the house. They watched television. They played monopoly. Olivia almost set the kitchen on fire.
making quiche. It was a fairly standard day. Minus the absence of Peter, who had another pack meeting, whatever that entailed. Chris couldn’t help but imagine the entire Hale pack sitting around a large dining room table talking about “the hunters.” He tried not to dwell on it.

Ms. Cindy had gone to work a little after breakfast. Before she left, she made him promise not to sleep out in the shed anymore. Regardless, he snuck back in there the very next night. Chris lied or withheld information from almost everyone. It was a survival technique. Not to mention, he didn’t have anywhere else to go.

Once inside the shed, he discovered a small white envelope on the floor by the doorway.

Chris frowned, ripping the envelope open and turning it upside down. A small golden key fell into the palm of his hand.

He slid the key into his pocket and unfolded the note inside.

*Shoes off at the door, kid.* – Ms. Cindy.

Chris’ surprised laughter echoed in the enclosed space. The warmth he felt in his chest was staggering.

***

The first time he and Peter spent the night together at Olivia’s house, they slept down in her basement. Chris usually stayed upstairs, on the couch. He hated it down there. The boiler was too loud and everything creaked and groaned.

He had carefully weighed the thought of being alone with Peter against his basement aversion. It wasn’t that difficult of a decision, in the end.

They had taken an extra blanket out of the hall closet and went down around midnight. As soon as the door closed behind them, Chris slid the lock into place. Peter’s nose had wrinkled up in amusement. He’d leaned forward to press a quick kiss to the side of Chris’ neck, teeth grazing the skin, just for an instant. Then he was clutching at Chris’ shoulders and dragging him down the stairs. Chris may have legitimately tripped and fallen on his ass if it wasn’t for Peter’s ever-steady, iron grip. They had explored each other with mouths and hands until he was more than spent.

Sleep came easy, after that, but it was far from restful.

As usual, Chris dreamt in vivid color and sound.

Broken, twisted up images that flashed rapidly and changed, like the winding colors of a kaleidoscope. He was standing in a room, bare foot. He felt a hand on the small of his back. Someone familiar spoke to him, indistinct words. There was laughter and crying and breaking glass. The smell of burnt hair. Streaks of black and red. And then he was watching his father and sister push a sleek, silver knife through the top of someone’s skull. Chris couldn’t see a face, hadn’t seen it, but he didn’t need to.

*Peter.*

The horror of it was enough to startle him back to consciousness again.

He woke, heart hammering, his lungs seizing for air. The red of the dream still bled through, muddling his mind into a mess of panic and confusion. He felt hands grabbing at him and holding him, so he lashed out, his body moving without his consent. *No, get away, stop.*
It took a few seconds, but the fog in his head lifted enough for him to hear Peter calling his name. "Christopher," he was saying, soft but insistent. "Chris. Chris. Christopher."

It snapped him back instantly, like they were attached by a tether.

A dream. It was just a dream. Peter was there. He was there, and safe, and not dead. Chris clenched his eyes shut, and then opened them. There was several feet of space between them. He must have scrambled to the foot of the bed in his confusion.

"Are you with me?" Peter asked, eyes fretful. There was a trickle of blood dripping from his nose. Chris didn’t move, just sat there with both hands clenched into fists. "Yes. I’m fine."

"Hey, c’mere," Peter said, reaching out, only to settle his hand back to the bed sheet with a frown. "Will you come here, please?"

Chris still didn’t budge. He was too busy watching Peter’s face. The werewolf looked a little pale, which was odd. "Your nose is bleeding."

"Yes, well-" Peter swiped his thumb under his nose, wiping the blood away "-you just cracked me in the face. Twice."

"Sorry."

"Don’t be sorry, just come here," he said. "It’ll stop in a second." As if on cue, the blood from the injury faded until only a faint redness was left behind. Peter gestured at his own face. "Told you."

He could see how much effort Peter was putting into not touching him. The wolf’s hands were moving, restless, over the blanket, his fingers flexing slightly as he spoke.

"Will you please come over here? It’s the middle of the night and it’s cold and I’m injured–"

"It looks fine now," Chris said, attempting a smile. It came off more like a grimace.

Peter talked right over him. "–so come the fuck over here and be my little spoon."

Chris gave a startled laugh, the rasp of it almost painful on his too tight throat. The space between them suddenly felt much larger.

"Fuck you," he muttered under his breath. Still, he crawled back to the top of the bed again, turning onto his side so Peter could curl up behind him. They weren’t much different in size, but they fit together perfectly like this. Peter’s arms closed around him like manacles. The claustrophobic feeling of being held like that used to make his skin crawl.

Peter ran his nose along the curve of Chris’ neck and shoulder, then all the way up to the space behind his ear, inhaling softly. Scenting. He did that a lot.

"You’re an idiot," Chris said without heat. The urge to pull away when they were close like this had long since passed. He internally cringed at the term ‘snuggling,’ but there was no denying that’s what they were doing.

His heart was still racing. He tried to focus on Peter and all the places that he could feel them touching; the soft, warm weight of the blanket that covered them; the steady rise and fall of the werewolf’s chest. He matched their breathing together until his heart rate slowed to an unhurried pace.
Nearly five minutes passed in silence before Peter said, “You really hate it down here, don’t you?”

The best response he had to that was a near inaudible “Hmpf.”

He felt the curve of Peter’s smile against the back of his neck. “We could have slept upstairs.”

Chris shook his head. “We couldn’t do this upstairs,” he said, fingernails dragging over the arm Peter had wrapped around him.

“Well, I wouldn’t care, but…” he trailed off. He wanted to ask about the dream; it was killing him not to. Peter couldn’t leave well enough alone if his life depended on it. “Do you want to tell me what that was about, then?”

Yes. “No.”

“Alright. That’s alright,” he said, close to Chris’ ear. “Does it happen often?”

Yes. “No.”

“Why does it bother you so much?” Peter asked, his voice pitched in that curious way of his. “Being down here?”

Chris fidgeted a little, rearranging himself on the pillow. No one had ever asked him that before. Of course, no one else knew this about him, with the exception of Finn… and Gerard, who only knew the story because he lived it.

He considered it for a second. Peter shared so much about himself, all the time. Stories about his family. Stories about him and Olivia, long before they ever met Chris. To tell the truth, Chris didn’t offer much in return, but this he could give him. He could trust him with this.

It was the middle of the night, so obviously the lights were off. The werewolf could see as well in pitch blackness as he could in broad daylight. Even still, Chris found it easier to speak without having to look at Peter’s face.

“My uncle Leon used to have this farm in Boston. My family stayed there for a while. I was about five, I think?” Chris said, his eyes locking on some indistinct shadow in the corner of the room, which he couldn’t quite make out. Maybe a mountain bike? “It was a great place to train. Real secluded. We stayed there for almost a year. It was… nice.” He paused, focusing once again on the cadence of Peter’s breathing.

Chris was conflicted. One part of him wanted to keep those memories locked in the box where they belonged, but the other was trying to force the words out of his mouth. Don’t be such a coward.

Peter readjusted his hold on Chris and didn’t speak. The wolf loved to fill space with the sound of his own voice, but he also knew when to be silent.

Finally, Chris said, “I remember there were apple trees all around the house. In the fall, my mother and I filled up these wicker baskets with apples.” Bittersweet warmth filled his chest at the memory. He had been too small to reach the branches, and he could still remember the feeling of his mother’s hands under his arms as she lifted him. “There were horses and cows. Lots of dogs, too. I really liked one in particular. Do you know what heterochromia is?” The wolf nodded his head. “Well, she had one blue eye and one green eye. I called her Cyclops.”

Peter readjusted his arms again, obviously picking up on Chris’ uneasiness.
There was this machine outside the barn, like a pulley system? My uncle used it to get the heavier hay bales up to the second floor,” Chris said. “I was out there one day with Cyclops when a cable snapped. This huge beam fell down and I didn’t even think. I just reacted.” He gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I saved the damn dog.”

“What happened?” Peter asked. Chris didn’t need to see him to know his face had gone all tense and worry-lined. He could hear it in his tone.

“The beam almost crushed me. I remember my mother came rushing out and she was screaming. They were so upset with me.”

The memory of his father’s voice came, as clear now as it ever was: *The boy’s too soft Allison. It’s going to get him killed if we don’t do something about it.*

Chris took a breath. “Gerard told me I was weak and stupid and that made me a liability to them. He took Cyclops away. I figured he shot her to punish me for being careless. But about three weeks after that,” he said, “I saw him dragging two of the bigger dog cages down to the basement. I didn’t ask what he was doing, but he woke me up later that night and brought me down there.” He shut his eyes. The edges of the room were getting fuzzy. “The cages were lined up right next to each other. He opened up the one on the left and told me to climb in.” Chris felt as if he was listening to someone else speak from a great distance.

There was this jerky, back-and-forth pull between the grounding weight of Peter’s hands and a strange numbness that wanted to lift him up and away from this. His mind, protecting itself. It wasn’t a feeling that he was used to fighting.

“He left me in there and disappeared for a while,” Chris said, his voice a low monotone. “When he came back, he had her: Cyclops. They came in through the bulkhead door. She had a mussel on at first, but Gerard took it off and threw her in the cage next to mine.” He leaned back against Peter’s chest, like maybe he could fuse their bones together, if he pushed hard enough. “There were bats in the hayloft. I’d heard them at night before. I just didn’t understand.”

“Rabies?” Peter asked, his voice weighty and thick, like he had already pieced together the ending to this story.

“Yes. He wanted to show me.”

*Dad, stop, no. Dad, please, stop, don’t.* It was the very last time he had referred to his father as anything but ‘Gerard.’

Chris could still remember what it felt like: the bars of the cage digging in between his shoulder blades as he shrunk back and cowered. “She couldn’t get at me, but she tried,” he said. "She broke her teeth on the bars trying to reach me. Trying to kill me. She thrashed around in there like a monster.” He dug his fingertips into Peter’s forearm, hard enough to leave indents behind. “She reared back so hard that it snapped her spine in two. I don’t think I realized that at the time, but it was so loud. I remember the sound. I remember my father opening the cage and pulling her out. Then he shot her.”

*Anything that dangerous, that out of control, is better off dead.* How many times had Gerard told him that since then?

“He left me in there until the next day.” Chris didn’t offer up any more details on that. His night cowering inside that cage, surrounded by noises that were harmless yet terrifying. He could have easily opened the latch and climbed out. It wasn’t locked, but he had been petrified. He wouldn’t have dared.
He thought about Cyclops, and how she used to bump her head against the back of his knees to
get his attention. “She was always such a gentle thing,” he said, with the ghost of a smile, “but the
transformation was… She was a monster. He wanted to show me that.”

Several moments passed before Peter spoke. “Chris, that’s not... You know that’s not...” he said,
whisper-soft. It sounded like he had glass stuck in his throat, but Chris had nothing left in him to
deal with it. You know that’s not the same. Yeah, that wasn’t a conversation he was up to having
right then.

Instead, Chris said, “I think I can go back to sleep now.” He was surprised at how natural the
drooping of his eyelids felt. “If that’s alright?”

Peter’s arms tightened around him, but his voice was softer than Chris had ever heard it.
“Whatever you want, love.”

Chris startled at the word, but he was far too worn out to truly react to it. He felt warm and safe
and almost unbearably light. He had never told that story to anyone before, and he hadn’t realized
the heaviness of it until he felt the weight lifting.

The steady rise and fall of Peter’s chest lulled him back into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so that was painful. I’m sorry to end two chapters in a row on such a
depressing note. There is less angst in the next chapter, I promise.

Comments are my lifeblood. If you have any kind of feedback, I would love to hear
it!

NEXT CHAPTER: Chris and Peter turn seventeen. Peter loses his anchor.
June 21st was the first day of summer vacation.

Livie ended up failing four out of seven of her classes, and she would have been held back if it wasn’t for Peter. He had to lay the charm on pretty thick, but he was able to sweet talk their high school principle into letting her go to summer school. It was far from the first time he had done something like that for her. He felt like he carried her, at times. Maybe he was doing her a disservice, but she was his to look after. Besides, he could admit it had been a little self-serving. If she was in all sophomore classes again, he wouldn’t see her as much.

But Livie had wrapped those deceptively strong arms of hers around him, hugging him tight. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I owe you. I so owe you.”

Peter had happily given her a list of ways to make it up to him, choosing not to mention that he had (at least in part) done it for his own benefit. There was no such thing as a truly altruistic act, after all.

The summer school program was six weeks long. They met five hours a day, five days a week. It kept her pretty busy.

Most of the time it was just him and Chris.

Peter had disliked the Goodro’s cabin since the first time Livie dragged him out there. It was a dump. Even so, recent events made him… reassess his previous misgivings on the place. He loved it there now. As much as he enjoyed spending the night with Chris at Olivia’s house (and he really, really did), the cabin was so much better. At Livie’s they still needed to sneak around and be quiet, like they were doing something wrong. But at the cabin, there was none of that. They could say and do whatever they wanted, for as long as they wanted. There were no restrictions, which was how he preferred most things.

One thing he discovered about Chris through their time at the cabin was how stealthy he was. If Chris needed to be home early for any reason, he would climb out of bed and sneak off before the sun came up, without even waking Peter. The first time it happened he had been mystified, among other things. Waking up to find Chris gone had not been pleasant, more like how a pumpkin must feel during its transformation into a jack-o’-lantern: knives slicing, guts being ripped out, and all that. Peter much preferred the mornings when he would wake up first, because then he could just… watch Chris for a while. His face completely stress free, unburdened, and relaxed in sleep. It was comforting. It made Peter feel like everything in the universe was lined up the way it should be.

They had grown closer since Chris told the story of what his father had done, with the cage and that dog. Peter had a thousand questions. He wanted to make sure Chris didn’t see some kind of correlation between what he went through and the process of turning into a werewolf, because it didn’t take a rocket scientist to see that’s what his lunatic father was trying to teach him. But Chris never brought it up again, so he hadn’t either. Truth be told, as much as he hated to admit it, he was afraid of what Chris’ answer might be. There were lines between them that even Peter didn’t want to poke at.

Still, the whole thing had been like popping the tab on a soda can. Because, after that night, Chris
started talking to him about other things.

He learned about the hunter’s predilection for numbers. It was something he had noticed a while ago. Chris had a special kind of brilliance to him. He was remarkable at seeing and deciphering patterns; it was part of what made him such an exceptional hunter. He knew a lot about ancient dialects too, since most of the older records on the supernatural were written in some dead language. He also spoke fluent French and Spanish, and his German was apparently “passable.”

Peter found out that Chris wasn’t born in the United States, but a city in France called “Marseille,” which was what it said on his birth certificate. He told Peter about his mother and how, at times, she would go a solid week without speaking a word of English, instead communicating in rapid-fire French and asking Chris to do the same. If I asked her something in English, she’d just pretend she didn’t hear me.

He spoke of how the woman loved older music — the 20s, the 30s, the 40s — and how she used to play her favorite songs on an old-fashioned record player.

Peter learned about some of the places they had traveled. Hundreds of locations, in only sixteen years.

They mostly spoke about these things at night, after the sun had set and moon shadows filled up all the empty spaces. Chris would lay with his head on Peter’s chest, drawing lazy patterns across Peter’s skin with his fingers while telling stories about some marketplace in Barcelona or a river in the South of France. Peter would just wrap his arms around him and listen. He savored those moments because no one held onto Chris unless he allowed them to. Peter was fully aware of that. It felt like a privilege every time it happened.

“Where would you go back to?” Peter asked him one night as they laid beneath a scratchy blanket on the cabin’s metal-frame bed. It was nearly four in the morning. “If you had to pick one place? Not for a hunt or any kind of obligation, but because you wanted to.”

The smallest crease formed between Chris’ eyebrows. “I think I would go back to Rome. The ruins of the Colosseum. It was like seeing a skeleton from another time,” he said. “There was just so much history there.” He raised his head a little so he could look at Peter’s face, his eyes soft with something unmistakably fond. “You would love it. I wish I could show you.”

“Alright, then we’ll go.”

“What?”

“You said you wanted to show me.”

“If, but...” Chris didn’t move from his position, but Peter still felt him withdrawing, in the metaphorical sense. “That’s not rational, Peter. You know we could never actually—”

“No, fuck that.

“No, I don’t know that,” Peter said, his voice clipped, almost abrupt. “If you choose to look at things that way, that’s fine, but I refuse to. We have a whole lifetime. You can show me whatever you want.”

Chris pulled away from him, literally, at that. He rolled off of Peter and onto his back, his eyes locking on the ceiling. “I’d really rather not—”

“Talk about this? Yes, I’m aware of that.” Peter sighed. “We have a whole lifetime to figure this out, Chris. And I promise you, we’ll go.” He turned on his side, resting a hand on Chris’ hip and
tugging lightly until Chris acquiesced and turned to face him again. Peter moved his hand to the back of Chris’ neck. “Do you believe me?”

Chris just stared at him, blinking. His eyes were so fucking blue; it never ceased to twist Peter’s head up, whenever their faces were close like this. But the only thing he could see in Chris’ eyes in that moment was doubt. It hurt, but Peter didn’t blame him for it. He wasn’t sure if Chris knew how to believe in anything.

“I believe you,” Chris said anyway, after a moment, and Peter didn’t need to hear his heartbeat stutter to know it was a lie.

They hadn’t discussed it again.

Chris was afraid to wish for things, or to want things. He didn’t think they could stand the test of time, but Peter did. He was certain of it. He wasn’t going to let anyone take Chris away from him. He would do anything to stop that from happening. Whatever it took.

Chris would say that he was being unreasonable, and maybe he was. Maybe his mindset on the whole thing made him pathetic, but he could give a fuck less. That’s the way things were going to be, and he embraced that as a fact because it was the only way he could function. It was as simple as that. Whatever might happened in the future? They would deal with it then. He wasn’t going to just let him go.

Throughout the month of July, there were a few stray werewolves that wandered into town.

The residual pull of Talia’s alpha status had faded months ago, but the wolves were being drawn by word of mouth now. Some were able to come and go within a matter of days, slipping through the cracks and not drawing Gerard Argent’s attention. But others, the ones that were stupid and lingered too long, they were far less fortunate.

The wolves weren’t the only things creeping around. There were others. A chupacabra thirty or so minutes outside of town, and a basilisk, which circled for a while but never quite crossed into Beacon Hills. The Argents dealt with them all. To some extent, it felt as if they were the supernatural magnets, not his sister.

Peter hated it when Chris was “on a hunt.” Whenever Chris locked his focus in on something, he couldn’t stop. He was like a thing possessed. There would be maps, books, and notepads spread out on every surface; tacked to the wall, or laid out across tables. He didn’t sleep, not that he ever did that well, and he barely ate. His face would grow pale and deep black circles would sit in the crevices beneath his eyes.

He drove himself into the ground, and Peter couldn’t stand it.

Sometimes, it would get to the point where Peter had to make him stop. He would walk up behind him, placing both hands under Chris’ arms and lifting him out of whatever chair he happened to be slumped in.

“Sleep now,” Peter would say, which was never enough on the first try.

Chris would just shrug him off, reaching back for whatever book his eyes had been drilling holes through. “OK, but just wait until–”

“No, we’re done for tonight.” You stubborn, self-sacrificing martyr.

“One more sec–”
“Nope, sorry.”

In those moments, Peter wasn’t beneath frog marching him to the bed, if that’s what it took. Chris was stubborn as all hell, but he wasn’t unpersuadable, not if you knew how to press in the right places.

The hunts where he left town with Gerard were so much harder. One time he was gone for seven-and-a-half days. Peter had driven Olivia nuts. He had been foul and short-tempered with everyone. But mostly, he found himself losing his patience with Talia.

Everything she did annoyed him, as of late. The way she spoke about the hunters. The way she would walk around the house like some burdened leader, stiff and unyielding, refusing to hear him out or listen to his suggestions. After all, Talia knew best. The distance between them grew with every passing day. His sister had always valued his input in the past, but they were no longer equals. She was the alpha, and the trait she seemed to display most often in her leadership was sitting on her hands.

Talia had noticed the changes in Peter’s behavior and tried to reach out to him more than once. But even when she asked him simple questions, which were most likely motivated by concern, it still felt like an inquisition. As if she was trying to dig inside him and pry things out. It made him irritable and secretive and that just widened the canyon of space between them even further.

He had felt this way for a while. Chris’ absences simply heightened feelings that were already there.

Peter just missed him, and worried, and maybe he lashed out because of that, but he couldn’t control it. He would think of Chris and the numerous faded scars that marked his skin. Some of them from old hunts, some of them not. He would think of how Chris startled awake at night, gasping for air like he was being suffocated. They’re just dreams, Chris would tell him. It’s fine, don’t worry so much.

But the thought of him waking up like that and Peter not being there? It was a new kind of torment. He would pace the floors at night just thinking about it. He worried about him. He worried about him so fucking much. That something would happen and he wouldn’t be able to help, because he didn’t even know about it.

The whole thing left Peter with dreams of his own. Dreams of killing Gerard Argent and ripping his body into pieces to burn on a pyre. The way the hunters did with the werewolves they killed. The man would scream and plead as he suffered. Suffered like Chris suffered.

And those dreams were Peter’s only respite.

***

Chris turned seventeen at the end of July.

As far as Peter knew, the Argents did nothing to celebrate the day. This was far from a shock to him, unacceptable as it was. Peter couldn’t think of a more worthy cause to celebrate than the anniversary of Chris’ birth. In his opinion, it should be a national holiday that was marked off on all the calendars. But Chris didn’t care for being put in a spotlight. He didn’t like attention or gifts or anything that left him feeling as if he owed some kind of debt. Peter tried to explain the reasons why he shouldn’t feel like that, but Chris could be very pigheaded when you tried to debate something head-on with him. It was much easier for Peter to just do what he wanted, letting the chips fall where they may, and then deal with the fallout afterwards. Chris could object to being “fussed over” as much as he liked. It wasn’t going to dissuade Peter from continuing to do so.
Somebody had to.

It was his birthday and Peter refused to let the occasion go by unmarked. He wasn’t going to make a big spectacle or anything, but he had to do something. Contrary to popular belief, he was capable of being sentimental, with the right person and under the right circumstances.

They were at the cabin that night. Peter waited until well after eleven o’clock, when Chris’ eyes were heavy and his body worn-out. Chris didn’t have the supernatural assist, as far as stamina went, that Peter did. But they were both teenage boys, meaning they could stretch things out for a while, if they paced it right. Besides, anytime Chris made claims of “not being able to get off again” — well, Peter would take that as a challenge.

Things were quiet now. Chris was curled up on his left side with his knees slightly bent, one arm tucked underneath the pillow. It was his default sleep position. His breathing was getting slower, too. Peter took a moment to flatten the stubborn cowlick at the back of Chris’ head, then climbed out of the bed.

The second his feet touched the floor, Chris was calling after him. “Where you going?”

“Nowhere,” Peter said. He walked over to the fireplace, where he had left his bag, unzipping the front compartment and pulling out the gift inside. There was a gold ribbon tied around its handle.

Chris sat up and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, his hair disheveled and his mouth still kiss swollen. The scowl that twisted his face fell a little short of being intimidating. “I said no gifts, Peter.”

“This isn’t a gift.”

“No?”

Peter moved back toward the bed and sat down beside him. “Nope.”

“What is it, then?”

He held the dagger out to Chris, turning it a little so he could get a better look at it. The blade itself was a bright silver. It had a slightly curved, bronze handle and the words *Enim Fortuna* were engraved onto the side. It was ancient but still in great condition.

Chris squinted his eyes as he read the inscription. “For luck?”

“Yes,” Peter said, smiling as he watched Chris trail a finger along the loops of the words. “It belonged to my nan’s grandfather. He was a soldier, in the Civil War.”

Chris pulled his hand back as if the blade had burnt the pads of his fingers. “Jesus, Peter, you can’t give me that. That’s an heirloom. It belongs to your family.”

Peter put the dagger down on the bed, in the space between them. “Actually, it belongs to me,” he said with a slight downward shift to his brow. “My grandmother left it to me in her will, among other things, so technically I can do whatever I want with it.” His head cocked to the side. “Are you going to listen to my story or not?”

Chris’ lips pressed together, like he was trying to stop a laugh from escaping. “Sorry, please continue.”

Peter let the tendrils of amusement and affection that he could feel from Chris fill up his senses. “Why, thank you,” he said. At this point, he was thinking less about story time and more about the
swell of Chris’ smirking mouth, but he had an agenda, so he pushed down the impulse. “Not every baby born into a werewolf family gets the wolf gene. Sometimes it’s recessive and they’re born human.”

“I know,” Chris said in that ‘I’ve read all the books on werewolf lore’ way of his.

“That’s nice for you, now hush,” Peter said. “As I was saying, my great-great-grandfather was the pack’s only human at that time. The human members of the pack are precious to us. They keep us grounded. They keep us connected to that part of the world.”

Chris leaned forward a little, his eyes betraying his interest. He ghosted his fingers along the edges of the blade again as Peter continued. “Before he enlisted, his mother gave him this.” He picked up the dagger and turned it so the engraved words were facing upwards.

“For luck?”

“Yes,” Peter said. “She told him it was more for her benefit than his. That she would sleep better at night knowing he carried a piece of the pack with him. It was completely self-serving. And I would define a gift as something selflessly given without thought of return payment.” He gently grasped onto the dagger’s razor-sharp blade, holding the handle out towards Chris again. Take it, please, just take it. “So, you see? Not a gift.”

Chris reached out a hand, the blanket falling from his shoulders in the process. “I couldn’t…” He hesitated. “I couldn’t possibly accept that.”

“You’re going to hurt my feelings, Christopher.”

The corners of Chris’ mouth twitched. He reluctantly took the dagger from Peter’s outstretched hand, testing the balance and spinning it around once, probably unintentionally. Peter had seen him do that with a butter knife before; it was a reflex. After a moment, Chris leaned over and placed the dagger on the folding tray table they used as a makeshift nightstand. Running a hand over his face, he turned back to Peter, taking hold of his wrist and pulling him close enough to press their lips together. Peter tilted his head, opening his mouth to it. He would never tire of this.

When Chris pulled away from him, Peter watched his face. There was something so exposed about his expression. He looked uncertain and confused, like no one had ever given him anything in his life, and maybe they hadn’t? He leaned forward again, pressing another quick kiss to Peter’s mouth. “Thank you.”

Peter ran his thumb along a stark-white scar that stretched across the line of Chris’ collarbone. I love you, he thought, I love you, I love you. But he couldn’t say that, not to Chris, Chris couldn’t handle that, so he just smiled and said, “You’re welcome.”

***

Peter’s own birthday was thirteen days later. The pack always made a huge deal out of it. They threw him the usual party and there were lots of presents, the best of which was a picture Derek made with glue and macaroni. It was a full day that’s sole focus was celebrating Peter. And as much as he conjured the image of overindulging in such attention, there was still something inside him that was unfulfilled by it. He was so often left with this strange hollowness in his gut that, for whatever reason, he could never quite fill up.

After helping his mom gather the wrapping paper scattered about their living room (she always reused it), he went over to Livie’s. Both she and Chris were waiting for him there. He found them in the kitchen, standing over a sink full of dirty pots and pans.
Peter swallowed down a sigh as he saw the tray Olivia was holding. He assumed it was some kind of… cake? At least, that’s probably what she was going for. It was smothered in white frosting, misshapen and lopsided. There was also a single blue candle stuck into the top of it.

Livie was positively beaming. “I made it myself!”

Peter’s eyebrows shot up. It looked like something snaked out of a drain. “You don’t say.”

Chris gently took the tray from Livie’s hand and placed it down on the counter, like he was afraid she was going to drop it. “I helped.”

“That’s true,” she said, sucking a bit of frosting off the side of her thumb. “He manned the fire extinguisher. And also frosted.”

Chris was only able to stay for forty-five minutes, which sucked beyond belief, but Peter would take what he could get. It never felt like they had enough time together, even when they had all night, and the stress of that was starting to wear on him. He put so much effort into reassuring Chris that everything would be alright, but his own feelings just kept building and building. Stress and bitterness and frustration. Anger. To top it all off, another (not so desirable) gift he received for his seventeenth birthday was the full moon, which was in two short days. He could already feel it. And watching Chris walk out the door made him want to rip the fucking thing off its hinges.

The next day was even worse.

The moon was tugging on him so violently that month, like metal-based tattoo ink under the pull of an MRI. For some reason, sounds and smells were hitting him harder than ever, and he was struggling to control his temper. He had even snapped at Derek once, which was bothersome enough on its own, but it wasn’t the only incident. When he and Steven were in town getting takeout from the pizza place, a little girl in pigtails had run through a set of swinging doors by the counter, one of the doors slamming hard into Peter’s knee. Typically, this wouldn’t have fazed him in the slightest, but he had felt a sudden jolt inside his chest, something primal. It made him want to grab the kid by her hair and yank her backwards. He had been so disturbed by the impulse that he’d left Steven there and walked home.

The night of the full moon brought everything to its peak. He had slipped unnoticed from his house, his instincts driving him to Olivia’s. When he got there, she was sitting outside on the porch swing, fuzzy slippers on her feet and a cup of peppermint tea in her hand.

Peter’s steps were soundless in the grass as he crossed the yard. She didn’t even notice him until he was standing right beside her.

“Olivia,” he said.

She let out a startled gasp, the cup falling from her hand and splashing hot tea across the deck. “Whoa! Dammit, Peter. Scare the shit out of me why don’t cha’!” she said, her heart stuttering. She let out a breath that puffed out her cheeks. “I think we’ve talked about this once or twice. You’re not supposed to sneak up on me like that, remember? You need to hum or whistle or something.” She paused, and he could see the cogs start to turn behind her eyes. “Did you just call me Olivia?”

Her eyes narrowed as she took in his current state. A hand reached out for him — small, delicate, and brittle as dried out twigs — and he felt it again: the jolt. He took a step back.

The sudden waves of concern he felt from her were like nails across his chest. Worry, confusion,
anxiety. She rose to her feet. “Peter? What’s up?”

It felt as if the moon was trying to tug his bones through his flesh. Like it wanted to turn his insides out and crush his skull to a fine powder. Push, pull, push, pull, push. His insides were rattling.

“Somethings wrong,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” Olivia reached for him again when he fist his hands into his hair. “Hey… why don’t you sit down?”

He easily dodged her, nearly choking on a heavy breath. There was something squeezing his throat shut; he couldn’t breathe. “Can’t sit. Where’s Chris?”

“I don’t know. He’s not here.” She didn’t try to touch him again, but her eyes were huge. “I could call–”

“No, no,” he said, panic making his heart jump. Was that feeling hers or his? “It’s not safe to call there.”

Peter was moon sick. He still had enough of his wits left to recognize that. His anchor… Talia, Talia. He had held on to it so tightly for so long, but he knew it was slipping. Every month he lost his grip a little more.

Olivia’s voice was growing distant now, just a tiny pinprick that wasn’t enough to hold his focus. “Take it easy. I’ll get Talia, okay?”

Peter’s growl echoed through the yard like the crackle-bang of a firework. “No! Not her. Not her!” His claws descended and skin tightened and shifted on his face. Colors grew brighter, searing at his eyes. But through all the rushing onslaught of sight and sound, a single quivering heartbeat called to him from inches away. He was suddenly ravenous for it, for her.

“L-Liv-Livie get back!” he said, nearly tripping in his rush to move away from her. “Get away from me!”

He could hear Olivia call after him “Peter, stop! Wait!” as he used the last of his sanity to bound over her fence and take off into the woods.

And then he was falling.

***

Everything was red — sharp, vivid, clear, yet somehow detached and distorted around the edges. Run, Run. His mind was a blank; he thought of nothing. It was fury and instinct in its purest form. Run, run, run. There was no restraint. No fight inside, no struggle. All his urges and impulses were free, unrestricted, and he could let himself be. As his feet pounded a disjointed rhythm against the dirt, he bayed and howled to the fiendish moon at the ecstasy of it all.

Time broke into fragments without meaning. It could have been minutes, or hours.

He was searching, his body screaming out with the need to hunt, to kill, to taste blood in his mouth. The sound of hearts beating came from all directions — a rabbit, a raccoon, a deer — but he followed the pull of his own heart until he could sense the pulsing of blood in human veins.

He could see his prey: warm and human and standing still, like it was waiting.
Everything was red.

Some forgotten thought writhed in the back of his consciousness, but he quelled it with ease, leaping forward and then pouncing. He was an animal: a wild, violent thing, and he lashed out without mercy, his claws sharp and his teeth snapping. The body beneath him was made of soft flesh and fragile bone. He should break it; it should break easily, but its hands moved in a blur and a flash of real pain broke through his fog of red.

It fought back.

He felt more pain in his wrist, his arm, his shoulder. A foot crashed into his ankle and then his knee. He snarled and pulled away, trying to subdue his prey as it twisted in his hold. Then, it happened: a blast of electricity struck his chest with such intensity that he howled and fell backwards. Before he could right himself, it was springing forward, pushing him back to the ground as loud, unintelligible sounds came from its mouth. It climbed on top of him, and he tried to catch its wrist between his teeth.

The sounds it was making grew clearer as it spoke the same words, over and over. “Peter!” it was saying, “Peter! Peter, look at me!”

Its heartbeat sung to him: Ba-dum-ba-dum. Ba-dum-ba-dum.

“Look at me, Peter. Look at me,” it said again, the blue of its eyes cutting into him. He felt an insistent tug in the back of his mind. Peter… His name. That was his name. “That’s it. Come back. Just come back.”

Awareness slammed into him and the brutality of it sucked the oxygen from his lungs. It sapped out all his energy and left him gasping for air.

Christopher.

“Chris… fuck,” Peter said, struggling to sit up. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Chris sat back on his heels, gripping onto Peter’s hand and helping him into a seated position. Peter’s eyes danced over his face, cataloging every inch of it as the horror of what just happened settled over him. There were red marks on Chris’ neck, and a cut beneath his eye, which would undoubtedly bruise. The knuckles on his left hand were scraped, too. Peter could smell the blood. He had marked him. He hurt him. He hurt him.

“It’s alright,” Chris said, inching closer. Peter shook his head and scrambled backwards until he hit the thick trunk of a tree, but Chris just followed after him. “Hey, hey, stop. It’s alright, I’ve had worse.”

The implications of that made fire burn in Peter’s throat. He let out a painful, rasping laugh. “Excellent, that’s excellent. It’s not alright!” He surged forward and took Chris’ face between his hands. “I couldn’t feel you,” he said, frantic and horrified by even the idea of it. He took a moment to wipe away the blood that was smeared under Chris’ eye. “I couldn’t feel that it was you.”

Chris stared at him, hard, like he was searching for something in Peter’s face. He then shook his head and moved closer, soft in a way he never was, and brushed a kiss against Peter’s mouth.

Peter’s chest tightened into knots. He ran his hand down the side of Chris’ face, from the tip of his cheekbone all the way to his chin, then back up again.
Chris sighed, reaching up to wrap his fingers around Peter’s wrist, applying just the slightest pressure. His eyes looked almost pitying. “I’m not made of glass, Peter.”

He certainly was not. “I know.”

There were a million thoughts racing in Chris’ expression; Peter could see them flickering behind his eyes, like channels switching rapidly on a television screen. He was looking for something in Peter’s face again. Peter stayed still and let him work through… whatever it was he was trying to work through. After a moment, something final and decisive twisted the air around them and Chris’ eyes cleared. His mouth turned up in a half-smile, then he was climbing into Peter’s lap and kissing him again.

This one, though, was deeper than the last. The kind of kiss that split the earth down the center and broke open the sky.

Peter’s hands moved over Chris’ chest and down his stomach, fingers hooking through his belt loops so he could pull their bodies close together. Closer, closer, he thought. If there was some way he could keep them touching like this forever, he would do so in a heartbeat. With a soft hum, Chris deliberately ground himself down on Peter — once, twice, three times — and then hissed at what was most definitely the feel of Peter’s cock hardening inside his pants. When he pressed down again, Peter’s hips rolled up to meet him this time, a sharp inhale catching in his throat.

Chris broke the kiss and pulled back.

He had a sudden look of resolve about him, but his face was clouding over again, a frown creasing up his forehead. Peter just blinked at him, watching as Chris’ eyes grew wider, then, with a nod, he slid a hand into the pocket of his jeans and pulled something out. Peter recognized it as one of those tiny, plastic jars of Vaseline that Livie’s mom had stockpiled in their front bathroom. It had the words “protects minor cuts & burns” written inside of a red header.

It took a few seconds for his brain to catch up.

He watched as Chris toed off one of his boots, then the other, his fingers unfastening his own belt and jeans.

Whoa, okay, fuck. That all escalated pretty quickly.

His immediate instinct was to just go with it, of course, but there was something else that made him hesitate. He knew that Chris had never done this before, with anyone. Nothing even close to this. His first time should be... different, not in the woods out in the middle of nowhere. It shouldn't be like this.

Peter needed to make him stop.

“Hold on,” he said, weakly.

Chris grinned and slowly pulled his jeans down his legs, tossing them to the side. “Shut up.”

Peter shuddered as Chris, bare from the waist down, climbed back into his lap. “Christopher, will you wait a sec–”

“Shut up,” he said again. “I want to.” Peter could read him well, and he heard the unspoken ‘please’ which was tacked onto the end of that, even if Chris was too proud to say it.

And, to be honest, that was more than enough to win him over.
He had wanted to do this proper, in a bed, where they could take their time and he could feel more of Chris’ skin. But as ever, Chris set the pace. If this was what he wanted then Peter sure as hell wasn’t going to say no.

Peter nodded his head, then reached down so he could unbutton his own pants, but Chris smacked his hands away and unfastened them himself. He wriggled a little to accommodate him as Chris pulled them down past his knees.

The little jar was resting on the ground beside them, where Chris had placed it. Peter really shouldn’t have said anything, but he couldn’t help himself. “Did you get that from Livie’s medicine cabinet?”

Chris made a sound halfway between a huff and a snort, but didn’t answer. He picked up the jar and popped the cap off with his thumb.

Chills shot down Peter’s spine. “Please, let me do that.”

“No,” Chris said. He dipped three fingers into the jar, and then his hand was disappearing down between his legs.

Peter couldn’t see well from the position they were in, so he watched Chris’ face instead. Chris caught his lip between his teeth, his chest rising and falling as he drew a breath in through his nose. His face grew pinched for a moment, his eyes sliding shut. He was using the muscles in his legs to brace himself up, one hand resting on Peter’s chest so he could hold his balance.

Peter ran his hands up the sides of Chris’ thighs, feeling the tension there. “Relax, love.”

Chris’ eyes snapped open. “Lean back,” he said. Peter nodded, resting his weight against the tree behind him as Chris scooped the rest of the jars contents onto his fingers and slicked it over Peter’s cock. He was proud of himself when he didn’t rock up into Chris’ hand.

Chris drew up onto his knees then, and Peter gripped onto his own cock, trying to line it up so Chris could just lower down on it, but he smacked Peter’s hand away again. “Let me. I’ve got it.”

Delighted laughter rose up in his throat. “By all means,” he said, letting both of his hands fall to the sides.

Peter would have been happy to take things slow, to ease into it, but this was Chris, so he should have known better.

Chris placed a hand on Peter’s shoulder, steadying himself, and then slowly sank down onto him. It felt different than any of the women he had ever been with. Warmer, tighter. He wanted to pull Chris’ hips down harder, but he could feel a slight tremor in the hand that clutched his shoulder; so Peter dug his fingertips into the dirt and focused on the beating of Chris’ heart, finding balance there.

Chris took a second to control his breathing, then asked, “Can you feel me now?”

Peter gave a jerky nod, and then Chris was moving, the muscles in his thighs working as he rose up and then down. Everything else fell away: all sounds and all thoughts, until there was nothing but the sliding of their skin and the tightness of Chris’ body.

He rested his hands on Chris’ hips, not guiding, just resting there. “Oh, God.” Peter's head fell back against the tree trunk, white-noise filling up the spaces between his ears. Chris was so tight and warm and, just, Christopher. Peter had fantasized about this moment a thousand times over,
but he hadn't *known*. That it would be like this. That it would *feel* like this. That anything could.

Christopher, Christopher, love you, so much. Love you. He had to sink his teeth into his lip to keep the words in.

Chris’ pupils were blown wide open, visibly enthralled by Peter’s response, but he could see a shadow of pain there, too — and that just wouldn’t do. Peter had never done this with a guy before either, but he knew the basics.

He wrapped his hand around Chris’ cock, which was still only half hard, and Chris’ whole body tightened up in response to it.

Peter bucked upwards; he couldn't help it. "Fuck, Chris," he growled, his hips rolling in small circles as that tight ring of muscles quivered around him so sweetly. He could do nothing but lay back and moan as Chris rose up and down and up and down, purposely clenching around Peter as he rode him. The hunter smirked when Peter let out a loud, throaty groan.

Watching Chris be smug about it was enough to force Peter's attention back to the task at hand, so to speak. He focused on Chris’ cock, slowly moving his thumb over the slit, then rubbing along the underside of the head. Peter knew how to touch him. He had learned Chris' body over the many, many months they'd been together, exploring, kissing, and touching, everywhere. He knew where to swipe his thumb and how to twist his wrist *just right* to make Chris writhe and come so hard his toes curled into the bed sheets. This time was no different. With just a half-a-dozen strokes, Chris was leaking pre-come over Peter's fingers and pushing up into his hand with hitching gasps. *Much better.*

Chris was moving faster now; he slid his hands around the back of Peter’s head to grip tightly at his hair. His lips were slightly parted, his breathing ragged, uneven. Peter caught Chris’ bottom lip between two fingers, then pushed a thumb into his mouth. Chris’ teeth closed around it and the hand gripping his hair tightened to the point of pain, so Peter let his head fall back again, exposing his throat.

Before long their bodies were moving in a blur as Chris rode up and down on his cock, hard and fast; sweat and heat and sliding skin. Peter re-angled Chris’ hips, using a bit more of his strength as he fucked up into him.

Chris let out a wolf-like growl of his own. “Fuck, *again*, right there,” he gasped out, his back arching. “Like that, like that.”

Heartened by the reaction, Peter dug his fingertips into Chris’ hipbones, hard enough to bruise, and started fucking him the way he wanted to. He steadily drove his hips upward as Chris sunk down on him, again and again and again and again. Chris’ eyes clenched shut and his nails raked over the back of Peter’s neck, cutting into the skin. He was making the prettiest noises now. Peter held tightly to his hips and kept the pace, kept fucking him. He wrapped his hand around Chris’ cock again and started working him faster, increasing the pressure.

Chris’ eyes flew open and he hissed a breath in through his teeth. “P-Peter,” he said, his voice a low whine, “Peter, Peter.” He pushed up into Peter’s hand and down onto his cock in quick, short movements. Peter had seen it happen enough times to know he was about to come. He watched as Chris’ face twisted up in pleasure — *God, he’s stunning.* Chris’ mouth fell open, his eyes rolling back, and then he was pulsing in Peter’s hand.

As a result, his body tensed around Peter’s cock, muscles drawing tight and contracting. Peter cried out; a long, low moan that bounced off the trees around them. He fucked into him a few more times, his mind blacking out at how *good* it felt. Shockwaves of pleasure and bliss surged
through him as he emptied himself inside of Chris' body.

He fell back against the tree — lifeless, spent.

Peter could barely feel the moon anymore. It was still there, of course, but all he could feel was the soft inhale-exhale of Chris’ breath against his throat; and his heartbeat, still rabid fast but slowing. Peter could feel it, not hear it, but feel it, like the pounding was inside his own chest; little hooks that were digging into his skin and pulling him back.

Anchoring him.

Peter felt the shift as all that earlier frenzy settled into its rightful place. He could feel the words like a song in Chris’ heartbeat: mine, mine, mine.

He slid his hands underneath the back of Chris’ shirt, lightly running his fingers across his lower back. Peter wanted to feel his skin. All of it. He wanted to touch every inch of him. Next time, he thought, because there would be a next time. Nothing would separate them — nothing could.

The wolf inside him gave a soft rumble, content. And for the first time in his life, he felt something like peace.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it took me so long to get this posted. I hope you guys liked it! Any comments would be much appreciated, XO.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A water main burst in their high school at the end of August; there was flooding and water damage, then construction to fix all that. It postponed the start of classes for almost two weeks. They would have to make the time up at the end of the school year, which wasn’t great, but Chris was trying to put into practice his new “focusing on right now and not looking ahead” technique — just as a general rule. It helped him sleep better at night.

The short extension on their summer vacation gave him more time with Peter.

It would take a lot of coaxing for him to admit this out loud, but the last two months had been the best of his life. Things were less structured and more relaxed, and there was a place where he felt wanted. Needed, even. He hadn’t realized that was something he was lacking until he started feeling that way around Peter. Chris had spent so much of his life feeling like a tool that was useful, on occasion, but a complete inconvenience the rest of the time. It was strange to be treated like something more than that.

Peter tried to play the caretaker with Chris, which bothered the hell out of him. He would shut that down as much as possible, but Peter was relentless to the point of being manipulative. This would at times escalate into fights. But anything that started off with them being in each other’s face, even if they were arguing, would eventually just turn into sex. This was Chris’ fault, a lot of the time. The only surefire way he had found to shut Peter the hell up was to thrown him down on the bed and ride him until he was an incoherent mess. Worked every time.

On occasion, he would indulge Peter and let the wolf fuss over him for a while because it made him happy, and Chris did want that.

Peter with his “Whatever you want,” and his endearments, and his “You’re the only reason I don’t go off the deep end and kill everyone, Christopher.”

Chris didn't believe that, but he knew he was the wolf’s anchor. The first time Peter told him about it, he hadn’t known how to react at all. He could make Peter shatter and fall to pieces, but on the flip side of that, he had the power to anchor him and keep him from losing control. Once the magnitude of that settled in, the idea of it was almost intoxicating.

The night before school started, they stayed out at the cabin together.

His desire to be with Peter was making him more reckless than he should be with Gerard. Chris found himself sneaking out at night, when Gerard was home, so they could meet up somewhere. It had only happened a few times, but he knew he was pushing his luck. The thing of it was… Chris struggled to fall asleep now when they were apart. When he and his father left town on a hunt, he would stare up at the motel room ceiling for hours, restless and unsettled. And for Chris, the more exhausted he became, the harder it was for him to sleep at all. He would never tell Peter about this, but a beta almost sliced open his throat on their last hunt because fatigue had made him sloppy.

Chris snuck out of the cabin around four in the morning. Peter hated it when he did that, but it was easier for him to just go, rather than to wake Peter up and say goodbye. Chris hated that.

The ride home was quiet, peaceful, and he climbed back through his bedroom window with no trouble. There was always a story ready in his mind to explain his absence, if Gerard was waiting
for him inside. The man would be angry and would punish him, no doubt. But as long as it didn’t endanger Peter in anyway, Chris was alright with that.

He showered and got his stuff together, leaving the house early enough to stop by the bakery for one of those raspberry pastry things before heading to school. The schedule he snagged from the guidance office listed all his classes for the semester. It wasn’t much different than sophomore year, with the exception of Calculus.

He lingered out in the hall for a while after that, walking down different corridors and purposely dragging his feet. Peter always tracked him down before the start of first period, so Chris just strolled around aimlessly until he felt a prickle at the back of his neck.

He had just walked past the janitor’s closet when a *psst* sound came from behind him. Turning on his heels, he saw Peter peeking out of the open door. “Christopher,” he said, his voice a low rumble. He waggled his eyebrows. “Come into the closet with me.”

Chris scanned the hallway for any witnesses, then followed Peter into the cramped space. “You’re an idiot,” he said as Peter crowded him back against the door. Their lips moved together lazily for a moment. On some days, they would crash so hard against each other; their time apart building things up until they were desperate and frantic. But it was easier to settle into something more relaxed when they’d already spent the whole night together.

Chris ran a hand through Peter’s newly short hair. He was still getting used to it. “I’ve got a few hours after school today,” he said. “Maybe we could go somewhere?”

Peter was kissing his way down Chris’ throat. “How many hours?”

“Two? I could—” Chris’ voice trailed off into a gasp when Peter nipped at that spot just below his ear. “Fuck… I could maybe push it to three.”

“Unacceptable.” Peter pulled back enough to meet Chris’ eyes. “It’s alright. I have to head straight home today anyway. Pack stuff,” he said. “What about later?”

“No, not tonight. Gerard’s been acting off lately. I think there might be a new hunt.” He was certain, actually. His father had been far too giddy in the past week for it to mean anything else, and staying out last night had been risky enough. “The last thing we need is for him to go into my room in the middle of the night and find my bed empty.”

The hand resting on the back of Chris’ neck tightened its grip. “I couldn’t agree more,” Peter said, his words worry laced and his brow pinched up. He kissed Chris again, and this one had far more of that familiar frantic energy to it. Chris let Peter run his hands over him for a moment — gripping, clutching, fingers curling into clothes — until he was satisfied enough to step back. When the wolf broke the kiss, his eyes were clear again. “A new hunt here?”

“You’ll know as soon as I do.”

Peter nodded his head.

Chris had taken a step away from the door while they were talking, but Peter smirked at him, rested his palm on Chris’ chest and shoved him back against it, hard enough that it rattled at the impact. He tried to pin Chris’ hands above his head, but Chris just pinched the small joint of Peter’s thumb between two fingers until the wolf yanked his hand back. “Ouch,” Peter said through a laugh. They played around like that a lot. “I missed you.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “It’s been four hours.”
“Is that all?” Peter’s eyes grew less playful. Darker. He settled his hands on Chris’ waist and slid his knee forward. Chris’ legs fell open a bit in response to it.

He was starting to calculate the odds of the little desk that was stuffed into the corner holding their weight — but, no. They were in a busy hallway. People might overhear. On top of that, he didn’t have anything on him to use as slick. The only thing in the closet that wasn’t out right poisonous was hand soap, and there was no fucking way that was happening.

Class was going to start any minute and they really shouldn’t skip, at least not on the very first day.

“Come on, I have to go,” he said as Peter leaned forward and starting kissing his neck again. “I have to go, Peter.”

“Mmhm.”

“I have to–” His mouth snapped shut when Peter rested a hand between his legs and started palming him through his jeans. As it always did with Peter, Chris’ cock swelled and hardened within seconds. Peter rubbed and squeezed until the sweet drag of it had Chris pressing up into his hand.

He loved Peter’s hands. They were his most favorite thing.

“Go. Yes, I heard you,” Peter said between kisses. “I’m not trying to fuck you right now, Chris. I just want to make you come.” He rested their foreheads together, his hand still moving slowly between Chris’ legs. “Do you want me to stop?”

All of his protests withered and faded under the feel of Peter touching him; he was lost in it now. The scratch of his jeans was almost painful. He wanted the barrier gone so he could feel it.

Chris took a moment to look at Peter’s eyes. It caught him up short, sometimes, how transparent the wolf could be. Everything Peter felt was always written so clearly on his face, and he held back nothing. Peter thought he loved Chris — Chris could see it reflecting back at him in that very moment — but he couldn’t understand why. He wasn’t able to give Peter half of that; he couldn’t even follow the thought through to its conclusion. It hurt too much. The idea that sooner or later they would be forced to separate: It was fucking agony. If this was what love felt like, he wasn’t sure why everyone wanted it so badly.

Peter deserved better.

Chris forced all that shit back into the box it belonged in and focused on what was happening now. “No.”

The corners of Peter’s mouth curved upwards. “What’s that, love?” he whispered, but his fingers were already drawing Chris’ zipper down.

Chris let his head fall back against the door. “No, don’t stop.”

***

As it turned out, he and Peter didn’t have a single class together. Chris wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Giving people opportunities to watch them interact was asking for trouble, but still, Chris felt a certain calm when they were in the same room with each other, even if they had to be fake and distant.

Chris and Olivia, on the other hand, were in three of the same classes, yet somehow she avoided
talking to him all day on Monday and partway through Tuesday. He didn’t know why, but she was dodging him.

He spent most of Tuesday morning sulking about his lack of classes with Peter, wondering when his father was going to tell him about this new hunt, and trying to figure out what he could have possibly done to piss off Olivia.

She answered that question for him before lunch, when she caught up with him in the hall.

“We need to talk,” she said, linking her elbow with his and leading him into Mr. Sumner’s empty classroom. The door shut behind them with a soft click. “Listen. I need to fake breakup with you.”

That was… not what he was expecting. “OK. Why?”

She threw her hands out to the side. “Why does there have to be a ‘why’?”

“It’s just a little out of the blue.”

Olivia turned away from him, pacing a bit. She picked up a snow globe off Mr. Sumner’s desk. “We’re juniors now. We have stuff this year.”

Chris squinted at her. “What stuff?”

“I don’t know, Chris!” She tipped the snow globe upside down, gave it a slight shake, then put it back on the desk. “Junior prom and all that.”

Junior prom... He didn’t understand the importance of stuff like that. Olivia had forced him to take her to their semi-formal the previous year. She had worn a green dress and he bought her flowers. Peter had gone with Sophie Morgan, who was “co-captain” of the cheerleading squad and far too fucking handsy for Chris’ liking. She had tried to drag Peter into the bathroom more than once, and Chris had actually taken a moment to weigh the consequences of shooting a high school student. No matter, though, because in the end it had been him and Peter that ended up in a storage closet together. Olivia had been far too busy spiking the punch bowl to even notice his absence.

Chris shook his head. “That’s at the end of the school year. It’s September.”

She gave a little shrug, but her behavior was odd. Her feet were shuffling and she was toying with that ring on her necklace, which meant there was something…

“Is there someone else?” he asked, his eyes going wide when the tips of her ears turned red. “There is. Who is it?”

She made a scoffing sound and flapped her arm at him, so he crossed the room and put his hands on her shoulders. “If you’re going to leave me for another man,” he joked, ”you could at least tell me who it is.”

Olivia snorted. “You do realize we’re not actually dating, right? Remember the part where you’re having regular sex with my best friend?” she asked, a hand on her hip. “Sometimes in my basement, where sound tends to travel through the air vent.”

Chris winced. That had happened last weekend. Peter could get so worked up when the moon was close and Chris couldn’t help but get sucked into that. And… alright, on this one occasion, he may have encouraged Peter a little. And they may have cracked one of the posts on the bed frame while they were at it, but that one was Peter’s fault.
He had the good grace to look sheepish. “How many times are you going to make us apologize for that?”

“At least once more. You’re just lucky my mom wasn’t home.”

Chris stared at her a moment, but she just pursed her lips and stared right back. He didn’t know why she was being so secretive about this. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“Because there’s nothing to tell,” she said. “It’s just hypothetical. I’d like to have the option open, you know?” She paused and a concerned look settled on her face. “If you don’t want to, I totally get it. I understand how hard it is for you guys to—”

Guilt chose that moment to rear its ugly head. If she didn’t want to confess, he wasn’t going to try and pry it out of her. But it was unfair of him to ask her to keep this up, regardless of him and Peter’s situation. “Olivia, no, stop,” he said. “If that’s what you want, then fine. I would never force you. I only ever planned to keep this going as long as you were comfortable with it.”

“Are you sure?”

Her face was still set in a worried scrunch, so he took one of her hands in his and brought it up to his chest. “One hundred percent,” Chris said as images of some theatrical display started flashing in his head. He frowned. “We don’t have to make a big scene in the lunch room or anything, do we?”

Olivia laughed, every ounce of discomfort vaporizing in an instant. “Nah, I’d never do that to you, handsome. We’ll just tell everyone it was an amicable split.” She patted his cheek. “That way we can still be friends afterwards and it won’t be weird.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I like that.”

***

Chris’ instincts about a new hunt were spot on.

After school on Wednesday, he came home to find a very familiar SUV parked in his driveway — in his spot, actually.

Finn.

Malachi Finnegan, who was “Mike” to everyone but Chris, was from an old hunter family, like the Argents. Finn’s mother had known Gerard since childhood, although there was no love lost between them. She had retired years ago, married a civilian — a pharmacist, of all things — and the two of them lived in a triple decker in New Bedford now. She wanted a different life for Finn, but he managed to get sucked into the family business all the same.

Chris should be happy to see his friend again, but all he felt was suspicion, and fear.

Why was he there at all? Did he need help with a hunt? Something that would draw them away from Beacon Hills?

Was this it? Were they leaving? Would they leave today? Would he have time to say goodbye first? Did he even want to?

By the time Chris realized he was panicking, sweat had beaded on his forehead and his knuckles, perched high on the steering wheel, had gone white. Control yourself. He took in a breath to settle his nerves, counting to five and then releasing it. If he walked in there rattled like this, both Finn
and Gerard would notice.

It took him a good five minutes to slow down his heart rate, but when he walked through the front door, Gerard, Katie, and Finn were sitting at the kitchen table. There was a large pile of files stacked up in between them and Gerard was pointing and gesturing, obviously deep in some kind of explanation. Chris felt some of the tension ease in his chest as he saw the expression on his sister’s face. She was shooting daggers at Finn. The last time Finn worked a hunt with them, he made an offhand comment about Katie being “just a kid” and how she “didn’t need to worry about such things.” His sister apparently hadn’t gotten over it yet.

Gerard noticed him first. “Christopher, good.” He pointed to the chair beside Finn’s. “Come and sit.”

Chris put his backpack down and walked into the kitchen.

Finn instantly stood to greet him, his hand reaching out to grasp at Chris’ forearm. Chris returned the gesture. “Hey, little brother,” Finn said, his cheeks dimpled. Chris hadn’t seen Finn in over a year. He tended to pop in and out, without any real schedule or notice. Finn liked to hunt alone and would go off for months at a time without checking in with anyone — except his mother, of course. Chris called her on occasion, too, just to make sure the fool was still alive.

His friend didn’t look any worse for wear, though.

“Finn, hi,” Chris said. “What are you doing here?”

Gerard spoke up from across the table. “Mike assisted on the hunt in Newton last month.”

Well, that was news to him, although his father never offered up details unless Chris asked for them.

“I told your old man I might stop in.” Finn pushed lightly at Chris’ shoulder before slumping back in his chair again.

Chris forced a smile and sat down beside him.

“And at the perfect time,” Gerard said, shuffling through the files on the table. He took a red folder from the middle of the stack and handed it to Chris. “We have a new hunt. Local, this time. There’s been a string of unexplained deaths all across the state. I’ve been studying its killing grounds and behavior patterns, and it seems to be headed our way. In fact, it might be here already.”

He felt the last of the tension leave his shoulders. Finn was there to help them, nothing else. They weren’t going anywhere.

Chris’ focus shifted and clicked into place in the space of a second. He leaned forward in his chair to scan through the folders contents: newspaper clippings, police reports, lined notebook paper decorated in his father’s messy scrawl. There were a lot of recorded deaths. “What is it?”

As usual, his father handed him a book. “A cerbistus,” Gerard said, flipping through the pages of a large spiral journal until he came to the right entry.

Finn was peering over Chris’ shoulder. “The three headed dog?”

Hours of listening to Peter yammer on about Greek mythology had Chris saying, “That’s Cerberus,” with a roll of his eyes.
While Gerard was busy reading through the entry, Finn elbowed Chris in the ribs. Katie’s responding giggle turned into another glare when Finn shot her a hopeful look.

Gerard didn’t even acknowledge them. “They have quite an impressive life span,” he said. His finger ran along a paragraph towards the bottom of the page. “It says here that the oldest recorded was over two hundred years old.”

Chris could care less about any of that. “What puts it down?”

“A any ordinary weapon will do, but we’ll need to get close. Its skin is as thick as an armored tank. The only vulnerable point it has is right here.” Gerard placed two fingers under Chris’ arm, by the top of his ribcage. “Where the skin is more delicate.”

There was a hand drawn sketch of the creature. It stood on all fours, with cloven feet and horns — it definitely wasn’t a shifter. Finn’s eyes scanned over the drawing, too.

“So, by close,” Finn said, “you mean close.”

A wry smile touched Gerard’s mouth. “Very close. That leads us to our next obstacle. Its bite is toxic. If the fangs break through skin, it injects a poison into the bloodstream that turns your veins to ice. A single bite will freeze a human body from the inside out.”

“Ice, huh?” Finn asked in his usual drawl. “Beats the Louisiana heat.”

Chris was skimming through the police reports now, and there was one thing that stood out to him. “It doesn’t feed on its victims?”

Gerard’s eyes sparkled. “No, it does not.”

“Then what does it eat?” Katie asked. She didn’t look up, too captivated by a crime scene photo inside the red folder. It was a young woman, dead, her eyes glossed over like frozen water on a lake. Chris tried to slide the folder away from Katie but their father lifted an eyebrow.

“Plants and other vegetation, mostly.” Gerard gave the journal to his sister, pointing to the sketch. “It’s essentially an herbivore. It kills only to sate its violent nature, not to survive. A beast like that is a formidable adversary, indeed.” He tucked a strand of Katie’s hair behind her ear. “Do you understand?”

Katie nodded, her eyes alight with an imitation of their father’s enthusiasm.

“Very good. Come on downstairs if you want to talk any more about it. OK, sweetheart?” Gerard said before turning to Chris, softness fading from his eyes like someone pulled the plug on a drain. “Help your sister with any questions she may have.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’re very grateful for your help, son,” his father said, to Finn. “Please make yourself at home.” Gerard reached out his hand and Finn took it, giving it a good firm shake.

“Thank you, sir. Happy to be here.”

The second Gerard walked through the basement door, Finn was out of his seat and pulling Chris into a one-armed hug. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, Chris. I’ve been on a hunt in Ville Platte for months. That’s like the armpit of Louisiana. I dropped at least ten pounds in sweat, man, let me tell you.”
“Too bad it wasn’t twenty,” Katie said from the table.

Chris ignored her. The more attention they showed her behavior, the worse she would get. It was better to just wait her out. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“I called you three times last week. Didn’t Katie tell you?”

His sister sucked on her teeth. “Oops.”

“Are you really still mad at me, little lady?” Finn asked. She leaned away as he moved towards her, turning her back to him for dramatic effect. A sharp laugh escaped Finn’s lips before he could stop it. “Come on, Katie...”

She spun back around in a huff. “Don’t call me that, it’s a baby name. I don’t like being called that anymore.”

Finn put a hand on his chest. “Well, excuse me.”

Chris could see potential violence in the set of her shoulders. He should really step in before she started throwing a complete fit. “Be nice, Katie.”

“I am being nice, Chris,” she said, her expression turning sugar sweet in an instant. Katie could turn her moods on and off at the drop of a hat.

“Oh, so that’s how it is?” Finn crossed his arms. “Chris gets to call you that, but I can’t?”

Katie’s mouth curled upwards, her eyes a tornado green. Like storm clouds. “You’re not Chris.”

Chris frowned at her, but mirth crinkled the corners of his eyes. He gestured down at the stack of folders. “Do you have any questions about this?”

“No,” she said, “I was listening.”

“Then why don’t you go downstairs and help out Gerard?”

She pushed away from the table, the chair's legs squeaking on the tiled floor. “Whatever,” she muttered, stomping across the room in her typical Katie flourish. The basement door slammed behind her.

If Chris ever did something like that, Gerard would probably slam Chris’ hand in the door until the bones broke.

Finn stared after her, bemused, his mouth partly open. “That girl can hold a grudge, I'll give her that.”

“You have no idea.” Chris’ smile had more than a touch of fondness in it. “She’ll get over it.”

“If it was you, maybe,” Finn said. “Not all of us are held in such high regard, brother. You can do no wrong in Ms. Katherine’s eyes.”

Brother.

He was around six or seven the first time Finn called him that. The word didn’t even faze him anymore.

Finn heaved his luggage onto the counter, unzipping his duffel bag and riffling around inside. He pulled out his Remington 700 bolt-action rifle and put it down on the table. “It’s real good to see
you, man.”

Chris smiled at him. Now that his earlier panic was gone, it was good to see him, too. “Yeah, you too.”

Chapter End Notes

This is Malachi Finnegan.

Feedback makes my heart happy :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!