"You think Derek's Scott's dealer?"

"Yeah," Jackson scoffs. "It's the only thing that makes sense—and even then. I know Scott's hiding something, Stiles, he's—he's cheating somehow."

"Okay," Stiles says, easy, with that glittering honey-soothe he always used to coat his voice in, when Jackson needed that, and the other boy's shoulders ease, some. "And if you figure out what he's hiding, Jax? What're you going to do then?"

"I'm going to do it, too," Jackson mumbles fiercely. "I'm going to do it better."
"Really? That's your solution? Someone else on the team gives you actual competition, maybe beats you a little, scores more points than you, you figure they must be doing drugs to accomplish this, and your first thought is: Oh, I should get on that incredibly unhealthy train, because that's a good idea."

Jackson turns toward him, mutinous and mulish, backs him up against the lockers, seething, "And what do you want me to do? Go to a therapist and, what, get fixed? There's nothing wrong with me, it's your friend who's using, I just want to level the playing field."

Notes

I had no idea what I was doing when I went into this. I had no idea what it would become. And I am vaguely terrified about it, but here it is.

Trigger Warning :: Kate fucked Derek up. She fucked him right up. And he has thoughts alluding to that when Peter necromantically does the Thing to Lydia, and when Gerard psychologically tortures a child into perpetuating the trauma. So. Beware.
Trigger Warning :: Gerard is psychologically abusive.
Trigger Warning :: Gerard tortures kids.
Trigger Warning :: Mild gore on occasion.

Content Warning :: These kids are drowning in impossible situations, trying to keep their heads above water, and making the best possible choices they can. Also, Stiles likes to be choked, and Jackson likes to choke him. Also, also, super casual marijuana smoking happens, like, maybe thrice? And underage drinking.

See the end of the work for more notes.

♡PRELUDE♡

A Study In Breathlessness

Stiles watches the trees sway in the wind absently, enjoying, for a moment, the silence.

He doesn't like silence, normally, in fact, it often scares him to the point that he's pushed to fight it with every word he's capable of speaking in the moment just so it'll leave, so that there'll be noise, enough that he knows he's not alone, enough that he knows everything's okay. But sometimes it's just fucking not, and he wants to run away from the idea that it is, because he can see through it, and it's fucking sickening, that nothing's going to change, that every day will drone mindlessly on until he's too dead to observe it any longer.

He vacillates between two extremes, incapable of stopping or controlling himself.

Scott understands, as much as someone who hasn't gone through it can understand, and lets him be alone when he needs it, indulges him when he's clingy, clings back sometimes, just because he knows it'll make Stiles feel better.
Today is one of those days, one where he wants quiet and lonely and real and feels hyper-aware of everything, nauseous of everything, disgusted by air and people and life. Which is why he's sitting back behind the school, looking out into the Preserve and ignoring his lunch because he knows if he even tries to eat it he'll end up retching in an hour or so, eliminating it all, and what's the fucking point?

Just his luck, though, that he's sitting under an open window—good shortcut back into the building, in case he dozes and gets woken up by the bell—when an all-too-familiar couple decides to have an argument in the vacant classroom inside.

"Nobody likes a loser, Jackson!" Is how it begins, shrill. Sheesh.

He sighs, fiddles with the juice box in his hands, debates moving.

See, the thing about Jackson and Lydia is, well, really, the thing about a small town is, everybody knows everybody, so. Stiles met Scott- became friends with him—because they were all playing at the same playground; he was over by the swings, trying to con some other kid into proving that they could go all the way around, if they were so confident about it. It was summer, a busy day, a hot day, it was loud and sweaty and breathless, restless, infuriating. A good day to take your kids to the playground, instead of, you know, killing them when they got on your last fucking nerve.

And he doesn't remember what caught his attention, exactly; he hadn't even been diagnosed yet, ants distracted him, that one brick in the wall that, when the sun hit it just right, looked like it had faces inside—that distracted him. Anyway, maybe the wind just blew the right way— it doesn't matter—the point is, he ended up hearing Scotty-boy spluttering and coughing as Jackson taunted and threw sand and sneered and he was suddenly furious, because he knew about Scott's asthma, even if he didn't really know Scott, then; he was his mom's nurse's son, and these were just things you retained when you heard them.

So he'd marched over and pushed Jackson, hard, gotten into his face and shouted and shouted until Melissa was coming over with an inhaler and his own dad was coming over to pull him off of Jackson, apologizing to Mr. Whittemore profusely when they all realized that Stiles had given his son a bloody nose and two black eyes to match.

After, Stiles and Scott became such fast friends that it was odd to think there was ever a time when they weren't attached at the hip, and Jackson became the 'douche' that they resolutely hated together, until they found more important things to do.

In sixth grade, Stiles found out that Lydia Martin, the new girl who'd come in from some big city and had eyes like sea-emeralds and hair like sunsets and skin whiter than milk, was fucking smarter than him. Needless to say, he fell in love immediately, and, because he could only ever be himself, he chattered on about it endlessly. Then, of course, entering eighth grade, Lydia and Jackson are suddenly an item, their ambitious idealism playing off of each other and allowing them to climb the ladder of social hierarchy faster than fucking cheetahs.

At the time, Stiles had begun to realize that the 'crush' he'd had on Lydia was more childish idealism than anything, adoration and something just this side of worshipful, like an overly dedicated fan—part of the reason he was realizing this was because of her personality, which, though he was perceptive enough to realize was capable of being so much more, was often cold and harsh and mercury and steel, an edge too sharp to hold without ending up bloody, and- although he recognized the defence mechanism for what it was, and actually respected her more for it—she'd allowed it and the position she'd managed to earn for herself to turn her into something more vicious, cruel, than he would ever be able to stomach. Besides, despite his initial reaction to her, and his capacity to appreciate her beauty aesthetically, he was quickly coming to the realization, as he grew and reacted
and explored himself, that he was almost certainly gay.

Like, he's probably also bi-romantic, because he can see it within himself to love a girl, maybe, and, besides, you fall in love with a person, not their gender, but. Well, he's still young, anyway, he just isn't really sexually attracted to the feminine side of things. At all.

But, the day Jackson started walking around with Lydia on his arm, he'd start shooting Stiles these really fucking smug looks, and. Okay, he'll admit, he has a small amount of competitiveness within him, but his stubbornness is pretty much a fatal flaw, and Jackson is just. Ugh. An asshole? A... He's something, alright? And he didn't deserve the goddess that was Lydia Martin, especially not if he was only with her because of their childhood whatever, and. Stiles realizes, knows, especially now that the two of them have been together nearly two years, that the world does not revolve around him and it's much more likely that Jackson saw what most of them saw, an air-headed bomb-shell with good grades and a vicious personality and claws enough to climb to the very fucking top, to beat everybody to get there, and help whomsoever chose to be by her side ride the tide of perfection.

Still, though.

Stubborn.

Not like his tenacity was going to get him anywhere, not like he even wanted or expected it to.

He slips the juice box's straw out of it's plastic wrappings as Jackson gives as good as he gets, talking about already being the best and what more does she fucking want from him, and her telling him all the ways she knows he could be better and continuing in that vein for an almost arduous amount of time. He's actually chewing on the straw, draining his juice box, and, despite his earlier languorousness, enjoying the proverbial train-wreck; he doesn't think it's the contents of it- which he doesn't really understand, social constructs, popularity, etcetera, don't matter much to him, for all that he's good at talking out of his ass like they do, it's mostly joking around- or even the people- he has genuine fan-love for Lydia and something tacitly arch-nemesis-esque for Jackson, but it's not like he'd wish... well, okay, he would wish harm on their relationship, if only to feel mildly vindicated. Whatever. It's more just the fact that it's a train-wreck, and, you know.

Mood.

Jackson is in the middle of some comeback or another, his voice moving back and forth like it has this whole time, like he's pacing through his frustrations, when it gets a little too close before cutting off with a sharp intake of breath.

Ah, Stiles thinks, looking up, I've been caught.

Jackson's glaring at him, hard and furious, but there's something in his eyes, just the slightest bit cracked open and vulnerable, his cheeks are flushed, and breath is coming slightly faster than normal, and— wow. He's genuinely upset. Not in that shallow way Stiles is used to seeing, not all puffed-up bravado and immature, snobbish elitism. This is...

Huh.

He wonders what, exactly, about this pushed the other boy's buttons. He knows part of it might be just seeing Stiles there- overhearing something that's probably pretty private, if he's being honest- but there's more to it than that. This argument, mostly consisting of Jackson not being good enough, it's fucking him up.

Stiles blinks, astounded, with something else he can't identify right away welling up inside of him.
"Jackson," Lydia snaps flatly, demanding, when his unfinished argument has remained unfinished for more than a minute and a half.

The other boy's eyebrows knit and his face gets redder, hot with something like shame and embarrassment and oh— Stiles knows what the feeling churning in his gut is now, he remembers it vividly; it's the same feeling he gets when Scott's being fucked with, when people used to make fun of his mom or his dad because he was this freaky kid who was incapable of focusing and it must've been the reason his mom was sick, or his dad was always at work, because they couldn't handle him — now that he's older he realizes they were trying to make fun of him, and probably only thought him weirder for defending his parents and their choices, instead of himself.

Nevermind that. Focus.

"Nothing," he hears Jackson grit out above him, though the boy is still glaring, "it's nothing."

That... throws him for a loop again. Because isn't he essentially protecting him right now? If Jackson said Stiles was there, the fight they're having might be subverted, at least for a little while, because Lydia would almost definitely be outraged, and rightly so, that he's been fucking eavesdropping on them this whole time. Saying it's nothing isn't earning him points with anyone, and is actually allowing Stiles to keep points with Lydia he could very well lose in this situation.

"Well, then." Lydia's voice cuts, like sharpened sheers, and Jackson's hands clench, white-knuckled, on the windowsill.

Okay.

Fuck this.

Stiles crawls a little to the side, out of sight, before he stands- because being caught out now would get them both into trouble- and Jackson watches him with this wide-eyed, implacable sort of shock that merely increases as Stiles grins at, "Oh, hey Jackie-boy, fancy seeing you here." He sidles toward the window, forcing Jackson to take a step back or get a full-on face collision. "Lydia," he crows, the moment he sees her.

She's so busy pinning him with a judgemental eyebrow and a narrow-eyed glare that it takes her a full three seconds longer than he expects- such is her irritation- to blanket it with idle disinterest and bubblegum-pop confusion as to why the fuck a non-entity is intruding on a conversation between the reigning heirs of highschool aristocracy.

Really, he's an anarchist, he doesn't see what she's not getting here; their invisible crowns mean literally nothing to him.

They both seem mildly distressed and vaguely horrified when, from there, he simply climbs through the window. "It's been awhile since I've seen you, have I told you yet today how absolutely gorgeous you look in that dress?"

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice crisp and airy, fingers playing with her hair, head cocked slightly to the side, "do I know you?"

"Oh, yeah, I sit behind you in biology, and, like, all your AP classes. I'm also in the— I'm on the— I, uh," he laughs, a little sheepish, ducking his head like he's embarrassed. "I ride the bench. But I'm with him!" Stiles claps Jackson on the shoulder and the other boy immediately shrugs him off, sneeringly disgusted, stalking over to Lydia and slinging an arm over her shoulder, both of them easily capable of combining forces in the face of unpopularity and the presence of someone so below
them. "You know," he says, showing it up like he's valiantly trying to attempt keeping his game-face on even when it desperately wants to crumble, "we're both on the same team. Right, Captain?"

Lydia offers a cold, polite smile, and Jackson curls his lip up disparagingly, before they both turn, as one, and walk away, but not before Jackson throws a, "Get a fucking life, Stilinski," over his shoulder, which, as snarky last-words go, is pretty lame, but, meh.

He stands there dumbly for a moment, for so many reasons, not the least of which involve him reevaluating his perception of Jackson, and wondering if it was always so easy to manipulate people?

He's not going to kid himself, though; it's very likely that all he did was make them table it for now, but maybe that'll give the idiot enough time to compose himself. Which, Jesus, Stiles, why are you even worried about him? And why the hell does Jackson need to compose himself over an argument that was so seemingly shallow, all face-value politics that completely went over Stiles' head? And, ugh, stop.

This is Jackson. Smug, super-jock, bullying asshole who is, coincidentally, the boyfriend of the girl you maintain that you have a crush on- even though Stiles has long since exited the infatuation stage, neatly landing into the dedicated fan column- he's essentially your childhood enemy, or something to that effect.

But his brain decides to become hyper-focused on the memory of the other boy, how his face screwed up, uncomfortable and upset and vulnerable.

Goddamnit.

It's a big game, really, but it's one of the last games of the year, and they lose.

His adoptive parents, often too busy with work and the hazards of life, don't normally come to his games, but they did this time, and he lost. He swallows, covered in sweat and grime and shame, his insides feel twisted and disgusting, and he can't fucking help himself, eyes drawn from the other team getting into this big celebratory fucking group hug, to his adoptive parents on the bleachers, Cynthia, sympathetic and passive, David already on the phone, refocusing on work, and beside him, Lydia, mouth twisted in distaste, eyes gone a little hollow.

His mouth is dry, and the heat of the day, of the game, of his fucking failure, is burning him up inside.

Feeling restless and frustrated and numb, he stalks off to the locker room, and it just wells up, a surge, an indomitable, monstrous thing, because he was so fucking stupid to think he'd be good enough, and why didn't he fucking practice more for this game, and he should've listened to her, and he's so weak and small and unworthy and—

His vision bleeds red and he's consumed with this urgent, reckless, despairing rage, at himself, at Coach and the ref and the other players, at his adoptive parents for not showing up to an important game where he might've done better, and then he hates, hates himself for thinking any of that, because it's his goddamn fault, because he isn't good enough, and there must be something wrong with him, god fucking—

"Jackson!" He hears, echoey and lost, a voice shouting through a tunnel, too far away to be heard clearly, then there's pressure, a halting, solid press of warmth of—stopping him, keeping him from hitting the wall again. He hisses with sudden, renewed cognizance, reality crashing back through the numbness and the agitated swarm of desperate, terrible, distressing feelings. His head throbs, and he
can't uncurl his bloodied, battered fists, thinks, distantly, that some fingers might actually be broken.

Shit.

What is he even doing?

"You're shaking, dude," the person heeding his assault on the concrete bricks murmurs, the one still holding his arm, probably holding him up, and fuck. No. He isn't this weak, he's fucking not. "You need to sit down."

"Fuck you," he says, and it sounds raw, his throat feels like someone took a power-sander to it, his head spins with the effort it takes to speak. "Fuck off. I'm fine."

"You keep right on telling yourself that, Dr. Banner," they snap sardonically, "I'm sure the locker room appreciates the sentiment as much as your hands do. Jesus Christ, dude." A sigh, deep and expansive with a slight tremor behind it. "I don't know why, but— I'm pretty sure you had a- a- something, okay? And you're going to sit the fuck down," the other boy- Stiles, he's quickly realizing, because who the fuck else would it be? All whiskey-honey fierce, dragging him over to one of the benches and forcing him to sit, which probably isn't much of an effort considering his body feels like badly refrigerated jello, considering his mind is glazing over, like he's trying to wade through white-noise and syrup just to think, all of it dulled in the aftermath of the violence he apparently inflicted on himself, "and wait the fuck here, while I go get you some water and the first-aid kit for your hands because you are the exact opposite of fine."

Water. That would be... really fucking nice.

He stares- whole body slumped in on itself- at his hands. He can't comprehend anything right now, that he hurt himself- because that is... that is what he did, right?- that Stiles is here, helping him. It's all. It's sand, every thought a handful of grains falling through his fingers as his fingers shake with the effort of holding on, every emotion a glacier, freezing and slow.

Stiles' cleats make an odd, dissonant sound against the linoleum. The only light they really have from the half moon, spilling its' reflection through the still-open door.

It's quiet, and he keeps thinking it's odd that it's this quiet, head thrumming and hands screaming aside, and then he wonders why everything feels so off.

He doesn't move to look up when Stiles' bottom half- long legs, muscular, thin, his shorts catching the light in a way that makes them gleam, his body casting shadows on Jackson's- enters his line of vision. The other boy sighs and crouches to the floor, one of his hands setting the first-aid kit down beside Jackson on the bench, and the other holding a bottle of water that he, upon grimacing at the state of Jackson's hands, opens himself before handing over.

It takes Jackson a minute too long to actually recognize it's for him, let alone take it, but Stiles just waits, patient, expression unreadable.

He inhales it so fast he nearly chokes on it, and it's the most satisfying water he's ever had in his goddamned life. Barely two seconds after he's gulped it down his head starts to feel better, clearer, though he still feels just as over-heated, claustrophobic, tense and disgusting and ashamed, all of it coming back with a vengeance now that he can think again. He crushes the empty bottle in his fist, heedless of his injuries, an angry noise in the back of his throat.

Stiles doesn't say anything, just nimbly, his long, deft fingers clever and irrefutable, opens Jackson's hand- little droplets of sanguine liquid flow, decorate the soft cream of Stiles' skin, run down the
creases of his palm to trickle down to the floor- takes the bottle, and sets it on the now blood-stained ground with the cap. He slides his hand from Jackson's up to his wrist, opening the first-aid kit and beginning to tend to him.

There's silence, and it's enough to make Jackson want to scream, for all that it feels somehow tender and fragile and intimate— if anything, that's just worse. He wants to run the fuck away.

"Why?" He asks, instead, sure that if he gets the other boy started, the trickle will become a fucking waterfall, and this uncomfortable, awkward, cringey situation will be made at least slightly more bearable, normal, because right now it's like they're suspended in this free fall or something. Their positions have changed. He needs his power back, he needs- he needs—

"I used to have panic attacks," Stiles says, suddenly, his voice as soft as the situation calls for, Jackson supposes, and he has this crazy urge to shake him until he speaks properly, until he drowns out the dull-quiet entirely with all his vivid-vivaciousness, and then he wants to sneer at him for it, look down his nose and return them to their proper fucking places so he can stop feeling whatever the fuck this is. 

"After my mom died."

"So? Are we confiding in each other now, Stilinski? Gonna share our fucked up tragedies with each other, become besties all because you saw me—?"

"Shut up, man. Just— shut up."

Stiles tears open a package of medicinal wipes, and Jackson tries to ignore the sting when he uses them to clean his knuckles. Without the blood obscuring his fingers he can see they're beginning to purple, but none of them are crooked, and when Stiles forces him to curl and uncurl them they don't hurt the way he knows they would if they were broken.

"I don't like you," Stiles says bluntly, ducking down to capture Jackson's eyes, looking at him far too steadily, "you're a bully, half the shit you do doesn't make any sense to me, and I'm still holding a grudge for all the shit that you did to Scott in the third grade because I'm too stubborn not to, but," chilled whiskey slides away, attention returning to his work as he rips a piece of gauze from the roll, enough to wrap tightly around Jackson's hand after he rubs disinfectant into the raw cuts, "when you ran in here, you looked like you were having a panic attack— I'm not entirely convinced you weren't, even though I've never seen someone react to one like that before."

Stiles sighs, moves onto his other hand. "No one else noticed, and I couldn't just leave you alone if I was right. So. That's my why, where's yours?"

"The fuck do you mean?"

"What happened? What triggered-" he waves a hand around, at what he's doing, at the abused wall-"all of this?"

Jackson doesn't respond, the answer to that question threatens to make him want the reprieve bashing his hands in might give him, and Stiles, done treating him, just looks at him, studying and searching. They stare at each other like that for one infinite moment, suspended in time, and Jackson feels like he's burning under that focus, feels imbalanced and wrong.

"I think I might have an idea," Stiles begins, his voice barely above a whisper, but no less shocking for it. "Why you're so desperate to be perfect, and the things that desperation ultimately leads you to do; honestly, I'm a little pissed I didn't see it before, but you're just—" he huffs, short and incredulous and wondering- "you're not shallow. You're insecure. You're terrified that if you're not better than eve—"
Maybe there's still some of that black-out impulsivity left, or maybe it's something else, something that's been building for a long time, that he's been willfully, irritatedly ignoring, or maybe it's that: the longer Stiles speaks the faster Jackson's heart beats, the more panicked and frustrated and angry he gets. Almost thoughtlessly, he winds his hand around the back of Stiles' neck, fingers curling tightly through short strands of bittersweet-chocolate hair, and pulls the other boy- startled- toward him, arresting his words with a biting, ferocious sort of kiss. And it feels good.

Cathartic.

Overwhelming.

So much more than he fucking expected, nipping at Stiles' bottom lip, swallowing his choked moan, feeling the other boy press against him, so close to helpless, keening when Jackson tugs on his hair again. And the taste of him, rich and tangy and smokey, meat-spice shadows, it's intoxicating. Stiles ends up in a standing kneel, arms wrapped around his back, Jackson with one hand in his hair and the other around his throat, feeling his adams-apple bob, his pulse race. Ah, he thinks, electricity sizzling through his veins, elated and giddy, this.

Stiles pulls away, gulping in heaving breaths, desperate for air, but Jackson doesn't let him go very far, and the other boy doesn't really seem inclined to. His lips are spit-slick and bruised the kind of red that makes you think of snow-white, shining apples, blood, poison. Jackson's fist clenches in curls that are like ink-blots in the cunning dark.

"Do you even know what you're doing?" Stiles murmurs, husky, amberine eyes penetrating his, diving deep into his soul and dragging every pitiful thing to the surface and that. That isn't what he wants.

He wants his power back, he wants not to feel weak and frail and like he's incapable of proving himself, of earning— fuck. He tugs on Stiles' hair again, and squeezes his hand around the boy's throat, ever so slightly, just to feel the pressure, someone else's fragility. Stiles makes a sharp, half pleasure, half wounded sort of noise, eyes fluttering shut for a moment before they struggle to open again, a little dazed, his mouth, wet and pretty, parts, gives way to the visage of muscle and bone and spit and Jackson's never wanted to devour anything like this, carnally, voraciously, sadistically.

He leans in, close, licks his lips and relishes the way Stiles tracks the movement. "Do you?"

Stiles takes a shaky breath, swallows- a gentle rush of sound, movement against his palm- drags one of his hands from Jackson's bicep to where fingers are curled around his throat, destructive. "Something reckless and fucking stupid," he cedes, moving Jackson's thumb and forefingers to his pulse-points. "Press there," he instructs, "not on my windpipe, not too hard, and not too long. Unless you actually want to kill me."

Jackson quirks an eyebrow, "You're such a freak for knowing that." And he cuts off whatever Stiles' response may've been by pressing down, not too hard, and not for more than five seconds, but the other boy is panting and whimpering and moaning, little coos of euphoria, by the end of it. "And for getting off on this."

"You're getting off on it, too," Stiles bites out, rugged, and Jackson kisses him again, hard, just to shut him the fuck up. But he's right. He's probably right about more than Jackson will ever be willing to admit. It feels... he isn't sure he can put it into words. Freeing? He has control over something, someone, and he's making them come undone with what he's doing, and he's.

He's being trusted to an extent that, now he's looking at it a little more closely, kind of terrifies him. The darkest thoughts, the despair, it rolls in again, a hook in his belly, pulling him toward an
"Hush," Stiles gasps, gentle-soothe, rubbing a line of comfort up and down his arms, and when the fuck did he start shaking again? "You're supposed to be choking me, here," the other boy says, deceptively light, and Jackson almost laughs before he can stop himself. "You've got me, alright? I'm not going to leave, and I think... I think you need this, so. Show me." The cadence melts down to something gooey and warm, coated with smoke and honey, purring sultry. "Show me that I'm making the right choice here, trusting you, hmm? Make me feel good, take my control, Jax. I don't even want it, not right now, and...

"You need it more than I do, don't you?"

"I don't need anything," he says sharply, but it's pathetically desperate, when their foreheads are pressed together and he's already cutting off Stiles' oxygen again, because it's absurd but it's helping him feel sane right now, and doing what Stiles is telling him to do, it's such a monumental relief.

They spend the next ten minutes doing this, caught in a push and pull of power, of breathlessness and release and this animalistic, ferine instinct that's untenable and brash. He chokes Stiles, and feels, for a moment, like something outside of himself, pure and honest and solid, then he lets go, and the rush escapes him, leaves him floundering and lost; Stiles, the instant he gets his breath back, is praising him, telling him how amazing he's being, talking like he's proud, and it doesn't make any sense, but each time it takes longer for the anxious bottomless pit of fear to return, until it doesn't come back at all.

And then Stiles is just kneeling there, head resting on his thigh, breathing steadily as Jackson cards damaged fingers through his hair, still occasionally tugging to feel the satisfaction of it, to hear the other boy moan.

What are they even doing, he wonders, and it's no longer distant, it's now a prickling thing in the forefront of his mind, and all he wants to do is get out.

Run.

Stiles sighs when Jackson tenses to move, but doesn't stop him, doesn't say anything, just lets him go.

He doesn't know how he went from enraged to making out with and choking a peer who shouldn't even be in his peripheral- despite what small amount of history they may share, despite a lot of things he doesn't want to examine too closely- to feeling good- sated and floaty, like something heavy and harrowing got released, expelled- to storming off trying to pretend, as he rejoins his family and his girlfriend, hands in his pockets, slightly chagrined but maintaining proud, that the past half an hour was all some fucked up fever-dream. That it didn't really happen.

It becomes... a thing, sort of.

Stiles understands it as much as he doesn't, is gaining a better perspective of Jackson, who, he's realizing, has many more issues than he could've ever guessed. There are deep-seated insecurities, terrors, and a desperation to be the best that's urgent and shaky, all his foundations in disrepair. He needs to do well, needs to be better, needs to earn the love he doesn't think he's good enough for, is sure everyone else thinks he isn't good enough for, so he has to prove them wrong, show them that he is better than them, than everybody, which has him lashing out, covering, pushing. He's got this vulnerability under it all, breathless, searching, yearning, because all that love he needs, is too proud to ask for, too scared to look at when it's actually given, it's not there, at least, not as far as Jackson can tell.
He'll never accept that he's good enough, never expect or feel comfortable with unconditional love, no matter how desperate he is for it.

And, somehow, upon noticing this, Stiles became the one who saw when the other boy was shaking apart, no matter how well he tried to hide it. And he'd go after him, and they'd always end up in relatively the same position, Stiles kneeling as words soaked in flowed freely from his lips, unbidden, as Jackson shook, choking him, tugging on his hair, and, when they were done, the second Jackson was calm and breathing, reassured, confident again, he'd run away.

Stiles wouldn't call Jackson a coward, really, but sometimes he acts close enough to it that it's hard not to.

It's... if you asked him he'd never be able to tell you how or why or even what they're doing. Just that it's impulsive, that it's needed, intense, inexplicable, bizarre; it's a pull, a desire, something neither of them can seem to stop.

And Stiles finds himself there, feeling needed, feeling like the thread holding Jackson together, and it's unhealthy, it's fucked, but it makes him feel powerful, useful, a little more at ease, capable of stillness, of breathing, when it's over. He knows it helps Jackson in the same way, gives him an outlet, control, power when he feels powerless, helps him find solid ground when he feels like he's drowning under the weight of his own perfectionism.

He can justify it to himself, to an extent, what they're doing to Lydia. Because, mostly- and he's looked some of this shit up, of course he has, ignorance is never bliss; ignorance gets your ass kicked by things you don't understand, and by the time they're kicking your ass, you don't have time to figure them out;; better to know beforehand- it's just platonic BDSM, a little kissing notwithstanding.

That changes, though, because whatever Stiles and Jackson have is like fire, and fire consumes everything it touches, a tiny flame never stays that way for long.

All it takes is a party, a silly 'end of the school year, it'll be summer in a week' party held by some obnoxious girl intent on getting into the popular circle somehow. And Stiles has got to hand it to her, it's a good party. Free food, underage drinking, a pool in the backyard, a swing tied to a tree, all of the important shit put in a high, locked place where it can't get broken or stolen, awesome music, the venue far enough away from other houses that- as long as their host is careful- police aren't going to get called, no matter how rowdy they get.

Stiles and Scott weren't invited.

They decided to go anyway. Or, more accurately, Stiles decided to go anyway, and Scott valiantly put up with being dragged along.

It's not like anyone will notice them and kick them out. There're, like, two hundred people here, and at least fifty of them weren't invited. Crashing popular kids' parties is not as uncommon a thing as you'd think.

Most of the crowd has congregated in the basement or the living room, with the exception of a herd of people smoking pot, who've cornered themselves in the kitchen. There's a girl, standing on the coffee table, obviously drunk, shouting over the music that God is black, and she's pissed, a gaggle of students spurring her on- Stiles slips past her and nicks her keys, hiding them somewhere mildly hard to find, just in case.

"Dude," Scott laughs, "you've been doing that all night, someone's gonna catch you at this rate."
"Really?" He intones, raising his eyebrows dubiously even as the girl turns toppling over into crowd-surfing. "I'm pretty sure they're all too drunk for that, Scott, ol' buddy, ol' pal."

"You sure? Hey, do you think we could get contact-high from-" "-from what, dude?" Stiles snorts, slapping his arm around Scott's shoulders. "The stoners are all the way over there."

"Yeah, but... I don't know, I'm feeling a little..."

"Paranoid?" Stiles ventures, mildly amused, but Scott just gives him this wide-eyed, worried look and breathes:

"Yeah."

Stiles snorts, "You're not high," he says, taking the other boy's drink and sniffing it delicately, before grimacing at the harsh scent, "you may be drunk, though."

"Oh, dude. I didn't even notice."

Stiles blinks at him, takes a tentative sip for himself, gags at the syrup-sweet candy-apple flavor, undercut with enough alcohol to make him tear up. "Christ, how?" He asks, awe mingling with some serious concern for his friend's taste-buds.

Scott shrugs, re-taking his drink and gulping a mouthful, swishing the fluid around a little before swallowing and shrugging again.

"You're crazy," Stiles tells him fervently, pulling him along to another party-goer who's making an absolute spectacle of themselves, "that shit's vile."

"Uh-uh," Scott denies, plaintive, "it tastes like- like- you know the suckers at that place, uhm, See's Candies, or something? 'S good."

"Sure," Stiles sing-songs sarcastically, watching two guys try to play keep-away with a beanie, the horde of partying teens making it a lost cause within nearly two minutes, and the players pissing themselves with laughter that they now have no idea where the beanie is. "Now they're high," he says, pointing at the bleary-eyed, inarticulately giddy pair, and Scott raises his eyebrows at the display, nodding, amusement painted clear on his face.

Stiles, for the hell of it, slips away from his friend to steal their keys as well, hiding them in the leaf of the dining room table, before trying to find Scott again- the other boy probably actually managing to mingle, something he's far better at than he realizes, all charismatic gentle-soul- when he sees Heidi, the girl who orchestrated the party, heading directly for him, wringing her hands.

Shit. Scott was right. Scott's always right, she's totally onto him about the keys, isn't she?

"Hey, uh, you have a car, right?" She asks fretfully. She comes about two centimeters short of his shoulders, round, full face in an endearing, cherubic sort of pout, and he gets this feeling from her, like she's small and fragile and should probably be protected. The feeling is very, very wrong, he knows, she's on the wrestling team and has about four medals and various awards for being the very definition of badass, but she knows how to get her way, and whatever favor she wants to ask of him, she's pulling out all the stops.

Also, the paranoia thing is apparently catching.

"Sure," he tells her, seriously hoping this isn't about his key pilfering.
"So, look, everyone is either too drunk, or they've lost their keys-" There's a little part of him, he's not gonna lie, that's just cackling, in the back of his head- "and no one wants to walk, and we're running out of food and chaser and there're, like, eight people willing to pay someone to go get more, and, I mean, I'd chip in obviously—"

"I'll go," he decides impulsively, since he was getting kind of bored with the key-snatching, anyway, and he can see Scott, over her shoulder, getting into an animated discussion with no less than three people, and he knows from experience that it's the type of conversation that'll take a while, "just need to check in with my buddy first."

She beams at him, "Totally!" She practically purrs, before handing him a long, detailed list, and a wad of cash. He groans a little through his teeth, wondering what he got himself into as he sees an In-N-Out order and a request for pancakes and pizza. It's his own fault, though, and it'll be interesting, at the very least.

"Yo, Scott!" He calls over the raucous pandemonium, "I'm going on a store-run- or—an everything run, you good?"

"Yeah, man!" Scott calls back, the music a buzzing undercurrent, Scott's new, temporary chatting companions all jabbering. "Get me something!"

Stiles snorts, but promises he will, and then goes to leave.

He doesn't know how he misses Jackson, since he's been so keyed into him for the past month, though it could be the distinct lack of Lydia, her brilliant, eye-catching sunset hair nowhere to be found, or maybe it's just luck being mean to him, but he doesn't notice the other boy until he's been followed down the street, nearly to his car, and Jackson's saying, "Stiles?" Which completely startles him out of his skin, then, "What the hell are you doing here?"

After he's done having a minor heart-attack, Stiles sputters, "What the hell are you? A ninja?" Jackson is not amused, facial expression clearly exemplifying douchebaggery at its' finest. "And what do you mean what am I doing here?" He flaps a hand at the house he just walked out of, "It's a party, what the hell do you think I'm doing here?"

Jackson smirks, does a very obvious comb-over with his eyes, scratching disdain into every line of Stiles' body, "Yeah, but... you?" The disbelief and condescension hangs heavy in the air, a jagged, sharp, surprisingly hurtful thing.

"You are such an asshole," Stiles breathes, and tries to recollect his capacity for apathy concerning Jackson, turning on his heel to get to his goddamned jeep, wondering why the hell, and why him, and why now.

Jackson, douche-canoe he is, doesn't let sleeping dogs lie, and follows him the rest of the way, "I mean, Heidi told me she was sending some no-name kid out for groceries, and I was wondering who she was talking about," he laughs, derisive, "I should've known. You obviously weren't invited, and even crashing the party you end up becoming nothing more than a gopher— how lame can you get, Stilinski?"

"Lame enough to kneel for a prick and play fetch for a gossip-girl, apparently, but, hey, who's counting?"

"This is you playing fetch?"

"Yep, I look surprisingly human for a dog don't I?"
"Isn't that... speciesist, or something?" Jackson asks, an odd quirk to his mouth, "I'm pretty sure seals play fetch, too."

Stiles shrugs, "I don't like seals."

Jackson smiles at that, helplessly amused, crystal-glass eyes twinkling despite themselves, "You don't like logic."

"Hey. That is just." Stiles pokes a finger at him. "Rude."

Jackson scoffs out a little laugh, which makes Stiles laugh in turn, a bubbling, near hysterical thing at the ridiculousness of it all. The sound must be as catching as the paranoia because soon they're both devolved into snorting, rambunctious, childish giggles, and then Jackson has him backed up against the car, their bodies pressed flush together, swallowing his gasp with overly dry chapped lips. A hint of teeth, and Stiles opens up for him, easier than he expects to, despite all the times they've done this before. There's something softer about it, this time, on the tail-end of laughter instead of urgency, it's intimate, sweet enough to make him ache, to make his heart clench and his eyes burn and his hands clench against Jackson's shoulder blades.

God, he wants to cry, why does he want to cry?

"Jackson," he whimpers, sandpaper rough and lost in the wet slide of tongue, in the choked moan he makes when Jackson's hands grasp his hips, squeeze, thigh wedging between his legs to provide friction, and, shit. Shit.

He tastes like alcohol, like that too-sweet goddamned drink, and if they do this, like this— fuck, he shouldn't even be thinking that, because this would be his first time, and there's also Lydia, and so many other reasons why this is a bad idea. Namely, probably, how badly he wants it in the first fucking place.

"Jackson." He repeats the name firmly, pushing him away, and the other boy's face isn't like he's ever seen it before, there's something equally scattered and whole, lost and trepidatious and open and his, this is his, this is breakable, and fuck his fucking life because the last thing he wants is for anything about it to break. "If I don't get everything on this list within the next hour, that little lady in there- who probably has whatever a boxer's version of a black-belt is- will kill me with her pinky finger. And that is not how I wanna go, man."

Thank God for clever lies, or—covers, whatever, quick thinking.

Jackson stares at him, and for a moment Stiles is terrified he isn't going to buy it, but he does, and, smirking, decides he'll be coming along, because someone who's scared of Heidi- who may be terrifying in the ring, but is otherwise a total sweetheart ("According to popular people, who she is nice to on principle, which means you have totally a skewed perspective, don't even."-) obviously needs protection.

Stiles mumbles something about alpha-male posturing bullshit, but accepts his passenger with as much grace as he is able whilst simultaneously having a minor freak-out about some maybe-sorta-possibly feelings, or something of that ilk, toward said passenger.


They don't really manage quiet for any part of the drive, Jackson would say something, stupid, patronizing, aggravating, and Stiles would snap back with sarcastic snark, and none of it would carry
the heat it normally did. No insult or jab was meaningful in a way that actually stung, and every barb they traded had them closer to laughter than anything; Jackson trying to catch a fry in his mouth to prove his awesomeness has Stiles pulling over on a bet that he can catch more, and ends with them basically throwing fries at each other— because that's constructive.

Stiles wins. Jackson, surprisingly, takes it well.

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that it wasn't a serious competition, maybe it has something to do with the fact that— Stiles doesn't really care, and, considering some of the shit he's said while he was lightheaded from air deprivation, Jackson knows this.

"Christ," Stiles sighs, "poor Roscoe, covered in french fries."

"Roscoe?"

"Yep," he grins, popping the p, patting the jeep lovingly as he returns to the road, "he is an awesome car, and he deserves an awesome name, he also deserves to be cleaned tomorrow-" the rest of Stiles sentence turns into a lilting baby-coo- "yes he does."

"You're crazy," Jackson intones, and Stiles raises an eyebrow at him primly. "You named your car. Your crappy, broken down—" Stiles talks over the insults, blatantly ignoring them:

"Don't listen to him, baby, he doesn't understand; you're a vital part of the family, Roscoe, a true Stilinski. You've had your moments, but you always get me where I need to go."

Jackson scoffs, and Stiles gives him a look as he changes course for their last destination.

"You know, this was my mom's car," he decides to say, lightly as he can, and without looking at his reasoning too closely. Jackson quiets, gazes out the window so his face is angled away. "I don't actually know why she named him Roscoe, but she always said it was better to respect the things that offer you support in life, and that there was magic in that, in believing in something, even if it was something as silly as a car.

"I remember, she had this newspaper route, woke up at two o'clock in the morning, and she'd take me out of my crib, put me in the passenger seat, and take me with her. No matter how fussy or upset I was, this, driving? Roscoe? He always calmed me down." Stiles picks at the steering wheel, looks over, catches a glimpse of Jackson in the window's reflection, his expression impossible to decipher. "After... well, after, dad talked a lot about selling him or scrapping him or. Because it was too much memory. I wouldn't let him, I-" he huffs, wistful. "I screamed and I cried and I went on an unholy rampage, and it was the first time I'd really acted like a kid since the funeral- I mean, I don't really remember, but that's what dad always says- anyway. He relented, kept him in the garage until I could actually drive him."

They lapse, then, thoughtful, the hum of the engine like a lullaby, sweet and comforting, so much like home.

"Rhonda," Stiles says eventually, and it's such a random non-sequitur that Jackson pulls himself away from sight-seeing long enough to blink at him. "Your car. She feels like a Rhonda."

"No way," Jackson says, not even missing a beat, "she's a porsche, she needs a classy name."

Stiles smirks, snorts, starts laughing like a maniac.

"What?"
"I won you over to the darkside," Stiles says as stage-drama antagonist as he can muster in between gurgling giggles. "Put him in a straightjacket, people! He's naming his car! Lock him up in Eichen!"

Jackson, biting down a smile, says, "That is not as funny as you think it is." And promptly throws another fry at him, which, not cool, because driving— after Stiles pulls over they immediately devolve into five-year-olds again, sword-fighting with their food.

When they kiss this time, it tastes like fast-food salt and overjoyed immaturity, it feels real and saturated and it seems to slow the whole world down. They breathe against each other's lips, mouths damp and warm and too-close, hands wondering, pulling at each other's clothes and bodies, before, absolutely done with how far apart they are, Stiles unbucksles and crawls over, until he's on the passenger side with Jackson, straddling him.

The other boy bucks up into him, and Stiles moans, fingertips under Jackson's jaw, moving him to make the kiss deeper as they writhe together, become sweat-slick and flushed and urgent.

A hand, familiar in every callous, every bone, every inch of soft skin, wraps around his throat, and Stiles keens. His hips jerk, grinding down, and he can feel Jackson smirk into their kiss.

"Fucker," Stiles whines, when he gets his air back, then, because he knows what Jackson needs, knows what he needs: "Feels good, amazing, perfect. Your thumb, move it a little-- there you go. Do it again, like... that..." He tilts his head back, feels a rush of nothingness, of dizziness, like a cloud has infiltrated his entire being, fuzzy and floaty and cotton. He knows he can still breathe, technically, there just isn't any air getting to his brain, but it feels like it's his lungs being denied, constricting, useless, an organ no longer his own, but under the control of—he doesn't know what to call him in situations like these. His name doesn't seem right, doesn't seem enough.

"Good," Stiles murmurs, raw, world spinning, when he's back on solid ground again, eyes sliding open to look down at Jackson, "so good, Jax, perfect, thank you."

Jackson's breath hitches when Stiles knuckles his chin up to kiss him again, soft and chaste, a slow caress. "Let me touch you," the other boy sighs, so much like a benediction that Stiles shivers. "I want to touch you." It would be a demand, he thinks, it's trying to be a demand, but all Stiles can hear is please.

He can't- he doesn't— they shouldn't.

"Then touch me."

Fingers stumble, twitchy, and they're kissing, messy, clumsy, clueless, but despite the lack of space, lack of lube, lack of condoms, despite the awkward and the burn, they manage, undressing, Jackson wincing when he hits his elbow and Stiles laughing at him until there are two fingers jammed in his mouth and a hand yanking on his hair, sending sparks of pleasure down his spine, as teeth chew at his collarbone.

It's uncomfortable, mostly, being opened up, especially in this position, but Jackson fingers him, deep, and Stiles directs him, breathlessly, toward his prostate, as he wraps a hand around Jackson's dick, the boy under him gasping, moaning, thrusting his fingers harder, until Stiles is a whimpering, sweat-soaked mess, begging for something, anything, more.

Stiles will never get over how absolutely insane it is, having a whole part of another person inside of you. It's too tight, for both of them, for too-long minutes, but then Stiles is encouraging and Jackson is biting, scratching, choking, tangling his fingers in Stiles' hair and giving that delicious tug. His body relaxes around Jackson, then, and the burn, the pain and discomfort slowly gives way to a wild,
feral, unkempt sort of pleasure, their bodies rocking together, Jackson fucking into him and Stiles grinding down on the feeling, on the pulse, the *thrash* of it.

He makes demands, in a way he never would in any other situation, *harder*, and *there*, and *wait*, and *bite me*, and *kiss me*, and *choke me*. He *praises*, perfect, and wonderful, and amazing, and, "You're so good, Jax, I'm so *proud* of you, you're doing so *well*, such a good boy. Perfect, *perfect*."

And Jackson *listens*, makes near *wounded* noises, curls around him like Stiles is something he could *cherish*, if he tried, like Stiles is someone he wants to cherish him *back*. He melts into the compliments, cries out for them, works harder to receive more, and as sloppy as this is, as impulsive and *messy*, it's *good*.

It feels like it was *inevitable*, the live-wire tension between them could only culminate in this, could only spill over into *this*, into Stiles rasping a shaky, "Come on, pet, *come for me*."

Teeth worrying at his jaw, sweat and heat and an implacable ache in his abdomen, a *fullness*, a dissonance, feeling someone coming *inside* of him, painting him with their colors— and it's such a *vivid* feeling, so new and visceral, that it has him toppling over the edge right after.

Stiles crumples on top of him, fucked-out ragged, both of them catching their breath before pulling apart, using drive-thru napkins to clean each other up, sharing quips and tiny giggles at the ridiculousness of it all. It's surprisingly candid— they redress, even though they both are in desperate need of a shower, and Roscoe *definitely* needs a thorough cleaning now, Jesus; Stiles whines about the food probably being cold by now, and Heidi's probably going to kill him; Jackson makes a quip about steaminess that's so lame and corny it throws them both into a laughing fit.

Stiles gets back to driving, Jackson mocks some, but maintains a certain amount of sweet that juxtaposes his sour, the vulnerability and bliss softening him, dulling every word from a sharp edge to a buttery sort of unintended kindness.

The party, when they finally manage to get back to it, is in more of an upswing— there are more people, the music is louder, most everyone is dancing, screaming, being generally ludicrous; Stiles is pretty sure he saw a group of people streaking, and there's someone in the throng dressed like a giant chicken. As soon as they're noticed, with soda and subway and pizza and In-N-Out, they're heralded like gods, because god*damn* were these people hungry, not to mention the lighter-weights needing better chaser than juice and water.

Jackson and Stiles both get lost in the sea of the crowd, Stiles wading through the tide to find Scott, and Jackson getting pulled into some conversation or another with people who are actually *supposed* to know him, the captain of the basketball team and three cheerleaders and Greenberg respectively.

"Stiles!" Scott shouts when he sees him, and Stiles grins a little dopily at his brother as he manages to cross the horde to get to him. He's got a group of diverse drunk and high people, all chattering about around him, talking about baking, *pokemon go*, and waffles. "Hey!" Scott laughs over the music, leaning heavily into him, "You're *awesome*, you're, like, *sooooooo* good, you're the best person ever —" everything else is some mutated form of slurred spanglish that Stiles can't entirely understand, but a girl with dark *dark* hair, a heart-shaped face, secretary glasses, gauges, and a deeper voice than he'd *ever* expect apparently does, because she's immediately on his level, and somehow convincing him that purple is totally his color.

Stiles, extremely amused and mildly averse to sitting down for the next hour or two, lets her give his bro a make-over before he fulfills his designated driver duties and drags him away— though he doesn't neglect to take, like, *five extremely* embarrassing photos first, just because he can.
It isn't lost on him that he just lost his virginity in the passenger seat of his car, and it isn't lost on him, either, that it was with Jackson. But it had been so natural, somehow, in-the-moment, youthful impetuosity and all that. Honestly, he's not as bothered by it as he should be; it's not like he's justifying it either, he can't. Jackson cheated on Lydia, with him, has been since the beginning, really.

He knows it was selfish, brash, thoughtless. He knows that, eventually, there will be consequences, that, even now, there's a shadowy, haunting sort of guilt that leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, makes him feel queasy and off-kilter.

He swallows it all down, or tries to, anyway, herding Scott into the back-seat, because letting him sit where Stiles lost his virginity not nearly long enough ago would just be... rude.

He can still hear the ghost of pleasured whimpers, all heat-slick sweat and the empty ache that comes with knowing what being full feels like, an echo of laughter and pain and something transcendent in its' own candied-brutal honesty. He's an asshole, probably, for already knowing that that wasn't the last time, and not caring.

"Stiles?" Scott murmurs, laying down in a convoluted position that makes buckling him in much harder than it should be. "You okay, bro?"

Stiles manages a smile for his friend, desperate to ignore the tears tracking their way down his cheeks, "Hey, the first time you have sex? You better both be in a committed relationship with each other, okay? And there better be schmoopy lovey-dovey shit, you hear me?"

"I—" Scott gives him a crooked, confused, puppy-dog smile, "Okay?"

"Promise?"

"Yeah, dude. Sure. Promise."

"Good. Because you deserve the fucking best, and this shit-" Stiles makes a little watery sound-"hurts."

Because he's pretty sure his dumb ass went and fell in love with someone he really shouldn't have, he's also pretty fucking sure having sex with him was a mistake, and he's absolutely certain that all it would take, now, now that he knows—all it would take is a touch, a word, and he'd make that mistake all over again. God, he hopes Jackson is smarter than him, he hopes, and he knows it's futile, because this whole thing started with him needing someone to- to—

"Awwwwwww, Stiles," Scott coos, moving against the belt and the drunkenness and gravity and everything else to pull him into one of the best hugs he's ever received. "'S'okay. Everything's okay, buddy. Don't cry." Stiles huffs, sniffles, sobs into Scott's shoulder for a minute, just until he feels stable enough to get behind the wheel.

Shit.

This night's been a fucking rollercoaster.

The spanglish drunk girl walks up to them the next day and takes back her big purple bow with an unabashed, completely unapologetic grin, offering Scott purple nailpolish in return because she still thinks it's his color. Her girlfriend laughs when Scott asks, imploringly, how the couple isn't more hungover.
Spanglish's name is Mathilda, and her girlfriend is Siobhan, and they're not actually in many of the same classes as Scott and Stiles- with the exception of Siobhan being in chemistry with them- but they're fun, outgoing, and easy enough to get along with. It's the very last week of the school year, so Stiles has no idea if they'll really stick around in Stiles and Scott's friendship bubble, but they seem cool enough.

Make-up and a little clever styling leaves Jackson's hickey's and love-bites unnoticed, though sitting for long periods of time is annoying because he's fucking sore. Lydia, whether thankfully or... he doesn't even know, but she maintains her absolute queenly ignorance of him, as does Jackson, and Stiles pretends, which is something he's abnormally good at.

He pretends none of it means anything, pretends whatever confusing feelings he might have- guilt, attraction, shame, love, power, yearning, despair- don't exist. Screwing his bravado to its' sticking place as he obsesses over Lydia and chatters and lies, by omission, outright, whatever. And it sucks.

Yet, still, the very next day, when Jackson corners him in the locker-room, he waves fatalistic permission, and ends up being fucked up against a grimy wall, lotion easing the way and a shower conveniently there when they're done.

Summer scorches.

Inbetween him playing video games with Scott, going on random bouts of philosophical rabbit-hole research with Mathilda, and them all getting together to play pokemon go and just, generally, be teenagers- inbetween Jackson going on dates with Lydia, practicing lacrosse, working out, and shooting the shit with Danny, Matt, and Craig- the two boys meet up. The places they find to spend time together are increasingly random, and, lately, Jackson just texts him the name of a motel and a room number.

It's not... It's probably really unhealthy, but it's addicting, and Stiles can't seem to stop. He knows that addiction runs in the family, it's part of the reason he tries to avoid things that feel a little too good, drinking, getting high, the general stuff, and he feels that, here, between them. Like a force to be reckoned with, intoxicating pleasure, endorphins, swirling, quick-sand, and soon he's so far down he doesn't know how to even begin crawling out of the hole he's dug himself into.

Sometimes he just wishes he could live in once upon a times, that it could ever be that easy, that simple, he remembers being really, really little, curling up on the bed with his mom, and she'd be pressed up against his side, leaning on her elbow, her other arm wrapped around him, pulling him close and safe and small. She'd begin, soft, lilted quiet, and every story started with that- once upon a time- and she'd get to the part where everything was happy and perfect and he'd fall asleep right there.

That's what he wants, that feeling, and for more than just one, fleeting second.

Instead, he's had to discover that there can be a learning curve to growing up, and that his needed to be fast, because his mom was sick and his dad was falling apart and sometimes the fairytale ends with someone's true love dying, ends with them drowning and drowning and drowning in that goddamned bottle, ends with your best friend just as terrified as you are, because when his dad started drowning, he got angry, and then he just fucking left, so.

No happy endings there.

Still, he wonders if his parents ruined him on relationships by their first example- being so,
phenominally, beautifully, wonderously perfect- or their last. Because a part of him thinks, now, that he'd never be able to live up to either, and he doesn't even know exactly what that means, he just knows it's true.

Knows it's true as he watches the idiot he's in love with pull up his pants and leave the goddamned motel room without a second fucking glance.

God, there's probably something wrong with him.

No. No, there's definitely something wrong with him.

The summer is over halfway past by the time he goes to Melissa—he isn't even entirely sure why he goes to her. Her motherhood? Because he knows she's been on the right side of an affair? Because he's at the end of his rope?

He doesn't know, just. His relationship with Jackson, the heat of it, of the day, of the guilt? All of it. It's burning him alive.

So, on her day off- Scott and Siobhan are out at some boutique trying to catch pokemon or something- he asks her to sit with him, and she seems a little worried, but she sits, and she's patient while he gathers his gumption, which he can only be thankful for.

"I'm, I'm in love with someone," he starts, and her lips quirk even as her eyebrows furrow, because he's started conversations a lot less serious with those exact words. He gets the disconnect. "It's not Lydia."

"Oh. Well, that's—" "I've already... been with them."

She blinks at him. "Oh," she says again, a hell of a lot more surprised, and Stiles offers a fleeting smirk.

"Yeah. Thing is... they're in a relationship, with someone else, and, I mean, it's not even just that. They've got issues- I do too, don't get me wrong- but they. They're the type of person who's really insecure, just, a complete lack of confidence, and, like, a tortured ego, you know? So they end up putting other people down to raise themself up, which is just." He scoffs, at himself, at the situation, "I'm not gonna sugar-coat it, they're kind of a bully, and it's not like being with me, having someone who might be capable of, I don't even know, giving their ego after-care or something— I'm not important enough to them, to change anything, and I don't even know if that's what I want."

He groans and puts his head in his hands, "I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know anything, I feel like a fucking idiot." He laughs, a little shaky, self-deprecating, "Wow. I didn't even realize how much I was spiraling until just now."

It helps nothing when the silence after his confession seems to drag on for nearly an eternity. He's too ashamed to even peek through his fingers at her, he can already imagine her face of Exceptional Disappointment™. It's a face he's good at inspiring, though not one he ever wants to inspire, in any context, nevermind this one.

"Stiles," she sighs, and he hears the creak of her chair, the swish of her skirt, and then she's next to him, arm around his shoulders. "Guilt," she says, "is a complicated thing—so are relationships. A healthy relationship means a lot of talking, which, I have a feeling, you and this other person don't do, hmm?"

Stiles flashes back to a few moments, fleeting and small, where they did, but he understands what
she means. Everything about their relationship is unspoken, in fact, he's pretty sure it started with a kiss to silence. His worries, and Jackson's, are never things they mention, never things they explore. They don't even have a fucking safeword, which, considering the things they do together, they should. And, he thinks, gut churning, heart clenching, he's pretty sure if he even brought up even half the shit he keeps bottled inside, it would make Jackson feel cornered, leave him lashing out and running in the other direction, incapable of facing it.

Stiles swallows, nods his head a little, and Melissa hums in the back of her throat, rubs soothing circles on his back.

"I know it's hard right now, you've got all those hormones running rampant, and falling in love is... it's an experience, and it can be a wonderful experience—" "This doesn't feel wonderful," he mumbles into his palms, "it feels shitty."

She makes an affirmative, considering noise.

"What do I do?" He asks her, because he suddenly feels so lost.

"I can't tell you that, exactly, it's your relationship, I can only caution you to be safe, and to do what you think is the right thing, because I know you, Stiles: when you feel genuinely guilty about something, it eats at you. So think about it; why are you so broken up over this? Is it because you feel guilty about being the person someone else is cheating with? Who do you feel guilty toward? Why? Is this a healthy relationship? Can it ever be a healthy relationship? Would it be better to hurt yourself like this, or break your own heart, in order to heal?"

"I wish I had more answers for you, baby, better answers, but all I can tell you now is that... life is funny, and love can make us stupid, but we can fall in love again, or we can push love to have a brain, if we gotta." Stiles snorts at that, turns so his face is buried in her shoulder. "I know it feels really, really big right now," she murmurs, "and I know it hurts."

"Yeah," he chokes out on the end of a sob, and she brings him closer to her, her warmth wrapping more firmly around him, all nurture and mother and soothe.

"You'll get through it, whatever you decide, I know you will."

"I thought," he hiccups, wet and snotty, but fuck it, the past few months have been hard, he's allowed to break down a little. "I thought you'd be- ugh, I don't know... mad?"

"Why? Because Rafa cheated on me? Honey," She huffs, stroking a hand through his hair, leaning them back so they're both more comfortable, "I'm still friends with the 'other woman'— you know Tilly?"

"Tilly? It was Tilly?"

She snorts at his surprise, "Yeah. I know it's... Emotions are weird, love is weird, relationships are weird, and figuring out how to have healthy boundaries is hard. Sometimes things happen against all reason, and sometimes we do things we regret, that's life. You're like a son to me Stiles, you needing my help to get through a relationship you don't even completely understand? I could never hate you, never, and it didn't even cross my mind to be upset at you for this, okay?"

He shivers, sniffs, feels grounded and inside-out and relieved of every ounce of tension he's been feeling for days all at once, "Okay."

"Your mom is kind of amazing," Stiles tells Scott when he gets back home, giddy with new catches
and the exhilaration of socializing with other people, which isn't something they often do.

"Yeah," Scott sighs, glowing, plopping down next to him on the couch.

"You want some ice cream?"

"Sure. You alright dude?"

"I don't know. I did something stupid. Stupider than usual."

"D'you want to talk about it?" Scott asks as Stiles feeds him a spoonful of quickly melting strawberry shortcake. Stiles leans into him, handing over the carton and the utensil, shaking his head no, and Scott accepts his weight easily, helping him finish off the ice cream as they watch shitty TV together.

This time, when Stiles gets that text he goes prepared for... well. It won't be anything good, he knows that much.

Another motel, another non-descript room, but it'll be different this time; he sets the precedent immediately, pushing Jackson back when the other boy opens the door, already eager to play. "No. Not—not this time."

"I—" Jackson backs off, and Stiles enters the room more fully, closing the door behind him. The other boy narrows his eyes, quickly becoming defensive, "Then why the fuck are you here?"

"Because we need to talk."

"Talk? What—like—like—" "Like normal people, Jackson; like normal, in-a-relationship people."

"We're not in a relationship," Jackson points out cruelly.

"I know," Stiles huffs, incredulous at his own stupidity, and filled with something overpoweringly painful. "I know. We can't be, because you have a fucking girlfriend."

"And, what?" Jackson hisses, suddenly right in front of him, angry, "You want me to break up with her for you, or something, Stilinski?"

"No," Stiles says, and gentles a hand on his chest, pushing him away again. "Although I suppose I deserve that." He swallows past the lump in his throat. "There are so many things I've been ignoring, because I can understand them, see beyond them, even, but. I mean, this isn't even about Lydia, not really, because as much as her being with a cheater sucks for her, I. I'm kind of an asshole, I guess, because I care so much more about you and you being happy that it totally eclipses whatever guilt I could possibly have there. I may've been... infatuated with her, but I don't know her, she's just—she's not my problem.

"But you, you, I—" he sucks in a deep, shuddering breath, and forces himself to meet eyes that blaze like the sky set aflame by the sun. "Being insecure and scared of being unloved doesn't give you the right to be a pious snob, doesn't mean that making people feel lesser is okay, and I get it- I do- it's textbook, but it's still... You know, even if I did want you to break up with her, even if you would choose me- which I'm almost positive you would never- it wouldn't matter because you—" He cuts himself off, can't manage to get the right thread of conversation, the proper way to put it into words, it's all so fucking convoluted and he's honestly floored by the fact that Jackson hasn't interrupted him or just outright punched him yet.

"I hate that the very idea that you could let anyone down by making a choice based off of what
could make you happy, instead of what would make other people look at you is insufferable to you.”

"Why do you even care?" Jackson asks, shaken, all of his guard coming up, the atmosphere of his eyes warping, freezing over, embittered and blistering. Losing that vulnerability that Jackson had shared with him, losing the trust they'd fostered, however fragile, nearly kills him. "It's my life, they're my fucking choices, and you're wrong, about so much of that shit- but—but, even if you were right? What the fuck does it matter to you, Stilinski, huh? We fuck, okay, that's what we do, the extent of it. So, either, you say you're done, and get the fuck out, or you get on your knees.”

"I care," Stiles tells him, not even bothering to hide how hurt he is, because what's the fucking point of pride in a situation like this? Fucking Christ, his heart is slowly shattering, he's pretty goddamn sure, "because I fell in love with you. Pretty dumb, huh? I—I conceded trust to you, which is pretty fucking hard for me, and I know you did the same. And I kept...

"Even though you can be a selfish, self-involved asshole, I kinda have a love/hate relationship with those parts of you, too, because you wouldn't be you without them, and, sometimes? I'd much rather kill you than 'fuck' you. But, in general, I just want to be close to you, and—do you want to know the most fucked up part?

"I want you to be happy, over everything else, and I felt like the absolute worst when I realized I couldn't do that for you. You're always on this razor-sharp edge, and the helplessness I feel, knowing I can't put you on solid ground?" Stiles shakes his head, tear-soaked cheeks burning with all this heated emotion, and he wonders who's more shocked by his confession, because, of all the things he planned to do today, saying all that wasn't anywhere on his list.

Jackson has backed himself up against the wall, body shaking, eyes wide, filled with helpless tears, and he's flushed with rage and shame and a plethora of other things, probably a good helping of denial, if Stiles knows him. Jesus, all that vulnerability he'd missed, and now he wishes the other boy would go back to blank, walls up, impervious and sneering, if only to spare him, and how selfish is that?

"Fuck you," Jackson seethes, "I—none of that- this isn't—"

With trembling, weak fingers, Stiles pulls a card out of his pocket and places it delicately on the table, he feels hollow, numb. "I know. I don't have any right, do I? All we do is fuck, and who am I to judge you? Trust me, Jax, I know."

"Get the fuck out," Jackson whispers, raspy and grating and as puncturing as any knife, the look on the other boy's face only salt in the wound. "Get out."

Stiles doesn't need to be told a third time.

It's over, they're done, whatever it is, whatever it was.

It's done.

♡ ACT ONE♡

The Best Laid Plans...

"Can someone tell me how new girl is here all of five minutes, and she's already a part of Lydia's clique?" Siobhan asks, mostly sardonic.

"Because she's hot," Stiles shrugs, watching as much as he probably shouldn't be, as much as seeing Jackson all over Lydia makes his heart ache, "beautiful people herd together."
Reveling in his best friend's awesomeness by osmosis is amazing, for all that he gets the distinct impression it's getting under Jackson's skin in all the wrong ways. But, then, there are more important things to worry about, like Scotty being a werewolf.

A freaking werewolf.

Life. What are you even?

There's a party, a girl, a lacrosse game, a murder mystery, hunters, and anger-issues—because even without the full-moon propelling the wolf, Scott still gets over-taken by blood-lust. (Re: Scott literally trying to kill him after tackling Jackson on the field and tearing the other boy's rotator cuff.)

The thing is, here, that even though Stiles is freaking out over all these things- there's a plethora of supernatural tail-spinning, he's trying to adapt- he realizes how much it's fucking with Scott, who has always been excessively, endearingly accepting of Stiles' own faults: He's got little to no control, his senses are hay-wire, his body has changed- at the drop of a dime, a completely unexpected evolution that he never consented to- all this on top of hormones and that yearning to be normal, to have friends, fall in love, have a life, and he's clinging to those things even more desperately than he normally would because of all those changes, forced upon him.

Stiles tries to be as supportive as possible, despite his own anxieties, the issues he's trying to run away from. Honestly, becoming hyper-focused on his brother's well-being is probably the best thing for him right now. Although, it doesn't help him escape as easily as he'd like it to, considering how weird Lydia and Jackson are being in the face of Scott's new-found athleticism, which makes them part of Stiles' worries about Scott.

It's mildly annoying, if he's being honest.

After the pain, and the cortisone shots, and the game- which he played despite it all, played to win, and got showed up by the severe asthmatic who's always ridden the bench with—— Jackson's curiosity is boiling over, mingled with shame and that need to just fucking do, be better.

He doesn't know what to think when he finds McCall's glove, every fingertip punctured, and he's even more unsure when he feels a prickle on the back of his neck, like someone's watching him.

Sure enough, when he turns, there's a man, tan-skinned and dark-haired, wearing a leather jacket. He stays just long enough to be creepy, and then he just... walks away.

Jackson has no idea what the hell is going on, but he's going to fucking find out.

Stiles realizes there's a visceral body-horror that comes with being a newly turned werewolf, and it probably quadruples when paired with the possibility that you could've seriously injured someone without even realizing it.

Scott- suitably terrified, under the circumstances, and against Stiles' better judgment- goes to Derek for help, more capable of seeing the good in people, less cynical, and all-in-all more hopeful that Derek isn't actually his sister's killer. The good news, for the moment, is that it worked—Scott ends up remembering what happened with the bus driver, and, although the outcome of the whole experience makes less sense the more thoroughly Stiles looks at it- werewolf hazing? Why?- it does soothe his brother, who can only think of Allison, and his group-date with Allison.

And Jackson.
Stiles doesn't know how he feels about that, honestly, so he's doing his level best to ignore it. And, in ignoring it, finds himself stalking Derek, just a little. The man is impeding Scott's safety, after all; he feels totally justified.

Okay, a little less justified when all he gets for his trouble, for most of the night, is Derek actually being alarmingly human, pedestrian, mild. He does get a little show at the end, there, with the hunters making a passive-aggressive, threatening display outside of the local food mart. The kid inside, behind the register, looks vaguely stoned, a little freaked, and like they don't get paid enough to deal with this shit.

Stiles, when he goes back home, just finds himself frustrated that there were no cctv cameras, and there would've been no way to get anyone caught, as the hunters left almost directly after, and Derek went about paying for his gas and leaving himself with all the nonchalance that comes with either a terrifying amount of confidence or a plainly stupid lack of self-preservation, he'd headed off to the hospital, where Stiles left him, unwilling to pursue the tail further, and, frankly, too tired to try even if he wanted to— it is a school night, after all.

Still, none of it sits right with him, and the most annoying part is, he doesn't know what to do with it, he's got the feeling he only has the edge pieces of the puzzle, the rest of it a gaping hole of missing information or misinformation.

And, unfortunately, he doesn't really have as much time as he'd like to research- or sleep, for that matter- and, on that note, nearly fifteen minutes after he gets home, the tap on his dad's phone- what? He's got his needs, he's a curious kid- informs him that the bus driver they were so worried about? He died, and this so soon after Stiles tracked their potential killer said bus driver was staying in. Well, to be fair, it's also the only hospital Beacon Hills has to its' name.

But the point is, you know. Extremely suspicious.

Maybe he shouldn't have called to tell Scott that— seriously, lycanthropy makes for the kind of blow-up brashness you'd expect from mentos and coke, baking soda and vinegar, not Scott. It's out of character enough that Stiles can't manage to stop him and, thoroughly exhausted, just decides to let it go.

If Scott wants to go confront the possible psycho-werewolf-murderer, Scott can go confront the possible psycho-werewolf-murderer, he just damn well better text Stiles that he's still alive when he's done.

"Dude," Stiles answers his phone blearily, but quickly transferring into alert, when Scott calls, waking him up out of a dead-sleep at three o'clock in the morning. "How'd it go?"

"Well, he didn't kill me, if that's what you're asking."

"Awesome," Stiles says, with feeling, and Scott snorts, though he sounds a little thin, brittle around the edges. "What is it?"

"He said he didn't kill anyone-" which, okay, Stiles was starting to get that feeling himself, but he's still mildly suspicious- "that his sister went missing and he came here looking for her. And, and I remembered the rest of what happened with the bus driver."

"Yeah?" Stiles prompts around a yawn, moving to sit on the edge of his bed, scrub the sleep out of his eyes.

"There's another werewolf, Stiles, an Alpha; Derek and I are Betas. And the Alpha- he's the one
who Bit me, and now I'm a part of his Pack— I mean, I don't know, it sounds crazy."

"Everything about this is crazy," Stiles points out, awarding him a huff on the other end of the line. "But this means we were right about the-" he gestures around vaguely, even though Scott isn't there to see it- "the rite-of-passage part of it, even if we weren't right about the Derek part— which honestly makes so much more sense, because I don't think Derek would help you remember something like that when it was already obvious you would react negatively, and I don't know the guy, but I know my gut and it wasn't—"

"Stiles," Scott cuts in, exasperated, and Stiles rubs a weary hand over his newly buzzed head, scratching a little at his scalp.

"Right, yeah. Sorry. So, what do we know? We know that the Alpha wants you to—to submit to him, I'm guessing, by killing with him, and we know that Derek wants——?"

"Me to help him find the Alpha."

"Because you've got some special bond with the guy? I refuse to believe that, there's no way this whole process can really be that shitty."

Scott sighs, and Stiles mirrors the sound not thirty seconds later, standing despite his lethargy and moving to his computer. "Do you want to help him?"

"I don't know, man, it kinda seems like the right thing to do, and... It's not like the Alpha is gonna stop, right?"

"Right," Stiles agrees, "especially if we're on the money with the whole 'submit to me hazing' thing — because according to what you remember, you didn't do what the Alpha wanted, which probably just means he'll try again. Christ, man, this is, like, a whole bag of suck."

"Yeah."

"Okay, well I'm gonna see if my wonderful researching skills can help us figure out the dynamics of it all— though I doubt it, since there's a lot of bullshit to wade through, but there's no sense in not trying." He's sitting at his desk and opening his laptop to the several pages he already has open on the subject even as he says it. "Alphas, Betas," he sing-songs sardonically to himself as he begins to type.

"You're being incredibly optimistic about all this," Scott muses, only half joking.

"Nah," Stiles denies airily, "more fatalistic than anything— I mean, look at it this way, at least you're not a vampire."

Scott snorts, yawns in an earth-shattering way, and Stiles decides to have mercy on him, telling the other boy to go ahead and go to sleep, he'll pick him up for school tomorrow, and he promises to share anything he finds, if he finds anything at all.

Stiles has had the mother of all long days, driving Derek around while dealing with not-so-vague threats to his person, and the possibility of cutting the man's goddamn arm off— but it ends on a relatively mellow note, Derek taking Scott on a field trip to see his cinder-burn uncle, and Stiles going to the station to visit his dad.

The next day is refreshingly free of crazy shenanigans, until night hits and a possible murder is called in while Stiles and his dad are arguing over curly-fries (really, his dad should be happy he's getting
take-out food at all).

His stomach churns a little at the whole thing— not the dead guy, really, because dead people in Beacon Hills is an increasingly common phenomenon and he maybe has a mildly sociopathic streak when it comes to people he doesn't care about getting hurt.

(Has he mentioned he's kind of an asshole? Because he is.

At least he owns it.)

No, what has him flushing and nauseous and worried is Jackson, looking like a cornered animal, screaming insults in his dad's face because the sheriff won't let him do the only thing he ever wants to do in situations like these— run away. "Hey, look!" Stiles calls out from the passenger seat of the cruiser, distracting Jackson from being rude, and his father from Jackson in general. "A dead body!"

He's stating the obvious here, he knows, and his dad is giving him a 'what the fuck is wrong with you?' look, which he probably deserves. Jackson's eyes light on him for the barest of moments, over-bright and vulnerable, and Stiles has to swallow past the lump in his throat, but it works— after a second of staring at him, Jackson seems to realize the distraction he's been provided and utilizes it to high-tail it the fuck outta there.

Stiles holds his breath until the other boy is all the way down the street, and only really manages to let it out when he hears the EMT wondering where the hell his patient went.

In this week's episode of Derek Hale being a creepy ass motherfucker, we have him cornering a defenseless sixteen-year-old in the highschool locker rooms- asking him if he saw anything when he was in the video-store being traumatized by a too-close in proximity murder- which just goes to show how shit BHHS' security is. This is, what? The fifth time Derek's lurked on the premises, unconcerned and without consequence?

Seriously.

Stiles waits a moment after the wolf leaves before he makes himself known to the other boy, arms folded across his chest, eyes serious. "You okay?"


"You think Derek's Scott's dealer?"

"Yeah," Jackson scoffs, moving to his locker, unashamedly stripping out of his towel to change into his clothes. Stiles isn't really bothered, beyond noting the odd scratches on the back of the other boy's neck that look infected, and that Derek pointed out earlier. "It's the only thing that makes sense— and even then. I know Scott's hiding something, Stiles, he's—he's cheating somehow."

"Okay," Stiles says, easy, with that glittering honey-soothe he always used to coat his voice in, when Jackson needed that, and the other boy's shoulders ease, some. "And if you figure out what he's hiding, Jax? What're you going to do then?"

"I'm going to do it, too," Jackson mumbles fiercely. "I'm going to do it better."

"Really? That's your solution? Someone else on the team gives you actual competition, maybe beats you a little, scores more points than you, and you figure they must be doing drugs to accomplish this, and your first thought is: Oh, I should get on that incredibly unhealthy train, because that's a good
idea."

Jackson turns toward him, mutinous and mulish, backs him up against the lockers, seething, "And what do you want me to do? Go to a therapist and, what, get fixed? There's nothing wrong with me, it's your friend who's using, I just want to level the playing field."

"Why?" Stiles wonders desperately, heart thudding dully within his chest, blood rushing in his ears.

"Because that loser freak doesn't deserve—" "To what?" Stiles breathes, tears welling up in his eyes as he steps forward, bridging what little space Jackson had given him, searching the other boy's face. "To be as good as you? Maybe a little better? I reiterate: why?"

Jackson backs off a little, eyes swirling with anger and that cracked-open loss of control that, once, would've driven them to find some dark, sweaty corner to be fucked up together in. "What do you want, Stilinski?"

Stiles blows a tremulous breath out, reining in his emotions and steeling himself, "I want you to let this go."

Jackson huffs out an incredulous laugh, "You're unbelievable. What happened to all that being in love with me bullshit? Huh? Wanting me to be happy?"

"This won't help you be happy, you fucking idiot," Stiles grits, frustration warring with devastation and the need to see at least one of the people he loves safe, "it'll help you be dead."

Jackson shakes his head, a smug, snobby veneer over all that hurt he's really not hiding as well as he thinks he is. "You're just protecting him," he says, "face it, Stilinski, you don't give two shits about me—you want your 'brother' to be better than me."

"God, do you even hear yourself? You realize what your argument here is?"

"Yeah," Jackson laughs, a broken sound, and Stiles winces, flinches away from it, "that you're a fucking liar. And you're as much of a fucking freak as McCall if you think that I'm ever gonna buy into your bullshit." He pokes an arrogant, accusing finger at Stiles' chest, "And I'm not letting this go — I don't give a shit how 'scary' Scott's dealer is, I'm going to figure out what's going on with him."

"You're going to get hurt," Stiles insists breathlessly, head spinning with emotions coming and going too fast to follow, the most predominant of them all being heartbreak, all ache and raw and shutter. Every word the other boy speaks tightens the clench around his heart, increases the steady-slow, agonizing simmer, makes his cheeks burn, his stomach swoop; a shaky sort of soul-crushing pit-fall adrenaline rush.

"I already got hurt," Jackson sneers, rolling his shoulder, "or did you forget about your best friend tearing my fucking rotator cuff?"

Stiles presses his lips into a thin line, and Jackson smirks, even as his eyes are swallowed by something gruesome and wounded, and, thinking himself the victor, the other boy stalks off.

Love is fucked up.

Werewolves are fucked up.

And it helps nothing going to Lydia's after school, especially when he finds a recording of what is very likely the Alpha on her phone and Scott ends up being entirely MIA.
He deletes the video, possibly the only piece of evidence that could've proven to her that she wasn't crazy, that she did see something, and it wasn't a mountain lion. The guilt that threatens to overwhelm him, over both her and Jackson, over not being able to help either, protect either— which is ironic, isn't it, in light of his position in this relationship?—it just pushes him to research, focus more, push himself harder.

There are things they need to know, in order to help Scott, in order to stop the Alpha, in order to figure out why he's going on a killing spree in the first place, and why/what the difference between an Alpha and a Beta really is.

Slowly, he attempts to gather the pieces of an unforgiving puzzle.

Now, despite whatever he may or may not've turned up, and despite his belief that Derek's not the killer, Stiles is ever the intuitive cynic, and he's pretty sure that Derek's drowning without any hope of a life-saver— which is resolutely not his problem. The man trying to institute himself as Scott's teacher when he clearly has no idea what he's doing, however, is.

Trusting people isn't Stiles' forte, and Scott— for all that turning off his phone when really big shit was going down so he could focus solely on his girlfriend was a dick move- is his best friend. He deserves the best, and he deserves to be capable of controlling this. So. Compromise. If Stiles can manage to teach him before Scott even meets up with Derek, then maybe they can ditch Derek altogether and figure this out on their own.

Nothing against the guy, really, Stiles just doesn't know him, doesn't have it within himself to trust him, and even if he's not a murderer, he's certainly not the best person to give the responsibility of a whole human being to. Stiles isn't even sure Derek can handle being responsible for himself, let alone Scott—not that he's blaming him, just.

The trust. It isn't there. He'd much rather handle this himself, that way he knows what's going on, knows his brother is safe, knows they're doing everything they can.

Plus, he's a much better Yoda than Derek.

And he gets to put Scott in some very well deserved- as far as he's concerned- pain. But it's in the name of science, and, as with all things, you kind of have to blow shit up to figure out how not to blow shit up.

And, unlike Derek, instead of focusing only on the former, Stiles and Scott end up focusing on the latter, too.

Three cheers for getting your werewolf bff beaten up in order to help him find his Anchor! And a round of applause for Allison, everybody.

Stiles is extremely satisfied with this victory, and very smug, yes he is.

He's also... Well, he was angry, an anger born from frustration that eventually morphed into this odd sort of disappointment. Because Scott has a responsibility, now, because of what he is, because of this Alpha business, and it's not even about him ditching Stiles for a whole day, it's—it's that.

And he says as much, when they get detention together. As honest and candid as he is able.

"Look, you have something, Scott; okay? Whether you want it or not—you can do things that... nobody else can do. So, that means that... you don't have a choice, anymore, you have to do something."
"I know," Scott says, serious, earnest, and understanding, "and I will."

Stiles just hopes he gets what that means, in its' entirety.

He does. And he takes it a step further by concocting a dumb ass plan to deal with things right away.

Well, this is Stiles' own fault, he guesses— and Derek's, for pushing and reacting and lashing out at everything within a five-mile radius. He thinks he gets it, to an extent, he was a little like that after his mom died, hell, Scott was a little like that after his dad left. And Deaton's kind of a shady guy—a relatively normal guy, and a good vet, he's just cursed with an all-around sketchy aura. But Stiles is pretty certain he's not the Alpha in all this.

And he definitely doesn't deserve to be hog-tied in the back of Derek's car.

The plan, in the end- which was supposed to prove that the animal doctor wasn't the Alpha- does nothing to that effect, since Deaton disappears, and the Alpha, then- as far as Stiles can tell- kills Derek and traps them in the fucking school.

This is why, Stiles decides, this is why he and Scott don't have nice things. Also why they should never be the ones coming up with plans. Ever. Plan-making is something they fail at.

Going out into the woods in search of a dead body? Shit plan. Howling at a psychopath Alpha and telling them exactly where you are while you have nothing to defend yourself with? Very shit plan.

But Stiles is nothing if not resourceful, and he'll always back Scott up, he'll always keep him safe. That's sorta how their whole brotherhood started in the first place, with Stiles keeping Scott safe. And logically, he knows that Scott's the wolf now, and that whatever reason the Alpha has to keep pulling Scott into his shit, would also probably be the reason he wouldn't hurt Scott.

But there isn't any logic in his protective instincts, in his need to see Scott safe above all else. It's part of the reason why Derek and the janitor's deaths don't really phase him, because he, essentially, doesn't give a shit about them, in this situation.

He gives a shit about his dad, who he'd rather not become involved in all this, because a gun would just piss that thing off, he's pretty fucking sure. And he gives something of a shit about himself, because of all the obituaries he could possibly have, getting vored by a psychopathic werewolf is so not the one he wants. But mostly he gives a shit about Scott, who's here, and just as shit-scared as Stiles is, for all the bravado Stiles plays up.

Lydia tries to calm herself, tries to pretend everything's alright, and ignores the way Jackson's blatantly flirting with Allison right in front of her— she doesn't get why he's doing it, it's not like Allison would ever fall for it, but Jackson's been... weird lately. Sick, at first, that scratch on the back of his neck getting infected, and then just. Crueler than normal.

Their relationship is a bit more open than most, in an unspoken sort of way: she tends to look away when he's obviously out with other people and he does the same when she's obviously out with other people. She'll admit, it was a little petty flirting with Scott so obviously in front of him, but Jackson's starting to lose his edge, and she wants her boyfriend at his peak.

Ending up trapped in the goddamned school, with something that- she's not stupid, though she may be terrified- is not human, and is not a mountain lion, no matter what she may end up blubbering later to rationalize this to herself, is the worst way to end this day, this fucking disaster of a week.
Then Scott is telling them his little story about Derek, which, frankly, she believes about as much as she believes in Santa Clause, which is to say: not at all. And Scott is a horrible liar, it's all in his body language, and his stupid face. That boy wears his heart on his sleeve, and his heart is not in it. Besides, all you'd have to do to know for sure is look over at Stiles, who wears a briefly bemused expression that quickly filters toward dawning pride and then completely encompasses someone who believes entirely that Derek Hale's the one trapping them in here, because Stiles is a much better liar than Scott, obviously.

Which makes her wonder, vaguely, why he left it up to Scott to tell the lie; whatever the reason, they're both sticking to their guns, now.

Which is infuriating, on so many levels.

Tensions rise, as they are wont to do when five teenagers are cornered by a something that almost definitely wants to kill them. And Jackson pushes that button, the one Stiles most obviously doesn't want pushed—because he's, apparently, insanely loyal, and would see them all dead before he ever saw the same of his father- the things you learn about people when you're in crazy-traumatic situations with them- which leads to Stiles flat-out punching him.

And there's this moment, there, when Jackson's crouched on the ground, holding his jaw, and Stiles is standing above him with his fists clenched. There's something indecipherable, timeless, breathless, and primal. She doesn't understand it, not really, but Jackson looks up, and Stiles looks down, and their eyes lock. Blue dives, swirls, oceans filled with emotions she's never seen before, would've never contemplated on Jackson, all of his walls, for one split-second, disappear.

Whatever passes between them must convince Stiles, because he swallows, unclenches his fists, and pulls out his phone to make the call, just as Allison rushes over to the injured boy, and Jackson manages to look away. Stiles would've sacrificed them all, to keep the sheriff safe, never would have called him, except...

There are things about this, she's realizing, that she just doesn't know, and it's beyond the who/what is trying to kill them, beyond the lies Scott and Stiles are trying to sell.

It's getting to the point where she just wants it all over and done with; she resents the fact that she's trembling and terrified and panicking, she resents the fact that nothing makes sense, she resents the fact that Stiles can pull that amount of humanity out of Jackson on one of his worse days, she resents everything, and she just wants to—

To light something on fucking fire.

She guesses it's lucky they end up in the chemistry room, and, oh, look at that, Allison realizes Scott's been lying, too. Smart girl.

Stiles really wishes it was him out there instead of Scott- though he gets why Scott left them all in this room in order to go looking for the janitor's body, since Scott's technically the safest, and he knows that Stiles, if it came down to it, would protect Allison for him with his life- but maybe it's better he's not, maybe it's better he's here, so he can see how odd Jackson's being, with Allison, with Lydia, with a scratch on the back of his neck that seems to cause him pain when the Alpha howls.

Stiles is vaguely worried, and he has an amalgamation of half-unfinished questions running rampant in his head; he thinks Lydia does, too. He's also pretty certain that the cocktail they gave Scotty to defend himself with isn't self-igniting at all, because Jackson's... Jackson might be in a worse place, mentally, than Stiles previously thought.
Despite worrying about his ex possibly contemplating murdering someone- even if only by circumstance- worrying about Scott as he generally worries about Scott- though he feels his worry meter has been consistently capping out this past week- and worrying about his dad— when the sheriff does come, with all his troops in tow, the Alpha seems to just skedaddle.

Which is lovely because yay, we're all alive, and not so lovely because his dad barely believes a word they're saying. Stiles can deal with that, though. He's not even putting much effort into this lie, anyway, in case they need to backpedal on it later.

The revelation that the Alpha has creepy mind-control powers linked to his best friend? That kinda freaks him out. He doesn't really think Scott's giving himself enough credit, though, because despite apparently wanting to kill them all, he locked them in until help arrived instead. Something that Stiles doubts Scott will retain, through the sheer violation of it all, and the trauma.

His eyes track his best friend from Deaton- who has become very suspect, in all this- to Allison, and he sighs, because his brother's about to get his heart broken, he can tell.

Then he drags his gaze over to Jackson, getting into his car with Lydia and rubbing at the back of his neck.

Well, at least Stiles will be able to sympathize, if only secretly.

The plan is to take Scott out into the woods and get him monumentally drunk whilst maintaining his sterling record as designated driver.

Has Stiles mentioned before how terrible their plans are? Because this one doesn't pan out well, either. He gets Scott- the lightweight to end all lightweights- to drink half a bottle of Jack and it gets them nowhere.

"Maybe it's like with the asthma? Maybe being a wolf makes getting drunk a no-go, which. Totally sucks, man, because then that means we're in the middle of the woods doing nothing." He searches Scott's eyes for a moment, "It also means this isn't helping you at all," he decides, trying to think. "You might still be able to get high?" he ventures hopefully, and Scott makes a face at him. Stiles snorts, shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, bro, I know this sucks." Scott raises an eyebrow at him. "No- I... well." He sighs, grapples with whether or not he should lay himself bare, right here, right now, still doesn't even completely know why he hasn't told Scott yet. "It's just a break, right? And we're young- who knows, maybe, with time-" He cuts himself off there, because it's been a month and he, himself, has been unable to even slightly get over Jackson, and that's with the introduction of the supernatural into his life to distract him.

He's lucky, he gets saved from further awkward pep-talking by two thugs trying to steal their booze. And then Scott scares the living shit out of said thugs and Stiles has a whole new category of internalized panic, because Scott didn't just lose his girlfriend, he lost his Anchor.

Shit.

The thing about Scott is, okay, that Stiles knows him; deep down to his bones, knows him.

But the werewolf thing has thrown that for a loop, not just because of physical and behavioral changes, side-effects of the full-moon, etcetera, but also because of their dynamic. Stiles is so used to being the one with the hair-brained ideas that will most likely get them into trouble, so used to them
not doing it or changing course or something of the kind because, despite Stiles' obnoxious restlessness, he'd never endanger Scott for his own needs, and asthma was always a looming, background, thing. He's used to being the one that protects and avenges and jokes about it all for days after.

But Scott's the stronger one, now, the dangerous one, the one so much more capable of violence, and it makes everything else precarious, odd, defiled, because Scott has this puppy-dog disposition, this endearing kind that's sweeter than anything and it's like it's being poisoned— and he knows Scott can feel it too, he knows it's just as terrifying for his best friend as it is for him.

He's just joking, when he asks Scott to test the Lydia waters for him, frenetic, needing normalcy, and he laughs it off when Scott actually does it, or so he says.

But after Scott pummels Danny it becomes clear that he probably did something very different with Lydia than just talk, and even more clear that the full moon without Allison is going to be dangerous, and fucked all to hell. Which is why he tricks Scotty into getting close enough to the radiator that Stiles can handcuff him to it, when it becomes apparent that the other boy isn't going to go along with their previous plans.

"Look," Stiles sighs, "I'm doing this for your own good; you yourself said you wanted this, needed this, because you thought you'd kill someone without it."

Then he leaves, hanging out just outside the door, wary, Scott yelling at him, the wolf trying different tactics, enraged, wanting to get out more than anything, probably. He brings up kissing Lydia at some point in his little half-growled tirade, and Stiles actually laughs.

"Dude," he says, "I don't actually care."

That stays Scott for a moment, the genuine confusion probably so shocking that it pulls him out of his wolfiness, if only for a moment.

"You don't?"

"I'll talk to you about it later," Stiles decides, "when you're actually in your right mind."

"I am in my right mind," Scott tells him, panting with exertion, before talking about how broken up he is about the break up, how he feels helpless, hopeless, every word driving the sharp stab of pain Stiles feels deeper. He wishes he knew more, how to—to anything.

God, they're just clueless fucking kids, aren't they?

Then Scott starts screaming, the way he did five years ago when they thought climbing trees was a fantastic idea and the poor kid broke his arm tumbling out of one, only, like, ten times worse and all Stiles can fucking do is sit there, wait it out until it's over.

The screaming stops. Cuts out, like putting a horror movie on mute, just, gone.

Stiles feels a moment of relief immediately eclipsed by panic.

Because of course Scott broke the handcuffs, he has superhuman strength. Jesus, Stiles really should've used the chains.

"So," Stiles begins, looking warily at a very human Scott, crawling through his window in a very wolf-like manner. "You back to bein' you again, buddy?"
Scott leans against the window-sill, shrugs, smiles sheepishly. "Looks like it."

Stiles sits up in his bed, scrubbing his hands over his face roughly. "A lot of what happened tonight was not cool, bro, so very not cool."

"I—I know," Scott worries at his bottom lip, "I'm sorry, about—all of it. Freaking you out," he grimaces, "kissing Lydia, going AWOL like that. Uhm, if it makes you feel any better, Derek kept me from doing anything stupid—well, more stupid."

"Yes, Scott, knowing that the guy we framed for murder multiple times is the one who talked you off the ledge makes me feel so much better." Scott winces, a look of such raw hurt crossing his features that Stiles sighs. "The Alpha struck again," he tells him, moving on pragmatically, "those two morons who fucked with us in the woods the other night? They're dead. I found out when I was out looking for you."

"Shit," Scott breathes, moving toward the bed, Stiles scoots over to accommodate him, so that they're both sitting side-by-side against the headboard. Scott looks a little dazed. "Derek said that if I killed the Alpha it might cure me," he ends up saying wonderingly.

"Okay," Stiles agrees, easily, and Scott gives him a befuddled frown.

"Just okay?"

"Yeah, dude," he huffs a little. "Scott, if you had've killed someone tonight, so long as it wasn't me or my dad, I wouldn't have cared—I would've helped you bury the body, probably done whatever was within my limited knowledge of forensic science to do in order to keep you suspect-free, definitely would've provided you with an alibi; I already had one set up, actually."

"Seriously?" Scott asks incredulously, vaguely awed, and Stiles musses his hair just because he can.

"Yep," He grins, popping the p, and Scott blinks owlishly at him.

"So... you're totally okay with the idea of me killing someone."

"Yes, Scott," Stiles says slowly, as if he were talking to a very young child. "I'm not so okay with the idea of you being upset, though, which is why I'm going to ask: are you okay with the idea of you killing someone?"

Scott opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again, groans and flops down into a splayed out position, the movement much more graceful than it has any right to be. "I don't know," he groans out, finally, "I just wanna be normal, I want to be able to be with Allison without worrying about all—" he flaps a hand over himself, all-encompassing. "I want not to go crazy every full moon, I want not to have a crazy serial-killer in my head, I want not to keep making you upset with me." He makes a choked, distressed sound, "I want my life back."

Stiles thinks about that for a second, not really having any answers, any defined ways out that don't involve his best friend-innocent kid-becoming a killer.

"I'm not upset with you," he says, since it's the only comfort he can really provide right now. "At least, not at the moment."

Scott looks up at him like he's grown a second head, "But I—I kissed Lydia."

"She kissed you, if I recall correctly," Stiles corrects, amused, and then rolls his eyes when Scott's face crumples at the reminder, flopping down himself to lay beside the boy, although he's much less
dignified about it, all knees and elbows and awkward limbs. "I'm gay," he confesses, as lightly as he is able, and Scott goes entirely still beside him. "I know, I know: what was I doing professing my love all these years, etcetera, etcetera. It was idolization, more than anything, honestly, and-" deep breath in, deep breath out- "it's been a process. Point is, I don't actually care, and—you are so much higher on the list of things I care about, dude. Even if I was straight, or bi, or properly in love with her, I don't love you in that way- you're my brother, you know this- but I love you so much more, it's. It's literally a non-issue, okay?"

"Wow, dude. I... Thank you for telling me, for one. And, just. Dude." Scott sniffs a little, and Stiles bites back a smile, "I love you, too."

"Good to know, bro."

"Ugh," Scott groans after a moment, and Stiles can appreciate his ability to compartmentalize, hopefully it'll help him survive. "What'm I gonna do?"

"Sleep," Stiles answers, patting the other boy companionably and leaning over him to turn off the light, "it's after midnight, we have school in the morning."

"Stiles," Scott whines, "how the hell am I supposed to sleep?"

Stiles plops a leg over his waist and an arm over his chest. "Anxiously," he guesses, and Scott whines again, a pitiful sound, but he manages to pass out before Stiles does, and Stiles decides to count it as a win.

Killing the Alpha to cure Scott does end up becoming the plan, though there are things they've gotta do in between to get there. The first step being teaming up with Derek, which... has its moments, despite them having essentially made the man a fugitive.

Second step: getting a necklace from Allison that may be important in the grand scheme of things—that gets interrupted before Scott can even start, by Jackson figuring the werewolf thing out. Which isn't hard, necessarily, it's just so unbelievable that, despite not underestimating Jackson's intelligence, Stiles thought it would take him longer to actually go there.

Unfortunately not.

Stiles may've overlooked just how harassed Jackson's felt by Scott's change, may've overlooked how obsessed he was becoming. And the shittiest thing about it is, his blackmail threat is actually terrifyingly valid- Jackson tells Allison, who tells literally any family member, and Scott's in danger, in 'the hunters actually know who I am and can therefore methodically kill me however they damn well please' kind of danger. And for all that he understands why Jackson's doing it, for all that he still feels some type of way, Jackson was right all that time ago.

Not in the way Jackson might have thought, but. In this, at least, protecting his brother is more important than Jackson's perfectionist ambitions, his debilitating insecurities, his desire to earn the love he so badly needs.

Not being a werewolf may upset the other boy, but at least it won't get anyone killed. Although he may get himself killed, taunting Scott the way he is, and just, generally, being a shitty person to get what he wants.

For now, Stiles is hoping that tracing the text that the Alpha presumably sent to Allison in Scott's name in order to trap them all at the school the other night will get them somewhere, in case Scott can't manage to get the necklace, and he prays that the Jackson problem will just sit in a damn corner.
and wait at least until the end of the goddamn day.

Danny will admit to being a flawed person, a teenager with raging hormones and all, but he's vaguely disappointed in himself for allowing Stiles to use Derek Hale's body as a way of conning him into tracing a text.

He's also left wondering why Stiles was hanging out with the guy he'd specifically called out for murder. Well, it could have something to do with the fact that Derek's a werewolf. Or the fact that Scott's a werewolf. Or it could just be Stiles. It seems like such a Stiles thing to do, make someone a fugitive and then help them hide from his father in his house and illegally trace texts with them.

He sighs heavily, realizing that they did not, in fact, get any lab work done, and lamenting the supernaturally inclined crazy-ass town he lives in. Well, at least Nana and his older sister will be happy, they seem to live for the stories he brings back to them, when he has stories to bring back. He doesn't understand why, it's not like their situations are any better, Rikki's best friend is a lamia for christ sakes.

But, such is life in Beacon Hills, you learn to live with it, get used to it, and move on.

He kind of wonders if Stiles really thinks he bought the whole 'cousin Miguel' thing... If he does, he's more gullible than Danny gave him credit for.

When Derek bashes Stiles' head into the steering wheel, and then orders him to go, well, he goes— because they need to figure this shit out, and while he's certain that Melissa has nothing to do with this, whatever the trace may have said, the idea that she's close enough to someone who does and who might even be trying to frame her, is chilling. But the first thought he has is: assault against a minor— and it's a very, very bitter tasting thing.

His head fucking hurts, thank you.

But the second thought he has is: turnabout's fair play. And maybe Derek really, really didn't like being sexualized for Danny's benefit which... Huh. He'll probably have to look more into that, later.

His third thought is holy shit, I'm gonna die—because Derek's Uncle is the fucking Alpha, and Peter Hale's nurse is the one who framed Melissa. And then Derek's protecting him and trying to martyr himself and as much as Stiles can't be having with that... Getting out of this alive is the only way he helps anybody.

So he runs.

To Scott, because he'll always go to Scott, and because telling Scott seems like the most important thing to do at the moment.

And, as it turns out, Scott already knows, because Peter apparently convinced Derek that banding together was a good idea, and Derek- the traitor- stood by as Peter dug his claws into the back of Scott's neck and essentially mind-melded with him, showing him just how fucking insane he is in some sick, twisted ploy to get Scott to work with them.

Also, also, Jackson knows exactly who the hunters are now and will tell them everything if he doesn't get what he wants within the next three days— nevermind the fact that the Argents are deliberating over who the Beta-who-is-not-Derek might be, and Jackson's just hopped to number one on their suspect list because of the fucking claw marks in the back of his fucking neck, which doesn't even make sense because if Jackson were a Beta those would've fucking healed.
"Christ on a banana split sundae, we're so screwed."

Scott huffs out a harsh breath, seems to sag all at once, like a puppet with its' strings cut, putting his head in his hands. "It was so—so terrible, man, he showed me, the fire, and the, the catatonia, and his psycho nurse, and, God, he's crazy, Stiles, he's crazy."

"Yeah," Stiles agrees, moving to sit beside Scott on the bench, the locker-room bright and smelly and the witness of one too many fucked up things this past fucked up month. He rubs circles into his best friend's back, as soothingly as possible. "Still want to kill him?"

Because he might've changed his mind, because killing a stranger is different than... than this. As far as Stiles is concerned, though, at this point, he may just kill Peter himself, even if this new knowledge of the wolf causes Scott to balk at the idea, because non-consensual Biting, non-consensual mind-fuckery, non-consensual memory sharing, none of that paints a pretty picture for the future, for Scott's safety. And, despite the fact that, normally, if it is something that would: a) make Scott cry, b) make Scott feel extremely upset, or c) make him feel offended— Stiles would avoid doing it at all costs, he feels he can make an exception, in this case.

"Yes," Scott says, then falters, sighs, heavily. "We've gotta keep an eye on Jackson."

Which is an easy thing to agree to, since Stiles wanted to do that anyway. Scott blinks, gives him a weird look, like he can smell something, or feel something, but then he shrugs it off and gets up to get dressed.

Stiles really hopes that his capacity to lie is up to werewolf snuff, because he really doesn't know how he'd explain his thing with Jackson, after everything that boy has done in the name of jealousy since the beginning of the year.

They've barely tailed Jackson for half a day- at least ten minutes of which were spent joy-riding for no apparent reason- when he gets accosted by Chris Argent, hunter, fucker of cars, bad guy. And, shit, Stiles thinks, Roscoe much slower than a porsche being pushed to full-throttle for the sheer exhilaration of it, Jackson looks entirely unprepared to have a hunter breathing down his neck.

Considering his blackmail-demands, he really needs to build a thicker skin against shit like this. But, then, Jackson's always been the type to freak out for very little reason, whether that leads to him obsessing or perfecting or bullying or just freaking.

He'll admit that, in this moment, him speeding his jeep toward the scene has more to do with his need to give Jackson a save than what Scott's worrying about, which is Jackson giving him away and making life all that much harder. But, regardless of intent, interrupting Chris' little interrogation is something they both want.

And easier than he'd thought it would be, jerking to a creaky halt alongside the seemingly broken down porsche with a flippant smile at the guy who was looming over a very unsettled looking Jackson, the guy who smiles back three parts danger and five parts family man. Which is just... creepier than it has any right to be, honestly.

And what is with Chris and car-trouble, like. It's a good tactic, maybe, but seeing it once is enough to make it boring.

Stiles' concern for the boy is more real than Scott's, but Scott's acting is getting better, he thinks, with no small amount of pride.

"There's a shop right down the street, I'm... sure they have a tow-truck."
"Yeah, you want a ride?" Stiles asks, lightly as he is able. Scott opens the door for him, and Stiles sees Jackson swallow, his stranded fear enough to make Stiles ache. "Hey, c'mon, Jackson. You're way too pretty to be out here all by yourself."

Jackson, still looking mildly lost, starts heading toward them, which is enough to make Chris think it's no longer worth it, because he slips something out of Jackson's car and starts it up, still projecting friendly, cheery, I could probably kill you with my thumb but butter wouldn't melt vibes that send chills creeping up Stiles' spine. As soon as the man is gone, Jackson goes that bitter-snarl veneer, the petty egotist bravado that probably protects him very little in the long run, but which he clings to desperately, seething, "What, are you following me now?"

And, really, what did Jackson expect? He's blackmailing them, he knows everything, he's willing to flip on a dime, and the Argents think he's the second Beta. Because no one ever listens to Stiles, and because he wouldn't just let this go, and because everyone in Stiles' life that he loves has to put themselves in danger. Because Stiles is an unlucky bastard.

Scott is very, very upset about all of this, especially the part where the Argents think Jackson's him, and Jackson's very likely to get him killed in that scenario as far as he's concerned, but Jackson, unwilling to take the heat, pushes it back on Scott, and- goddamn it, Roscoe has nothing to do with it- "Can we stop hitting my jeep, please?"

But them not hitting his jeep means Scott actually talking, like a semi-reasonable human being, who apparently also has semi-patronizing fears about his capacity to protect Stiles, which. Yeah, no. They will be having talks about this later, in a place with less testosterone-crazy.

Jackson, on the other hand, cares little about his own fragility, beyond destroying it by turning, because being a werewolf has, in the past month, become his ideal for perfection, for his own identity. Stiles would sigh, but it's so true to form that he kind of saw it coming from a mile away, even if he was in denial. The insulting arrogance makes him want to punch the other boy in the face, again, especially since car analogies leave much to be desired in this situation, and Stiles is pretty sure it doesn't matter who you are or how prepared you are for it—becoming a different species will fuck you up.

But it's not as if Jackson would ever listen to them. Stubborn pride, fatal flaw. At this rate, Stiles worries that Jackson really will die from it, but he doesn't know what more he could do to stop him. What more either of them could do.

He deserves the most special, horrifying place in hell for plying his father with alcohol to get more information about this case, yes he does.

He's still clearing the table of all the files and loose papers, his mind reeling with all the new information, the last of the whiskey in the cupboard and his dad tucked neatly in bed, on his side, with a cup of water and two aspirin on his nightstand, when Scott calls, because Peter's, apparently, made a move.

On Melissa.

Stiles decides that he loves Roscoe just that little bit more for being so okay with ramming into the back of Peter's car— a fender bender is as good a distraction as any, and leaving a psychotic serial killer alone with Scott's mom is just. No. So much no.

He'll deal with Melissa being pissed at him later, her irritation much more welcome than her death.
Jackson was restless.

He knew *everything*, now, and he knew what he *wanted*, and he knew how to *get* it. Which is why he'd pushed Scott so hard, becoming even more frustrated when the other boy *denied* vehemently what was so obviously a *gift*. He could see better, hear better, he was so much *stronger*, and Jackson wanted that for his own, *needed* that, to be better, to be the *best*. (And, in that, be more honestly *himself.*)

And he had good leverage, he had a good *plan*, so when Derek Hale showed up, telling him he'd gotten *through*, that he was going to *take* him to the Alpha, Jackson believed him. It was surprising, entering the charred husk of the Hale house and realizing it was the place he'd been dreaming about ever since he'd gotten that scratch, and confusing, and *daunting*, because he had surreal memories of this place, locked somewhere in his mind.

Fire, burning, terror, screams.

He swallows, tries to breathe, and looks back at Derek just as the man closes the door, because it's becoming pretty obvious that the Alpha isn't *here*. His eyes well, and his throat feels clogged, and he remembers, distantly, Stiles telling him to let this go- echoed later by Danny when Jackson had been upset about Scott becoming co-captain- that it would only get him *killed*.

For the first time, he thinks maybe he should've listened.

And as he cries, *begs* for his life, hears Derek lay all of his insecurities bare, that it *doesn't* matter, that *no one* *cares*, that all of his achievements, that everything he did to *earn*—-that none of it *matters*. That maybe, even, he deserves to die, because, after all, who would save him? For a moment, for one, spare, gut-wrenching moment, he looks at the man who will very likely kill him, and all he can think of is *Stiles*.

Someone who let him tremble in their arms and wanted him to be *better*, not with perfection or *things*, but to *himself*, who felt hurt that he couldn't *help*, but who tried anyway. Left a card with the name of a therapist and said he *loved* him, despite it all.

Does Stiles still feel that way, he wonders, fleetingly, bile rising in his throat. If Stiles knew what was happening, would he come here and save him? *Stop* Derek?

But all that thought gets sharply thrown when someone *does* end up saving him, *Scott*, and then there's a fight, and gun-fire, and, feeling raw and torn open, like all that agitation has just built and built and built and he's *suffocating* under it, he escapes.

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Stiles is... exhausted. He got completely *reamed* by Melissa, but she's alive and Peter's vanished so he's hoping it's—fine- or some approximation of fine- and Scott's not answering his texts. *Again*.

Stiles doesn't know if he should be miffed about it or insanely worried. He kind of hopes for the former instead of the latter, because if something *else* is going on, he has no idea about it, and therefore can't *do* anything for it. So, for now, he just goes home; his dad's working late tonight, which leaves him relatively alone with his own thoughts, and he's debating whether or not he should just veg out on the couch and watch shitty tv until his brain manages sleep, however restless, when there's a slightly urgent knock on the door.

Having gone through a thorough study in self-preservation, terror, and the claustrophobia of the bad guys being too goddamned *close* these past two months, the doors and windows are all, of course, locked, and he is *not* about to unlock them for anyone but his dad or Scott. What's that saying? It's...
not paranoia if they're really out to get you, and Stiles values his life, yes he does.

Only, when he looks through the peep-hole, he's startled to see Jackson, tear-soaked and trembling violently. The sight crumbles all of his wary to dust, making his heart clench painfully and every protective instinct he has ride the coattails of the gut-churning rage at whoever caused this that blooms fierce and violent within him, the speed of it almost dizzying. The door's unlocked and opened within seconds, "Jax? Jax, what is it? What happened? Are you okay? Did th—" He nearly gets bowled over by the other boy launching himself into Stiles' arms, shaking apart, all hitched breath tremor, and he swallows down the rest of his questions.

Priorities.

He closes the door, re-locks it, and stumbles- Jackson clinging desperately the whole way- up the stairs to his room. It's a little startling to realize that, despite everything that's happened between them, Jackson's never actually been here, in his bedroom, on his bed.

He sits the boy down, kneels in front of him— because that's what's natural for them, that's what feels right, and there's a kind of relief that floods him, tempered by a lot of different not-so-good feelings, at being in this familiar position.

"Jackson," he murmurs, soft, and eyes like ice cracked open to reveal the sea beneath meet his, wild in a way Stiles doesn't entirely understand, since he doesn't have the context, but has seen before, a few times—when Jackson's adopted dad left Beacon Hills for work, which was surprisingly often, it always hit him hard. Maybe not this hard, but close. "Jax, you gotta tell me what's wrong, man."

Jackson swallows, twice, hard, and when his voice comes out it's gravel and sandpaper and nothing like him at all, "I need— I—I'm not. He was wrong, he was wrong."

"Okay," Stiles agrees instantly, takes Jackson's hands in his. "About what?"

Jackson lets out a breath that's half a sob and half a sigh, fingers winding around Stiles', squeezing. "I deserve— I've earned— I'm—not. He was wrong, he was wrong."

"Okay," Stiles agrees instantly, takes Jackson’s hands in his. "About what?"

Jackson lets out a breath that's half a sob and half a sigh, fingers winding around Stiles', squeezing. "I deserve— I've earned— I'm—I'm..."

Jackson trails off, face crumpling, and Stiles wonders who did this to him, shattered those walls of his, all faked self-esteem and a hulking ego. Stiles has always suspected that Jackson's narcissism was born from this twisted, surreal sense that he'll never get anything more than the shallowest kind of emotions directed toward him, that he'd have to be absolute inhuman perfection to be worthy, to get pride and love and groups of people supporting him, and, even then, it'll never be enough because he will never trust it. Because he doesn't believe in himself, doesn't believe he's good enough to deserve it, thinks everyone else around him secretly shares the same opinion. The opinion he fosters, the opinion he probably feels his bio-parents fostered.

"You're good," Stiles tells him softly, and Jackson's breath stutters, his whole body seems to clench down on the words, like if he holds still enough he'll be able to contain them within himself. (There's a fragility in swallowing something so fleeting, if you wrap a tenacious fist around a butterfly, after all, there's only one plausible conclusion: Death.) "You're an ass more often than you need to be, but you're wonderful, too, Jackson, and loved— werewolf or not, you do get that, right? Your parents love you, Lydia loves you..." He hesitates, breathes. "I love you."

"Liar," Jackson whispers. Then, like he can't even help himself, "Scott keeps stealing things from me, and he's been cheating, I know that, now, and if I get the Bite I can be better— you don't understand, you don't—neither of you do, he should be grateful, he's—"
"Hush," Stiles sighs, "hush. I'm not gonna fight you on that, right now. Not tonight."

Jackson's eyes dim, hurt and resigned, but he's not shaking so much anymore, and the tears have mostly dried.

"I'm tired of thinking," he decides, "and I'm pretty sure you are too, so here's what we're going to do. You're going to tie me up, blindfold me, and then you're going to fuck me, and I'm going to tell you what a good boy you are until my throat is sore, okay?"

Jackson blinks at him, owlish, and with a hidden sort of relief, an overwhelming need.

"Okay," he agrees, husky, stronger than he's been all night, and Stiles musters up a smile.

Stiles wakes up sore and achy in all the good ways and does his level best not to question all his life choices.

Since it's the weekend and Scott still isn't answering his phone, and he's pretty sure Melissa is at work, Stiles heads over to the Mc Calls' place. It's then that he finds out that Scott didn't ditch, but rather went to the Hale house in order to save Jackson from Derek the traitorwolf; not twenty seconds into the 'were brawl, hunters show up in a blaze of glory, and his rescue apparently runs away in the ensuing gunfight— Stiles tries not to wince at that, because Scott could've bled out while Stiles was with Jackson last night, and he never would've known because Jackson never said anything.

Among the hail of bullets and hell-fire, Derek saved Scott's life before promptly throwing himself into the flames, because the man is contrary as fuck.

Meanwhile, Scott gets away, collapses, and gets picked up by his boss, Deaton, the perpetually shady guy who somehow not only knows more than he lets on, but is also here to help? Maybe?

Then Peter does the typical super-villain thing, showing up at the most inconvenient time and place to promptly threaten the girl. Ugh.

It's so predictable that Stiles kind of resents how well it works. See: Scott, freaking the hell out because he can't find his phone, and he thinks getting Derek's help to protect Allison is the best idea, which Stiles thinks makes very little sense, considering the guy's current track record of violence, creepiness, inconsistency, and more violence.

"He wasn't going to kill anyone," Scott says, and he sounds very confident about it, despite it directly contradicting his own testimony—if Derek wasn't going to kill anyone, then why did Scott have to save anyone, hmm? "And I'm not letting him die."

"Could you at least think about letting him die? For me?" Stiles asks hopefully, a little desperate, because it would solve everything wouldn't it? Or almost everything. The hunters get the Alpha with Derek as bait, and then kill them both; two less dangerous people in their lives. Of course, Scott would stay a werewolf, and there'd still be hunters in town, and there'd still be Jackson to deal with in more ways than just the one, for Stiles- and—

Goddamnit, why can't anything ever be easy?

Scott's scrambling. He knows he's scrambling, but he can't help it.

He doesn't want anyone else to get hurt, he doesn't want anyone else to die.
Least of all Allison.

Which is why, when he gets banned from going to the winter formal, he asks Jackson to take Allison instead; it irks him, and he wishes he didn't have to, but at least she'll be safe this way. He hopes.

Stiles- who's smelled a little... different, ever since yesterday- follows after, to help him convince the jackass, as per usual. But there's something off; he can't put his finger on it, it's something in the air, acrid and intangible. Stiles' scent, which is kind of like the Preserve in the middle of a rainstorm, salt-water soaked earth and moss and damp and growth, gets stronger and sharper, souring at the edges, getting saltier and crisp, like sea waves crashing up against something immovable.

Jackson's scent, on the other hand, dims, becomes distant and harder to catch.

Scott's trying to convince him, desperate, and Jackson's being typically snide, but something he says catches Scott's attention, not the nature of it- "Screw you. You know what? Screw you, too. In fact, screw each other."- but the way Jackson's heart blips and Stiles' speeds up at that last bit. Scott tries very hard not to give them both odd looks, though he has a feeling he fails.

"He took a bullet for you," Stiles says, and there's an undercurrent there that Scott doesn't understand. "You saw him take a bullet for you."

"I didn't see anything," Jackson hisses, and Stiles stalks a step forward, searching the other boy's face.

"Really? Would you have told me if you had?"

Jackson's eyes soften, just a little, something childish in them, though his chin juts out mulishly.

"Because I would be very disappointed-" Stiles' voice drops, gets honey-thick in a way Scott has never heard before, and his eyebrows raise- "if you knew my brother was in danger and didn't tell me."

Jackson swallows, brows furrowing, lips pursing.

"Jax."

"I didn't— I thought he'd be fine, okay?" Jackson grits, aggrieved, something yearning and desperate and cracking in his tone, a ghost of the way he'd been the other night, begging Derek to spare him. Stiles smiles slightly, approval shining in his eyes.

"Okay," Stiles purrs, "I believe you. But you still should've told me." Jackson rolls his shoulders, flicks his eyes down, and for a moment he almost seems chastened before he lifts his chin back up, and Scott can tell he's about to say something derogatory, upsetting, or generally unhelpful, which is the exact opposite of what they need, but Stiles stays him with a steely look. "Allison's your friend," he says, "and she's mine, too. Do you know how impressed I would be, if you protected her? Kept her from getting hurt?"

"And what if I get hurt?" Jackson asks, strangely pouting, the barest hints of a whine beneath the words.

Scott would say something, he thinks, if he could get a word in edge-wise, or if this felt anything less than powerfully, isolatingly private, like Stiles and Jackson have managed to create a bubble around themselves by sheer force of will.

"You won't, Jackson," Stiles murmurs, soft and enticing, like a lure, like something else entirely. "I
trust you," he says, and the words aren't surprising so much as the fact that he's not actually lying when he says them. "I want to trust you with this. Prove to me that I should, show me that you can, be a good boy for me Jax, hmm? Make me proud."

Jackson seems almost lulled into a trance by the words, heart thundering in his chest, emotions swirling fervent and feverish in his eyes. "You'll be proud?" He asks, the vulnerability, humanity in his voice making Scott's eyes pop wide.

Stiles just grins, "Yes."

And that's all it takes to make Jackson agree, not even begrudgingly, but like he really wants to make Stiles proud, to please him.

"Dude," Scott exclaims after the other boy stalks off with a determined air, and a return to the snobbishness he'd seemed to let go of for that fleeting moment. "How did you do that? What just happened? Did you, like, hypnotize him, or something?"

Stiles bites back a sorta smile, shrugs, then makes a face. "I don't really know how to explain it," he says, "so I'm not going to try." He claps Scott on the shoulder companionably, "You should just be glad we got Allison a date to the winter formal."

Scott, still dazed, lets Stiles drag him to their next class. That whole interaction was so... confusing.

He can't help but be mildly reassured though, with the single-minded intent Jackson's suddenly displaying for... Allison? Maybe more for Stiles, which begins to weird him out all over again until Stiles distracts him with questions about the dance, which he will be going to.

And which Stiles is flawlessly, fatally, willing to help him out with.

It's that, more than anything else, that brings things back to seeming normalcy— or as normal as things can get, with, as Stiles puts it, werewolves and werewolf hunters all out to kick his little werewolf ass.

Lydia is aggrieved that she has to ask Stiles, of all people, to the dance, but friends, best friends, come few and far between, and she knows she screwed up with Allison by making out with Scott. She wants Allison to forgive her, and so she does as the girl asks, despite it all.

The thing is, though, that Stiles seems surprisingly indifferent, a pleased smile, flailing flamboyant grace, sarcasm and enthusiastic submission to any and all demands, but. But a little more distant than she expects, and not at all as besotted. Friendlier, in a way, with something layered indecipherable underneath.

When they get to the dance, in Stiles' crappy, stupid jeep—she sees Jackson with Allison in hand almost directly after she steps out of the vehicle.

"Jackson," she says, in her most airy voice, practiced to queenly perfection, "you look handsome."

"Obviously," he returns, but Stiles cuts in before he can continue with an almost lackadaisical:

"Jax." Blue eyes flash up, fester. Stiles smirks, eyebrows raised, "You do look handsome."

Jackson flushes, mutters a mild, "Thanks," and stalks off.

Shocked doesn't even come close to how she feels at the moment. She's starting to think this isn't
going to go *at all* like she expected.

And she's more right than she anticipated, because she learns that Stiles, calmly, kindly, and platonically, can flatter and enchant and exceed, that he knows exactly how smart she is and is pretty insanely smart in his own right, that if he's in love with *anyone*, it isn't her.

It's *Jackson*.

Funny she only notices this now, while they're dancing, and burnt caramel eyes are tracing every line of the gym, searching, just like she is. As soon as they realize he's no longer there, probably having disappeared when Scott took over with Allison, Stiles goes *rigid*, worried, intense in a way that might be scary to be on the other side of, and she knows she won't even have to beg off dancing with him, because right now he wants to leave just as badly as she does; wants to *find* him— just as badly as she does.

Jackson's desperation, yearning, that niggling want to be stronger, to be *like* them, *powerful*, draws him away from his task the moment he realizes Scott has it well in hand.

Except, the twin lights, red, and bright, and tempting, coming from the Preserve, don't lead him to the Alpha, to his desire. They lead him to *hunters*, adults, with guns and smiles like they can fix every goddamn thing and he... he falls for it.

"You won't hurt him?" He asks, because. Because Scott saved his life, because Scott is Stiles' brother, because this whole thing is making his chest ache and his head hurt and he already told them *everything* and he just doesn't fucking know what to do anymore.

"Of course not," Chris says, arm wrapped companionably around Jackson's shoulder, "he's just a *kid*."

Jackson... doesn't know if he can believe that. Wishes he could. Waffles with indecision. Thankfully, Chris decides for him, telling him to go back to the party, where it turns out Stiles is waiting. Stiles who wanted him to *prove* himself, who wanted to trust him, who loves him and said he would've been proud. Just one thing, all he'd had to do. But he suddenly feels like this is it, and his stomach swoops, because he was fine, mostly, with losing him that first time.

He's not so sure he'll be fine losing him *this* time, and he *knows* he's going to. This is the mistake that's *really* going to cost him.

Stiles takes one look at him, and becomes the picture of complete concern, pacing over, hands cupping his cheeks, honeyed eyes searching, worried, almost motherly, all fierce-nurture focus, "Hey, hey. What is it, what's wrong?"

Jackson starts, stutters, feels his blood drain as he tries to explain, feels dizzy as Stiles' eyes widen with horrified realization, and he begins to back away, slightly.

"What happened?" Stiles asks, voice becoming sharp, sizzling with quiet anger, anguish. "Jackson? What did you *do*?"

Stiles is furious, and, and *betrayed*, and he feels silly and stupid and immature for letting himself—— but it doesn't matter, he can't *let* it matter. He needs to tell Scott.

He wants to tell him right fucking *now*, but plays the pros and cons of interrupting him and Allison or just holding off, letting his best friend have his moment. He should probably find Lydia anyway,
he decides, tell her Jackson came back. He feels oddly detached right now, like there's a cavern opening up in his chest, and his whole soul is caving in. Heartbreak, internal structural damage, same difference.

Maybe he should just have Jackson tell Scott, maybe Scott will be angry enough to punch him, kick him, throw him at the wall, Stiles doesn't know, he can't deal with it right now. So— manageable things first. Let's go find Lydia.

Who is being attacked by the Alpha a whole, literal field away. Because of course she is. That's... that's great. That's just great. Well, at least he's good at thinking on his feet, right?

"You're the clever one, aren't you, Stiles?" Peter Hale says- yeah, sure, thanks, nice to be appreciated by a total and complete psychopath, we should do this again sometime. Coffee? Does tuesday work for you?- and his voice, even with fangs, even with Lydia's blood dripping down his chin, is like silk, like velvet rubbed the right way, seductive.

For a moment he's reminded of Eve and the serpent and the apple. For a moment he's trapped in ice and terror and frozen. For a moment it's all too much.

But then he blinks, and the spell breaks, and he tells Peter his theory about Derek having taken Scott's phone, that maybe they could track it, because even though he really shouldn't know anything about anything at the moment— Peter's right.

He is the clever one.

And, also, exceedingly, times about twenty thousand, fuck this guy. Just— fuck him.

"I'm not just letting you leave her here," and yes, he's trembling, he's terrified, but this is important.

"You don't have a choice Stiles, you're coming with me."

"If you want me to go with you," Stiles says, ignores the way his voice shakes, looks up at the man in a startling show of defiant courage that he must've dredged up from the pits of hell, because he's just as surprised by it as Peter seems to be, "you'll let me call someone, an ambulance, something. I will not leave her here."

Peter quirks an eyebrow, somewhere between intrigued, amused, and almost entirely insane. He puts the tips of his claws just under Stiles' jaw, lifts him up in a display of brutality, confidence, and dominance. Stiles tries not to fucking swallow or jerk the wrong way, because as much as he may be into erotic asphyxiation, having his windpipe slashed would not be fun. Peter narrows his eyes, smooth, melody-lilt, absorbing, he murmurs, "Call your friend. Tell Jackson where she is, that's all you get."

Stiles has to wonder if he chose Jackson specifically for the twisted perversion of it, or something, if he even knows. But there isn't any time to wonder, not right now, at least, and he wouldn't endanger Lydia for something so fucking petty.

He calls Jackson.

Then he gives the psycho a ride, because for all that Roscoe gets a bad rap, he's a good car, and he'll get them from point a to point b, which is good enough for the psycho-serial-killer. Also, he'd leave his mom's car behind about as soon as he'd leave Lydia injured on a field without help, which is to say: never.
Stiles wonders when Peter's apparent interest in him—whether it be with his bravery, or his intellect, or whatever—will dissipate enough that indulging Stiles' nerve-wracked babble, sarcasm, and stubbornness will no longer be worth it.

"Whose car is this?"

He wonders, too, if Scott's alright, if Lydia's alright, if Jackson is.

"It belonged to my nurse."

He never got to warn Scott about the hunters. His dad will be devastated if he dies. He's got to think of something.

"What happened to your n—O—oh my God!" That's a dead body in the trunk of that car. A long since dead body.

Peter glances at Stiles, back to the corpse, back to Stiles. "I got better," he says, by way of explanation, like he needs to explain it.

Which tells Stiles three things.

One: Peter Hale is insane, which he already knew, but normally— at least for him— he wouldn't kill for killing's sake. According to him, according to Scott, according to evidence, this has all been a revenge-spree— although, with how he's gone about it, he'd technically be a mass-murderer, not a spree-killer or a serial-killer, but, y'know, semantics— the only exception being Laura who he either killed in the throes of catatonia, insanity, or full-moon-blood-lusty hijinks.

So, two: Even though he and the nurse were working together at one point— which, how? He'd really like more details on that, please— Peter was either greatly offended by something about her, or she'd done something that was unconscionable to him—he's got a God-complex a mile wide, and playing judge, jury, and executioner is only making it worse, it'll never end, he'll never stop, even when everyone responsible for the fire is dead, he'll just find more people who he can feel justified in killing. That's the distinction, sort of, of a mass-murderer, too—they usually die via suicide by cop or something akin to it, because the only way they stop is if they're made to stop. It's all very self-destructive.

Or he isn't actually insane at all, but is instead a sociopath. In which case, he killed Laura because her only usefulness to him would be to die, so he could heal, and he killed his nurse because, as he said, he got better, which means she no longer had any usefulness to him, wasn't entertaining, etcetera.

Which brings him to three: In order to survive, Stiles needs to be as useful, entertaining, and contrary as possible. No reaction he provides can or should be expected, because expected is boring, and boring gets him killed. Unexpected is exhilarating, new, provides something, gets him time even when/if his usefulness runs out. Whether Peter is insane or a sociopath or both, Stiles can play him, he can do this, he can live.

"Do you want the Bite?"

And here's the thing with that fucked-in-the-ass question. The answer is fucking complicated. Being more powerful might be a wonderful thing, but there are complications, consequences, side-effects.

Stiles takes adderall to manage his ADHD, and, sometimes, if he's not careful, he'll forget to eat for weeks, because he's just not hungry, or everything tastes like card-board. He gets migraines, often,
like nobody's business, though he's good at dealing with them—his pain-tolerance is kinda awesome, he's not gonna lie. When he *is* blessed with sleep, he cherishes it, because chronic insomnia is a thing. He’s irritable and restless so consistently that, at this point, he doesn't know if it's a personality trait or not anymore.

Lycanthropy comes hand-in-hand with behavioral changes, the occasional body-dysmorphic, culture-shock, life-rocking responsibilities, nevermind the speciesism currently rampant in the community, see: hunters, everywhere. And for all he knows, it affects your brain-chemistry as well, and Stiles’ brain chemistry is already fucked.

Besides, yes, he could do good things with this power. But he could do terrible things, too. And. To protect his dad, to protect Scott, Scott's mom? He *would*, he *knows* he would, he *has*.

And then there's *addiction*. It runs in his family. It's the same reason why, even though he sometimes *isn't* careful with his meds, he always tries to pace himself, why he *tries* to avoid drinking, why he *should’ve* avoided Jackson. When you *want*, when it feels too good to be true, and you know you'll just ache for *more*, it's a bad, *bad* idea.

All the red-flags.

Steer fucking clear.

So the correct question to ask himself is: does he need it? And the answer to that would be a resounding no.

"I don't want to be like you," he answers, and lets Peter think he read a lie in his heartbeat. He's allowed to have his secrets. And you can't read *everything* from the way a heart beats.

Arrogant bastard.

Peter crushed his keys, but he also left him in a carpark, and Stiles is pretty ingenuitive.

Apologies to the owner of the tan toyota, you'll get your car back soon. He's only borrowing it. He promises.

So, alive, pants-wetting terror passed, but that doesn't matter because Lydia's still in the hospital and his dad- who he has no answers for, no lies or truths he could possibly tell- may or may not be pissed at him. But frustrated exasperation has worked to his advantage before and it works to his advantage now.

Update on the five-year-old arson case: *definitely* arson; they've got a witness, and the mastermind- who is most probably an Argent- was a young girl, around twenty-something now, who wore a pendant.

Like the pendant *Kate* gave to Allison.

Stiles would curse, *colorfully*, but his father would hear, and he doesn't even think he has that much time to waste. Lydia's safe, his dad's safe, Scott- who has mentioned wanting to save Derek- is MIA — and considering the hunters' newfound knowledge, and *Stiles*, Scott's either with the hunters, with Derek, or with Allison and/or killer-Kate, so. Not safe, very likely in the tunnels under the Hale house.

*Thank you, Peter, for thinking out loud and revealing potentially helpful information. If you'd just stop killing people, maybe I'd buy you a fruit-basket.*
"Hey, where are you going?" Jackson asks, trying to keep up with Stiles as the other boy marches down the hall with grim determination.

"To find Scott," he says, vague and precise at once, and Jackson wonders if he's in too much of a hurry to explain, if he'd explain even if he wasn't, if any love and trust they'd had, if all of it, is really lost.

"You don't have a car," he points out, grasping at straws, desperate.

"I'm aware of that, thank you," Stiles grits, brisk and terse, and Jackson's gut churns.

"Hey, look. I—I'll drive—" He reaches out and Stiles bats his hand away, jerks back, unwilling to be touched, and that. That maybe kills him, a little, and the look in those honey-whiskey eyes—like the sugar's been stripped out of them, angry, betrayed, unforgiving, disappointed— that just pours salt into the wound.

"Just because you feel guilty all of a sudden doesn't make it okay, alright? You made a choice, one that endangered all of us—not just him. You, me, maybe even Lydia, now. Do you get that?"

Jackson swallows the bile and the burn and the shame, keeps his eyes on Stiles' even though every instinct is screaming for him to look away.

"Do you even care?" Stiles asks, and his voice is softer, now, twisted, broken and weary. "I've been justifying everything you've done, since day one, because I thought I knew you. But maybe you were right? Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you really don't care about anyone, anything, except yourself."

"It—" He chokes on the words, but he forces them out, violent, shredding: "It doesn't matter. Look, I have a car, and you don't. Do you want my help or not?"

"I want you to answer me, Jax. When you told them about Scott, did you think about what would happen? Did you think they might kill him?" Stiles sucks in a sharp breath, and something cuts off in his eyes, some extension of himself that was always naked and exposed and there suddenly secreted away, hidden, dark. He looks so much different without it that for a second Jackson can't even breathe. "Would you have been okay with that?"

"No. No!"

"Really? Because you tried to get him killed once before, with the molotov cocktail. I know you did."

"Stiles. " He clears his throat, can't take it anymore, lets his eyes fall to the ground. "Please, can we just..."

"Fine," Stiles concedes, stressed and unhappy. "Give me your keys."

Jackson nods, submissive, tugging them out of his pocket to hand over, and then they turn to leave, and there's Chris Argent, smiling cheerfully as he blocks the way. Stiles makes an aggrieved noise that's a long way from surprise, like he'd expected this, and the way his eyes narrow, it's like he's already working out how to get past this new obstacle.

Jackson hopes none of his plans involve Jackson lying to adults with guns, because he's pretty sure he's shit at that.
Nothing, *nothing*, about his life, in his life, just generally *surrounding* his life, can ever, *ever* be easy.

The Gods of Luck have failed him, or just hate him, or have *selective fucking blindness* when it comes. To. Him.

Think about it—you get betrayed by your maybe-boyfriend/ex, witness your former-crush/idol/maybe-friend get maimed by a mass-murderer, get *kidnapped* by said mass-murderer, get reamed by your dad, have a fight with your maybe-boyfriend/ex, get accosted by and locked up in a room with a bunch of trigger-happy hunters. That has been his day. And it's not even *over* yet.

Lucky him, though, he has just enough information to change the stakes from *Where is Scott McCall?* and *'We're all werewolf bigots who want to convert you to the dark side because we know shit-all about what it means to be loyal'*, to *'Code, what Code? Oh, that Code'* and *little sister Kate is also killer-killer wolf-char-dinner Kate*.

Which is enough, apparently, to get Chris to back the fuck off and re-group. Churrah.

And Stiles, who is extremely observant at the worst of times, and who obviously researched it to hell and back after that night trapped in the school, realizes that they could probably make a self-igniting molotov cocktail with some things in the hospital, and, thanks to Chris, funny enough, remembers that plans are *sh*t*, it's best to improvise, and even *better* to improvise with *weapons*.

It irks him though, how much time it takes, and the fact that Roscoe's still at that carpark, because the porsche was just *not made* to be driven through the Preserve.

But they get there, thank God, just in time to help Scott fight off a fully-transformed Peter. Stiles throws his cocktail, but Peter, predictably, catches it—*what, does he need a Leprechaun? Christ-* at which point Scotty backs him up by tossing Allison her bow, and she, in awesomely awesome fashion, shoots an arrow at the cocktail, which must *hurt* the guy, but doesn't actually put him *down*.

Then Jackson throws *his* cocktail, and—well, in the infamous words of Coach, *'the bigger they are, the bigger they are'!*

Stiles feels literally no remorse, he knew this was going to happen—not the fire part, and it kind of sucks that they retraumatized him, but the. The dying in a blaze of glory part? Yeah, he called that.

He kind of basks quietly in Scott and Allison's reunion, because his brother's happiness is his happiness, if only by osmosis, and offers Jackson a pained, strained, guarded smile when he looks over from the display and finds the other boy chancing a glance at him. The corner of Jackson's lips twitch up, but he looks kind of thrashed himself, and Stiles ruthlessly suppresses the part of him that wants, relentlessly, to hug, or kiss, or touch, or soothe, or comfort.

He's not—they shouldn't—*they can't* be like that. He'll never be entirely what Jackson needs, because what Jackson needs is *help*, and maybe a good kick in the ass, and Stiles doesn't think he can provide that, not in a healthy way, not in a——he did what he could, at the end of summer, breaking up with Jackson and referring the boy to his old therapist by way of business card. He should've stuck to that.

He's *going* to stick to that.

He blinks out of his trail of thought when Scott notices Derek, which, since everyone was kind of watching the couple, leads them *all* to noticing Derek, and—*oh*. Oh, *no*. Poor Scotty. There goes that chance, if it was ever even *real*. 
"I'm the Alpha, now," Derek announces, and Stiles kind of wants to shake him, just a little, because this is serious—a serious, terrible, traumatizing, brutal, all-the-bad-things sort of moment, and that was the cheesiest of all possible things to say.

Just—just—ugh.

Chris, being the werewolf hunter who just lost his sister to a werewolf—although, y'know. Mildly justified, as far as Stiles is concerned—and who has issues with bias, and who probably also just wants to take his daughter somewhere they can lick their wounds—doesn't let Allison stay for very much longer, ignoring the Romeo & Juliet of it all to drag her away, take her home. Derek starts digging, under the floorboards of his house, to bury his Uncle there. Which is extremely, intensely morbid. Scott still seems to be in shock, and so, for that matter, does Jackson, although Stiles can see it in his eyes, that glimmer.

He already knows Jackson's going to ask Derek for the Bite. He already knows he's not going to be able to stop him. But the kid's not going to do it now, because he's at least got a little sense.

Stiles sighs, tosses the other boy his keys and says, "Go home, Jackson."

Jackson furrows his brows, gesturing at Scott and Stiles respectively, "What about you two?"

"Don't act like you care, man, just fucking go."

Jackson doesn't protest, painting on a smirk and donning all his smug swagger as he gets into the driver seat and speeds away. Stiles watches the car until he can no longer see it through the thicket of trees before turning back to Scott, who's leaning up against one of the Hale house's less decrepit walls, staring at the burnt wreck of a body that was once Peter Hale, devastated and numb in equal measure. Stiles walks forward, picks up the necklace he'd seen among the foliage, all fallen leaves and scorched dirt, musses Scott's hair on his way into the crumbling building.

Sure enough, there's Kate, right there, throat torn out. Because, the things is, Stiles may not've been here for the whole fight, but he'd been sure ever since he realized Kate was the one who set the fire that Peter wouldn't let himself die until she, at least, was dead. He'll probably have to pry the details out of Scott, later, when he's less upset, but, for now, he just stalks over to her corpse, ignoring Derek digging his Uncle's grave until the man asks, "What the hell are you doing, Stiles?"

"Making my dad's life easier," he says lightly, "and giving your family the justice they deserve." He picks up the dead-weight of her head, the feeling of her hair coarse and clumped with blood and gore, slipping the necklace around her disgusting, shredded neck, the skin there gaping, thin and flimsy like paint-soaked paper, and the sight is honestly disturbing, but Stiles can deal. When he's done, still crouching over the body, he turns to look at Derek over his shoulder.

Hazel eyes pierce his, intense and brooding, the man's hands flexing around his shovel.

"You should probably hurry with that, because I'm calling in an anonymous tip the second the sun starts coming up." Derek stares—then, sharp, curt, aggressive and a little uncomfortable, he nods. "Oh, and, dude?" Stiles stands, moves to leave, "Dick move."

He doesn't wait for Derek's response or turn back to see his reaction, he doesn't honestly care; as far as he's concerned, their work here is done. "Hey, c'mon," he says to Scott, heaving the boy up from his... would vigil be the right word? Depression? Whatever. As soon as his friend's standing, he wraps an arm around his shoulders and says, "Curly fries and milkshakes, bro. On me."

"Wha—I'm not hungry, and I don't really want to hike to Donnie's."
"Well, **tough**, okay? You're a werewolf, and you're *staying* a werewolf, and that *sucks*, but you got the girl- mostly- and the biggest baddie is *dead*. We're celebrating. Or grieving. Whichever— but it's happening."

Scott looks at him, and he's trying *so hard* to keep the burgeoning smile off his face, but it blooms there anyway, because Scott's never been the type of guy you can keep down for long. "She said she *loves* me," he breathes, awed.

"**Yeah** she did, Scotty," he pats his brother's chest. "**Yeah**, she did."

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The days after the Big Climactic Thing at the Hale house are both *easier* and *harder* than Stiles thought they would be.

Stiles and Scott spend a lot of time at the hospital keeping an eye on Lydia who's been Bitten and isn't dead, isn't changed, so therefore either *immune*, or something *else* entirely. Knowing their luck, it's the latter.

The Argents seem to be hiding, for the moment, Allison being kept from school and Scott and her phone and her *life*, in general, for all of a week, so far, but no one's attacking, maiming, or killing anyone, so there's *that*— also, Scott and Allison are sneaky, and her parents are surprisingly bad at both catching and *stopping* them.

Derek's pulling the same ghost act, but he must've buried Peter's body in time, and dealt with everything else he needed to, because by the time the sheriff got there all he'd found was Kate's body, with the pendant proclaiming her *killer* around her blood-soaked neck. Stiles has a feeling his dad's more *frustrated* by the conclusion of these events than not, but it *is* a conclusion, in a sense, and, hopefully, that'll be good *enough* for a while.

Jackson... is a problem Stiles is going to firmly *ignore* for the moment. Though he may pray a little, to the Gods of Luck, if nothing else.

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It takes three days after the police-tape has been taken down and the Hale house is no longer a crime-scene for Jackson to give in, to go, to *get* what he *wants*.

What he *needs*.

And the Bite, he decides, hopes, prays, will be *worth* it.

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♡ **ACT TWO** ♡

Luck Be A Lady— Nope, Nevermind, She's A Bitch

Stiles is on Lydia duty at the moment, since Scott and Allison are sneaking around as stealthily as possible because Chris' apparent ultimatum was that they couldn't see each other or else he'd put a bullet in Scotty-boy's love-addled brain. Even when death is on the line you can't keep those two apart, Stiles thinks fondly, and then wants to laugh at the hopeless romance of it all. Being friends with Scott has now become like watching a constant, never-ending chick-flick.

Stiles won't complain, since he likes seeing Scott happy, but it does kind of put his own shitty, mostly secretive love-life in stark, depressing perspective.
He flips off the hospital vending machine with feeling when the thing doesn't give him his goddamned Reese's. You know what? He deserves some candy; the past three months have been shit, he's fighting Deborah-- the name he'd not-so-affectionately bequeathed the asshole of a vending-machine when he was five, the first time it decided to withhold sugary treats by way of mechanical malfunction- for it. Which, of course, leads to Deborah falling over and smashing her glass face on the chemical-shiny linoleum floor, and Stiles backing away whilst putting off as many 'I am innocent, I am the picture of innocence' vibes as he possibly can—until he hears Lydia screaming.

Fuck.

Well, he's a shitty knight-errant, apparently, because that scream precedes Lydia literally vanishing. Gone. Disappeared into thin air.

Double fuck.

Also, time to call Scott.

"I know," Scott says, cutting off Stiles' rambling explanation at the root as he hops from the Argents' roof to a tree, flips from the branches to the ground, and sprints out of sight.

"You know?"

"I mean I heard," he amends.

"... Buddy, I'm gonna need you to clarify."

"I heard her screaming, Stiles. I— I don't know how, okay? But I did."

"Alright. Okay. I mean, weird, but your werewolfiness has never been predictable before, why should it start now? And maybe it has something to do with her being Bitten? Even if she's immune? Like-"

"Stiles."

"Yeah, bro?"

"Focus."

"I am focused, I'm the picture—the study—the anthropomorphic personification of the very idea of focus, I promise you. And, to that effect, tell you to get your werewolf hiney to Roscoe while I go steal something that'll help you sniff her out."

Scott huffs a laugh, hopping over an obstacle and climbing a fence in his path. "On my way."

Stiles should've learned by now—or, well, he has learned by now, mostly, that even with the mandate on Scott's head, Scott has officially become a combined entity— he's leveled up, evolved into Scott&Allison. Three cheers for relationship goals in the face of death and severe trauma!

But it doesn't really matter, because despite the Argents' incapacity for honesty, communication, and anything that's not exceptionally unforthcoming, Allison is a badass spy in the making, and having her tag along does give them a piece of knowledge they didn't have before:

The Argents probably don't care what's going on, and are very, very likely to kill Lydia on-sight, no
questions asked.

Stiles noticed this with the Jackson thing, too— when they thought the other boy was the second Beta, not Scott. They thought that because of unhealed scratch marks. Stiles has only been in this game for three and a half months and he knows that's not how it works. And they play it seriously fast-and-loose with that 'Code' of theirs.

Argents- Stiles thinks distractedly, as Scott calls out another direction for them to follow, his nose leading, top half of him hanging precariously out of Roscoe's passenger window- are not very good at their jobs.

Scotty's tracking capabilities lead them to the Hale house, which can't be a coincidence, although the reasons as to why are numerous. Maybe Lydia did turn, and instinct brought her here in search of an Alpha, maybe the scent of wolves caught her, or maybe they just don't have enough information yet.

There's a trip-wire, Scott dealing with a no doubt offensive, life-threatening conversation with Chris Argent, Scott being a complete badass with claws just because he can, and an empty- no sign of Lydia- Hale house.

Because their lives can never be easy.

Despite having some knowledge of what happens to a Bitten werewolf simply by being one, Scott can't really relate to running around naked in the woods and eating a corpse's liver. He's pretty sure the first few nights he did, in fact, run around, mostly unaware of his own mind, but then there was Chris shooting him with an arrow and Derek being Derek and Allison.

He had things to focus on, an Anchor.

And the only Anchor they can really think of for Lydia is Jackson— who is, expectedly, a douche about it all. Although, Scott notices, the scent thing that was going on the last time he and Stiles tried to convince Jackson of something—it's happening again, only in reverse.

Stiles' scent is the one that dims, carves itself out of the air to tuck close, hide, and Jackson's scent, like dew and ripe cherries and fields of cherry trees, is the one that gets stronger, sours, becomes rotting fruit and molding leaves. Stiles' eyes become knives fossilized in amber, cutting, holding his grudge with a vengeance, and Jackson's go hollow, as light, bright, and empty as freshly fallen snow.

The other boy acts superior and dismissive, playing dumb for a moment until Stiles calls him out, and he finally relents to say that it's not Lydia who's in danger here, because: "When I was with Lydia, you should've seen the scratch marks she left on me." Jackson's eyes flick fleetingly to Stiles, then- whose heart upticks- before he huffs derisively. "What do you think she's going to do with a set of real claws?" He puts to them as he shoulders past.

Stiles watches Jackson's retreating back for a second longer than he really needs to, face carefully blank, and Scott wonders if there's something to this that he doesn't know, that Stiles hasn't told him.

Stiles catches the nose-bleed Jackson's hit with in the middle of class, but, considering Mr. Harris is up his ass, he can't do anything about it. Which might actually be better in light of the fact that he shouldn't be doing anything about it.

There's love lost, here, and maybe he's pining a little- for the idea of the relationship, if nothing else-
but being with Jackson was never very healthy, for so many reasons, and... If he's rejecting the Bite (which Stiles knows—he knows Jackson got- the second he could- and he knows Derek gave, because Derek’s an ass, a freshly made Alpha ass, and he needs Pack in order to be stronger—mentally, physically, goddamn wolfishly) it's not Stiles' problem, it can't be.

It was Jackson's choice, and Stiles couldn't have stopped him if he tried.

Maybe it's just a nosebleed. He hopes it's just a nosebleed.

And he's irritated beyond all measure when Harris decides to keep him back a half an hour longer out of some sort of weird, petty revenge schtick against his father— because apparently he was the witness they had for the fire. Ugh. Stiles has got a funeral to get to, a brother and his girlfriend to support, he really doesn't have time for this.

They get caught spying on Kate’s funeral by his dad, because Noah Stilinski is nothing if not a good cop, and it's actually lucky, in a way, because it means they're there when a DOA in the back of an ambulance getting mauled by something 'unnatural' gets called in. Which is, hopefully, a lead for Lydia, although he does vaguely hope that she's not really the one cannibalizing dead bodies.

But, after Scott catches whatever scent he catches, and runs off to go track it, and Stiles decides to ditch playing hide-and-go-seek to talk to his dad—Lydia shows up, naked, and with no apparent memory where she's been the past few days.

Her Bite hasn't healed, and, so far as he can currently tell, she still isn't a werewolf; which leads to the question: who maimed the dead guy? And whose scent is Scott tracking?

He gets his answer when Scott calls him at- he checks his clock, sleep-hazy- two in the morning. "Are these gonna become a thing?" He wonders aloud, "Wake-up calls at the witching hour?"

Scott pauses for a breath. Then, ponderously, "Isn't the witching hour midnight?"

"I don't know, dude, I'm too tired for my brain to function properly. I need coffee, adderall—more coffee." He decidedly gets up, because it's not like he's going to go back to sleep anyway, and he has a feeling he's going to need to be aware for this call. "Alright, what's up? Lay it on me."

"You know the new people who showed up at Kate's funeral? The, uh, the reinforcements?"

"You mean grandpa Argent and his goons? Yeeaahhhhh——?" He only just manages not to flail off one of the top steps and fall down the stairs- which would have totally woken his dad up- and he does a quietly victorious fist-pump when he succeeds the rest of the way to the kitchen in relative, non-klutzy silence.

"Well, I tracked down the 'were that fucked with that ambulance- it wasn't Lydia- it was— it was an Omega. A wolf without a Pack, one that's alone. Anyway, he tripped one of the trip-wires the Argents have-

"Wait, they have more than one? What the hell! People hike in the Preserve, Scott," he takes the pot of coffee from its' holder, anchoring his cell between his shoulder and his ear as he grabs a mug from the top shelf of the cupboard, "normal, perfectly innocent, mundane mortals who know shit-for-shit and do not deserve to get tied up just for walking."

Scott huffs out a breath, both agreeing and fond. "Look, it gets worse."
"Jesus Mary Magdeline, yes, of course, I should've guessed," he mock mumbles, pouring the dark, heavy-rich liquid into his cup before adding an exorbitant amount of sugar and about two tablespoons of creamer.

"He was hung up by his wrists," Scott explains, resolutely ignoring his melodrama, "and I was going to cut him down- I thought I had enough time, even though I could already hear the hunters coming- but Derek stopped me, held me back, said it was already too late, and then Gerard Argent—he cut the Omega in half."

"Holy shit, dude."

"It still gets worse."

"Oh, I'm sure it does. Why wouldn't it?"

Scott snorts, sighs. "He says, since a wolf killed his daughter-" he makes a lip-smacking sound of finality- "no more Code."

"That's not surprising," Stiles says, "and it's not like we could've trusted any of them to follow that flimsy-ass Code anyway— even if they did follow it, they'd just use it as an excuse; these are violent people, living without consequences to their actions because everything they do is hidden, secret. It puts them in a unique position, and they're going to abuse that— maybe not all of them, but it's better to be suspicious and survive than it is to be hopeful and die."

"Well, aren't you just a ball of sunshine."

"I will have you know I'm the sunniest sunshine there is, dude, I make Apollo cower." He gulps down the whole of his coffee, before pouring himself another cup. "Look, all I'm saying is: their Code? Not to be trusted. But it is something they hide behind, so. They're probably ten times more dangerous without it."

"That's just... great."

"You gonna talk to Allison?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't want to worry her and... I don't want to hurt her relationship with her family any more than I already have."

"Awww," Stiles coos, unashamed in finding Scott's worry adorable.

"Shut up," Scott returns, rolling the words around on his tongue so that they tumble out soaked in affectionate exasperation. Stiles beams at him through the phone. "And, uh, Derek wants me in his Pack, I guess?" Stiles narrows his eyes at the wall, imagining it to be Derek's stupid, macho-aggressive face. "Like, if we team up, maybe we'll be able to survive them? The hunters."

"That one's up to you, Scotty-boy, you know how I feel about him: suspicious, generally unfriendly, and still a little pissed that he caused you so much psychological distress—" "It wasn't that mu—"

"Ah-ah-ah, don't interrupt." Stiles pauses to let that sink in, because he is secretly a little shit, and he's been house training this kid for years. Scott makes a lightly annoyed sound in the back of his throat.

"Not interrupting," he grumbles, conceding, and Stiles hums his approval.

"You know how I feel about him," Stiles repeats, "but I'm with you in this no matter what, so. Whatever you decide."
"Thanks, bro."

"You're welcome, now—on a much happier note, since we all deserve a little good news: we found Lydia!"

"Wha——really? Is she alright? Is she okay? Is she a werewolf? Where was she?"

"Yes, yes, to be determined, and I don't know. She doesn't know. It was a—uh, uh," he snaps his fingers, trying to remember, "fugue state, apparently. Or something. That's what the doctors are calling it, anyway. Jury's still out on lycanthropy, since her injuries haven't healed, and she's not sporting any claws or fangs or glowy eyes or super-senses. But she's alive, and safe, and we know where she is, so."

"Yeah. Yeah—no, it's—it's good news."

"Let's just hope it stays good news," Stiles says, and Scott chuckles softly. "Where are you right now, by the way?"

"On my way to Allison's."

"Alright: tell her I said hi, don't get yourself killed, you know, the usual."

"Got it. Love you, bro."

"Love you, too. Bye."

Their plights don't end there: the next day, directly before their fourth full-moon, Scott catches a scent that's like werewolf, but it's fleeting, and he couldn't really get a good handle on it, couldn't tell who it was, before it had already escaped him.

"What if you can get them one on one?" Stiles asks, an idea already formulating. "Would that help?"

"Yeah."

And with that, Stiles runs off to get Coach to switch Scott and Danny for the day, putting Scott in goal, which is about as one-on-one as you can get in lacrosse. Although, when he tells Scott he's the goalie for today, his brother just looks at him with open, puppy-dog oblivious confusion.

"I seriously don't understand how you survive without me, sometimes," Stiles says, clapping him on the shoulder and pulling him up with the motion.

But Scott gets it, eventually, and starts using his temporary position to get his sniff on. He is not sneaky about it, at all, and Stiles has to honestly wonder how no one has guessed at his wolfiness—they're really not very good at hiding it. Mostly the exercise just serves to frustrate Coach which is... mildly hilarious, he's not gonna lie.

They do find the needle in the haystack, though— tall kid with baby-blues who's got helpless, fragile, and in-need-of-protection written all over him: Isaac Lahey. And the moment they figure him out, Stiles' dad is walking onto the field with two of his deputies astride, because Isaac's dad was murdered last night.

Turns out, Isaac might be a suspect, in which case they'd probably want to lock him in a holding cell for 24 hours. Overnight. During a full-moon.
And, where Scott's maybe more accustomed to it by now, or just has really badass self-control, or a really badass Anchor—Stiles is pretty sure this'll be Isaac's first full moon. And hello bloodlust, my new best friend.

Which means they're probably going to have to help him, if only to keep him from hurting anyone in the sheriff's department, where Stiles' dad works.

Ah, luck, you suck, go fuck a soaking wet duck.

But—But!—there is a chance that's not the case, since Isaac's so young; they'd need solid evidence. Or a witness. Like Jackson, who gets called into the principal's office to talk to the sheriff, since he does live across the street from Isaac.

Considering Harris is an absolute ass, though, getting to the principal's office to eavesdrop is almost painfully easy.

Learning that Jackson knew Isaac was getting abused and told no one puts another nail in that coffin. Learning that the new principal is Gerard is just icing on the cake. He is, by far, the creepiest guy ("You look like you're about to crack a cyanide pill with your teeth," as a way of saying 'you look uncomfortable'? Like—just—why?). And, since one of them needs to take the fall for pissing their chemistry teacher off, and one of them needs to get Isaac out of lock-up, and one of them happens to be human while the other is werewolf; well—you do the math.

Scott doesn't want to trust Derek- not after everything- and he doesn't really want to work with him, but.

But Isaac could hurt someone, and Scott can tell he doesn't want to, he can also sympathize with that loss of control, that want to maintain—if not what you were before, than who.

He wants to help him, he wants to protect him. And if that means working with Derek, then- for now, at least- he will. Even though it's Derek's fault in the first place, for Biting Isaac. At least Derek admits to that; it's not nearly good enough, but it's better than nothing.

And Derek doesn't think Isaac killed his dad, even though they're in Isaac's house trying to get rid of evidence that would cast yet more suspicion on him. He knows, the older 'were says, something ancient-dust dry in his heterochromatic eyes, due to a combination of his senses—more than just his sense of smell.

Scott winces a little internally. "Y—you... saw the lacrosse thing today?"

"Yeah," Derek says, flatly.

Scott scrunches up his face, "Did it look that bad?"

"Yeah," Derek says, flatly.

Derek takes a deep breath, wraps an arm around the back of Scott's neck, hand massaging his shoulder a little, and Scott reels some at how pleased his wolf is with the touch. "Yeah," Derek says again, just as deadpan, and Scott fights the urge to groan in embarrassment, letting the man pull him further into the house.

Derek leads him to the basement, guiding him from the top of the stairs, without breeching or contaminating the space, to use his senses- all of them- to find what they're looking for. The thing that could be considered motive. And there is a scent: acrid, deep, and rich with salt— but there's also an aftertaste of sound, and his gaze tracks a broken mirror, scratch marks on the floor beside it
that lead to—to a [freezer]. Locked.

The scent’s stronger here, and there’s a [sense], altogether it’s own, foreboding, the ghost of terror, fear so strong it [stains] everything around it.

"Open it," Derek says, and when Scott does, he’s nothing less than horrified by what he sees. Another scent gets added to the mix, tangy, copper, earth-grit dry: [blood].

The second Stiles gets out of detention, he checks his phone—since Harris fucking [took] it from him during his [punishment], not like there are [life-and-death] situations going on, not like a [teenager] could ever be called for an [emergency].

Fucker.

He's got two texts from Scott: one saying that he's going to see what he can do, and another saying he's at the Lahey's place with Derek—which has Stiles wondering if Scott's considering actually teaming up with the guy, or if something else is going on.

He's also got two missed calls from Allison.

He responds to the texts first, explaining that he's free-and-clear, to please keep him updated, and that he'll be there as soon as he can.

Then he calls Allison back. Turns out, the Argents have been interrogating her about Lydia, and now they've sent out one of their own, dressed as a Deputy- probably for Isaac- with a box of wolfsbane, or wolfsbane bullets; either way, the intent is clear, and they're running out of time.

[Everything] about this house explains why Isaac would want the Bite, but Scott still doesn't like the idea of Derek just going around turning people—he gets that Derek explained it all, the hunters, the dangers- though he doubts how well he explained it, he [does] believe the man when he says he did-but, still.

And, yeah, Derek's pitch is near perfect, like, maybe it would be easier to have someone who really knew all this stuff teaching it to him, to not have so much responsibility, to not be so alone, and he can feel how his wolf, within him, keens for it.

But he wants- he needs- Allison more.

And if she won't let the [Argents] keep them apart, he's not going to let [Derek] keep them apart. Not for anything.

He's made his choice.

But, whatever that choice means for him and Derek, he still wants to help the man with Isaac, because Isaac's his responsibility too, because Isaac doesn't deserve any of this- even if he asked for the Bite- because Isaac's new to this world, and the look he had in the back of that cruiser was frightened, because Isaac's innocent.

(He ignores the connotation that he isn't, presses it back within himself and covers it with the duty life has charged him with—it's not important enough for him to deal with right now, anyway.)
Since they don't have time, and all the wolves— with the possible exception of Derek—are under the sway of Lady Luna herself, their plan is typically shitty.

Stiles asks Allison to slow down the Argent secret-agent-guy, which she does, brilliantly, stealthily, and with arrows. Lots of arrows. Then he picks her up in Roscoe, takes her to Isaac's— where Scott's waiting for her with bells and constricting chains on— and trades her out for Derek, who, for the sake of his brother, he's going to help break Isaac out of lock-up.

The thing is, here, that he could very well let Derek do this on his own, which probably wouldn't be too much of a hardship for the guy, and since they obviously weren't accepting his offer of Pack— despite their helping him out with this— Stiles had no obligations, not to the Alpha, and not to Isaac.

But Scott feels an obligation to Isaac, and Stiles' dad is in there, in far too close a proximity to the possible danger for Stiles to feel in any way comfortable. Besides, Stiles has a feeling that if anything bad happened to, or because of, this newly Bitten kid, Scott would cry. And Stiles is willing to do many, many things he wouldn't, otherwise, to keep Scott from crying. Like, for instance, trying to make sure everyone gets out of this alive, not just his dad, Derek, Isaac, and maybe that one Deputy he really likes— although those people will obviously be the priority, also probably in that order.

But that's worst-case scenario.

At the moment, no one's trying to kill anyone, and, as far as he knows, Isaac hasn't gone crazy enough to draw attention from anyone he could potentially maim, but— again— they're limited on time, here: stuck between an impending rock- the Argents- and an impending hard place- Isaac going moon-crazy- and they need to get through this before those two things crash together to create catastrophe, that way his dad is safe, Derek and Isaac are safe, and Scott's happy.

Snarking with Derek takes up precious minutes, but he feels justified, because Derek— Derek— former fugitive who communicates with frowns, Eyebrows of Aggression™, occasional sarcasm (that is far too dry, even for Stiles), threats, and physical violence, Derek— wants to distract the night officer at reception so Stiles can sneak into his dad's office and break into his dad's lock-box and steal the sheriff's keys for whichever room Isaac's locked up in.

Stiles has no faith.

Then, walking-sex-on-a-stick flashes his bunny teeth in a very fake but very genuine looking smile, says, "Hi," like he's a little lost, and like butter wouldn't fucking melt in his mouth, and officer Smith totally fucking falls for it.

God, if it weren't so incredibly helpful, he'd actually feel a little bit sorry for her.

Except the keys aren't in the lock-box, which has already been broken into. Yeah, that time crunch they're on? It just got... crunchier. Is that a valid thing to say? Stiles doesn't know, he's in crisis-mode.

His stress only increases when, rushing down the hall, he nearly crashes into a Deputy. A Deputy with an arrow-shaft coming out of his gruesome, bloodied leg, which means he isn't a Deputy at all, but the Argent secret-agent-guy. Great.

Would you believe this hasn't been his shittiest day?

He has a hard time believing it, when he doesn't get away fast enough and ends up being dragged the rest of the way down the hall with a wolfsbane syringe pointed at his throat and a clammy, bloody, rough-textured hand clamped around his mouth.
But, hey! Home-field advantage—he's lived this station, explored it and discovered it and gotten in trouble in it, been raised in it—this place is as much his home as his own house, as Scott's. He knows every nook, crevice, cranny, and he sure as hell knows where the fire-alarm is. And this idiot left his hands free.

He reaches out as soon as he sees it, already prepared, curls his fingers around the lever, tight, and lets the hunter's stumbling momentum help him to pull.

The sound of the alarm, trill, rises like a swarm of bees, and he hopes he didn't just endanger anyone further, but the hunter is surprised enough that when they finally get to the holding room he lets Stiles go, which was the point.

But it doesn't matter because Isaac's already out, and before Stiles has a moment to react to that revelation, let alone breathe, the wolf is pouncing on the hunter with an animalistic growl, all claws and teeth and frenzy. He breaks the arm holding the syringe, bashes the man's head against the wall, makes a guttural sound as the Argent falls to the ground.

Then Derek walks in, easy- and who knows what happened to the night officer- crushes the syringe under his heel, and- when Isaac turns to Stiles, feral, clicking his teeth, hungry- Derek roars at him. Isaac immediately cowers, whining in the back of his throat like a goddamned puppy, features shifting to human.

"How—" Stiles swallows, shivers, wonders if he's going to react like this every fucking time he gets assaulted, or if he'll eventually get desensitized enough that the conditioned response of adrenaline and fear will wear away. Then he wonders if that would be better or worse— "How'd you do that?"

"I'm the Alpha," Derek says, and Stiles decides it isn't really that cliched, just a statement of fact: honest, deliberate, powerful.

Terrifying, considering the other Alpha they dealt with.

Noah knows his son.

He knows when his son lies, and, normally, he knows why.

It's not that he has tells, exactly, it has more to do with how convincing he is, or is trying to be. He's been lying a little bit more often lately, the kind of lies he tells when he's protecting someone, when he feels threatened and cornered by things that may not be insurmountable, but are close enough to it that he doesn't want anyone else involved, worried, would rather have all that weight on his own shoulders. But they haven't been truly big lies, not yet, not that Noah can tell.

So, when he marches through the station- turning off the fire-alarm along the way- to the only currently occupied holding-cell, and finds Stiles standing there, mildly indifferent, before he points to the unconscious Deputy sagged against the wall and just says, "He did it."

Well. Noah's worried. Maybe kind of frustrated. Because that detached attitude, it's. He's seen it before. Once. And it doesn't belong to a lie like this, that Stiles doesn't even seem to be putting a lot of effort into.

But, for now, there isn't really anything he can do about it, except take Stiles' statement, and try to put the truth together with the lies he weaves.

He loves his kid, he gets what he's trying to do, but how's Noah supposed to do his job, how's Noah
supposed to protect Stiles, if he doesn't know what's going on? If he doesn't know why Stiles is—is changing, what or who he's trying to protect; why?

But, the truth will out, and the only thing Noah can do to protect him now, is pretend he believes the lie as much as Stiles does.

Scott climbs through Stiles' window at the ass-crack of dawn looking mildly frazzled, and Stiles promptly gives up on any idea of sleep, sitting up, scooting over, and patting the bed beside him. With a huff, Scott flops face down onto the pillows, spread out in such a way that half his body is hanging off the mattress. Indulgently, Stiles runs his fingers through Scott's hair, leaves little scratches along his scalp that have him melting and rumbling in that soft wolfish-purr that Stiles has only recently discovered, and teases him relentlessly for.

"Dude," Scott breathes through the sub-vocal sound, muffled by the pillow, he sounds exhausted. "I managed. Like, it was really rough at first- not as rough as the last two times, but rough- and then Allison was in danger and all of a sudden I was in control." He does a very lazy, contorted, lying down fist-pump, "I did it."

Stiles smiles slightly, but he doesn't really say anything. He's both tired and not, hyper-aware and fuzzy, reality is bursting at the seams, soaked in something ethereal and vacant. Scott, who was probably expecting questions, shifts against the bed until he can look at him properly.

"Feeling quiet?" He asks, understanding smoothing out the temporary confusion. Stiles presses his lips together, then nods, and Scott pats him on the knee. "Something bad happen?"

"No." Stiles answers immediately, "Everyone's safe."

"Okay," Scott replies, easy, hushed.

"I think my dad's mad at me."

Scott blinks, sighs, grabs Stiles bodily and uses his weight to pull him into lying down. "Rest," he says, "we'll figure it out in the morning."

Stiles hums, closes his eyes, lets his thoughts circle until he's dizzy and nauseous, until, finally, sleep claims him.

He still feels quiet and a little off-kilter when they wake up, like he's full-up with white-noise, like he wants to puke, twitchy and stilted. But he's more capable of keeping up, at least, and manages to listen as Scott talks about the ridiculously fast lizardous thing that tried to attack Allison last night, and about everything that happened with Derek before that. Stiles has a hard time regaling everything that happened at the station, but he does, and as soon as he's done lapses, gratefully, into silence.

Scott gives him a slightly worried smile on the drive to school, but he's had quiet days before, and they both know how to deal with them.

The kid who works graveyard at the local food mart blinks dauntedly when all the lights blink out, clutches at their heart a little as they pace trepidatiously toward the wall-wide window, peering breathlessly outside at whatever could be going on.

They see a girl- Allison- who comes by often, most normally with a boy who's got an aura of warmth radiating off of him, is bright in that caring type of way, like an entire sun, all wrapped up in
cotton-fuzz; sometimes she's here with another regular, the sheriff's son, who's got an aura like **power**, lurking and **clever**, like a volcano that's yet to erupt, all bubbling magma and reckless patience and **natural disaster**; sometimes, instead, with her father, who's aura looks and tastes like steel and thick-threaded rope. The **girl's** aura is bird-like, feathery soft but with sharp talons and a beak to match, and the food mart clerk has always wondered when she'll notice that her wings aren't **clipped**, that there's no reason at all she can't just **fly away**, or if she'll ever notice at all.

They watch, a little terrified, as Allison walks around her car as if looking for something, confused and with no small amount of terror herself— and then the man with the motorcycle that the clerk just served, not ten seconds ago, pulls a black hood over her head, and drags her away. The clerk gasps, horrified, presses shaking fingertips to their lips, and waits.

Electricity whirs as all the lights come back on. The clerk blinks. Goes back to their register. Sighs wearily.

This is what they get for living in Beacon Hills, they think, taking an edible they'd been saving out of their pocket, deciding that there's no way they're doing the rest of this shift sober, no siree.

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After Derek's stint as a fugitive, Stiles finds it mildly amusing that, now, his newest Beta is in the **same position**, he also doesn't really think it's his problem, or Scott's, for that matter. Isaac made a choice—based on circumstance and desperation, sure, but it was... mostly informed, and it was his own goddamn decision. Isaac and Derek are Pack, their own unit, free agents, Stiles doesn't really care.

But Scott kind of does, and Stiles has a feeling he will be pushed into a position where he has to, eventually.

A little after PE, after Scott's wolf somehow reacting enough to Erica's disposition to catch her when she started having a seizure on the rock-wall- which probably saved her life- Stiles sees Jackson blowing up at Lydia in the hallway, and for a moment he's not sure about what, or why he's being so **explosive**, but then he really hears him, and it **clicks**.

Jackson thinks he's immune because Lydia's immune—which means he **did** get the Bite, and it didn't do anything to him either, which is... interesting. Concerning? Worrying.

"You ruined it for me," Jackson's seething. "You. Ruined. Everything!"

"**Jax!**"

Jackson freezes, he's still facing Lydia, still has her backed up against the wall, trembling, tears welling in her eyes which are darting, now, between Jackson's face and Stiles’ over Jackson's shoulder.

"She ruined **shit** for you," Stiles tells his back, "and even if it was her, it wouldn't matter." Jackson turns to him, slowly, something of a sneer still painted on his lips. "I don't get you, man," he murmurs, the slightest bit raspy, shaking his head and stepping closer. "You don't need this as badly as you think you do, you're **good without** it. You **can** be good, **without** it."

"Get out of my **face**, Stilinski," Jackson growls, eyes crackling, swirling, like cauldrons of boiling water stirred with impotent fury, blind, impetuous rage.

"Stop throwing tantrums, Jackson," he says, softer than he means to, far more weary. "You're **scaring** her," he swallows, knows there's too much emotion showing in his eyes, but he can't help it.
There's a lot here, love and helplessness and betrayal, a yearning, a devastation, something so broken and twisted Stiles doesn't even know how it worked, while it did, if it can ever be repaired, now.

Jackson's eyebrows furrow, for a moment, and he looks back at Lydia as if only just now realizing she has feelings at all, before returning his gaze to Stiles, snarling, "I don't fucking care." His eyes are over-bright, manic. "She deserves it."

And he's close, now, closer to Stiles than he was to Lydia, before, barely a breath away, and Stiles searches the other boy's face, finds himself thinking that maybe there's something broken in him, and maybe it broke a long time ago, and maybe he's been playing with radioactive shrapnel this whole time, without ever realizing—maybe he's just been breaking it further.

He thinks his heart shatters at that.

He tries to breathe through it, and misses, with an almost desperate ferocity, the feeling that came with kneeling, the familiar weight of a hand circling his throat.

"Okay, Jax," he whispers, raw, and blinks back the tears he doesn't dare let fall. "Okay."

Jackson makes a sound not unlike a growl and pushes past him, the shove nearly knocking Stiles to the ground. When he looks back at Lydia she's staring at him like she's never seen him before in her life (maybe she hasn't), and he offers her an extremely wobbly smile before retreating as quickly as he possibly fucking can.

He should do something for her later, he thinks. To make up for... well, everything.

The Ice-rink plan is a go.

After trying, and failing, to haggle with Boyd, Stiles is now fifty dollars poorer and the temporary keeper of the keys to said ice-rink.

Scotty wasn't so much a fan of this idea, when Stiles first suggested it, since there's so much stuff going on, with Allison- who's apparently being trained, drumroll please, Argent style- Derek and Isaac, the hunters- in general- and this new monster-thingy-madoo-dad. But, Stiles had reminded him, Lydia, by all technicality, is a part of the stuff going on, still—because he refuses to believe she's just immune. Nothing is ever that simple.

Just because they don't know how the Bite is affecting her, doesn't mean it isn't effecting her.

He thinks, though, that Scott agreed less out of conceding the point and more out of concern for him and whatever smell/sound/aura he was putting off, which might've been some amalgamation of guilt, overwhelming anxiety, and absolute despair, but, uh. He's not gonna look at that too closely. In fact, he's just going to ignore it.

Ignore it until it goes away.

And, oh, wow, hello, Erica. She got a makeover. And a confidence boost. And a smirk like the whole world is a joke only she's in on, which is a smirk he's seen before, frankly, on both of the Hales. He looks at Scott, and he seems appalled, and also, okay, yes, yep——She's a werewolf.

Jesus christ, Derek, really?

What, is he going to round up all the emotionally vulnerable kids in Beacon Hills and Bite them?
Like, why? He must get that having a bigger Pack, for all that it might make him stronger, will also paint a bigger target on his back, right? And— shit. Shit. Stiles actually, vaguely, doesn't want the older man to die, would not be okay with him dead.

He wonders when that changed, exactly. But there it is.

Great.

The ice-rink plan is nice—for all of a minute: Lydia's having a good time, and Stiles feels some of his guilt ease for it; Scott and Allison are having a good time, which makes him feel, just, generally fluffy—but then Lydia seems to see something, in the ice, and she starts screaming, shrieking, wailing, and she's utterly inconsolable.

It sucks, and it freaks him out, and there's absolutely nothing he can do about it, but, when he gets back home, maybe he can do something about Derek, because——

Even if he can't help all of his precious people, maybe he can help at least one of them. (He's not going to think too hard or look too long on the fact that Derek entered that circle without Stiles' permission and is now managing to stick there like a bur with even less of it; it's a Thing, now, and he's moving on.)

Research.

Research is a beautiful thing.

It may take forever, and selling essays to college students along with doing a few other not-so-legal things to earn enough cash to buy ancient tomes and the like, and finding an online supernatural forum that's actually legit, but. A beautiful thing.

It's how he figures out the Dynamic thing, and that Derek really was most-probably lying about the cure, because, nine times out of ten, killing an Alpha just makes you an Alpha.

An Alpha's wolf has red eyes, an innocent Beta's wolf has gold, a tainted Beta's wolf has blue.

The appellation 'Omega' has more duality to it, being, either, archaic slang for the runts of the Pack, used in almost the same derogatory fashion as bitch (most Packs don't push the weaker ones- for a relative, subjective meaning of 'weaker'- down or out, don't bully or oppress them- it would be foolish, as it would weaken the health of the Pack as a whole- but there are more tyrannical, violent Packs out there, and it does happen), or it can be a term that encompasses an actual biological reaction to what, for werewolves, is a physiological, neurological need (it doesn't matter if you're Alpha or Beta, if you don't have a Pack, you go Omega, and Omegas can very easily go feral, their wolf feeding off of the human parts of them in order to satisfy its' cravings until the humanity is gone, and they are entirely animal. The symptoms of going feral vary from person to person, but the how is pretty much always the same.

Loneliness.)

Packs can come in all different shapes and sizes, with or without an Alpha, with or without humans, etcetera. But, typically, in order to stabilize their power, an Alpha needs to have at least three bonded Betas, and a Beta needs to have at least one bonded Pack-mate.

Keeping the bond healthy requires keeping the relationship healthy, at least to an extent. It's harder to
break a bond between an Alpha and a Beta than it is to break a bond between a Beta and their Pack-mate. Alphas are capable of helping their Betas with the shift along with a plethora of other things. The more Pack-bonds a wolf has the stronger it is, the more power and control it has. Unstable Pack-bonds can lead to feral behavior, from time to time, and generally shitty mental-health.

Alphas tend to feel the need to provide, and have a certain amount of dominance: they lead, protect, keep. Betas, when in a Pack with an Alpha, will instinctually follow, seek approval, submit, be loyal to and protective of and anxious without; when in a Pack without an Alpha, their instincts and needs may vary depending on their wolf and the structure of the Pack they do have. All wolves need touch and socialization and Pack—period.

He's kind of proud of his skills, in this, and that he managed to get this much—he's been looking into it since nearly the very beginning, but getting it all, putting it all together, and sussing out the truth from the lies, that's been hard, especially with all the shit they've been put through in such a short amount of time. But now that he's got it...

Peter Hale makes so much more sense.

Some of Scotty's wolfy quirks do, too. Along with what Derek's doing. Stiles is just the slightest bit less worried now that he knows that the man will stop at three, and he hopes for Derek's sake that the Argents won't try too exceptionally hard to kill his Pack just for existing, though that hope is very thin, and very hollow. Still, despite his newfound ability to care about Derek Hale's well being, the heart of his loyalty lies with Scott, and- beyond needing to know for the sake of his own sanity and curiosity- Scott's the one he did this research for.

So, he attaches all the information to an email, presses send, and crawls into bed for a fitful night's sleep.

Scott, now he knows Derek needs a third, wants to know who the third will be, and, when Boyd's table is vacated during lunch, Stiles has a pretty good idea.

But then it goes from wanting to know, to wanting to stop, which...

"Maybe we should just let him," Stiles suggests, soft and a little wavering. At Scott's questioning look he clarifies: "Boyd, y'know, man? You said Derek's giving them a choice, right?"

Scott's jaw drops slightly, and then he goes mulish. "We can't," he says, terse, grabbing Stiles' arm to propel him to follow. And while Stiles kind of waffles- because Erica does look better, healthier, now, and Derek's wolf kind of needs this, and he doesn't really know if it's something they should stop, let alone get involved in- Scott seems to be more bigger-picture about it: being wolves puts these kids in danger, it adds to the cluster-fuck of this whole situation, and it'll get out of control, chaotic, end in yet more dead bodies.

Scott feels responsible—for them, for the town, for Derek and what he's doing, and. And Stiles gets it, he does.

"All right," he says, throwing his arms out, like he's wiping away any and all previous doubts. "I'm with you."

Unfortunately, checking Boyd's house for Boyd only leads him to Erica—whether she was waiting for him there or stalked him there, fuck all knows.
He likes her new-found confidence, he does, but breasts are a source of nutrition for babies, can sometimes be aesthetically pleasing, but are mostly just mounds of flesh that he doesn't actually care about. Like—he can appreciate them. He appreciates bees for being a cornerstone species for the environment, it doesn't mean he's going to stare at a bee-hive all day.

Okay, that's a lie—he might, if it were interesting enough.

Point is, Erica really does have beautiful eyes, and if he had tits, he'd so ask her to go clothes shopping with him, because the bra, shirt, jacket, and even jeans, hug and compliment all the right places. Hell, he may ask her to go clothes shopping with him anyway. He kind of wonders what he'd look like in a dress. He'd look totally awesome, right?

Tsk, he shouldn't have lost focus, if he hadn't've lost focus, he might've noticed the fact that she was holding his carburetor behind her back, and that she was about to knock him the fuck out with it.

And, really, with the car trouble schtick? He thought that was an Argent thing. Although, with the hunters it seemed more like a passive aggressive intimidation tactic. This is just outright aggressive.

Also, like, she defiled Roscoe; she took out one of his organs and hit Stiles over the head with it. Not cool, bro, not cool.

Waking up in a dumpster is not his brightest moment, but it isn't really his darkest, either, which just... says something about his life, doesn't it?

A few quick texts to and From Scott later and he knows that Scott found Boyd at the ice-skating rink, got into a fight with the Betas—which he won—and Derek—which he did not—and none of it mattered anyway because Boyd was already turned. There's more to it than that, but they're probably gonna have to meet in person to hash it all out, which Scott can't do because his healing-factor is being wonky—exceedingly worrisome—and Stiles can't do because Roscoe's out of commission and he'd rather not hotwire a car if he doesn't really have to—he'd never hot-wire Roscoe, Roscoe's his baby.

Who needs a tow and a mechanic, apparently. God, Stiles really needs to learn more about cars, this is so gonna cost money he doesn't have. Or just barely has but really wanted to spend on something full-moon related.

C'est la vie.

Fuck the jerkwad mechanic. Seriously? Seriously?

This is the second time this week he's been swindled, he's pretty sure. But he needs Roscoe back in working condition, and as much as he promises himself he's gonna learn more about cars asap, he knows shit-all about them now, so. He seethes, grumbles, and walks away to let the guy do his expensive, expensive work.

He grumbles some more when the door-handle on the door that leads to the waiting-room/office-area is covered in gooey gross undefinable something. Yuck.

He wipes it off on his hoodie and slips his phone out of his pocket, wanting to check in with Scott, see if he's healed yet, or if it's getting worse, or—he's going to try not to let himself panic needlessly. He's sure Scott will be fine. Maybe.
When breathing gets a little harder and his hands start to shake, he wonders, confused, if he's having a panic-attack, or if Erica gave him a concussion, but, no—he's anxious, but it's nowhere near that sweeping, nauseous, overpowering, hyperventilating, the world is most definitely ending and I am going to die sort of feeling. And he knows what a concussion feels like, this is—this is different, this is his body not responding, maybe incapable of responding.

His breath goes shaky, inconsistent, and maybe he wasn't having a panic-attack before, but he might be having one now. Shit. Just, just think.

Look around you, try to figure it out, logic it until it's not fucking scary anymore.

Out of the observational window, he sees... it. Crawling on top of his jeep, over the roof, toward the douche-canoe mechanic. A big, hulking, reptilian humanoid with long, clear claws and shimmering, ephemeral scales, and a giant. Fucking. Tail.

"Hey," he calls out, or tries to, because letting people die in front of you is not a good thing to do. It's against the laws of morality taught to him by his dad and instilled in him by Scott. Getting the attention of the killer-lizard wouldn't be the brightest idea he's ever had, but if he doesn't at least try, he knows his dad will be disappointed in him, and Scott will give him the sad puppy-dog eyes that make him feel like the scum of the earth and the worst brother to ever exist in ever.

"He-e-ey!" He tries again, but his mouth is cotton-numb, and his tongue is this big, sloppy thing that's intimidating and gummy. Then his whole fucking body gives out, like every muscle fell asleep all at once, and just getting the guy's attention is no longer a problem, because he's pretty sure the monster-lizard struck him and he's down for the count, too.

Stubbornness, though: fatal flaw.

It takes him a second, but he manages to crawl over to his dropped phone, and, suddenly fiercely invested, pushes himself as hard as he can, making his body cooperate, trying to call 911.

But he's too late—by the time the operator answers he's pretty much been forced to witness that stupid fucking swindling mechanic, who doesn't deserve at all to die, get crushed by his car. The monster-lizard is in front of him, for, like, the barest second, hissing, and then it's just gone.

And he feels helpless, hopeless, dazed. Did that really just happen? Could he really do nothing to save the life taken in front of him? And why, why did that thing decide to let him go?

When the EMTs, police, and his dad get there, whatever it was that caused the paralysis is out of his system, and he hates—hates lying to his dad, but he has no idea how to tell him anything without putting him in danger, and Stiles would die before he did that. There is, too, the fact that it's more Scott's secret than his own, and he doesn't want to jeopardize his brother, either.

So Stiles tells him that he walked into the shop, and the jeep was already on top of the guy. He can tell that his dad doesn't entirely believe him, but he's letting it go for now, thank God.

Poor Roscoe, though, he got bad-touched by Erica, used as a murder weapon, and he's now going to be impounded as evidence, all in the span of a day.

Stiles is still shaky, a little numb, disgusted, something dark, distressed, ashamed swirling inside of him, making a home somewhere deep and unprotected and fraught with old, old memories.

He clears his throat, rubs a trembling, twitching hand over his eyes, swallows, tries to breathe.
He wants someone to take control, he wants to be out of his own head, he wants to trust someone else with his thoughts for awhile, he wants—he wants Jackson. And then he laughs at himself, bitter, because Jackson isn't that, he never was, even when Stiles thought he was.

Because Jackson's an insecure, selfish, borderline narcissist asshole, who only really cares about himself, and going to him right now wouldn't. It.

No, he decides, rubbing his eyes more furiously when tears threaten to fall, he can't. It's a bad idea, he knows that. But he doesn't think he can go home, either. And he just doesn't... doesn't want to be alone right now, so he calls Scott, asks him to come pick him up. There's a lot they need to talk about, anyway. Derek, Derek's Pack, the monster-lizard thing that—now Stiles is thinking about it, as clearly as he is capable—seemed... familiar.

It was something—something in its' eyes.

Stiles questions Scott a bit more about the good doctor after the other boy picks him up from the crime-scene- since Deaton is the one who'd patched Scotty up after his big row at the ice-rink- and the guy apparently knows a shit-tonne more than even Stiles guessed he did, but seems- to Scott, at least- to be on the side of good, so: hooray!

Stiles is also glad to learn that the reason Scott was so laid-up wasn't because there was anything technically biologically wrong with him, his healing-factor was just being stubborn because the thing that had injured him was an Alpha, and wounds inflicted by Alphas, apparently, are more lasting.

Which is... worrisome.

Setting aside other Alphas—Stiles has absolutely zero faith in the idea that Derek could ever be capable of not being violent. It's literally his go-to move, it's how the man communicates. And what if this happens again? What if it's worse next time? Can they actually trust Deaton with all of Scott's medical needs? And speaking of his medical needs: what even are those, now? Can they really play it so fast and loose with his health? His biology? Biology which has fundamentally changed, and is not only no longer human but—but other stuff. Other stuff they do not know beyond what they've figured out through trial and fucking error, Jesus Christ.

Semi-luckily for them, though, Scott recovering in the back-room when the Argents burst in with a corpse, demanding to know what had happened to it, meant that he got to eavesdrop on the whole thing ("Like the awesome werewolf badass you're slowly becoming." "I mean, thanks for being proud of me? For getting better at sneakiness and subterfuge? Even though I'm pretty sure that's a bad thing to be proud of me for. And I'm also pretty sure Deaton knew I was listening in and was—" "Shh-shh-shhhh, don't ruin this moment, man. Accept that you are a beautiful baby spywolf, and you're growin' up." "... I'm not actually sure that sentence makes sense, dude, but okay?"). One of the hunters' own had been killed by Beacon Hills' resident supernatural Thing, and they wanted Deaton's 'expert opinion'— because they knew far more about what Deaton was than either Scott or Stiles did.

So, their current, compounded knowledge of the Thing is that it has paralytic venom in its' claws, evisceration is its' favorite modus operandi, it's most likely killing for killing's sake, it's a gruesome supernatural lizard thug, and it's not about to stop anytime soon. The implied, here, being that it's not going to stop without intervention, and, knowing Scott, they'll be the ones intervening.

Which isn't something Stiles actually has so much of a problem with, considering how the Thing paralyzed him, used Roscoe as a thoughtless murder weapon, and probably deserves all the possible
death. Ugh.

He can guess there's more, but he's exhausted, and Scott's exhausted, and by the time they've hashed all that out Scott's gotten them to his house, where there's a perfectly cozy room with a perfectly comfy bed that they immediately cuddle up on and go to sleep in.

Tomorrow's worries are best left to tomorrow.

Being Scott and Allison's living telephone/messenger for the day is just weird.

On so many levels.

Because where Scott is his brother, Allison's very quickly becoming something like a sister-in-law, and the puppy-love mushy-gushy to the end of the world stuff makes him both love them insanely more and want to curl up and cry, just a little.

But, after they get that conversation over with:

Deaton apparently suggested to Scott that they find something of the Argents', a record of everything they've ever hunted, a compendium. A bestiary.

Scott, bumbling do-gooder he is, doesn't actually seem to know what a bestiary is, because, when Stiles says that that's what they're looking for, his brother's face blooms into the goofiest most adorable freaking smile as he chuckles, "I think you mean bestiality."

"Nope. Pretty sure I don't. A bestiary, it's... like an encyclopedia of mythical creatures."

Scott's jaw drops, and he looks a little offended at himself for himself. Stiles is almost proud of how complicated his expression is right now. "How am I the only one that doesn't seem to know any of this stuff?"

"It's okay. You're my best friend. You're a creature of the night. It's kind of like a priority of mine. Besides: you've got me, and if I know it, you'll learn it... eventually."

Scott beams at him a little for that before getting back to business; they both mutually decide that getting the Argents' bestiary would probably be the best idea. The only problem is: how?

A round of Stiles literally running around the school playing Hermes to their Cupid and Psyche later, and they have an answer: Gerard has the bestiary, as far as Allison knows, most likely keeps it in his office, and the way to get into his office would be with his keys. Which gives them a rough plan, and, with the lacrosse game tonight, an oppurtunity.

Hey, who knows, maybe the Gods of Luck will be on their side this time.

Stiles narrows his eyes at Jackson from the bench, watching him talk to Danny and Daehler suspiciously— he heard snippets, something about a video and a loop and two hours. He's not going to rope Scott into helping him eavesdrop, but he's curious.

He's also other things, things that are still pretty hard to ignore— until he remembers the betrayal, the resentment. Jackson's horrible, malicious attitude; his obsessive, selfish desires that get in the way of him caring about literally anything. The fact that he saw a child getting abused and didn't fucking do anything about it—granted, they and Isaac are the same age, but it doesn't fucking matter, it's.
That's the extent. Of his moral capacity. He can't even justify his own feelings anymore.

But they're still fucking there. And he wants. He wants badly.

"Stiles?"

He blinks, shakes himself out of it, looks over at Scott who flicks his eyes meaningfully to Jackson and back, eyebrows furrowed in confused concern, nose scrunching up a little.

"Yeah, bro?"

"You alright?" Scott asks.

"Course," Stiles grins, "go be awesome. Allison and I've got this."

"I can't be awesome," Scott whines, a little petulantly, "not with Gerard watching."

"I don't believe that, dude. You're always awesome." He claps Scott on the shoulder, pushes him to stand, to move. "Now, go. Make me proud!" Scott waves him off over his shoulder, jogging to his position, and Stiles feels all fuzzy-fond inside, smiling after his brother, returning his mind to the task at hand.

The lacrosse game acts as a distraction, Allison's the pick-pocket, and Stiles is the one who she hands off to, who gets to go rummaging in Gerard's office, because he's good at shit like that, and he can handle the time constraint. Mostly.

He sees Lydia on his way there, crying in her car, and he falters for a second, but he has no time. He does have a phone, however, and friends other than Scott, who he might not keep up with or talk to often, and who don't actually play lacrosse, but who are here, and Lydia looks like she could use somebody. So he shoots off a text and continues on his merry, rushed-as-fuck way.

Unfortunately, rushing doesn't really help when the rummaging doesn't turn up anything. He sighs, frustrated, texts Allison that her grandfather's office is coming up empty right before hearing the clicking of heels against wood. His heart jumps up to his throat, and he looks up with a surprised jerk, terrified he's just been caught.

"Hello, Stiles," Erica smiles, slow, oil-syrup, and Stiles has to bite down a sigh.

"Gods of Luck, you disappoint me greatly."

She raises an eyebrow at him, pouty lips spread wide around her teeth, the sharp danger of the expression too intent, vulgar and threatening all at once. That is the smile of a femme fatale, Stiles thinks, and then wonders why he didn't see the potential sooner. "I'm gonna need you to come with me," she purrs, stepping closer.

"Uh," he says, intelligently. "Yeah, how about no."

Her lips purse, full and glittering, and her eyes go wide, eyebrows raised. She looks like a very slutty doll, it's kind of infuriating. "Who said you had a choice?" She asks sweetly, and then grabs him by the fucking ear.

He doesn't protest as much as he probably should, beyond a consistent stream of: 'owowowow' the whole while she's dragging him toward the school swimmingpool. She digs her knuckles into the shell of his ear, hard, but she doesn't otherwise hurt him.
When they get to the pool, there's Derek- and he'd guessed that'd be who she was taking him to- with a basketball in hand that he claws to death by way of threat as he questions Stiles about what he may or may not have seen at the fucking mechanic's garage. He's got no time for this, and he really doesn't care whether or not Derek knows: Derek knowing about the monster-lizard-thing doesn't hurt or hinder anyone he loves, and it's all stuff the man could probably find out pretty easily on his own, anyway, so Stiles spills, easy.

Dawning horror and understanding braces their features as their eyes are slowly captured by something above and behind him— because speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

He could kill something- if he had the power to do so without dying for the attempt- he's so fucking frustrated.

The lizard jumps down, all graceful speed and hissing, and Derek immediately puts himself between it and Stiles with a roaring growl deep in his throat. It whips out its' tail, throwing Erica, who crashes to the floor about five feet away, hopefully just knocked out and not dead.

Derek turns, urgent and fierce and— again with the martyring. Stiles doesn't get it, it's so contradictory with everything else he does. The man's hand against his chest pushes him back, and eyes like sea-brine and willow leaves bore into him, razor-sharp, unwavering, ferocious, urgent, "Run!"

But Stiles can't, okay? There is a very small amount of people in this world he'd be willing to die for, that he is insanely, debilitatingly loyal to. That's part of the reason why it's so hard for him to let people in, because as soon as he recognizes someone as his, he's like a raw nerve when it comes to them, exposed and open and pulsing, and his need to keep those people safe and happy and cared for is all-encompassing.

Those peoples' ability to hurt him, though, is increased by about ten million.

His dad and his brother are at the very top, are people he wouldn't just die for, they're the people he would raze the earth for, kill for, allow the apocalypse for, let all the rest of his favorite people die and burn in hell for. Which is why Derek somehow gaining his loyalty doesn't necessarily mean his loyalties are divided— especially since the man's currently lowest on the totem pole.

He could still let the Alpha die for Scott, could even kill him for Scott- though he doesn't honestly think it'll ever really get that far- and, yeah, he'd feel some type of way, he'd feel a hell of a lot more than he would about anyone else dying, but he'd do it.

Except, Scott isn't here right now, neither is Stiles' dad, for that matter, and he's pretty sure the monster thing just nicked Derek with— with what? Its' tail, its' claws? He doesn't know, it was too fast to really see, but Stiles is pretty sure Derek just got injected with the same thing the mechanic did, the same thing that was probably on the handle of that door, the same thing that fucking paralyzes you.

So, no, he's not gonna fucking run, because he's not leaving Derek here.

When the man starts to go down, Stiles catches him, puts his arm around his shoulder, "Come on, come here," and stumbles to drag him the fuck away from the scaley-thing that's trying to kill them for no fucking reason.

Just. Fuck his life.

"Call Scott."
That... is an incredibly good idea. Until his clumsiness turns getting his phone out of his pocket into dropping his phone, and moving to pick the thing up has Derek slipping out of his grip and into the goddamn water. Diving in after him is probably one of the easiest split-second, you may regret this later choices Stiles's ever made, and he's made a lot of them.

Lydia is... she's going crazy, maybe. Or everything around her is falling apart. And she hates crying, but she can't keep it in anymore, it's. It's just all too much.

She startles when knuckles rap on her window, looks over to see... a girl she does not know. At all. She's got an angular sort of face, a prominent widow's peak, long black hair pulled into a loose, unkempt ponytail. Velvet eyes dance behind rounded cat-eye black-framed glasses, and full, pointed lips painted a dark, seductive looking red pull into a somewhat sheepish smile as she waves, before returning her hand back into her jacket pocket, shifting from foot to foot like she's cold.

Lydia sniffles, clears her throat. "Go away."

"See, the thing is," the strange girl says, and her voice is a little nasally, but very deep, in a reverberating, big-spirited sort of way that's kind of surprising, since she looks so tiny, "I can't do that."

"Why?"

"Because a mutual friend of ours told me to come check on you: see if you were okay. And you are really, really obviously not okay, and if I leave you here like this I'm gonna feel like a shit person for the rest of the week and, Lydia, let me tell you, I'm not gonna let you ruin my week."

Lydia looks down at the hand, back up into Mathilda's eyes, and says, "No thank you," to all of it, as primly as she can manage with mascara running, salty, down her cheeks.

Mathilda raises thick, perfect, angular eyebrows at that, but pulls her arm back, her hands resting, fidgety, in her lap. She's not dressed in any particularly fashionable way, zipped up black hoodie, dark jeans, worn black sneakers, all dark and skin-tight, even though most of her curves are pretty flat, her whole body gangly and razor-sharp, all points and angles and too-precise lines. And she's got a septum piercing, black gauges widening her earlobes.

This is not the type of person Lydia would normally be caught dead with.

"You know, you're not really mutual friend material."

"Neither are you," Mathilda returns, blunt, shrugging one shoulder. "You're kind of a bitch."

Lydia's eyes widen, her jaw dropping.

"You're also a little bit of a narcissist— but we're all human, and we're all flawed. Now, tell me why you were crying." Mathilda leans her back against the door, juts her chin out, and crosses her arms over her chest.
"No," Lydia breathes, caught between horrified, insulted, and generally aghast.

"Why not? Do you want me to guess?" Mathilda looks up as if in thought, inhales deep. "Does it have to do with Jackson breaking up with you?"

"No!"

"Is it something embarrassing?"

"No."

"Frightening?"

Lydia snaps her jaw shut so hard it clicks, and Mathilda smirks a little, then grimaces, running a hand down the pale expanse of her long neck and pressing her lips together.

"I could do this all night, you know. I have nowhere to be. But—I kinda don't wanna make light of something that's very obviously upsetting you. As much as this has been a terrible first impression... I'm here to help. And talking about whatever it is that's bothering you?" Mathilda leans forward, and she looks really, genuinely earnest. "That might help."

"You'll think I'm crazy," Lydia murmurs, relenting, and hates the way her voice wobbles. Mathilda smiles, a little sympathetic, and knowing in a way that Lydia doesn't really understand until she says:

"My big brother has paranoid schizophrenia, and my girlfriend is bipolar. And they're two of the best people I know. I don't know what's going on, but if it is you goin' a little crazy? You shouldn't be ashamed of it, and it's all the more reason to tell someone."

"I don't want to be crazy," Lydia admits with a sob before she can help herself, and Mathilda sighs, pulls her into a hug she's incapable of rejecting or escaping, smooths a hand down her back, soothing.

"I know, лапушка," she murmurs, "I don't think anyone does."

He's been holding this man, snarky ass and all, up above water for——he actually doesn't know, it's not like there's a clock here, but it feels like it's been a small eternity, and his muscles are burning. Treading water was never something he was very good at: too restless, too prone to moving and going and doing. So he's struggling here, and his phone is right there- he'd have to let Derek go to get it, but it's not like he'd leave him- and the lizard-monster is just circling, waiting.

If they stay like this for much longer Stiles is going to go crazy.

But once Stiles makes a move for it, Derek gets vehement, adamant, the kind of insistent you are when you don't trust, and you're very sure someone's about to get you killed, which. Considering? He takes offence, he takes all the offence.

"I'm the one keeping you alive, okay? Have you noticed that?"

"Yeah," Derek huffs, and Stiles wonders how he can be so infuriatingly sardonic with a mouthful of chlorine, "and when the paralysis wears off, who's gonna be able to fight that thing, you or me?"

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait.

"So, that's why I've been holding you up for the past two hours?" That's what Derek thinks?
"You don't trust me, I don't trust you-" hurtful- "but you need me to survive, which is why you're not letting me go."

Oh my God, this fucking asshole. He really believes that, that this is just about them being integral to each other's survival. You know what? No. He's going to save them both, and then punch Derek in the nose. It'll make life easier.

Stiles slides him off his shoulders, determined, ignoring the man crying out his name, and swims as fast as his cramping, aching, locking muscles will let him. The lizard notices, and its' quick, but it's far enough away that Stiles manages to grab his cell-phone before the thing can manage to grab him, and playing keep-away is pretty easy since it seems to be scared of the water.

He swims back over to Derek as he makes the call and as soon as his brother picks up he shouts an urgent, "Scott!"

The reply is breathless and hushed, "I can't talk right now."

And then the line goes dead, and Stiles groans, curses his luck, tosses his phone away and dives to retrieve Derek. When they're above water Derek growls out, exasperated and probably about as done with all this as Stiles feels: "Tell me you got him."

Stiles makes an aggrieved sound, and Derek rumbles, infuriated. Talk about a useless fucking endeavor.

He can't, he can't can't can't can't.

He needs something, something to hold on to, his body won't let him keep doing this forever. He looks around, decides clinging to the starting-block will be a better bet than drowning, and swims them both over there with the last reserves of his strength.

Which unfortunately just means that by the time they get there, his body refuses to keep going. And he tries— he reaches out to grasp at their saving grace with desperate, trembling fingers, but his grip fails, and he has this moment of sheer, certain panic as the water begins to take them that they really are going to die here, like this.

Familiar, wonderful, amazing, miraculous claws dip into the water and drag them out, tossing them clear, and onto solid ground. He blinks the chlorine out of his eyes, coughs out the water clogging his lungs, and takes deep, tempered breaths. His curiosity is God-like, or it must be, for it to allow him to move at all, with the state his muscles are in, in order to see what's going on.

Although there's an immense amount of relief at the sight of Scott being here, a feeling that crashes through him and leaves him trembling as much as the cold and the exertion does, there's still the Thing- the monster, lizard, reptile, Thing- and it's dangerous. As much as he wants to be safe, as much as he's glad his brother's here, and he has faith, he still doesn't know how this fight will turn out, and he's a worrier by nature.

Lucky for them, the fight turns out amazingly, incredibly, confusingly well.

Scotty! Use reflection! It ran away!

Serious.

This is his life now.
The bestiary turns out to be on a USB drive on Gerard's keychain, which means a lot of the trouble they went through could've been avoided, but, then again, Scott coming back to the school to get the keys is the only reason why he heard the reptile-thingy and came by to save the day, so.

Pros and cons.

Stiles is seriously beginning to wonder if he has really shitty luck, or if he actually has insanely incredible luck. The things he's survived, Christ.

The bestiary itself doesn't give them much, seeing as it's in a language neither of them understand, but Derek decides to offer up what he knows, now he's seen the Thing with his own two eyes.

It's a kanima, it doesn't know what or who it is- hence the confusion and/or fear of its' own reflection-an abomination that didn't turn right. A shape-shifter gone wrong. But that's only what Derek's heard, through stories, rumors, because he grew up with this shit in his life, he was surrounded by it until it burned up all around him—which means there could still be a dissonance between what he thinks it is, and what it might actually be.

Memories can be distorted by time and trauma.

Stiles is mildly surprised when Scott bursts out: "We need to work together on this," but he's also more than a little pleased. He likes having the people he wants to survive all in the same corner, where he can watch them, see them, keep them. "Maybe even tell the Argents," aw, fuck, c'mon, Scotty. You know better.

"You trust them?" Derek asks, like it's an accusation, or a challenge.

And Scott—Scott's smart, and he can be just as suspicious as Stiles, but he also wants people to stop dying, and them all fighting each other helps nothing when this thing is on the loose tearing people apart. And none of them want the kanima running rampant, so: The Enemy of my Enemy is my Friend Gambit.

It's a good plan, hell, it's even a good pitch, but Stiles already knows Derek isn't going to play ball. The man is... it's more than distrusting, it's... He can't put his finger on it, not right now, but even if Derek could maybe push himself to work with Scott- trustlessly, and like a big thing putting themselves into a very small box, wanting only to lash out or escape, but recognizing that it would be safer for everyone if they didn't- he'd never be able to do the same for the Argents.

And maybe asking him to try is asking too much.

Scott gets out of his mom's car, exhausted but vaguely relieved that the day is done. For once his mind isn't spinning with what to do and how and when in order to keep as many people as he can safe; Allison, Stiles, Derek, and the others are all okay, the kanima is nowhere to be found, and after he picks his mom up from her shift, takes her home, he's got his bed to look forward to. Well, that and homework, but even something like that is a relief in its' mundanity.

He's completely unsuspecting when he feels a hand on his shoulder—he's thinking, vaguely, that it could be one of his mom's friends, or a nurse, or one of the security guards, or the janitor, all people he knows ambiguously- Stiles is always teasing him that he could become chummy with the devil itself without even trying, he's always telling him he's too friendly for his own good- which is why he's got a kind, questioning word already on the tip of his tongue when he turns and a knife gets plunged into him, to the hilt.
For a moment he is subsumed by pain and a wash of overbearing sound: the squish of organs and blood and flesh trying to heal around a foreign object, re-tearing with every breath, the woozy pull within him, the wet-scrape of the knife, and, white-noise beneath that, every beeping monitor, every beating heart, every throat working around a silk-spit swallow, every teeth clicking word spoken, every tapping step, drilling, drilling, drilling into him.

A blink, breath, flinch, and the keen metal digs itself deeper, Gerard twisting it slightly to maintain his grip, free hand squeezing Scott's shoulder and holding him still. Those fingers clamped so close to his throat make his wolf howl within him, and it hurts but he can't keep his legs from bowing, can't keep his chin from trying to lower, every instinct in overdrive.

That hand, that hand on him is like the most visceral imprint of fear, an ice-burn brand freezing him in his shuddering place—and he's a werewolf now, if being monstrous is good for nothing, shouldn't it at least allow him to escape things like this?

But even if he could—even if he could, he wouldn't. Because at least Gerard's doing this to him. Because he can heal, because he can handle this, because he's, hopefully, tremulously, strong enough to endure.

His mother, though. She isn't. She's human, and Gerard's just proven that he can get away with anything he pleases. He accosted Scott in public. He effortlessly surrounded himself with such a perfected smog of grandfatherly innocence as he maliciously gouged a teenager in plain sight before sweeping off with a pleasant smile that nobody noticed.

So when his mother asks, "Are you alright?"

He answers, "Yes."

And he tells no one. And he prays his keeping her safe won't hurt anyone else. And he zips up his jacket, ignores the blood soaking his shirt, ignores the way his mind is all white-static, the way his hands shake, the way this decision feels like a lead weight in his gut, tastes putrid-acidic on his tongue, because he knows that when Gerard comes to him and asks his favor, he'll comply.

And his hands just keep getting dirtier.

And he prays.

Stiles nearly chokes on his toast.

"Wai— wha—?"

His dad's looking at him, eyebrows raised, arms folded over the table, early morning light swirling around their dining room, making everything seem soft and sweeter, milkier, hazier than normal.

"I said: your classmate? Isaac. He just got exonerated, so don't be surprised if you see him in class today, and don't call me when you do."

"I—okay." He puts down his toast, tries to wipe crumbs off his hands, but the buttery jam makes them cling, and all the paper-towel does is spread it around. He wonders if that's an omen. Or a euphemism. "I need more coffee," he decides, snatching his empty mug and moving to stand. "Why—How was he exonerated?"

"The kid- Jackson- he recalled his statement, so we lost our witness, which was the only evidence
we really had to keep him as a suspect in the first place." His dad scrubs a hand over his face, world-weary. "And we don't have any other suspects," he sighs, heavy.

Stiles worries at his bottom lip, wonders if Jackson... No. It was probably Derek, or Isaac himself. They probably threatened Jax and got him to—and it's not like knowing will help his dad, since Stiles wouldn't be able to tell him anything even if he did know.

"M sorry, dad," he says instead, turning on the faucet so he can rinse his hands, knowing he won't be hungry enough to dirty them again with his food. "That sucks."

Sure enough, Isaac's in class when Scott and Stiles get there.

But that ends up being the not-so-important thing, because in their second class Jackson comes to them wondering what the hell a kanima is, because he apparently overheard Isaac and Erica talking about it, about Lydia, and whatever else, and it, all in all- especially since, the last time they saw him, Derek vowed to kill the kanima as soon as he found it- sounds pretty fucking ominous.

"It's not her," he says, because he feels he ought to.

"How do you know?" Scott asks.

"Because—look, okay, before the whole swimmingpool fiasco, I saw her, kinda, crying in her car? And I couldn't do anything about it, obviously, because I didn't have any time, but Mathilda and Siobhan were at the game, too, so I texted them to go and see if she was okay."

"And?" Scott prompts.

"And, what? And nothing. She was with them when the Kanima attacked us last night, so she can't be the kanima."

"Are you sure? Have Mathilda or Siobhan texted? Called? Have you seen them—anything?"

Stiles presses his lips together. "My phone is at the bottom of the pool, in case you forgot, and they aren't really in any of our classes. So, no. I haven't gotten the chance to do—" he waves a hand around- "any of that."

"Then how do we know it's not her?"

Stiles sighs, he can't just say there's some... instinct, some niggling feeling of familiarity and entanglement and intuitive sense that it's not her, it can't be her, because it's someone else— he can't say that, because Scott's too realistic, too much like his dad, needs a solid touch-stone of evidence, proof, and Derek probably will, too. All he has right now is conjecture, and that's not enough.

"If I just—If I find Mathilda or Siobhan, talk to them, they'll be able to tell us, right? And then we'll know."

"Yeah, maybe, if the time-frame is right, and even then." Scott blows out a an explosive breath, runs a hand through his hair, "I don't think Derek will listen to us."

No. No, he won't, will he?

And even if Lydia isn't the kanima, Stiles thinks, swallowing when he looks up from his paper to see her writing 'Someone Help Me' over and over again, backwards, on the chalkboard, there is something going on with her.
The Betas’ proof comes in the form of a test, Jackson inevitably tells them, because a snake is immune to its' own venom, and the same, they think, holds true here—which means the Betas are going to try to dose her with that kanima goop-stuff, although how, fuck-all knows.

Scott and Stiles realize they're probably going to try and do it in chemistry, though, and do their best to try and stop it— because getting paralyzed is never fun, and because if, for whatever reason, she is immune? Then the big bad Alpha is going to try his hand at killing her. Or Isaac is. And it's not exactly impossible that their test won't work: maybe whatever's going on with her will make her resistant to the paralytic, you never know.

It won't mean that she's irrefutably the kanima.

Avoiding it altogether would be the best plan. But Harris makes it an impossible plan by playing musical-lab-partners for no reason other than to be a piss-ant, and Lydia does, inevitably, get dosed.

Nothing happens.

Shit.

And Derek's waiting outside of the school, perilously, the fucking lurker- Stiles has some serious complaints to take up with BHHS security- and will probably kidnap, kill, maim, whatever he feels the need to do to Lydia since she failed his test— the moment she steps foot outside.

Double shit.

Which means they need a plan, one that either convinces Derek she's not the kanima, or at least stalls him, or protects her from him. And they've only really got until school ends to figure it out, so they come together to put something together, and then they split up, each person with their own job to do:

Allison thinks she can find someone to help translate the page of the bestiary dedicated to the kanima, which might refute the proof Derek has, Scott hopes talking to the man might change his mind, or at least help, though he isn't counting on it, and Stiles is off to go find Mathilda and Siobhan, see if they did spend last night with Lydia, and, if so, for how long.

Allison only really comes back with one translated sentence- one that doesn't help them much as far as Stiles is concerned- Stiles can't manage to find either of the girls, and Scott's still talking to Derek — a cursory look out of the window is all it takes to know that's not going well.

As always, they're running out of time, but they do have a back-up plan, which is, essentially, to just evade Derek's Pack and get Lydia the hell out of there. It's not the best, but it's what they've got.

Jackson, out of a... a sense of obligation, or maybe something deeper, butts in to help them.

Getting Lydia out of the school and to Scott's house under the pretense of studying is only hard inasmuch as she thinks they're acting like nut-cases, and can probably taste their lies in the air, they're laying it on so thick.

Luckily, Jackson has something he needs to talk to her about, which should be a good distraction for her, enough of one for her to forget how strange they're being. She hesitates for a moment before he
pulls her away, though, flicking her eyes to Stiles, and Stiles has to wonder how much she's gleaned, so far, about the reality of the nature of his relationship with Jackson, or what it used to be.

He swallows, ducks his head, and she lets Jackson corral her into Scott's room without further adieu.

They stay up there as it starts to get dark, the day getting later and later, Allison and Stiles staying out by the front door to keep watch. Derek and his Betas do eventually show up, but they just... Stand. Outside. Lurking.

It's incredibly disquieting, but at least it gives them enough time to call Scott for help.

Allison twists her phone in her hands, starts wondering aloud if she should call her dad— something that might be good idea— since they are not equipped to deal with this, and Chris Argent is— but that Stiles would really, really like to avoid, re: Chris threatening Scott's life and Scott and Allison's relationship and threatening Scott's life again. So, he tries to convince her to shoot one of them- the Betas- since the shock of humans fighting back might convince Derek & co. to leave.

Except one of Derek's 'co.' is gone.

Or, actually, Stiles amends, looking over his shoulder when he hears the floor-boards creak, inside the fucking house. Isaac throwing him across the room isn't so terrible, though, really—no, what is is the fact that directly after, he hears Allison call out:

"Stiles! It's here!"

Because of course it has to happen all at once when he's in no capacity to truly do anything about it.

Scott shows up just as Stiles eyes the baseball bat, though, and they manage to come out on top with Isaac KO'd in the corner, Allison rushing downstairs, then, to tell them that she took care of Erica upstairs. The united front they make dragging the two 'weres out of the house and throwing them at Derek's feet is pretty fucking awesome, he has to admit, but it shouldn't deter from the fact that Lydia's locked herself in the bathroom while the kanima- who is pretty obviously Jackson, at this point- has gone AWOL.

"You know, I think I'm getting why you keep refusing me, Scott. You're not an Omega, you're already an Alpha— no he is not Derek, where is your logic? You're a born wolf, Stiles should not know more than you about this, no he should not- "of your own Pack." Then he grins in a predictably wolfish manner, "But you know you can't beat me."

"Maybe not," Scott cedes, "but I can hold you off until the cops get here."

Cue sirens in the distance, and, then, three clicks later, cue the kanima crawling on top of the roof and making a chittering, hissing noise that would almost be cute if it didn't precede bloody murder. Stiles, Scott, and Allison, all, rush down from the porch to look up at the Thing, catching sight of it before it hops off the building and darts away, too fast for anyone to follow.

"Will someone please tell me," Lydia grits, as she half-runs out of the house to all of them, "what the hell is going on?"

Derek blinks, and Stiles can almost see the moment it clicks. He kind of wants to punch the man for taking so long to realize, and for Biting Jax in the fucking first place.

"Allison," Scott says, after a moment of silence, and his head is cocked, like he's straining to hear something. The moment he speaks Derek's broken out of his surprise, and then he's running, off in
the direction the Kanima went. Scott growls a little, but continues, mostly calmly, "Do you think you could take Lydia home?"

Allison sucks in a sharp breath, nods, the slightest bit shaky but quickly regaining her rock-solid composure.

Scott grabs Stiles by the arms and starts dragging him to his jeep, eyes shut tight in concentration, "I can still hear it," he says, "we can still follow it, but we have to go, now."

They manage to track it down to the Jungle- or that weird industrial area under the bridge you'd take to get to the Jungle- but Stiles can't just keep Roscoe stalled there while Scott runs off, so the Jungle parking lot is where he ends up, feeling a little worried and a little ditched until he sees Scott out of the corner of his eye and runs up to him.

But the kanima doesn't seem to have a scent, and the Jungle is a loud club with too many people, sounds, and scents overlapping, anyway, so they're a little stuck, a little lost.

After a bit of sarcasm, and a reminding that Jackson is still a person, whatever the kanima may do in his skin, because Jackson's not Jackson when he's the kanima and vice-fucking-versa- which is probably why the venom-test didn't work- they catch sight of him again by virtue of his long-ass tail, and holy shit motherfucker. He's inside the goddamned club.

As far as Scott can tell, upon scenting Jackson's best friend, seeing the other boy walk inside, and recalling clawed up, completely destroyed shoulder pads: it's after Danny.

Rescue Mission, ahoy.

Stiles now has the numbers of no less than four drag-queens, which is awesome, what is not so awesome is trying to wade through the crazy crowd of half-naked men to find Danny while Scott goes after Jackson.

Jesus Christ, Jackson.

Then there's screaming and pandemonium and chaos, and he's getting jostled all to hell, but he still manages to check the text that Scott sends him asking Stiles to meet him in the parking lot out back, where he finds his brother standing over his ex, who's naked and bloodied and half-dead but healing.

Stiles' mind whirls, his knees feel like buckling, and all of his focus tunnels on the boy. For a moment, he can't breathe, he can't think, and he just wants Jackson to wake up and hold him, to be strong and solid and alive and real and okay.

"-les! STILES!"

"Yeah," Stiles breathes faintly, his throat sticking on the word so it cracks in the middle. He presses his fist to his chest, rubs, tries to ground himself. "Yeah," he repeats, stronger. "I'm here, I'm——Get 'im up, get 'im up. I've—Roscoe's right here, we get him in the backseat and then we can——"

"We have to check on Danny," Scott says, and he's using the same voice he used to use when he talked Stiles down from panic-attacks, although he seems a little confused about why. Stiles grinds his knuckles into his chest harder and inhales, shaky, trying to think through something numbing and syrupy and complicated.

"Okay. I—okay. Just," he moves to help Scott pick up the other boy, and his brother doesn't protest
as they work with each other to carry Jackson to Roscoe and place him as gently as they are able into the backseat. Stiles climbs in after him, crouched, cramped, in the footwell, fingers automatically carding through Jackson's hair.

"Stiles?" Scott murmurs, and when Stiles looks up at him, his eyes are wide and full of concern and... and something else, like the puzzle pieces are finally slotting together but he's not so sure he wants to look at the picture they make.

"I know what he is," Stiles rasps, "and I know that he chose this—I." His hand clenches in Jackson's hair and he drops his gaze, unable to meet Scott's. He's been keeping this secret for too long, for too many reasons, and he doesn't think he can lay it all bare right now, even if he's pretty sure Scott's already guessed some of it. "Go," he says, instead, taking the blanket he keeps behind the backseat—the one his mom kept there, for when she would go stargazing with him when he was a kid. They were far too restless, the **both** of them, only capable of settling down when the sky caught their eyes, or when wanderlust settled just right in their bones and pushed them to go on spontaneously long, long drives that would no doubt get them in trouble with his dad. It's a ratty, old, knitted thing, too big for itself, like someone started knitting it and just didn't **stop**.

His mom used to say that she bought it at a faerie market, that **sprites** lived inside the yarn, and that he shouldn't misbehave or else it would unravel. His dad told him, once, in confidence, that his maternal grandmother had made it for her, but that the two of them didn't **talk** anymore, and that she didn't like to **think** about it.

Stiles remembers curling up with Scott under this thing, remembers his mom telling Scott the same fantastical stories about it, his magic blanket.

Jackson's shivering, he's also covered in blood.

Stiles covers him with it anyway, and Scott makes a muffled, indecipherable sound.

"Go, check on Danny," Stiles orders, "I'll take care of him, bring the car around."

"Oh. Okay, I'll... I'll meet you out front, then," he says in a near whisper, unintrusive, careful, and Stiles nods, once, tucking Jackson in, deliberately gentle.

Danny seems fine, Scott tells him as he climbs into the jeep, but he doesn't really know anything, and they weren't **fast** enough, apparently, to get away before Stiles' dad got there.

Roscoe is a robin's egg blue 1980 Jeep C-5, which is **not** a common car, and even if Roscoe's maybe not identifiable by **everyone** in the small town of Beacon Hills- he's been locked up in their garage since Stiles' mom died, until this summer when he became old enough to get his drivers' license- he certainly wouldn't be missed by the sheriff.

"Get rid of him," Scott demands, only so bossy because of their urgency.

"Get **rid** of him?" Stiles repeats, incredulously. "We're at a **crime scene** and he's the **sheriff**!"

Scott wiggles around, discomfited and insistent. "**Do something!**"

Stiles makes an aggrieved sound and flails around for the doorhandle, stumbling out of the car and straight for his dad, who's already stalking expectantly toward him. "Heh—hey."

"What're you doin' here?" His dad asks, full-on sheriff mode with just a little **disappointed dad** underneath, arms crossing over his chest, startlingly perceptive blue eyes narrowed.
"Whaddaya mean what'm I doin' here? What? It's a club. We were clubbin', y'know-" he makes a little gesture- "at the club."

His dad sniffs suspiciously, cocks an eyebrow. "Not exactly your type o' club," he points out, which is... accurate.

Mostly.

But... He might as well, right? This is the perfect opportunity, isn't it?

"Uh... Well, dad. There's a conversation that we—"

"You're not gay." And doesn't he sound confident.

"I—I could be—" "Not dressed like that."

Stiles makes a face, and his dad tries to move past him, toward the car, which is the very definition of not good, so Stiles gets in front of him, arms out, stopping him, and watches his face morph from irritated exasperation to frustrated anger.

"This is the second crime-scene that you just happened to have shown up on. And, at this point, I've been fed so many lies I'm not sure I know the kid standin' in front of me—now, what the hell is goin' on?!"

"Dad, I—I—" "The truth, Stiles."

And Stiles, he. He's. He's so mad, stressed and upset and fucking terrified for the boy he's still fucking in love with, who's laying in the backseat of his car, fucked up by his own stupid, selfish decisions—decisions that Stiles doesn't think he'll ever be able to truly understand.

He hates lying to his dad, he fucking hates it and what it's so obviously doing to their relationship, but this? This isn't a fucking lie.

"Dad, I love you," he says, and his voice is sincere, but there's this jagged edge of distressed fury to it, and his dad looks a little taken aback, surprised by it. "And maybe you're right, maybe I'm not gay, but beyond aesthetic and intellectual appreciation, and occasional infatuation, I've never been sexually attracted to girls. I mean—I think last year, maybe, if Lydia had come up to me out of the blue and wanted to do stuff with me, I might've, for her; but I don't think it would've done anything for me, physically, even though I probably still would've been capable of being happy—look. Look, I—" He cuts himself off with a slightly annoyed sound, scrubs his hands over his head. A deep breath, and then he meets his dad's eyes—which are wide with lots of dawning emotions-dead-on.

"I'm young," he says, pointedly, "and I don't know, but I'm trying to figure it out, okay? And that has absolutely nothing to do with my clothes. And my stupid, motherfucking, shitty ass luck shouldn't have anything to do with—with—with—" he scrubs the tears out of his eyes furiously, gestures at the club, his whole body shaking and heated and live-wire pumped, heart beating too fucking fast, but he can't stop himself, now. His dad tries to say something, and his tone is a little subdued, a little rocked, but Stiles can't right now, he's hurting in too many places, there's too much raw heartache. So he just grabs the man by the shoulders and pulls him into the tightest fucking hug he can, bone-crushing.

"I just need you to say that you love me, too."

"Oh, kiddo," his dad breathes, and there's guilt there, but there's something genuine and soft and
Stiles huffs, feeling tear-soaked and mildly ridiculous as he pulls away, also a little floaty and like he can take on the world, because his dad is the literal best. He rubs both of his hands over his face, trying to clear it. "I'm sorry I broke down on you like that."

"No, no, I uh." His dad sniffs, clears his throat, reigning back his own emotions. "I kinda deserved it."

Stiles laughs, a little choked. "So... You don't mind that I was here?"

"No," his dad takes a steadying breath before blowing it harshly out. "Just... Be careful, Stiles. I really. I worry about you."

"I know, dad," he murmurs. "I'll try."

His dad nods, offers him a supportive, sugary kind of smile, and leaves him with it. Stiles watches his retreating back for a few long, indulgent seconds before returning to Roscoe, his brother, his ex-something, his problems.

Scott raises his eyebrows, and he looks a little surprised, a little contemplative, and the slightest bit like he already knew. "You were telling the truth," is all he says, quiet, personal.

"Yeah," Stiles responds, shooting him a quick quirk of his lips, and starting up the car.

Bending the law has, at this point, become a given, especially if they want other people to survive as much as they want themselves to, which is how they end up locking Jackson in a Beacon County Sheriff’s Department prisoner transport van, just to keep him contained until they... figure it out.

Or convince him of the truth, although Stiles highly doubts that's possible.

Still, Scott thinks- rightly- that Stiles has more of a repertoire with Jackson, so he's the one put to the talking task while Scott goes to school and works with Allison to see if there's any way to fix their not-so-friendly neighborhood lizardman.

Stiles climbs into the back of the van with sandwiches and very little hope for himself, especially when Jackson starts out pissed off and entirely unwilling to listen to reason. Stiles sighs, tosses the other boy his food and relaxes into as comfortable a position as he is able.

"You're the kanima," he tells him, "your killing people Jax. To death."

"I am not," Jackson grumbles, trying to pick the plastic off of his food. The handcuffs make it difficult for him, though, so Stiles takes it and opens it for him before handing it back. The other boy glares at him. "My parents are going to be looking for me."

"Not if they don't think anything's wrong," Stiles points out, leaning back against the metal wall of the compartment, kicking his feet up on the bench across from him, pressing himself slightly along one of Jackson's thighs. Jackson doesn't shrug him off or move away and Stiles smiles at him, a little wistful, a little melancholy. "I used your phone to text them, said you were staying at a friend's, not to worry, and that... that you loved them."

Jackson flinches like he's been struck. Stiles opens his own sandwich, picks at it, and waits.
"That'll just make them suspicious," the other boy murmurs softly after a long, still moment, and Stiles nods, because he knew that.

"Yeah. Worth it, though."

"Does McCall think so?" Jackson snaps. Stiles digs out a tomato, eats it on its' own, savors the flavor, and contemplates not answering that question.

"He doesn't know," he admits, little more than a whisper, "I didn't tell him."

"You're an idiot," Jackson tells him plainly, before biting viciously into his food, and Stiles almost laughs.

"Jax?"

"Hmm."

"Why can't you just be... better?"

Jackson frowns imperiously at him, "What the hell does that mean?"

Stiles turns his gaze away as his eyebrows furrow, gnawing on the inside of his cheek as his fingers agitatedly tear apart pieces of meat and sauce-glazed bread. "You... You justify the shitty things you do with how—how you've worked—had to work so much harder to get to where you are, because you felt you had to earn things other people just had. And then you push yourself even harder, get to this breaking point, because the people you want to accept you aren't even there. They're—" he waves a hand around, grimaces- "ghosts. An idea.

"But everything you do, for those people, to make them... proud? Pleased? I mean, I'm sure it's more complicated than that, and I-" he huffs- "I don't think I'm explaining it very well, but. You bar yourself from things, you push yourself too hard and you're... You hate yourself, I can—I can see that in you. It's why I broke things off in the first place, because that negativity was consuming you, and I knew no matter how much I loved you, it wouldn't—it was never going to change, and I was sure I was hurting you more than helping you.

"And then." He scoffs, shakes his head, "This fucking werewolf stuff. I'm... I'm not even going to pretend to understand why you thought you needed the Bite so badly, why you were willing to be so crazy, stupid, cruel to get it.

"I think it has something to do with your twisted perception of the world, though, like. If you think you're not good enough, if your bio-parents thought you weren't good enough, then maybe everyone else thinks the same thing. Maybe there's something inherently wrong with you, and maybe that's why they gave you up in the first place. And maybe. Maybe changing yourself so completely, so inherently, maybe that's the key. To fixing it. To being the best.

"Because the only way you think you're worthy is if you're perfect. And you equate the whole reality of your existence to that perfection.

"But nobody's perfect Jax, and whatever led to you being given up for adoption? I guarantee you it wasn't an easy, black and white decision, and I promise you, that that decision was not reliant upon you, it wasn't your fault and... and I know you won't believe me. Maybe you never will, but I guess what I'm trying to say is:"

Stiles takes a deep, steadying, suffocating breath.
"You didn't need the Bite, you never did, but maybe..." He closes his eyes, presses his knuckles to his chest, he feels constricted, on fire, too big and too small all at once. "Maybe you could just be kind. You could try to just... be kind."

Jackson is looking at him, he knows, he can feel it, he can feel him shaking, and he doesn't know if he's pissed or breaking down or something else entirely and it hurts, it's killing him, but he can't bring himself to open his eyes, can't force his lungs to unconstrict—he thinks this is the deepest, most intrinsic fear he's ever felt in his entire life. And isn't that fucking funny, considering everything he's been through.

His heart thuds dully in his chest, every beat bringing with it a flicker of nausea and the prick of thousands of needles against every expanse of uncovered skin.

"I could be kind to you," Jackson finally says, so rough it's almost unrecognizable, and Stiles coughs out a wet, half startled laugh.

The boy is hunched in on himself, but the glaciers of his eyes, like icicles, melting under the force of a blazing sun, they're glued to Stiles with a near perplexing intensity, and, for once, Stiles can't decipher what's in them at all. But he moves to be closer, to lean forward, touch, and Jackson gasps softly at the feeling of his hands, bows his head, swallows with a click.

Stiles ducks down to bump their noses together, knuckles under the other boy's chin until his lips are more accessible, brushes their mouths together, more a caress than a kiss. Jackson growls out in an agonized, despairing way and bites at him, begging him to open, and diving when he does. Their breathing is harsh, and the taste is all tear-salt bitter, but they don't pull away from each other, it feels too much like they can't.

A pull, a desire, a craving that they've both denied for too long. Something they need to satisfy, want to cherish.

It's Stiles who finally breaks away, pushing Jackson back and reseating himself on the bench across from him, just out of reach, a sound very much like a whimper escaping his aching lungs before he can stop it.

"I don't think that's enough," he manages brokenly, "I don't think it can be." He hiccups, tries to regain all that air he lost, wrings his hands in his lap shakily. "Not now."

♡ ACT THREE ♡

The Answer to That Question Is: 42

"Scales?" Jackson asks, dubious, but Stiles has to give him credit for at least trying. "Like a fish?"

"Nah, more like a reptile." Jackson rolls his eyes and Stiles dutifully ignores the motion, "Um. And, uh, your claws have this gooey stuff that paralyzes people. Aaand you have a tail."

"I have a tail." Jackson repeats, very flat, and Stiles purses his lips against a smile.

"Yeah," he agrees, laughter in his voice despite himself, "you have a tail."

Jackson can only maintain his dubious squint for so long before he snorts, shaking his head a little. "Does it do anything?"
"No, not that I know of," Stiles answers biting his lips to keep the laughter in. Jackson raises his eyebrows, and, **ridiculously,** wriggles his nose, and Stiles bursts out into a helpless fit of giggles. Jackson smiles slightly at that, and, though it's strained, it's still lighter, **better,** than both of them had been since their kiss.

Once his mirth dies down, Stiles searches Jax's expression, brings his legs into his chest, steeples his hands on top of his knees, rests his chin on his interwoven fingers. Sighs, a little defeated.

"You still don't believe me," he begins, and cocks his head so his cheek is resting on the back of his hand, "do you?"

Jackson's gaze flutters down- to the handcuffs around his wrists- doesn't respond, though his silence is answer enough.

Stiles hums, thoughtful, "...The night of the semi-final game—what did you do right after?"

Jackson's brows knit, and the look he throws Stiles is **extremely** bemused. "I went home."

"Are you sure about that?"

Jackson's jaw sets, half mulish, half irritated, "What else would I do?"

"Attack Derek and I," Stiles answers, more amused than he ought to be. "Trap us in a pool for two hours." He shrugs, vaguely apologetic. "You've done other things, too, as the kanima: killed a mechanic, killed one of the Argents' men— you tried to kill Danny, last night. Derek, uh, got you pretty good—at least, that's what Scott thinks happened. We found you naked and bloody in the parking lot—you healed, but. Still. Anyway, that's how you ended up here."

"I wouldn't hurt Danny," Jackson argues, but it's soft, unheated. Stiles thinks they both kind of cried out whatever fight they had in them, earlier. Everything, right now, feels intimate, saturated, drift-lull.

"Maybe not you, but the **kanima,** when it takes over."

Jackson frowns at him. "Why?"

"We don't know. But Scott's trying to figure it out. And, hopefully, when we know we'll be able to —" He cuts himself off and snorts, shaking his head and stretching out his legs, his arms, letting the bones pop and the muscles unbunch, relax, with a slightly relieved sigh. "I don't know. Save you? **Stop** you? Let you go, at least."

Jackson narrows his eyes, a wisp of suspicion sliding around all his vulnerable, "You know I'm gonna have to **do** something about this, when it's all over, right?"

"**Do** something?"

"Sue, prosecute, **something.** My parents aren't just going to let this go, and, to be honest, I don't really want to let this go **either.**"

"Because you still think we're wrong," Stiles surmises, and Jackson looks away.

"**That,** and it's just plain **fucked up,** this whole goddamned thing."

Stiles swivels on the little bench until he's laying down along it- ignoring how uncomfortable it is- and staring up at the unforgiving metallic looking ceiling. "Okay," he says. "Then... however you
decide to do it? To—to retaliate? Let it be me who takes the fall."

"Stiles," Jackson begins, reluctant, and Stiles flaps a hand to stay him.

"No. No, Jax, I mean it, okay? If—if you ever cared for me at all. Alright?"

He hears the other boy make an aggrieved sound that pitches down to wounded before he mutters, begrudging. "Alright."

Stiles' creative license with the texts he sent to Jackson's parents bites him in the ass sooner than he anticipated, since they apparently went to the police as soon as they received it, according to Allison. It's not that bad, though, since she told him just in time for him to put a call out that the police could trace—a distraction while they got the hell out of dodge and moved to a new location.

A little after four, Scott shows up with some new information. The reason the kanima went after Danny could've been because of the footage he helped Jackson recover, and there's a very real possibility the footage was of him turning. Whoever broke into Danny's car to steal the tablet, and thereby the video, did it with too much precision to have been anything but human— which means there's someone else out there who knows what Jackson is, probably the same someone who deleted the part of the recording where Jackson turned in the first place, erasing any evidence that he was the kanima so he wouldn't know.

"Like the bestiary says, the kanima seeks a friend, right?" Allison asks, eyebrows raising, eyes automatically flicking to Scott for approval.

Stiles makes a dissenting noise. "I don't know if that's exactly right. I hate to be the one to break it to you, but your family isn't so great at knowing the dynamics of this stuff—even Derek seems to have a few things wrong, and I only know any of this shit because I looked for it, hard, and forced Scotty here to have long, arduous, uncomfortable late-night discussions with me." Scott groans his exasperation to the sky at the memory and Stiles pats him companionably on the shoulder- "in order to suss out the truth from the lie."

"Yeah, but all your knowledge is based around wolves and Packs. Even if it's a little off-base: the bestiary, what Derek told us, and our own experience are all we have for the kanima," she tells him reasonably, and he grumbles a bit about how little trust he has for it all, but agrees.

Then Scott starts theorizing, the beginning of the theory being the small amount of research Stiles was able to find about the kanima in the beginning- or, relative beginning- that it went after murderers; the middle being the idea that maybe that's exactly what it has been doing, that it wasn't trying to kill any of them, or Danny—considering it had plenty of opportunities to do so, and it never actually did; and ending with the fact that they just don't know enough about the kanima, or its' possible protector/friend/accomplice, or anything.

But, no matter how little they know, they're all on the saving him/keeping him safe/keeping others safe from him train. Which Stiles guesses is good, although he kind of misses the simplicity and reliability of the days when he could be all for just killing the problem.

He's started caring about too many people, he feels, and feels it even more fervently when he gets a text from Mathilda- since he's got a new phone, now, hooray- bidding him to come to her so she can talk to him about the Lydia thing. He doesn't really want to leave Jackson, but he has an inkling this might end up being important, and he doesn't think he and the other boy have much more to talk about anyway.
He claps his hand on the back-door of the van twice and tells Jackson to get some sleep by way of goodbye before he goes, leaving Scott and Allison to keep watch.

"Okay," Mathilda says, walking up to his booth, breathing heavily, looking very displeased, "but, like, why?"

Stiles snorts, because that is the typical reaction he gets when he forces people other than Scott and his dad to meet him at Donnie's, the Diner that's planted firmly in the exact middle of a small mountain within the Preserve. "It has the best curly fries in the universe," he explains as she catches her breath and slides into the red-plastic plushy booth across from his with a grateful groan, "and even better milkshakes. It's worth the hike, I swear."

That isn't the only reason he made her meet him here, he mostly chose this place because it's close enough to where they're keeping Jackson that it eases his mind somewhat, and, y'know. Comfort food.

It's been a long day.

"I'll believe it when I taste it," she says, right before a pudgy sort of guy with bright red curls and simpering brown eyes and a fancy mustache comes up to their table to take their order. She asks for a homestyle blt with a side of sausages and eggs, peanut butter waffles, and a rootbeer float to drink. Stiles just asks for the usual and whatever else Donahue decides to make for him.

"Are you high?" he asks, vaguely amused, when their waiter leaves.

"Generally, yeah," she tells him unapologetically. "I'm going to be perpetually for the next three days, my dude. Endometriosis is a bitch."

He winces. She's complained about it to him often enough- all her incredibly descriptive explanations colored with lots of cursing and pitiful noises- that he feels intimately familiar with it to an extent that almost grosses him out. "You have my sympathies."

"And you have my thanks," she smirks at him, waggles her eyebrows, "as well as a few curses to your name for that fuckin' hike you just made me embark on."

He gapes at her, then, maturely, "Uh-uh, you don't even know my name."

"Wouldn't be hard to figure out, though," she laughs, shifting back in her seat when their waiter returns, setting her copious amounts of food in front of her, and dispensing Stiles' strawberry milkshake, curly fries and two golden, crisp, melty, glistening grilled cheeses in front of him. He makes very dramatic appreciative noises at the mouth-watering sight and it's totally worth how Mathilda teases him because Oh. My. God.

"Okay," she concedes, after wolfing down her first few bites with an almost rabid hunger, "you're right. It was worth it."

He sticks his tongue out at her, and she sticks her tongue out right back.

They spend the rest of the first half of the meal making small-talk: Siobhan apparently got suspended for throwing a desk at a teacher after he made excuses for a male student trying to grope her ass, but the male student got suspended, too, so that's something—Stiles wonders in the back of his mind how creepy-creeper Gerard handled all that. Mathilda and Siobhan, without much context to go on, aren't really sure if they liked how he handled it, because of the lecture he gave Siobhan and the mildly ableist, neurotypical way he went about it with her, but they aren't sure if they didn't like how
he handled it, *either*, because he *slammed* the groper *and* the teacher in all the satisfying vindicating ways that make you feel like *justice* has been served.

Mathilda herself is going to reserve her judgment, since she got *seriously* weird vibes from the man, and she doesn't know how she feels about the *nepotism* that comes with him hiring his daughter-in-law on as a substitute while the teacher involved is on unpaid leave.

She asks him about Scott, and Pokemon Go, and if they've been to any parties lately, and they discuss their grades and the amount of weird-crime shit going on in Beacon Hills before they finally get to Lydia.

"She thinks she might be going nuts," Mathilda sighs, leaning back and looking around at the general lack of people and supervision before pulling out her pipe and taking a hit. She offers him some, but he politely declines. "And, I don't know if that's really it, you know? But it may be something close. She was violently assaulted, man. That's *traumatic* shit, and, I only really spent a few hours with her but she's kinda... *high strung*. I mean... I honestly don't know. There's PTSD, which could explain some of her fugue episodes, *maybe*.

"There's the possibility that she went through a trauma when she was *younger*, and what happened to her at the winter formal triggered an underlying problem, but, even *then*."

"I've only talked to her a few times since that night in her car, and from what I can tell she's a *genius*, who's *terrified* of losing her *mind* because that's her *greatest asset*. She's also debilitatingly proud, which is infuriating. And I kind of hate you for introducing me to her, because we're probably going to end up becoming best friends, even though she's annoying as all hell."

Stiles chuckles a little at that, and then hums thoughtfully, thinking over her assessment. They haven't really thought of that, he thinks- or, at least, *he* hasn't, he knows Scott has, and he doesn't know about Allison- that she's well and truly just *immune*, and everything else going on with her is a *natural* reaction to what happened to her, not a *supernatural* reaction.

"Has she talked to Ms. Morell?" He asks, curious.

"She has *appointments* with Ms. Morell- sits in her office for an hour every other day, *but talked*?" Mathilda scoffs, "*Hell* no. Did you not *hear* me say *debilitatingly* proud? That girl will *crash* and *burn* before she asks for- *let alone accepts-* help."

Stiles sighs. "*Fuck.*"

Mathilda scoops some fizzy ice-cream into her mouth before pointing the lipstick smudged spoon at him and smacking her lips. "Accurate summary."

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When Stiles gets back to their impromptu kidnap-camp- God, their lives are so *weird*- his stomach immediately hits the floor, heartbeat thundering, when he sees the prison transport van's doors ripped open, and Jackson nowhere to be seen.

The ensuing panic doesn't surprise him, but the way the overwhelming fear nearly crushes him, crashes all reeling thought to a train-wrecked halt, *that* does.

Scott, he decides, check on Scott first.

He kind of wants to break something when he finds his brother curled up with Allison in the backseat of Melissa's car, *asleep*. He's not sure if the sudden violent impulse is due to the crippling anxiety that came with the thought that he might be *hurt*, or the heart-soaring rush of relief that comes
with seeing that he isn't. There's no real anger though, the amount of times they've both been running on fumes has increased exponentially since the supernatural has been introduced into their lives, and the same goes for Allison, though the amount of time it's affected her has been technically shorter.

He swallows down the most complicated of his emotions, gets a better handle on himself, and then knocks on the car window to wake the two of them up and alert them to the situation as it is now. Read: not fucking good.

New, radical, kind of sucky but only reasonable thing left to do plan: tell an adult.

Namely, the sheriff and the super-soldier hunter. Allison won't have to go through much effort to tell/convince her dad of anything, since he already knows it all, but for the secrets she's been keeping from him to protect Scott, and while Stiles is terrified for his brother and Jackson both- because he has no doubt Chris will take the kill-shot the moment he's got it- he understands the need, nevermind how sick to his stomach it makes him feel.

As for his dad, well. His best buddy is, physically and literally, all the proof he needs.

By the time Stiles and Scott get to the sheriff's office, Jackson's already there with his adoptive father, David Whittemore. Esquire.

Jackson, at least, has the grace to give an apologetic grimace to Stiles before he starts pressing charges, gathering his snobbish, egotistical, self-important mask up and putting it back on with all the ease of long familiarity.

While they're waiting for Jackson's dad and Stiles' dad to finish talking, they get an awesomely informative call from Allison, who similarly ditched the 'tell an adult' plan when she got a surprise visitor. And due to Lydia being a badass awesome genius who's much better at translating archaic Latin than their French teacher cum guidance counselor, Allison was able to learn that the kanima doesn't seek a friend, but, rather, a master.

Which means, whoever this person is, they're not protecting Jackson, they're controlling him.

And Stiles knows, from the conversation he had with the boy, that Jackson doesn't know anything, genuinely believes they're incorrect about him, that he's still a werewolf and being with Lydia somehow delayed the whole thing.

As far as they can tell, being the kanima allows for an altered state of mind, kind of like Lydia's fugue episodes, although Jackson's end in a lot more murder and death. So, the kanima-state takes care of everything, ties it all up in a nice little bow, with the exception of the video Jax took of himself on the night of the full moon—that is the only proof that the kanima needed help getting rid of.

So the only two ways they can conceive of to figure this out, is to disabuse Jackson of the notion that he's not the kanima, and to maybe look more closely into the whole video thing.

The only problem with talking to Jackson? Jackson's dad just filed restraining orders against them both, which is, honestly, letting them off the hook easy, but still incredibly inconvenient.

The parental units are all pissed, as evidenced by Melissa going so far as to ground Scott from Stiles, along with kind of freaking out a little bit, and the sheriff yelling through his frustration before walking back into the interrogation room and gritting his teeth and bearing it as Mr. Whittemore berated him.
Holy shit, they're terrible kids.

Further translations from Lydia- who probably doesn't buy the band-aid lie that they're part of an online gaming community that battles mythical creatures, like, *at all-* tells them that the kanima can only kill for vengeance—up until its' bond with its' master becomes strong enough that it no longer cares or discerns. And though the kanima was *meant* to be a werewolf, it *can't be* until it resolves that in its' past which manifested it.

So. Jackson needs therapy. Tell Stiles something he *doesn't know.*

But most of it does kind of comes from him being unable to reconcile with the fact that he was adopted, although, what happened with his birth parents is something all three of them are in the dark on. Lydia might know, and Jackson *definitely* knows.

Scott and Stiles can't get within fifty feet of Jackson, but *Allison* can, while Scott has a chemistry test to ace, and Stiles is off to go find Lydia. Go team.

Lydia is being deliberately annoying for reasons unknown, and all questioning her gets him is a big fat load of zilch—aaaaaand being accosted by Erica in the hallway.

"Why are you asking Lydia about Jackson's real parents?"

Stiles blinks at her, then down at the wolfy talons digging into his skin through his shirt.

"Why are you bringing out the claws on *camera?*" He returns, jerking his chin toward the newly-mint security cameras Gerard had installed. He may be a villain, but he's an *efficient* one. She looks over her shoulder, grudgingly removing her hand from his chest once she sees what he's talking about. "That's right," he says, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder. "You wanna play catwoman? I'll be your batman."

Completely done with her shit, and irritated that he's already lost Lydia, he moves past her, only to stop and turn back when she calls out, answering the question he's been asking, easy as anything.

Jackson's bio-parents? They're fucking *dead.*

*How* does she know that? Does she know *more* than that? Will getting it out of her be easier than getting it out of Lydia? Probably, yes, since she's actually *here* and seemingly willing to bargain.

Quid pro quo, and all.

Unfortunately, in *trying* to bargain, he inadvertently gives Jackson up to her as the kanima—simple deduction, really, if you didn't know Stiles that well you'd never jump to the conclusion that he's asking because he's *hyper-focused* and can't help himself- it happens more often than you'd think- and the only other reason that makes sense is the one that's, in this case, the *truth.*

And trying to convince her otherwise, or trying to convince her *not to tell,* gets them nowhere except to a big puddle outside of the boy's locker-room, the door to said locker-room splintering under the weight of Jackson and Scott fighting not three seconds after he notices the flooding. Erica snatches Jackson, all werewolf strength and a loud, aggressive growl that she abruptly cuts off when Harris strolls in on the scene and, because he's just *not* a nice guy, assigns them all, along with an innocent bystander, to detention.

For shits and giggles, Stiles swears.
The innocent bystander- Matt Daehler- has a seriously iffy vibe.

And Stiles trusts his gut, but Scott trusts evidence, and there's literally nothing about Matt beyond Stiles being bugged by him that could make his brother think he's the guy. Stiles's not even really sure he's being entirely serious about it until he throws it out there, but now he's said it... Hmm.

Jackson getting what looks like a migraine and stumbling out of the library, for all that it's intensely worrying, distracts Harrison and takes away their proximity restrictions, since the guy with the restraining order is no longer in the room. The second he's gone, and the teacher after him, Stiles and Scott move over to Erica's table to question her about what she knows, now that they know she knows anything.

She offers the information a little too easily for his tastes: that Jackson's parents died in a car accident and her father was the insurance investigator. It leaves Stiles wondering when the accident happened, since, as far as he knows, Jax has never met his bio-parents. With a nonchalance and eager helpfulness that leaves a suspiciously bitter taste in his mouth, Erica decides to go looking for the insurance report about the accident, which tells them that Jackson's bio-parents died the literal day before his date of birth.

And everything about the car accident reads inconclusive, meaning it could've been murder, or just an accident, and either way, Jackson's mother and father were DOA, his mother, pregnant with him, still, gave birth post-mortem via c-section, and, miraculously, her baby survived.

All of a sudden, many, many things make so much more sense.

When Jackson comes back from the bathroom, he's sweaty and panting, having a generally hard time, and Stiles tries his very best not to worry. When Scott comes back from the office, having been called there by Allison's mom, he seems a little spooked, but basically fine.

The whole 'his parents could've been murdered' thing falls directly in line with the kanima avenger lore, and Scott decides the best thing to do, right this very second, would be to go tell him. Stiles thinks that werewolves have some serious impulsivity issues, and maybe some more thought should be put into it- because he does not think this is a conversation that could ever go well- but Scott is already rounding the bookshelf to speak with Jackson.

As soon as he's out of sight, though, there's a crash as one of the overhead lighting fixtures gets fucked all to hell by the kanima being an earthquake causing, parkour havoc-wreaking douchebag, who scratches its' paralytic into the back of Erica's neck before running off to throw down with Scott.

Now, Scott, his buddy, his pal, has a certain order of priorities, and the moment he can, scrambles away from the rubble to put himself in front of Allison. Stiles, crouched down beside her by the bottom shelves has a swooping, sickening, vertigo sensation as he watches Jackson- in this weird half-shift, with the scales and the eyes but not the lizard-body- go all possessed writing on the chalkboard, like something out of the fucking Shining. When he's done, he jumps right the fuck out of the window.

What he wrote basically amounts to a promise to kill them all if they get in his way, but that isn't quite so important as Erica, who, the effects of the kanima venom and flickering lights combining to work against her, is seizing.

(Matt, who he cares far, far less about, is also paralyzed. And unconscious— but alive, so. Good for
Stiles is pretty sure they need to take her to a hospital— or to Derek, since she's being so goddamned insistent— but he can't take her alone while she's still seizing, he isn't strong enough. Lucky thing Scott's there—mildly unlucky that Allison's tending to Matt, and Scott and Allison apparently need to have a moment before he can be helpful, but. Ugh.

Them's the breaks. Stress and love make people stupid. He gets it. He's done it. He still kind of wants to slap his brother upside the head for it.

The abandoned railroad depot. That's where Derek's been living ever since the Argents decided to use the Hale ruins as a training site? (Which, you have to admit, is unbearably, inhumanely cruel, considering everything they've already taken from the man.)

It doesn't matter.

They get Erica there as quickly as they can, carry her inside, where Derek directs them to a large, decrepit, rusting subway train-car. Beacon Hills doesn't even have a subway? Like, what?— before he breaks her fucking arm in order to jump-start the healing process, and then bleeds her in order to get the Kanima venom out. It's gruesome, and it looks indescribably painful, but Erica's a trooper, and at least this way it ends in her not being dead.

Which is, surprisingly, something he finds himself wanting. Her survival.

He's going to punt whichever mythological creature that's decided to give out his loyalty and ability to care willy-nilly. He's got enough to fucking worry about.

"St—Stiles," she pants, a small whining laugh underlying her tremulous voice. "You make a good batman."

And that's it.

He's doomed.

She's on his list of favorite people.

Fuck his life.

"We're really teaming up with Derek?" Stiles asks, because... Scott had been so hesitant before, and he's acting a little shifty, now.

"Yeah," the other boy answers, struggles not to avert his eyes, and Stiles frowns. "I agreed to work with him, as a part of his Pack, and he promised not to kill Jackson. To capture him. To do it my way- our way-" he amends, gesturing in between the two of them- "instead."

"Scott... What're you hiding from me?"

"No—nothing! Nothing, Stiles, I swear. " He runs his hands through his hair, paces the length of Stiles' room, agitated, on edge. It's getting under Stiles' skin, making him itch. "Look—look, I know you. I know there's something going on between you and Jackson that you aren't telling me, you're acting a lot nicer to him than you would be if there weren't. I know you, Stiles. I know you can be a little... sociopathic towards the people you don't care about, although you generally refrain from doing anything bad because it would upset the people you do care about—"
"Aww, Scotty. You know me so well."

"Of course I do," Scott sighs, and moves to sit on Stiles' computer chair, turning serious, rain-soaked earth eyes up, looking at him with puppy-dog sincerity. "You're my brother. I also know that, normally? You would've suggested killing Jackson at least a dozen times by now if it weren't for— for whatever it is going on between you two."

Stiles crosses his arms over his chest, and makes a face at him, because he's right, and then sighs himself. "So, we do the Pack thing and Jax gets out of this alive?"

"Exactly."

Stiles worries at his bottom lip. "And after?" He asks.

Scott grimaces a little, shrugs, "Derek's not my Alpha."

Stiles groans and flops down on his bed, "This is gonna suck, isn't it?"

Scott just laughs at him, which is as good as agreement.

While Scott's off following Jackson and planning with Derek, Stiles takes a very, very healthy dinner to his dad in hopes of sussing some information out of him, try and figure out if there's any connection between the kanima's murders, something that could help them figure out who the Kanima's master is.

Apparently, all the victims- with the exception of Keith Lahey- were twenty-four, and Isaac's older brother, a military guy who's been presumed dead after too long MIA, Camden Lahey, he would've been twenty-four as well this year. Same age-group could mean lots of things, but, most likely in this case, that they were all in the same class.

Stiles and his dad do some research and find that the group all went to BHHS- including Isaac's brother- and all of them were in Harris' chemistry class together in 2006.

Hopefully, this is their suspect pool. Hopefully, knowing this? Will help save lives, for his dad's sake, if no one else's, since this is, technically, the sheriff's lead.

Jackson, or the kanima, or either— is going to a rave tomorrow night. And they need tickets, to trap him, stop him, protect him/everyone around him. They're throwing ideas around about how to get into the Thing when Matt, who Stiles does not like, comes up to them to be a whiny bitch about the whole library incident, which, if the other boy's telling the truth, he knows extremely little about.

The guy, he just... he makes Stiles' skin crawl.

But the interruption matters very little. They've got shit to do. Like getting into the rave, because the last time the kanima's master ordered it to kill someone- a pregnant lady- the Kanima didn't, and its' human counterpart had to finish the job on their own, so, odds are, they'll be there for the next kill, to make sure their little pet does it right this time.

The only way Stiles is managing to stay sane about this, about the fact that it's Jackson in this position, is by ruthlessly separating the two entities in his mind. Jackson is Jekyll, the kanima and its' master are Hyde—not polar opposites, no, and Jackson and the kanima share the same body, but... they don't share the same mind.
He tries to hold onto that, and struggles to hold himself together with it.

Getting tickets is actually easier than they were making it out to be, as Isaac proves by beating them out of two of their unsuspecting peers. Stiles has a feeling Scott's going to want to send them fruit-baskets as an apology. Whereas Isaac just earned quite a few asshole brownie points in Stiles' book, gotta give props where they're due.

Getting the stuff to trap and subdue the kanima and/or its' master just takes a trip to the vet, who gives Scotty-boy a vial full of ketamine and Stiles a trash bag full of mountain ash and a strange speech about being the Spark that ignites it with the force of his will, his imagination, his belief. Stiles isn't so sure about all that, and the pressure of the responsibility piled on top of all his stress and unhappiness and longing makes him even more stressed and unhappy.

The longing? That he is going to ignore, yes he is.

The sheriff's son stealing police property and getting a restraining order does not reflect well on the county, so they decide to fire his dad. And Stiles did that. That's on him.

His dad walking into their house, without his badge, without his gun, without his station, looking morose and dejected and depressed, unable to even gather enough energy to yell, to be angry, frustrated, upset—all of that is Stiles' fault, and he can't do anything about it, because he's got to get to Scott's house, pick him up for the rave, circle the whole area with mountain ash and a butt-load of belief that he's not so sure he can muster, with this much weight on his shoulders.

But he's damn well going to try.

He's also, maybe, going to yell at Scott a little for abandoning him as soon as they get there without so much as a why. (Unless you can count a horrified, breathy, "Allison," as an explanation. Which... you kind of can, if you look back on their current track-record.)

Motherfucker.

"Be careful," Scott tells Isaac, after he gives him the syringe and detailed instructions on how to use it. Isaac scoffs, looking at the weapon he'll be using.

"I doubt I'll even... slightly hurt him."

"No, I mean you," Scott says, and Isaac blinks down at him in surprise. Scott looks endearingly earnest, completely serious, warm brown eyes filled with compassionate concern. "I don't want you to get hurt."

Isaac swallows, because, other than maybe Erica, no one ever means him, no one worries about his safety, no one recognizes his pain; they only ever inflict it. Even Derek, who gave him the tools to be stronger, but wants to hone them with that same kind of dominance his father had over him, with broken bones and threatening words.

Scott presses his fingers to Isaac's wrist, urgent and depending, trusting him with the task given. "Okay?"

Isaac blinks again, a little dazed. "Okay."
It takes him under a minute to convey the plan to Erica, get her to help him corner Jackson, seduce him into compliance. They don't expect the claws, though, paralyzing, slicing into them because they're too fucking close and they weren't paying enough attention because he still looks human.

His wolf cries out within him, seeking approval, wanting to have earned the trust Scott had so freely given.

It's a struggle, but he manages to push past the venom coursing through his veins for long enough to grab the syringe that'd clattered to the ground when he fell. Picking it up he forces himself to stand, heaves unwilling limbs the four steps it takes to get to Jackson, and plunges the goddamn needle in the other boy's neck.

Stiles runs out of mountain ash with, like, five feet left until he could've been home-free. So, so teeth-achingly close.

Fuck.

He calls Scott. Because that's what he does, that's what's ingrained in him, what he's supposed to do when shit goes wrong, call his brother. Scott... doesn't fucking answer. He hasn't been answering alot lately.

To be fair, they're all highschool students in terrifying, daunting, traumatizing situations that keep right on piling up, and Stiles understands that Scott's just doing his best, here.

Stiles stares at the handful of mountain ash he has left, the giant gap inbetween the beginning of the line, and the end of it. Logically, he doesn't have enough. But Scott's a werewolf, Jackson's a kanima, there are hunters and bestiaries and he's pretty fucking sure one of the drag queens he's now friends with is a witch, and Deaton's something—hell, Lydia might be, too.

Logic doesn't fucking factor into this.

So he closes his eyes and he imagines, prays, hopes, believes, wills it into being, manifests it as he walks unsteadily forward, letting the ash slip through his fingers completing the boundary.

For a second, when the handful is gone, he opens his eyes and thinks maybe it didn't work. But then he looks, and the gap is filled, it's one great, big, whole fucking circle, surrounding the building.

He laughs, elated and disbelieving because he did it, god fucking damn, but he did it.

His job done, he opens the group-text he has with all the Betas- Scott included- and asks how far they've gotten with theirs. Isaac and Erica text back relatively quickly, Isaac saying that he pumped Jax full of ketamine, and Erica sending a picture of the batman spotlight shining into a cloudy night sky before giving him directions to a back-room off to the side of the general raving area.

Cute, he texts back sardonically, but he goes as fast as his legs will take him.

The space is small, all patches of metal stuck together with rust and grime, only marginally worse than Derek's little lair, in his opinion. Jackson's sat, limp, in a metal chair close to the wall, Erica and Isaac standing before him, watching, jittery. They both jump a little when Stiles lets himself in, and Stiles is almost as worried for them, at this point, as he is for Jackson.

"He okay?" Stiles asks, twisting his fingers together, and Isaac sighs.

"Well. Let's find out." Trying to slash Jackson with his wolf-claws only serves to prove the ketamine
didn't do shit to his survival instincts, since Jackson- still unconscious as far as Stiles can tell- nearly breaks Isaac's arm stopping him. "I thought the ketamine was supposed to put him out," Isaac whines, strained, and Stiles grits his teeth against the instinctual need to comfort. Isaac'll heal, and he doesn't know how he'd soothe him anyway.

"Yeah, well, this is all we're gonna get. So, let's just hope that whoever's controlling him decides to show up tonight."

Jackson—no, not Jackson: the kanima's eyes snap open, and in a distorted voice, sub-vocal hiss underneath every inflection, it says, "I'm here. I'm right here with you."

Which. Yeah, not creepy or disturbing at all, thanks.

Asking Jackson questions while he's in The Shining—Kanima Mode, though? Mildly useful. Because, so far as it- or its' master- is concerned, all of the people it's killed so far deserved it, were guilty of murder, guilty of murdering them. And, Stiles is pretty sure, when it says, "They murdered me," that it's not the kanima talking, not really.

Now, the question is slowly becoming, to his dawning horror: is the kanima's master a ghost? Or a human with an NDE and a really loose definition of murder? He's kinda hopin' for the latter, here, but when has his life ever been that easy.

"Ketamine," Stiles says faintly, as he, Isaac, and Erica back away, Jackson's eyes going from their human shape to their lizard shape, and isn't that a weird thing to witness. "He needs more ketamine."

"We don't have any more," Isaac hisses desperately into his ear, as the kanima stands, half of him scales and half of him skin, blunt, human fingernails replaced with clear, poisonous claws.

"Shit, okay." He's got a hand around Erica's wrist, and an arm held protectively out in front of Isaac, his eyes locked on the kanima's now-advancing form. It opens its' mouth with a hissing roar, mercury-colored fangs, all overlapping and gleaming, dangerous, terrifying. "Okay, out. Everybody—everybody go," He pushes Erica out the door, follows after her and pulls Isaac along urgently. "Go—go—go—go!"

As soon as they're out of the room, they press their backs against the door, but that helps nothing, because before they can even react, the kanima tears out of the wall, the speed of it near to impossible.

"Why?" He questions the sky, his life, the universe, everything. "Why doesn't anything ever go according to plan?"

Erica clears her throat a little, raises her eyebrows at him, "So, uh, batman." She swallows. Wide, clear, honeycomb eyes begging for direction. "Any ideas?"

He clicks his tongue, bobs his head, and rattles off before he even has time to think, "Yeah. I'm gonna go look for Derek, you two see if you can find Ja—the kanima, okay?"

He looks from Erica- who flashes a small, vulnerable smile, a worried crease between her perfectly arched brows- to Isaac- who seems to hesitate for a moment, eyes flickering to his Pack-mate before returning to Stiles as he nods curtly. Stiles pats them both on the head and then runs off, texting Derek at the same time and managing to avoid tripping and falling on his face twice for the effort.

The Alpha meets him outside by his jeep, and Stiles immediately starts babbling about what happened, panic-bright and freaking.
Erica and Isaac rush out of the place not long after him, but stall at the edge of the exit, unable to pass the barrier he'd made. "Oh my God, it's working!" Stiles crows, pride in himself actually managing to bubble up past the, well, *everything* else. "**Yes! I did something.**"

But Derek's brows furrow like it's maybe not the *best* thing, eyes flickering in between his Betas, and the pups look unhappy about it too, a little *distrubed*, even.

Then Derek inhales sharply, gaze suddenly darting somewhere none of them can see (or *hear*, as Stiles is pretty sure the case may be), "**Scott?**"

"**What?**"

"Break it," the man says, more urgent, and Stiles was already going to, he gets the feeling he *has* to, it's settled into his bones along with his apparent and new-found fondness for Derek's Pack, but—

"**Why?**"

"Scott's dying."

"Wai— wa—wait, *what?* How do you know that?" Stiles asks, a cold chill curling up his spine.

"Oh my God, **Stiles!**" Derek yells, aggrieved, irises bleeding just the slightest bit of red, like drops of blood in swamp water, *murky*. "I just know! Break it!"

And how in the hell is he supposed to argue with that? Groaning slightly in frustration, Stiles crouches down in front of the line, and on little more than *instinct*, hovers his hands over it, pressed together, and then *apart* with a mental *push*. The boundary breaks, and Derek rushes past him, into the building, into a crowd of surging bodies. After the door closes behind the man, shuts out the rave, Stiles refocuses on the Betas, who look disquieted and a little lost.

If he's being honest, he feels pretty much exactly the same way.

"Come on," he decides—and he's done enough research on this to know that being tactile with the wolves in your Pack is *good for them*, and maybe this is temporary, maybe Scott has a plan that Stiles isn't privy to that will shatter all this like so much glass, but right now he doesn't *care*. Because he thinks he needs it as much as they do, he feels too raw, useless, helpless, *exposed*.

He has no idea if Derek's going to manage to save Scott, he has no idea if his dad's ever going to forgive him, he has no idea if Jax is going to—— He's got no idea about *any* of it.

He steps forward, takes Isaac and Erica by the hands and walks them to the jeep. "Let's..." He heaves a sigh. "Let's go get milkshakes and curly fries. Go to the arcade after. Let's be fucking *kids* for a goddamn second. Text Boyd, I'll pick him up on the way."

"**Arcade?**" Erica laughs a little, wet and wavering, but she gets into Roscoe without protest.

"We've got *stuff* going on tomorrow," Isaac points out, but he climbs in just the same, both of them squeezing into the passenger seat together, unwilling to be any amount of distance from each other, from *him*. Isaac's practically in Erica's lap, and Erica has her leg pressed against Stiles', while Isaac has a hand absentely curled around the back of his neck. "Shouldn't we be going to *sleep?*"

"Puh-lease," he says, starting the car and pulling out of the parking lot. "All sleep'll do is give us nightmares, food and games are *far more* productive."

"Oh, yeah?" Isaac asks, mostly sarcastic, and Stiles reaches over to muss his curls just because he
Derek's been drowning. He knows it.

He was never meant to be an Alpha, but Peter was his responsibility, and now that he is an Alpha, he needs to be strong, he needs to have a Pack, he needs them all to be strong enough to face what's coming.

Part of him hoped that the kanima would help them band together, learn to work together against a threat to their territory, part of him was trying to emulate his mother, who always flawlessly protected this place. Rogue 'weres, pixies, kitsunes, selkies, nagas, the rare, new Thing. They were a stable Pack, a stable territory.

But they're all dead now, because of him.

Just like Jackson's the kanima, because of him.

Scott... scares him, endears him, lots of things in equal measure. Reminds him too much of himself, when he was young, the parallels exhausting, and the mental hoops he's gone through trying to create a dialogue with this boy—they've been excessively influenced by the Argent girl, who, though she doesn't have the same coloring, has the same shape, and such a similar smell that Derek thinks if she ever called him 'sweetie' he'd choke on all the vile memories- so like smoke- and suffocate in the destruction they'd breed- so like fire.

And, yet, Scott is never what he expects, almost always what he needs, and very much a steadfast human being. He's still a teenager, still a child, still caged by his own fantastical ideas of love and heroism and his need for control in countless uncontrollable situations, but. But he accepted Derek-even if the acceptance was conditional- as his Alpha.

And maybe it's that: his demands and conditions and dominance. Scott acts like an Alpha, for all that Derek's the one with red eyes, with the culpability and the guilt and the pressure. Scott reminds him of Laura, all bossy-impetuous and clicking teeth and brash chipper-bright smiles. He reminds him of his mom, gentle-nurture and tranquil leadership, but with an unexpected, spit-fire temper.

He wants him.

But, he thinks, that desperation for a connection with this Beta makes the weight of it all so much worse when he fails him. He's supposed to protect him, keep him from getting hurt unless it's necessary, and Scott almost died tonight.

Derek can't help but think that it was his fault somehow, though part of him blames the boy, too, just a bit, because this—this is what you get when you trust the Argents. And Derek had tried, hadn't he? To warn him?

He sits, hunched and vaguely disappointed in himself, Scott, this whole endeavor— watches Deaton tend to his Beta as he remains still, distant, numb, detaching in that way he used to, just after the fire. The way that made Laura whine and crawl into bed with him, curl up protectively around him and try to coat him in her scent because she said he smelled wrong like that.

He tries to stop it, to ground himself, but he can't manage it.
What he does manage, though his voice sounds a long way away from him, is: "Thank you."

Deaton doesn't respond. Can probably tell there's something going on with him, might even know what. He just nods sagely and walks away.

Derek retreats within himself, lets everything go fuzzy. After all, there's nothing more he can really do right now, is there?

After Scott heals enough from what Victoria tried to do to him, and is aware enough, Derek takes him to the railroad depot, trying to regroup, replan, because he doesn't want to end up in a situation where one of them is too hurt to heal. Too dead.

Scott concedes, reluctantly, that maybe they can't save Jackson. But Derek doesn't really think they can kill him, either.

"I've seen a lot of things, Scott," he tells him, candid, opening up in a way that he doesn't really like, but knows he needs. "But I've never seen anything like this." He sighs, hanging his head, "Every full moon's just gonna make him stronger."

"Then how do we stop him?" Scott asks, soft, trusting, passive.

"I don't know," Derek answers with the same cadence, giving too much away, but incapable of stopping himself. "I don't even know if we can."

Something aches deep within him when Scott says, "Maybe we should just let the Argents handle it?"

Derek breathes, looks off into the distance, tries not to think about how he'll never be able to remember his baby sister's first steps and her gurgling laughter- all sun-bright innocence- or the way his mom and dad just were with one another, as Mates are, or the way scents of wax-clean wood would mingle with Pack-play, chlorine, and sweat in the summertime, without remembering, too, how he felt when he was with Kate, and the scent, taste, texture of char.

"I'm the one who turned him," he murmurs, almost to himself. "It's my fault."

"Yeah, but you didn't turn him into this," Scott cuts in, unreasonably reasonable, and somewhere between reassuring and confused as to why Derek would feel this way in the first place. "This happened because of something in his past, right?"

Derek shakes his head, irritated, "That's a legend in a book, it's not that simple."

Scott narrows his eyes, "What d'you mean it's not that simple? What aren't you telling me?"

That he has every right to blame himself. That he'd just become the Alpha when Jackson came to him, that he'd been riding a riptide of grief because he'd murdered his fucking Uncle, who'd killed his big sister, his Alpha, the only family he'd had for six years. That he was standing over his Uncle's grave, beside where Peter had ripped Kate's throat out, inside the house his family died in, the smell of all that warped death gnawing at his bones, the last vestiges of a nightmare still clinging to his soul with fucking meat-hooks when Jackson came to him asking for the Bite.

That he knew he wasn't right yet, but that his wolf was so goddamned lonely that he couldn't stop himself.
And there was that scratch, too; that day when he'd been shot with a wolfsbane bullet, and his infected blood probably entered Jackson's bloodstream when Derek pushed him away, accidentally scratching the back of his neck—the same place an Alpha digs their claws into to affect memories, the same place a kanima infects you with its' venom, so close to the spine, so close to the brain.

He doesn't know what the correlation is, exactly, but he's sure there is one.

He doesn't say any of that, though, can't bring himself to, clings to his rage and his wolf and his armor, getting defensive, instead: "Why do you always think I'm keeping something from you?"

"Because you always are keeping something from me!" Scott responds, voice rising, all indignant frustration.

"Well maybe I do it to protect you," Derek snaps, though there's something earnest underlying the admission, his wolf needing its' Beta to understand.

Scott sighs, looks away for a moment; then, "Doesn't being a part of your Pack mean no more secrets?" Mother-earth eyes looking at him through long, dancing lashes. Derek holds his gaze for a moment before he can't any longer, has to look away.

"Go home, Scott," he says, weary. "Sleep. Heal. Make sure your friends are safe. There's a full-moon tomorrow, and. I've got a feeling it's going to be a rough one."

Scott sucks in this big breath, like he's filling his lungs with all his protests and irritation and curiosity, his frustration with how Derek is handling this. He swallows it down, and he holds it all the way out of the subway car.

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Stiles, Erica, Isaac, and Boyd (who Stiles picked up walking from the rave to the railroad depot, full of three bullet wounds that were having trouble healing because they were laced with wolfsbane; lucky for Boyd, Stiles got Allison to steal him a bunch of the Argents' laced ammunition supply in case this ever happened again, and, with the help of the other two Betas, along with the previous example Derek set on how to heal these sorts of wounds, they were able to patch him up, easy-peasy) spent the rest of the night at the arcade, playing, rough-housing, snarking and teasing.

Boyd is smart, stoic—a gentle-giant type, despite his lycan behavioral issues and his simplistic yearning for power, glory, and a group, people to share it with, to be with, to conquer with. Isaac's damaged, snarky, sweet, on edge, coiled tight as a spring, he kind of needs someone to be an asshole with as much as he needs someone to be soft with, and someone to tell him when he's going too far. Erica's similar, but with a better sense of humor and a harder time reconciling with her soft, her fragile, vulnerable, human.

They're fun to hang out with, and they actually do a really amazing job of distracting him from his woes. All the casual touching, random, absent-minded scenting? It's unexpectedly wonderful, and he kind of revels in it.

They spend dawn hiking, Erica piggy-backing him all the way up the small mountain in the Preserve for the hell of it, racing Isaac- who she beats- and Boyd- who she doesn't- with Stiles as her penalty because she lost so many of the bets/games at the arcade. They all four stumble back down the steep incline, breathless with laughter, exertion, and exhaustion, getting to the half-way point- Donnie's-on little more than fumes.

Stiles corrals all the pups inside, promising to pay for all the curly fries and milkshakes they want, because he lost second-most to Erica at the arcade, and because, while he doesn't have much money
to spare, he does have more than most of them, and ways to earn more. Besides, he kind of just wants to splurge and not think for a while.

It's probably a good thing that Donahue's brother is a deputy, and that he's got such a soft-spot for Stiles, or else they probably never would've gotten away with the impromptu puppy-pile, a tangle of bodies splayed over the booth and the table that kind of ended in them just passing out all over each other and their half-eaten food.

Whatever. It was worth it.

When Stiles gets home it's nearly afternoon—he dropped all the Betas off at Derek's lair, wishing them a strained, happy full-moon night, receiving a kiss on the cheek from Erica, a pat on the shoulder from Boyd, and a playful noogie that stung a little from Isaac, as they each hopped out of his car.

Scott finally started answering his texts at some point last night, reassuring him that he was fine, apologizing for everything, telling him that they'll get through this, and to be careful tonight, since it's the full-moon. Stiles feels marginally better for having read them, and—since his dad will always come first, and, in this case, it'll be killing two birds with one stone anyway: he starts obsessing over the BHHS 2006 yearbook, trying to find the new connection, since the girl the kanima killed last night at the rave wasn't in Harris' chemistry class.

His dad walks in on him with it, and is a balm to most of his frenetic energy, trying to tell him that he doesn't need to focus on this the first day of spring break, doesn't need to solve this case for him, etcetera. It's really sweet, the sentiment. And, the Gods of Luck finally deciding to shed some awesomely awesome light on them, the course of the conversation ends with them finding the missing link.

BHHS' 2006 swim team. All the murdered young adults on the team, and Keith Lahey as the fucking Coach.

Which might also have something to do with the water thing.

There's still stuff missing, Stiles knows, but they have more, now, than they did.

Stiles has just a little indecisiveness about going to Lydia's birthday party, since Derek's Betas are all going to be chained up tonight and will probably be having the exact opposite of a good time, but Jackson could be there, and Scott will definitely be there, since Allison will definitely be there, and Stiles has a lot of love for Lyds, he does; besides, he's kind of got shit to tell his brother-from-another-mother and his practical sister-in-law, shit better said in person, so. He goes.

He prays for this to be normal: a typical, Lydia-esque type of thing with lots of drinks and food and people and stories to be taken home after, because he doesn't want to run out of stuff to do if Jackson doesn't show up—although he'll never run out of this gut-churning worry, if their plans either keep falling through or not happening at all.

Seriously, the bestiary said the kanima gets more powerful on the full-moon, and more bloodthirsty, just like a werewolf.

Ugh.

He's... He's not thinking about it. He's bringing a big, cuddly-ass teddybear in a comically oversized
box and he's *not fucking thinking* about it.

Unfortunately, no one's there: there's no loud music, no dancing horde, *nada*. It's just he, Allison, and Scott all standing lamely in her backyard while she's stiff-backed in a corner looking about three clicks away from fucking *crying*. She didn't actually send out any invites, for one thing, and, for another, she's been acting too out of sorts lately; they live in a *small town*. The gossip-mill is *something to be feared*.

Scott doesn't think they *owe* her a party, Allison *does*, and Stiles just wants a crowd to *lose* himself in. So, they get a bit of a phone-tree going for it—Stiles, in particular, feeling fatalistic and in need of some cathartic partying.

He knows Mathilda, Siobhan, and the drag queens he met at the Jungle the other night- the latter of whom are now his cell-phone buddies, and are all pretty amazingly cool people, except *Greg* on the occasional wednesday; but, then, Greg's kind of a diva/divo- will be down to come and help get this thing started, bringing some of *their* friends along with *them* who'll bring more and more until the whole house is *infested*. Perfect.

He's trying to talk his idiot brother into apologizing to Allison- because it is always, *always* the guy's fault, and he's more than a little sure that the only real reason Scott's resisting is because of the full moon's influence- when Jax shows up.

Except it's not Jackson, Stiles thinks, not really, but he goes up to him anyway, drawn perilously, inescapably. "Jax," he says, and the boy cocks his head like something altogether *inhuman*.

Lydia comes up to them, manic grace, places a cup of punch in Jackson's hand and smiles faintly, her eyes devoid of any feeling. "I'm glad you could make it," she says, before sweeping away.

Jackson blinks, takes a sip of the drink absent-mindedly as he watches her walk briskly toward other guests, turns slowly back to Stiles.

"Where *are* you?" Stiles asks, reaching out to skate his fingertips along the curve of his once-lover's jaw, tickle-soft, fleeting, but the touch seems to flip a switch, and he gasps, eyes clearing, flooding, face crumpling.

"Stiles," he whispers, like a gasp of fresh air, half broken. Then, "I—I—I shouldn't be here. You don't want me here—I——" Jackson blinks, his face reassembles, and then it's the *kanima* staring back at him, and Stiles can't——

He can't *breathe*, it *hurts* in places he never knew *could hurt* like this.

He wonders when he became such a coward, so as to run away from someone he loves because of the *pain* they cause. He's not some forsaken damsel, and this isn't some goddamned romance novel, and yet.

Stiles has certain memories stowed away *deep*.

Like the one, just after his mom's funeral, when his dad started binge-drinking and screaming at him about what a burden he was, started emulating some of the things his mom had said at her worst: that *Stiles* was the one *killing her*, that *Stiles* *murdered* her. And then he'd thrown the bottle.
The next morning Stiles had told him that the scratch was from something silly he'd done with Scott. The day after that all the booze was locked up or poured down the drain.

After the party, Stiles will learn that almost everyone got a message from their subconscious. Allison hallucinated an evil doppelganger killing her, Scott: the kanima getting it on with his girlfriend, Greg: one of his best friends coming to the party in the same outfit before bitching at him and tearing at his clothes like one of the step-sisters in the old Cinderella cartoon, Mathilda: everyone's teeth falling out and the floor trying to chew on her feet until they were nothing but bone, Siobhan: flying, multicolored fish.

Later, he will learn that this is all just a crazy trip spurned on by wolfsbane laced punch.

Later, he'll learn that Peter Hale had his hands on a very ancient spell that called for chaos magic, energy culmination, blood magic, the crystalized light of the worm moon, and the wail of a Bitten Banshee that he'd instilled enough of a tether to his soul in, to resurrect relatively unscathed.

Later, he'll appreciate that his hallucination used direct quotes, and only reopened an old wound instead of tearing open a whole new one.

Scott tries and fails miserably to sober Stiles up, after the fact. Thankfully, Siobhan is there to help, vis a vie dunking the whole upper half of Stiles' body in the goddamn freezing cold pool.

How she manages that without killing him when she's high off her ass, too? He has no earthly idea.

Stiles promises to buy her a big bundle of candy and flowers as thanks, maybe a colorful fish balloon, too, considering, but, for now, they need to find Lydia, who has disappeared completely amidst the pandemonium of her party.

It's then, though, that they witness Matt getting freaked out about being thrown into the pool because he can't swim, and Jackson, still on auto-pilot lizard hind-brain mode, picking the boy out of the water, easy as anything.

...It's probably rude to just stare. Even ruder to say 'I told you so', but Stiles has the immense urge.

He doesn't get a chance to, though, because five seconds after Matt shoulders past them sirens announce the arrival of the cops, and everyone starts scrambling to get the hell outta dodge.

Derek knew he'd have trouble keeping three Betas contained on the full moon, all of them clustered together with chains, but not enough chains, and none of them with an Anchor.

He calls Scott for help, despite himself, but ends up not needing him- not like the kid would show up anyway, he chastises himself- as Isaac gains enough control to help him keep Boyd and Erica down. Derek isn't going to pretend to understand his Beta's Anchor, but if it keeps him stable, it's doing its' job, and that's all they need.

He leaves the subway car for a second, just to—to get some air, and he's drained, but he isn't so drained that he wouldn't have heard her, smelled her. But she's like mist until she solidifies, and then she's just there, with a handful of wolfsbane powder that she uses to incapacitate him.

It's all dark, at first, and then he feels wood splintering, the rough of it grating against his back,
charcoal crumble, smoke-acrid stench. He must've lost time, he thinks, and wonders how he went from collapsing in the railroad depot to being dragged through the burnt down skeleton of his former home.

He doesn't know what's happening, *exactly*, but there's the ozone mercury-pop of magic in the air and an undercurrent of sick-sweet death-rot, and he knows where she's *taking* him, and he knows he *doesn't want it to happen*.

"Lydia," he gasps, high and desperate, sluggish, slurred. "Lydia, *stop.*"

He remembers, when he was much younger, saying those exact words to someone who he thought he loved, thought loved *him*. Who convinced him to shut up, because she was going to do it *anyway*, and *don't you want to me my pretty boy, sweetie? You like it, too, I know you do. Don't lie, baby. Lying's cruel. You're gonna hurt my feelings. Don't you love me? Why would you lie to me if you loved me? Your body isn't lying, sweetie. See, look at that. You do want it.*

He struggles away from the memory, from the grasp of his ghosts as Lydia settles him down, moves his arm away from his body, puts it above the grave, wraps Peter's cold, dead hand around his wrist, immobilizing.

"You don't know what you're doing," he breathes, warped thin around the edges. He tries to shake his head but every movement costs him, like struggling against molasses—thick, poisonous, mind-numbing molasses.

She pushes a mirror into a very specific place, and, suddenly, all he can *see* is something like a refracted light-show, but he can *feel* the pull of the moon *intensify*, and the scent of magic nearly *overwhelm* the stench of death and stale, years-past fire.

The human body in that grave grows claws which *dig* into Derek's skin, bleed him, stroke a Pack-bond to life that he didn't want or ask for or *allow*, and his Uncle, he utilizes *that* along with *everything else* he's done here, set up, planned, *put together*, to come *alive* again.

The man, terrifyingly, *jumps* out of his grave, and Derek tries to crawl back, tries not to be *sick*.

"I heard there was a *party,*" Peter says, covered in blood and moonlight and desert-dry earth. "Don't worry. I invited *myself.*"

The smile he offers them then makes Derek heave himself onto his side with the limited amount of movement he has as bile mingles with his last meal and crawls up his throat to expel itself on the dirty, scorched wooden floor.

"Now, nephew," Peter chides. "Don't be like that."

Like what? He wonders, and tries desperately not to shake out of his skin.

Now that they know *who's* controlling the kanima, telling his dad seems like the best option. Because, a) his dad needs to be reinstated as sheriff, obviously, b) while Stiles would *prefer* *killing* the guy—though Scott would like to *avoid* that, if they can—*they can't find* the guy, and c) arresting him would at least have him *detained* until they can figure out what to *do with him*.

Point is, they're just teenagers, they don't have a lot of resources, but Stiles' *dad* does, even if they're latent because he is, technically, no longer the sheriff.
It hurts, to know that his father trusts Scott over him, but he guesses he kind of deserves it—lying is Stiles' default in any and all situations, even when he doesn't need to. It's his disposition combined with his shitty brain-to-mouth filter, but, hey, what're you gonna do?

They need to find evidence, since they don't have motive—and, with his dad's help, they're able to get access to tapes and files they wouldn't've otherwise.

They go through the hospital stuff first, since the one person Matt killed in the kanima's stead was killed directly after she gave birth, smothered to death in her hospital bed.

Going over the tapes reveals Melissa as witness to Matt being at the hospital around the time of that murder—she stopped him because he was tracking mud in the hall, which leads them to shoe-prints alongside the tire-tacks at the trailer-site—where the pregnant ladies' husband was murdered—they already know he was at the rave, and a receipt puts him at the mechanic's garage at around the same time the mechanic was murdered.

That's four crime-scenes.

One's an incident, two's a coincidence, three's a pattern, and four—four is enough for a goddamn warrant.

If Stiles had silver-sparkle pom-poms right now, he'd be shaking them so hard.

His dad tells him to go give the night-officer a heads-up that Melissa's coming and when she gets there to let her in, tells Scott to call her, and Stiles is so exhilarated that he doesn't even realize anything's wrong until it's too late, until he's looking at the night-officer's corpse and Matt's waving a gun in his face and telling him to move.

And then Matt has the advantage, cornering all three of them in the sheriff's office at gunpoint. His dad starts talking to the psycho, trying to de-escalate, but it doesn't work, and Matt ends up taking their phones, forcing Stiles to hand-cuff his dad to a wall in one of the holding cells, out of the way, and then just leave him, which makes Stiles want to beat reality over the head with a stick because being in a life-threatening situation and then having to leave his dad alone handcuffed to the wall—That's just cruel and unusual.

Matt marches them down the hall, past scenes of bodies fucking piled up, deputies Stiles has known his whole fucking life, people Matt apparently killed by just thinking at the kanima. Fucking Christ.

He has them shred every file, delete every video, but he doesn't stop there. Because Scott's mom comes, then, and she's the last piece of evidence, isn't she?

Except it isn't Melissa—it's Derek, with the kanima right on his heels, paralyzing him and dropping him to the floor before he even has the chance to move. Stiles' own snark gets him a front row seat on top of Derek, both of them just as incapable of moving, of doing anything when headlights flash through the window and another car creaks to a halt outside.

And Matt: he threatens brilliantly, nearly crushes Stiles' windpipe under his heel to get Scott to listen to him before telling the only person who Stiles has ever wanted choking him, to get him and Derek out of the way—plus side: Stiles is no longer on top of their Alpha, so. There's that.

Being in a room where he can't see, know, do, help, sucks worse than anything he's ever experienced in his life. And being stuck here with Derek of all people? Yeah, that's no cake-walk either. But it only really lasts until Matt, after shooting Scott in front of Ms. McCall and scaring the
absolute hell out of her, locks her up in the holding cell right by where Stiles' dad is chained to a wall- with Scott's help, because he is a psycho- because as soon as the parental units are out of the way he's pushing Scott back into the front room with them, a half-scaled, lizard-eyed Jackson looming in the corner.

Him being so miffy about the evidence was pretty much an impromptu coincidental thing—serendipity, if you will. No, what he's really there threatening them with a gun for is the bestiary, which, as far as he's concerned- and he's probably right about this- is his only hope in hell he has of figuring out why he's suddenly growing scales.

This is why you don't mess with supernatural shit you don't understand, Stiles, he thinks- immediately and mercilessly scrapping any ideas he may've had about experimenting with his Spark on his own- because it will fuck you up.

A small, hushed conversation with Derek in the lull of all this confrontation, while Matt's not paying them attention, lets him know that the reason Matt's growing scales is because he broke the rules, using Jax to kill people who didn't deserve it, and killing people himself.

The Universe requires Balance.

Break the rules of the kanima, become the kanima.

But it's not like Matt'll believe them if they tell him that, and as soon as the kid's got the bestiary they lose their value, whatever it may currently be, and whether the book gives him an answer he doesn't like, or doesn't give him one at all, Matt's in a place right now where his trigger finger is itchy, and he will need very, very little justification to use it.

This is disorganized, impulsive, explosive. Matt's deteriorating: he went from having a plan with a set of specific people to be killed for specific reasons, to discarding the plan entirely and killing anyone who got in the way. He's explosive and unpredictable. Which is never a good place for any killer to be. Especially in direct relation to Stiles and those he cares about. Especially, especially when Stiles's splayed out on the floor completely incapable of moving.

"So, what do we do?" He asks, because he knows what an Alpha's instincts are, and even if he's not necessarily in Derek's Pack- he doesn't know, he could be, but it's never safe to assume shit like this-Scott is, and Scott's in just as much danger—if not more, considering Scott's the one who Matt has walking around with him as he paces the sheriff's station restlessly, waiting for Allison- who he texted using Scott's phone—this is the third time a bad guy's done that: calling is infinitely safer, Stiles doesn't think he'll ever trust a fucking text again in his life- to bring the bestiary.

"Do we just... just sit here and wait to die?" He adds, because he is literally incapable of helping himself.

"Unless we can... figure out a way to push the toxin out of my body," Derek murmurs, just this side of rough. Then, with an intonation Stiles doesn't really understand, like grim determination paired with something a little lost and a little young, "Like triggering the healing process."

Then he makes this small, pained grunting sound, and Stiles furrows his brows in confusion, trails eyes over the man to find the cause of it, and—oh. He's digging his claws into his own thigh.

Huh.

Like. The act itself is gross, because blood, but also... Sometimes Stiles wonders about this guy, the information he has paired with the interactions they've been in don't really paint a concise picture, not
concise enough, anyway.

Stiles thinks he needs to know more about born werewolf culture than he does right now, he also thinks he needs to reevaluate the whole responsible adult thing—he sometimes forgets Derek's only twenty-one, a lot older than them, granted, but his whole family died when he was a year younger than they are. That may have stunted the aging process a bit, and.

There's probably a difference, between family and Pack. So, them having been both...

And the whole Laura and Peter thing.

Stiles wonders how traumatized Derek really is, behind all that rage and dry humor and growl-grit sour. He wonders, too- when Scott's Anchor is Allison/Love, and some of the wolves he's chatted with online have talked about theirs being Pack or relatively healthy things- how fucked up Derek is, to be holding onto the anger stage of grief and using that as his Anchor.

Stiles remembers the anger stage of his grief. Remembers beating the shit out of anyone who dared get close to him and Scott, remembers his dad's disappointed face and Scott's concerned grimace, remembers going to therapy, remembers, eventually, learning how to cope.

Derek isn't coping, Stiles realizes, and feels his inclination to care about the man's well-being increase about ten-fold.

"So," Stiles starts, because the silence is getting to him, "is that hypothetical situation we talked about getting any less hypothetical?"

Derek makes a quiet, frustrated noise that's laced with a small, animal whine, but his voice is flat and even when he says, "I think so," and his claws dig deeper. Halting, and vaguely hopeful, "I can move my toes."

"Dude. I can move my toes."

Derek growls, but before he can say anything more the hum of electricity in the building whirrs to a halt, every light flashing off, until they're in near to complete darkness, and then the alarms sound, rapid-fire gunshots ringing out with an explosive undercurrent of shattered glass right after. Stiles wants desperately to know what's going on, he'd literally give anything for it.

Smoke starts clogging the air, Scott rushing into the room after it, Matt and the kanima nowhere to be seen—which isn't saying much, considering his floor-bound vantage point. His brother runs to them and crouches, checking them over for any injuries accrued: none, beyond the ones Derek inflicted upon himself.

"Take him," Derek grits, and Stiles wants to punch him in the face, because he's getting tired of the man's go-to move being self-sacrifice. "Take him and go!"

That same, violent, bloody-knuckle instinct surges again when Scott listens, leaving Derek behind. Then he just curses all of the Gods of Luck he possibly can when they get cornered by the kanima and he can't do anything (re: paralyzed from the neck down) except maybe talk.

"Dude, you gotta go."

"What?" Scott hisses furiously, and Stiles rolls his head toward him. "I'm not leaving you."

"Yeah, well. You're not leaving your mom, either, or my dad, or Derek, okay? And I. Can't. Move. I'm a dead-weight, I'll only slow you down—so you, you sit me on a chair, you lock the door behind
you, and you go save them. We clear?"

Scott blinks at him, then gives him a strained, brave, pretty, proud smile. "Yeah. Yeah, bro, we're clear."

"Good," Stiles laughs, small, battle-adrenaline fueled, but as real as it can be in a situation like this.

Derek, when he can move again, goes after the kanima first, and then, on the heels of that, tries to go after Daehler. He somehow manages to lose both of them, visually, but he can still hear the kanima, it's whole body has a discordant cadence to it, and, paired with the swishing of its' tail, is fairly easy to track. The problem being that it's fast, and scentless—though that last one matters little, since the Argents have stormed this place and thrown smoke bombs in: the air's too clogged with chemicals for him to scent anything.

He's creeping through the halls listening for it when he hears Scott, hears an Argent too close, and his wolf rears its' head, because that's their Beta and he's in danger. Derek's three clicks away from charging in when Scott stops, familiarity mingled with impatience in his tone as he whispers, urgent, "What are you doing here? This wasn't supposed to happen—it wasn't supposed to happen like this."

Gerard, the Argent he'd spoken to, responds, cool-calm, "Trust me, I'm aware of that."

And in the span of maybe a minute Scott reveals the full extent of his betrayal: spying on Derek and his Pack, taking orders from the Argent, all of it. Derek, who's been attacked by his near feral Betas, drugged with wolfsbane and bled by his now-undead Uncle, gotten scolded by Deaton- who he's beginning to suspect of a great many things- paralyzed, and more all in the span of one night, is...

Done.

He's done.

When the sun comes up, everything changes, or, at least, that's how it feels to Stiles.

Derek's disappeared, so has Jackson, and Melissa knows now—not about everything, she wouldn't let Scott talk to her, she was too freaked out, but about their werewolf stuff, about Scott (and his brother had looked so resigned, but there was no trace of surprise there, like he'd expected it, like he understood it). Stiles' dad doesn't, he got knocked out at one point during the whole thing, before he could witness any of the less-than-natural goings-on, but he knows that Stiles isn't telling him the whole truth about it all- more than that, is actively avoiding telling him anything- and Stiles can tell it chafes.

The Argents, the ones who had shut off the electricity and triggered the sirens- and who, as far as he knows, didn't really help anything, beyond just running amok- they're gone. Cleared out of the sheriff's station and returned to the picture-perfect, happy, completely mundane family.

And Matt? He's dead. Drowned in the river just outside the sheriff's station. The suspect list for who killed him is surprisingly small: it could've been Derek, but Stiles doubts it, which leaves the Argent Clan, Allison excepted. His dad doesn't know that, neither does the county, all the county knows is that without Noah Stilinski as their Sheriff, they're scrambling, and Noah's the one who figured out Matt was the killer to begin with—before this whole shit-storm happened, so: let's reinstate him.

Which is good for Stiles' dad, and good for Stiles inasmuch as it keeps his father occupied, happier than he would be without it.
Allison is... up in the air right now. Whatever problems she and Scott had started at the rave and only got exacerbated by this, but the big thing is that her mom's dead (The Argents are saying it was suicide, but Stiles knows better).

According to the triple-threat-pups- who survived their first full-moon together relatively unscathed, although they were a little miffed about Derek disappearing in the middle until Stiles pointed out why (kanimas, serial-killers, all the good stuff), and even then- Derek had said that what he was saving Scott from at the rave the other night was Victoria Argent, and it's possible that he'd Bitten her in the scuffle, which is the only motive Stiles can discern anyone might've had for killing her, if she was murdered. And if, instead, she killed herself, well.

Hunters be crazy.

Fanaticism will do that to you.

The scary thing is, he thinks the other Argents- Gerard, in particular- indoctrinated the girl, using her grief to bring her under their thumb, because she's very suddenly acting far more like a hunter and far less like their best friend, like Scott's girlfriend, like herself.

Scott, after everything, isn't really talking to him, or to anyone, like he's isolating himself. It's weird, not particularly healthy, but he guesses he understands. His brother's got shit to work through.

Stiles, on the other hand, though he's pleased with Matty being dead, is curious and terrified in equal measure about and for Jackson, who showed up to school today like nothing. Like he was just your average teenager. It was freaky.

This is all inspiring Stiles to be very, very freaked out. He's starting to have this constant, overwhelming fear that something terrible's about to happen, within the next second, next breath, next blink. It crawled inside of him at some point during the past few months, and last night he thinks it built a home and decided to stay.

All of this is also inspiring no small amount of clingingness. And since he can't cling to Scott, he's clinging to the puppies. Because they're there. And because he's pretty sure last night having been a full moon is making them feel just as clingy, so maybe it's a blessing they all have each other.

And, considering the inevitable lethargy that comes with not having really slept for the past week and a half, and having gone through crazy amounts of violence within the past twenty four hours—to the library, where they all spend most of the day curled up on each other.

Erica tells him they won't be at school tomorrow, though, that all three of them are, essentially, going into hiding with Derek, that their Alpha heard something last night that has him running scared. Stiles gets it, although part of him wishes he could beg them to stay constantly within his vicinity, if only so he could keep an eye on them, but. The Hunters. Everything. If Derek thinks that this is how he keeps them safe Stiles will try to trust that.

"But you guys better text me, okay? And call me. And send me videos—" Erica interrupts with something of a wet laugh. He clicks his fingers and points at her, already nodding in agreement, like that's the best idea she's ever had. "Those too. All the time, alright? I need to know you guys are okay, I..." He hesitates to say this, because as far as he knows, when Scott accepted Derek as Alpha it was temporary and conditional. But then he decides, fuck it, he doesn't care, they all need each other, and who says they can't be together, after this whole kanima thing is over?
"We're Pack," he declares. Then, a little unsure, "Right?"

Erica's grinning at him, Isaac's rolling his eyes, and Boyd, surprisingly, is the first one to grab at him, pulling him into a four-way group hug that's as good an agreement as any.

The next day Derek and his Betas- Scott excepted- are nowhere to be found. Forty-two hours later, the three teens are declared missing, and Stiles has at least twenty pictures of them all being idiots, almost a dozen of Derek scowling at them all being idiots, and their group-chat has over two hundred messages sent back and forth between them all.

"If you're going through hell," Ms. Morell had quoted, "keep going."

It's a good quote, and, along with the drowning analogy, something he thinks he should hold onto, try to use to help propel him forward. Isaac thinks it's outdated, that you'd keep going anyway, because with a bunch of demons on your ass what the hell else are you gonna do? Erica thinks she likes it, and that Isaac's just being a bit of a douche because he's going to miss his first lacrosse game since he got Bitten being on the lamb from Hunters. Boyd adds that it says something about their lives that Stiles is showing symptoms of PTSD after only four to five months of this shit.

Stiles sends a picture of him sticking his tongue out and it all goes downhill from there until the puppies text that Derek said to settle down or he'd take their phones away, to which Stiles begs one of them to make a dad joke, because it seems appropriate.

The next day the context changes, gets more serious. Erica and Boyd talking about another wolf showing up at the place they're hiding, getting into a fight with Derek. They're staying out of the way, for now, but it seems weird— and Isaac tells them he's going to see Scott, ask him for some advice about, well, everything.

Stiles will admit he enabled Isaac in that vein a little, just because they all seem so split apart right now, and they kind of need to bring Scotty back into the fold, whatever problems Derek seems to be having with him right now aside. Besides, Isaac seems to have an admiration.crush.hero-worship thing going on for Stiles' brother, and Scotty has that over-protective, need to take care of/mother-hen people thing of his, a thing that Stiles always inspired- albeit less so lately- Allison pushed into overdrive, and then, upon finding her badass self, was no longer in need of. In fact, if Stiles is reading the cards right, kind of started resenting.

But it's something Scott's always needed- even before all this- to care for people. It's the thing that grounds him. And he hasn't been very grounded lately.

So, if Isaac can get through to him, more's the better.

Stiles tells Erica and Boyd to keep him updated on this 'other wolf' and the whole Derek situation, tells Isaac to keep him updated on Scott, and promises to keep them updated on the game that's going to happen tonight, since it seems like Jax is going to be there, and none of them honestly know what's going on with him yet.

Scott gets benched for the game, since he's failing three classes, which gives Stiles the opportunity to talk to him, though he doesn't end up telling him much. Just that his dad is there, but Allison and Lydia don't seem to be. Then, looking out at Jax already on the field, and thinking back to Gerard finishing up Coach's speech in the locker-room earlier, he asks:

"D'you know what's going on?" What Gerard's planning? What's up with the kanima? What we're
"Not yet," Scott sighs, with feeling, and Stiles could probably cry for it.

"It's going to be bad, isn't it?" He knows that, can feel it in his bones. "I mean, like: people screaming, running for their lives- blood, killing, maiming- kind of bad?"

Scott swallows, turns to him, searching his face for something. Strength, maybe. Stiles is sorry to say his brother won't find much, he's been running out for a while, now. "Looks like it."

Stiles sighs deeply. "Scott... The other night, everything that happened, while I'm lying there and I can't even move. It's just. I wa- I wanna help, you know? I... But I can't do the things that you can do." He looks down at his gloved hands. "I can't..." He blinks back tears, shakes his head at himself, feels Scott's hand on his shoulder, the touch an anchor, a comfort.

"It's okay," Scott says, and maybe it's the way he says it, or the look in his eyes, or just the fact that he's there, he's family, and they're together— but Stiles can almost believe it. Not just about himself, and the useless despair he sometimes feels, but about everything.

Only for a moment, though, and then reality crashes back into him. "We're losing, dude," he murmurs, more melancholy than anything, little more than a whisper, but enough for Coach to hear and interrupt their really, very serious conversation with all his popcorn competitive crazy.

And some... kind of good news?

Scotty may be benched this game, but Stiles is, apparently, not.

Stiles really needs to buy silver-sparkle pom-poms. Some occasions really call for them.

The embarrassment/rush of absolute love he feels when his dad- upon seeing him actually playing-cheers, "My son is on the field!" With all the pride in the world coloring his voice might actually be one of them. Maybe he should buy his dad silver-sparkle pom-poms?

Hey, if he's gonna be embarrassed, he might as well go all-out, right?

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Erica and Boyd watch their Alpha fight, wrestle, maim the other, strange wolf, one completely unknown to them. But, as cut-throat terrible as it seems to be, and though there is some real anger there, it also seems almost as if they're... playing. If it was anything more they might've stepped in by now, but it's. They can feel that it's intimate, personal, and Derek already growled at them to stay out of it, but it's been two hours, and the sun's already down, and they're bored.

Not to mention hungry.

So, they head out. Donnie's is across the Preserve, on the opposite side of where the Hale house is, and just outside of their territory, but they think the hike will be worth it, especially since there's a chance that, after his lacrosse game, they could bitch after Stiles and convince him to meet them there, and it's a place Isaac- who forewent Derek's orders about the game after talking to Deaton and McCall- knows, too, since them all giving Derek and his... whoever- frenemy?- some space seems like the best idea.

Besides. It might be Stiles' influence but... milkshakes.

They send out a text, start walking, but they get side-tracked by a sound, like wolves, like two dozen
of them, howling. Curious and worried in equal measure, they move to check it out.

When Isaac shows up, talks to Scott a little, and then gets on the field, Stiles cheers, just a bit, because strength in numbers.

"I thought Derek told you you couldn't play?"

"Hiding might be safer, but," Isaac shrugs. "I prefer the hands-on approach. Besides, I'm a teenager—I'm allowed to be rebellious."

Stiles snorts, shakes his head, scans the team, Gerard standing off to the side, his dad, Malissa, and Lydia now in the stands. He chews on the inside of his cheek, lets his eyes fall to Jackson, worries fervently. "Do we have a plan?"

Isaac sucks in a deep breath. "Make it so Coach has no choice but to put McCall on the field—that way he can keep an 'eye' on Jackson. Ah—and," he looks a little hesitant about this part, "try to avoid putting anyone in the hospital."

Stiles bobs his head in a nod, "Uh-huh. You think you're gonna be able to handle that, buddy?"

Isaac narrows his eyes at him, "Three baskets of curly fries says I can."

Stiles grins at him, sharper than a knife, "You are so on."

Six players down but not seriously injured later, and Isaac's earned them, especially when Jackson knocks him down, nearly breaking a bone in the process and nicking him with the kanima-venom.

"Shit," Stiles breathes, rushing to crouch down next to the boy as they bring in a stretcher for him, Scott on his other side. "Are you okay?"

"Nothing's broken," he groans, "but moving's not an option."

Scott grimaces and Stiles nods, tsks when the guys with the stretcher moves him out of the way so they can pick Isaac up. "Four baskets of curly fries," he decides, "and a milkshake- although I'm willing to, mercifully, make Derek pay for them- because you totally lost our bet."

Isaac makes a very offended noise, saying, "I did not," at the same time Scott yelps, half incredulously: "Bet? What bet?"

"Avoid putting anyone in the hospital," Stiles reminds, then raises his eyebrows, squinting his eyes and tonguing the back of his teeth as he waits for that to sink in, as soon as it does Isaac starts sputtering, but Stiles isn't having it. "Those were our terms."

"Come on, that's not fair," Isaac whines, and Stiles claps his shoulder, companionable, sympathetic, and relieved enough that the other boy's still alive to shake with it. Isaac notices and his eyes darken some with understanding. "And Derek won't ever agree to it, anyway, so I guess I'll just have to pony-up, huh?"

Stiles takes a steadying breath, squeezes Isaac's shoulder again, hard, anchoring himself in the reality that his friend is alive and fine and here, "Yeah. And maybe next time you won't let yourself get hurt, you idiot."

Isaac smiles, sweet-soft, "Sure, Stiles. Promise."
Stiles lets go of him reluctantly as they take him away, and Scott wraps his fingers around Stiles' wrist, reassuring, fleeting, seeming vaguely distracted until Coach comes by to tell him he can play, has to, actually, or they'll be forced to forfeit.

Melissa comes up to them as Finstock walks away, eyes wide with knowing and motherly vigilance. That strength Scott was looking for? She's wearing it, and it looks fucking beautiful on her.

"Something's happening, isn't it? Something more than a lacrosse game?"

"You should go," Scott advises, nail-bitingly on edge, which doesn't bode well. For any of them.

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere," she breathes, all nurture, authority, and overprotectiveness. Stiles has a feeling that she just made peace with the fact that her son is a werewolf. It didn't even take her a week, mad props to Mama McCall (although there is some disappointment that it took he any time at all, but Stiles supposes being open-minded in the face of body-horror and culture-shock is hard).

"But everything I said before, forget it. All of it. Okay? If you can do something to help, then you do it, you have to."

Her eyes bore into Scott's and he seems to build a foundation out of that ferocity, steel-solid and determined. "I will."

She nods, smiles, and runs back to the stands, Stiles shifts a little, gives Scott a curious glance. "I want to ask what all that was about, but..." He glances at the clock on the scoreboard, "we don't have enough time, so."

A smile begins to take root on Scott's face, the force of it not unlike the sun, "Yeah," he says with a burgeoning optimism. "Yeah, I think we are."

"Please, Allison!" Erica sobs, as the girl nocks another arrow. Boyd is stood above her, bleeding, but unwilling to stand down, unwilling to let Erica be used as a motherfucking pin-cushion. It was stupid to follow that sound without backup, so. Fucking. Stupid.

They should've known it was a trap.

"Please, Allison," she repeats, not above begging, "stop!"

The huntress doesn't, probably never would have if it weren't for her father shooting her bow clear out of her hand. But even if the immediate threat- Boyd being shot to death- has been suspended, it isn't over, because Boyd's chalk-full of arrows and bleeding out, he's down, and it's not like she can leave him.

They're trapped.

"Hey," Stiles murmurs to Scott after Jackson's tackled them both down about four times, "where's Gerard?"

Scott blinks at him, a little dazed, before he looks around in puppy-ish confusion.

"Dude," Stiles begins, and he's aware that he's being paranoid, but, just in case, "we're sure that the EMTs who took Isaac were EMTs, right? Because the timing's a little..."
Scott frowns, eyebrows knitting as he cocks his head in that way he does when he's listening. Then the other boy grits his teeth, a growl gradually increasing within him, and Stiles groans.

"Was I right? I'm right, aren't I?" Scott nods, all saw-shred violence with an undertone of devotion and danger. Stiles suddenly feels very viscerally pleased that Scotty's his best friend, because anyone on the other side of that growl is in for a fucking time. Also, he's allowed, he feels, to be proud of this—his brother just being a genuinely good person with a badass, utterly respectable kind of loyalty. "Okay. Okay—okay—okay— you. You go—right? Save the puppy from the geriatric psychopath. I'll try to keep Jackie-boy from killing anyone."

Scott gives him a dubious look, but doesn't stop growling, even as he talks, which will never not be weird. Do werewolves have two sets of vocal-chords or something? These are important questions to ask. "What if he tries to kill you?"

"Uh," Stiles says intelligently. Scott's growl gets impossibly louder. "Look, we don't have much of a choice, alright?" He pats his friend on the back, pushing him forward with the movement. "Just, go."

Scott makes a slightly defeated sound, turns back to Stiles to snatch him in a bone-crushing- but not at all unwelcome- hug that Stiles returns with just as much vigor. "I'll be back," Scott promises, "we both will."

"I know, I know. I trust you," he pulls away, pats Scott on the cheek, presses a gloved hand to Scott's chest and gives a gentle push. "Now go."

Scott flashes him a quick, reassuring smile, and complies.

Stiles wrings his hands around his lacrosse stick, eyes the field, and prays. And maybe he prays just hard enough, because he somehow manages to get the ball, or maybe the Gods of Luck have decided to throw him a bone, because he also manages to score a goal.

His dad jumps up, cheering ecstatically, waving his arms around like a mad-man, and Stiles decides that that man is definitely getting silver-sparkle pom-poms, yes he is.

When Stiles scores another goal- this one tying them with the visiting team- he's so fucking pleased by the victory he almost forgets to be suspicious. Greenberg- of all people- scores two after him, but the last goal of the game, that one's his.

It's exhilarating, empowering, validating, and profoundly, intensely, overwhelmingly good.

Distracting, too—which is probably what Gerard wanted, because not ten seconds later, he sees Jackson's eyes change, go yellow, pupils becoming slits, skin shimmering to scales, fingers becoming claws. His breath gets caught in his throat and he takes one lurching step forward, prepared to do something, anything——

And then everything goes black.

He wakes up to being jostled out of a car and frog-marched into the Argents' place. Goon number one puts a hand over his mouth when he tries to scream, and goon number two punches him in the gut when he starts biting, and they both take a vindictive sort of pleasure- he can fucking tell- in throwing him down the stairs into the basement.

The basement—where Erica and Boyd are strung up with duct-tape and electric fucking wire. The
electric part he doesn't realize- though they try to warn him, even gagged as they are- until he actually touches it, trying to get them out of it.

He snatches his hand back, flaps it around to make the bees-buzzing-under-his-skin feeling go away. "Okay," he mutters to himself, "not a big deal just need to find—" Where the electricity is coming from, or a knife to cut them down, something.

But he doesn't get a chance to say it, let alone do it, because suddenly the stairs are creaking under the weight of someone walking down them and there's Gerard.

Stiles swallows.

He's a little tired of being 147 pounds of pale skin and fragile bones with sarcasm as his only defense.

Sarcasm that inspires violence against him. One of these days his stupid goddamn mouth is going to get him killed. Hell, that day might even be today.

Stiles gets why Gerard's doing this, to an extent: Stiles getting beaten bloody is a message for Scott, who went against him by saving Isaac. But the way Gerard says it, the way he puts it, like Scott wasn't going against him before.

Like Scott's been working with him and Stiles is the other boy's incentive to do as he's told.

Oh, Scotty. What the hell have you gotten yourself into? What the hell have you gotten Stiles into?

♡ACT FOUR♡

Dude... We Need A Responsible Adult

Everything hurts, everything.

Breathing has never been this hard, and considering some of the things he used to do in his spare time, that's saying something.

He blinks, and the room swirls, pulses, looks like wet, sopping paint, like the kind of art you make when you're a kid and you're too impatient to let anything dry before you attack it with more color, until it's all piled on and the flimsy page is too wet to withstand it. There's this fuzzy, fast-asleep white-noise feeling in his muscles, all of him feels so heavy—he remembers reading once that the Jupiter's gravity fucks with the whole solar system, tears shit apart, and that a person would weigh two and a half times what they weigh on earth, there.

He feels like that.

Like he's on the surface of Jupiter.

Gerard has punched and kicked and cut—there are little slices all over him, his legs, arms, back, belly, feet- none of them are big enough to create a blood loss problem, but he's still fucking bleeding- the worst of it, though, is the electrocution. Imagine a thousand bees stinging every pore, sliding the tip of their stingers in and leaving them to sink slowly inside, underneath your skin, the sharp organs gathering lightning instead of venom.

As Gerard does this he systematically destroys the supposedly fragile psychology of Stiles and
Scott's friendship with a long and detached monologue about how little Scott must trust him, to not have told him anything, since it's so obvious by now that Scott didn't. That, yes, Gerard may've threatened Scott's mom to make the boy follow along, but he didn't say anything about keeping it from Stiles, and how it must be horrible to realize that Scott was playing Stiles just as much as he was playing Derek and his Betas, since the Pack unity was all a farce so that Gerard could have a spy.

And Scott didn't tell him because, in truth, he doesn't care about Stiles, does he? How many times since becoming a werewolf has he just left him to flounder in his own humanity? How many insecurities about Stiles' own incapacity has he seeded and watered and brought to bloom? How much has he truly changed since he's turned?

Is he even still Stiles' friend at all—or just an empty shell for the wolf?

At one point Stiles managed to tune out and pretend that this was all a dream, the kind of dream only his brain could ever make up, the kind where everything reaches the peak of awesomeness, just to tip over and bring him lower than he's ever been.

He doesn't believe any of what Gerard's been spewing, but hearing it is still hard, brings with it the kind of pain that's deep and heart-worn, intense. It's like he's twisting every positive moment until it's dark and rotting and decayed, his every lie punctuated with a jab or a slice or a shock until Stiles is dull, cracked open, infested with all this man's vitriol, thousands of little cockroaches squirming alongside the stingers nestled just beneath his flesh.

He's still twitching from the last jolt- the throb of his tongue and the blood bubbling in his mouth informing him that he probably bit down too hard in his attempts to refrain from screaming- when Gerard hauls him up, intent on taking him who-knows-where.

Maybe he's going to have goon one and two drive Stiles back to the lacrosse field, or the McCall house, or his own house. He doubts very much the man'll have them take him to the hospital, Stiles' well-being is obviously none of his business, not his problem.

"No," Stiles slurs, trying to reach out for his friends, the puppies, his Pack. "No, no, no, no. I can't leave them. I won't let you make me leave them. I won't leave them!"

Erica writhes, her whole face a mess of streaked makeup and snot and tears, eyes flashing gold. She kicks out, shakes her head, silently begging him not to irritate his torturer further. Boyd's much the same, every heaved breath bringing with it a high-pitched whining growl, water-logged eyes pleading with him to just stay quiet and go.

But he can't, he can't, so he begs: "Please; they're my friends."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Stiles. Maybe you should've warned them, then, not to get in bed with my daughter's murderer."

Stiles sputters out a choked laugh, "Really? That's what you're making this about? Vengeance?" He struggles to gain enough breath to continue speaking, and Gerard cocks a brow at him impatiently, like it's Stiles' own fault it's taking him so long to get his point across, like the man's got somewhere to be, and he's being genuinely compassionate by indulging Stiles' rudeness. He has to wonder why Gerard's letting him talk at all, but the ponderance doesn't stop him, being tortured doesn't stop him—he's incapable of being stopped, here, even by himself.

"You realize how dumb that is? Kate kills nearly all of the Hales, Peter kills Kate to avenge them,
Derek kills Peter to avenge Laura, you kill Derek to avenge Kate? And then what?" He snarls, more vicious than he's ever been, like all this agony stripped him down to bare basics, and all he's bleeding right now is rage. "Huh? Who kills you to avenge Derek? Me? Scott? Who kills us to avenge you? When the hell does this cycle end? And where the hell is your logic, anyway?

"Derek had almost shit-all to do with Kate's death! Where do you get off blaming him?"

"You know, Stiles," Gerard says, and raises his hand, "you ask too many questions."

And Stiles should've thought of that, shouldn't he? That Gerard would just knock him out again if he put up too much of a fuss.

Noah sighs as he gets off of the phone, so worried, aggrieved. He hopes that Scott was right: that Stiles just ran off because of the nerves that come with, for once in his life, being the MVP. But it doesn't track. For one, Stiles would never leave Roscoe, and he's not the type of person to run away from anything, unless it's a really, really bad day, and even then he usually forces himself not to—besides, today wasn't a bad day.

"Ah, come on, Stiles," he murmurs to himself. "Where the hell are you?"

"M right here," he hears his son rasp, and he looks over to——

Stiles has the beginnings of a black eye, his cheek is scraped badly, he's got cuts on his lip, bruises around his neck, his wrists, one of his fingers looks broken, and Noah has never felt such pure, blinding, terrified rage over anything in his entire life. He moves toward him, and Stiles must see something in his face, because he says, "It's okay, it's okay—dad, it's okay." But the words are desperate, pleading, and they're the most unconvincing lie Noah's ever heard his son tell. He presses a gentling hand under his child's jaw—his baby boy—and moves Stiles' face so he can see the more prominent wounds in better light.

"Who did it?" He asks, furious, protective.

"Dad—" Stiles breathes, but he stops there, cuts himself off, milk-wheat honey-gloss eyes flickering from over-bright to something drowned out and dull. He's seen that kind of look before, in people who've survived intense trauma, and seeing it in his son's eyes— in Claudia's eyes— it damn near kills him.

"Who did this? Just tell me, I'll—I'll pistol-whip every goddamn one of those bastards!"

"No! No, dad, I just." Stiles' eyes well up, tears and pain and utter exhaustion. "I said it was okay," he repeats, like he's trying to convince Noah as much as he's trying to convince himself, and Noah swallows down everything— although it splinters and shatters and scrapes at his insides like jagged-sharp glass— wraps his arms around his son and pulls him close, as close as he possibly can, cradling him, rocking him, holding him.

Stiles' fight, his strength, his tenacious endurance—it seems to leave him all at once, and he melts there, weeps into Noah's shoulder, inconsolable, kneading the back of his knuckles into Noah's back before giving up and just fisting his hands into the sheriff's jacket and holding on for dear life.

"Daddy," he chokes, water-logged, hiccupping for more air through his whimpering, too-docile sobs. "Daddy, I'm scared."
"Oh, kiddo," Noah sighs, a heavy thing. How could this have happened? How did he let this happen? "Oh, Stiles, I'm so sorry."

Stiles sniffs, pulls back just enough to look at him, determination and something loyal, fierce, brave sparkling in the honeycomb of his eyes. "I don't want you to get hurt," he says, and his voice creaks like floorboards under the weight of something insurmountable, "I'm so terrified that if I tell you, it ends in you dead," his words hitch and Noah feels some terrible realization take hold of him, that all the lies Stiles has been telling these past couple of months—that the reason behind them, is what culminated in this. "But you're not the only one I care about who's in danger, and I nee—I need your help, I can—can't do this on my own, I—" the hitching rapidly deteriorates into hyperventilating, and Noah hasn't seen his son have a panic attack in years, but he's damn well having one now.

"Shh, shh," Noah soothes, walking him over to his bed so he doesn't have to stay standing on wobbly legs, one less thing for him to worry about. "Come on, kid, focus on me, breathe." He takes Stiles' hands in his, presses one to his chest and the other to his neck, fingers on his pulse-point. "Follow me, in... Out... It's okay; like you said, right? It's okay, I'm okay. Nothing's going to happen to me Stiles, I'm right here with you. Come on, son, breathe with me.

"Remember what mom used to say?" And Noah really has to wonder how shaken he, himself, is, to say this at all. "That her heart beat for us? Noah, thump, thump, Mischief, thump, thump—you remember that? Huh? Well, mine's beatin' for you, alright, kid? And it's beating slow, because I'm calm, and I'm alive, and I need yours to beat for me, now, alright? Slow and steady... there, just like that. There you go.

Stiles gulps in air, steadier now, nodding, face blotchy and tear-soaked and crumpled. "You—you gotta promise me that you'll be careful. I can't t—tell you everything, because I don't know if th—they-ey have enough ti—time for that. But i—it's so—it's bad," he whimpers out a small, hysterical laugh, and his voice strained, colored with enough daunted honesty that Noah can do little more than nod in agreement, because he knows Stiles, and at this point he's prepared to expect any nightmare thing he can conceive of, up to and including the cartel, the mob, maybe some confidential government agency involved in an impossible conspiracy—he doesn't know.

But for Stiles to be acting like this? He'd bet on his wife's grave that 'bad' is probably the biggest understatement in the universe.

"I'll bring deputies," he promises, "I'll bring all of them, and I'll stay clear outta the line of fire, Stiles, I swear, but you gotta tell me what's goin' on. Where I'm taking them."

Stiles takes a very, very deep, steeling sort of breath, squares his shoulders, and says, "Erica Reyes and Vernon Boyd are tied up in the Argents' basement. Gerard Argent kidnapped them and put them there, just like he kidnapped me," his voice shakes, gets so, so very small. "And had me there." His shoulders shake with a silent sob. "Save them," he begs, "please, please save them. I know you won't let me go with you, and I don't even think—I'm—" he huffs, wet, a little afraid, but clutching onto his bravery and keeping hold of it. "He fucked me up, dad." He looks off into the middle distance, then. Says, more detached than Noah would like:

"Save them."

Stiles curls up on the couch, one leg pulled in against his chest and the other with its' foot up on the coffee table. Mathilda's here, because his dad wasn't about to leave him alone, and even though Stiles had only just gotten his phone back, he was pretty sure- based on the amount of missed texts that Scotty, Isaac, and basically the nut gallery, had sent him- that the usual suspects weren't an
option, so he'd texted her to come over instead. Impromptu movie-night/sleep-over for the win.

Siobhan's here, too, for obvious reasons, and they both offered to smoke him out, because it's very, very obvious how fucked up he is, and he told them he'd think about it, because it's honestly tempting, but he needs to read his text messages first, because, no matter what's happened to him, if he has to get off his tortured ass and save his friends, he will.

He doesn't know if he'll be of any help—which is one of the only reasons why he told his father any amount of the truth, another being that he's pretty sure hunters can't escape the law. They're perfectly, poignantly human. Even if they have guns, knives, bows and arrows, a commensurate militia with no small amount of skill——aaaaand he's not thinking about it.

He's not thinking about it, because his dad will be fine, and Erica will be fine, and Boyd will be fine, and Gerard will be in jail, and everything will be fine. He's not thinking about it. He's checking his goddamned text-messages.

And then he's having a minor breakdown over the whole Jackson dying thing, which he did not know. Mathilda helps him breathe through it. He almost punches her when she tries to take his phone. Iron Man goes willfully ignored in the background.

Peter's back from the dead, apparently—Lydia may have PTSD, but that's not what was causing her to act, for lack of a better word, crazy. She had being haunted by a dead guy and forced to commit necromancy psychosis. Much different. Peter also has a phone, and has been texting him in a committed, nearly obsessed way that is both creepy and vaguely flattering, especially since he seems to have the most critical information to offer—or, well, a lot of his information is kind of along the same lines as Scott's, but Scott gets a little shit at texting in a crisis, his excitement making it all become panicked gibberish that's extremely hard to decipher.

He's been getting better at it lately, probably because 'lately' has consistently been one crisis after another, but the point, for now, remains.

And what Peter has to say, is this:

Gerard is the one in control of the kanima, he's been the one in control of it since he killed Matt that night at the station.

He's been threatening Scott's mom to get Scott to play along with his plans since nearly the beginning of this whole affair, and he was threatening everyone at the lacrosse game with Jackson—his ability to control the boy, make him kill whoever he wanted him to. But, in the end, the person Gerard made the kanima kill, or seemingly kill, was Jackson himself.

The Hales had a library—when they were alive, when they had a house, when they had——and Peter spent some of his time during his stint with madness and revenge and plotting many, many deaths (oh, is that what he's calling it? Stiles thinks the man's underplaying himself a little, here, or, at least, marginally twisting the truth)—gathering what little survived and creating a bestiary—among other things, Stiles is sure—for himself. Because if Gerard ordered the kanima to kill itself, Peter has no doubt there was a reason, and even less doubt that whatever the reason was, it doesn't bode well for any of them.

The former dead guy/former Alpha spends a few texts, here, going on a tangent about Derek, Stiles, and the Betas that's essentially him vacillating from waxing poetic about the old Hale Pack, what it was, and what their Pack could be, to trying to manipulate trust out of and/or a better opinion of
himself and/or a good word from the human Beta to his Nephew and Alpha-hopeful. Stiles doesn’t know what to think about any of it, and he's in too fragile a state of mind to try to apply any sort of logic to it.

He reads on.

Peter explains that the kanima is something without its’ own name, identity—much like an orphan (Stiles side-eyes that part pretty hard, but this is Peter, so)—which is why it seeks a master, not a Pack; that, right now, Jackson’s identity is disappearing under a reptilian skin and the way to save him? To bring him back? Is by reminding him of who he really is. And the way to do that is through his heart.

The one person Peter can think of, with whom Jackson has shared a real connection, bond, who might be able to reach him, save him—is Lydia.

He goes on to say that he has little to no faith in many members of their 'team’— excepting Derek, and even then, Derek seems to be more of a mind to tear things apart than to try and reason with them—which, while Peter understands, he doesn't actually want his nephew to be thrice the murderer (Stiles is going to do an in-depth psychological study of these texts someday, he swears, but, right now? It's this part, more than anything, that makes it seem like he genuinely... cares?). Stiles, on the other hand, is the clever one, and can be trusted with the more complex bits of strategy Peter highly doubts anyone else will be even marginally helpful with, hence the great number of one-sided texts.

Like, for instance, figuring out how to get certain chess pieces- Lydia (the Queen)- to other chess pieces- Jackson (the Pawn)- enabling them to get across the board.

Stiles starts slightly when the three dots that mean the person on the other end is composing a text appear, and doesn't know whether to laugh or cry when the next four things he receives in rapid succession are: Peter being extremely gleeful that he was right, and Jackson isn't dead-dead, the supposed death being Gerard's theatrics on display; the McCall's and Isaac are with his body at the hospital, just called Derek to explain that the kid is wrapped in some kind of transparent casing- a cacoon, if you will- made from the venom that resides within his claws, and that he's starting to move—all of which sounds sufficiently terrifying, but not terrifying enough, apparently, because the next text explains that this is all leading up to Jackson turning into the kanima's Alpha-form.

The fourth text is a gif of the kanima's Alpha-form.

It has wings.

Stiles is... properly motivated, he thinks.

└ » I still don’t like you, Stiles texts back, but I believe you, and I want Jax alive at the end of this, so: I'm getting Lyds. Just tell me where to go.

Peter texts back immediately, his good-cheer grating enough that Stiles nearly smashes his phone before remembering that he does, actually, need it. He slips it into his pocket, instead, and moves to stand.

"Woah—woah—woah, my dude," Mathilda starts, "where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Uhhhh," he responds, faltering, and she stands to put her hands on her hips and glare at him. "Look, I—" "You just got beaten all to hell," she interrupts. "And you've yet to tell us who, or why—but I
know for goddamn sure that what we can see isn't the worst of it, and I may not be one of your best friends, but I am your friend. I know you, man, and I know that face."

"Everyone knows that face," Siobhan cuts in, mildly amused, eating popcorn and paying more attention to the movie than Stiles and her suddenly fiercely protective girlfriend have had the entire time.

Stiles gapes at them both, trying for innocent and offended all at once, "This—is this my normal face? This is my regular, day-to-day—" he jerks his head forward a little flapping a hand at his, well, face. "Just—general, living, breathing, natural face!"

"No," Siobhan tells him, matter of fact. "It's the face you used to make when you were about to go berserker on some bullies' ass in the third grade. Like..." She wiggles her butter-grease coated fingers, trying to find the right words. "Like—you know you're going to get hurt or get into trouble, but whoever it was hurt Scott first, so you didn't give a damn?"

Mathilda snaps, points between Siobhan and Stiles in a rapid-fire sort of way. "What she said, that is exactly right! Thank you, baby."

Siobhan smiles a little dopily, "You're welcome, baby."

"Oh my God, you two are worse than Scott and Allison."

"That's a compliment," Mathilda says plainly, at the same time Siobhan fist-pumps and crows about something that happened in the movie only she's really paying attention to. "So. Where do you think you're going?" She asks again, crossing her arms over her chest stubbornly.

"To Lydia's," he tells her, far too wrung out by the events of the day to be less honest. If it were any other time, he'd be babbling and deflecting and completely overriding her suspicions by twirling her around verbally until she was sure that nothing was suspicious and something else was going on entirely. But he's been tortured. His dad is out there, hopefully saving the Betas and arresting the guy who tortured him and not dying. Hopefully.

Too many things are relying on hope right now, though, and, where he might not have been able to save Erica and Boyd, maybe he can at least save Jackson.

"And you're not stopping me."

Mathilda sighs heavily, "I know," she murmurs. Then, "You're an idiot," mostly fond. And a second after that, "I'd go with you, but—" "I wouldn't let you," Stiles tells her, and smiles a little sadly, "I've already got too many people who I care about on the line, you know?"

"No, you ass, I don't know," she gripes, before essentially assaulting him with a brisk but genuinely caring sort of hug. "But I get it, sorta." She pulls back before flopping, slightly defeated, beside her girlfriend on the couch. Siobhan pats her arm comfortingly, and Mathilda flashes the girl a smile despite the fact that she's obviously pouting. "Go... save the world or whatever, dude," she orders, "bring me back a souvenir."

"Sure," he laughs, his mind a little less a writhing cess-pit of crawling bugs and uncertainty, his body more ache than agony, now that a little time has passed. He's... not good, but good enough to make it.

As he leaves his house, though, a small curl of dread coils within him, that maybe he would've been alright enough to go with his dad, if he'd tried harder, that maybe he could abandon Jackson and his
friends, now, to go make sure the man is okay, make sure that he isn't getting hurt or killed doing what Stiles asked him to.

He climbs into Roscoe- his dad must've brought him back home from the school parking lot, because his father is one of the best people ever and—and— Stiles breathes, presses the key into its' socket, struggles, and starts the car.

Noah's deputies are a little warier and on edge than normal, the loss of five of them no more than a week ago a burden they all must carry, and every single one of them with memories of his son on the forefront of their minds—the kid who grew up with them in that station just as much as he grew up with Scott and Melissa and Noah himself. Stiles has always been mischievous, ornery, the cause of exasperation and worry and strife, but he's also capable of inspiring an incredible amount of love and endeared warmth, deep-wells of affection, and all of Noah's deputies have long-since been named honorary aunts and uncles to the boy, so hearing that he came home looking nothing less than traumatized, and this is where he pointed the blame?

The lot of them are furious and trepidatious in equal measure. They know how Stiles protects Noah, know that he wouldn't have sent his father alone, and without putting up much of a fight about it, unless it was the kind of serious that requires guns out, safeties off, stealth, and watchful eyes—just like they know that if Noah doesn't come out of this anything less than unscathed, they'll have Stiles to answer to.

It's a better incentive than you'd think.

But all the anxiety-ridden stress that comes with raiding the place ends kind of anti-climactically, since none of the Argents appear to be around, although it seems they only just missed them. It's frustrating, but it happens, and Noah's not sure he wants the others around when he goes face-to-face with Gerard, anyway.

That motherfucker beat up his son, Noah doesn't give a shit about the why, he wants the old man to eat a bullet for it.

He signals two of his officers to follow him, charges into the basement, and. He knew Stiles was telling the truth, but seeing it?

Erica and Boyd are both cuffed to the ceiling, although they don't seem to have any injuries to speak of, and when he rushes up to the young girl, tearing the tape covering her mouth off as one of the men who followed him looks at the machine that seems to be attached to the wires around her wrists, she rasps, "We're okay, we're fine, he turned it off, we just needed a second to—" she grunts a little, there's a full body shiver, a growl, a click, a few sizzling snaps, and suddenly she's free, crouched in front of him with her knees up and her knuckles to the floor.

There's something about the position that's eerily animalistic. Her eyes catch the light oddly when she looks up at him so they seem like little orbs of stardust, glowing and golden and vast, but it's only for a second, and then Boyd is following after her, somehow getting out of his restraints just as easily, ripping off his own tape-gag with feeling.

"Recalibrate," the boy finishes, rolling his shoulders, a blank stoicism to his expression that catches Noah off-guard.

"Sheriff," Erica breathes, something grit-growl in the undercurrent of her voice as she stands proper, lurches for him, trembling hands tangling in the collar of his jacket. Her eyes are like Stiles', all wide
and honeyed, but hers are paler, and there are flecks of gray in them if you look closely, like pastel mingled with ash, all fine-powder soft. "Is he okay? Stiles?" She's breathless in her worry, near frantic, and the sub-vocal rumble just gets louder with it. "You know where he is, right? They didn't just leave him in the middle of the fucking Preserve somewhere, did they?"

"No. No, he's home," Noah tells her, and has to wonder how bad it really was for her to be shaking apart at the seams like this, how much did they see? "He's alright. He's actually the reason I'm here, told me to come save you."

Erica huffs a tremulous smile, "Course he did." She backs off then, though she stays close, rubbing her makeup-stained tear-streaked face with tired hands. "God, all I've been able to smell for the past hour is his blood."

Boyd presses his hand to Erica's shoulder, both reassuring and halting whatever else she might have said. She looks up at him, sniffs, and nods slightly.

Protocol dictates getting them to the hospital, getting their statements, maybe taking them home, but the kids aren't having it, either of them. They're worried for Stiles and they want to see him and they won't go along with anything until they do. The sentiment, loyalty, and stubbornness that colors everything they're doing, even in the face of what's just happened to them, is so like Stiles that his other officers give in, and Noah does, too, eventually.

That they're Stiles' friends is exceptionally clear, as is the fact that they love him, and that, whatever happened to them in there, they're terrified for him.

Lydia blinks at Stiles dumbly for a moment.

She knows- knew- bits and pieces, all of it filtering in and out in horrifying, splintering fragments. And, to an extent, she's glad for him explaining all the empty spaces, gathering the parts of the story she didn't know and dictating them to her concisely. Because, in knowing it all, she can maybe start trusting her own mind again, and use it to point out how much of an idiot he's being.

His hands flex agitatedly on the steering wheel as he side-eyes her. "I'm being an idiot?"

"Yes," she intones, smooths down her skirt and shifts in her seat. She doesn't know where they're going, exactly, and the fact that they're getting directions from Peter is extremely unsettling, but they've been in the warehouse district skirting the edge of the Preserve for the past five minutes, the number of cars and people and lighting dwindling the further they go, until everything's all ink-shadow and ghosts. She'd never been afraid of the dark as a child. She'd never known what lurked in it, then.

"I want to help Jackson," she says, "because... I still love him, I do, and I know what it's like-" her voice breaks, but she pushes past it- "to be forced to do things you wouldn't, otherwise. If I can help him, I will, I don't care if it's dangerous, but, Stiles..."

"If the reason you think you need me there is to have someone who can get through to him? Via his heart?" She inclines her head as she twists to really look at the boy next to her, swaying waves of strawberry blonde hair obscuring her sight. Stiles gives her a momentary glance, unease and curiosity warring in his eyes before they return to the darkened road. "Stiles." She purses her lips, "Jackson was in love with me, but that was a long time ago. It got... complicated, and hurtful, because we're... ambitious and proud and maybe a little narcissistic." Stiles snorts a bit at that, and she smiles for it. It's easier to joke about, she thinks, when you're not trapped within it- "but our staying together up
until recently? I think that had more to do with—neither of us are good on our own, and we’d been together so long it just...

"It seemed easier to stay that way?" He asks softly, contemplatively.

"Yeah," she murmurs, turning away to watch the woods they're driving along through the window. She ignores the imaginary monsters her mind tries to create for her, rationalizes the glowing red eyes, and digs her fingernails into her palms to ground herself. "But the longer we stayed together, the more toxic our relationship got—I mean, I may be a horrible person sometimes, a may be a cold hearted bitch, but. If I was still in love with Jackson, do you really think I would've made out with Scott in Finstock's office?"

Stiles shrugs, "Maybe. If you wanted to make him jealous."

"That would've only worked if he was still in love with me. I know when to pick my battles, Stiles, and I know how to pick them so that the odds are in my favor. I gave up on keeping Jackson in love with me the moment he fell out of love with me." She sighs, runs her fingers through her hair, untangling some of the more unfavorable knots, shaking it all out and beginning to plait her forelocks back, away from her eyes, since a stray lock of hair won't do her any good on the battle-field she has no doubt they're heading toward. "I fell in love with Jackson the same way I fell out of my grandmother's apple-tree when I was twelve years old. Stupidly, quickly, and clumsily enough that breaking something was inevitable, no matter what I did.

"When I realized he didn't love me anymore, I kept loving him because I couldn't help myself. When I realized I didn't love him anymore, I stayed with him because it was familiar. Because I'd made a choice, and I wanted to stick with it.

"But he knows me better than anyone, and he can hurt me better than anyone, just like I can do the same to him. We... resented each other, maybe. Without even really meaning to. And we were cruel, because it was the only way we could... reconcile? Feel validated? It's hard to explain, honestly, but, eventually, it got to the point where it was just habit.

"We were more in love with the idea of a relationship than we ever were with each other." She clips her hair all into perfect place, before digging through her bag for her lotion, foundation, and lipstick, touching herself up since they seem to have the time and it's as good a distraction as any—keeps her mind inside the car. "But. The reason I fell in love with him in the first place? Was because we were similar in a lot of ways, and because I got to see parts of him no one else did, and because we were best friends. Closer, even, than he and Danny. And I hope that, maybe, after all of this has passed, we'll be able to return to that.

"I'd much rather have my best friend back than my boyfriend. I'm just sorry it took me mourning the loss of a relationship I didn't really want and being driven mad by the ghost of a deranged werewolf to realize that."

Stiles' brow furrows as he stops the jeep in front of a particularly run-down looking building, checking his texts before looking at her, and there's something accumulated in his eyes she's never seen before, it glitters like starlight in the depth of amber tides, and she doesn't know what to make of it, but she thinks the person to blame for it is the same person who caused all those bruises, the shakiness and the manic and the well-hidden doubt. His own, personal, Peter.

"Okay. But that doesn't necessarily mean you won't be able to do it. I mean, everything you just said proves that you both undeniably love each other, right? Maybe not in the way Peter means, but I don't think it has to be romantic love, and, besides, it's about identity, too." His arms flail out a
little, and he makes an emphatic sort of face, overly cheerful, "Like you said: you both know each other better than anyone."

She puts all of her makeup back in her bag, zips it, and slides it from her lap down into the footwell before turning to the boy and searching his face with the kind of gaze that looks in instead of through. Stiles inhales sharply, swallows, backs away almost unconsciously. She smiles, then, sharp. "You're right. It might work, even without all the roses and music and little flying babies with bows and arrows-" he raises his eyebrows and gapes at her slightly- "but if there's anything I've learned from being violated by the big bad wolf, it's that it's always good to have a backup plan."

Stiles scrunches up his nose at her, looks out the windshield, fiddles with his phone while he thinks. "Lyds," he says, haltingly, "you're kind of our only plan."

"That's not true. There's someone else Jackson has an emotional connection with that could probably remind him of who he is just as well as if not better than I."

Stiles goes completely, unnaturally still. Like a video someone's put on pause. Like a statue, frozen and perfectly life-like, but made of petrified stone. Then he exhales harshly, and the stillness shatters. His hands are everywhere all at once, in his hair, tangling with the hem of his shirt, messing with the mirrors, windows, door handles, all hyped up energy and neurosis, fearful frenetic.

"Stiles," she says sharply. "Stiles." She curls a hand around his arm, lets her nails dig in to ground him.

"You know?" He breathes, and she smiles as soothingly as she can, squeezing his arm slightly before pulling her hand away.

"You're one of the only people in Beacon Hills who knows how smart I am," Lydia reminds him, "did you honestly think I wouldn't figure it out?"

He huffs, and throws his hands up a little, whether the gesture is in defeat or question or wry exhaustion, she doesn't know. "No," he admits. "No, I guess not... Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"I didn't really see the point," she shrugs, looks out at the building they're parked in front of, jerks her head toward it. "Is this our stop?"

"Yeah," Stiles answers, chewing on the inside of his cheek and fiddling with his phone again. "Just waiting for the word. God, Roscoe's gonna hate me for this."

Lydia narrows her eyes at him, and- in a mildly dangerous tone- asks, "Why?"

He blinks at her, and then, the picture of boyish innocence- belied only by something impish lighting up his eyes, making them bright in a way that isn't panicked or manic- he grins.

The sheriff hasn't even parked yet, and Erica already knows that Stiles isn't here. She can't hear his heartbeat, and, rolling down the window as Stiles' dad mutters something about Roscoe not being in the driveway, she scents the air. The familiar smell of trees growing, fertile soil, and heavy rain mingled with blood and sweat and distress and Pack is faint, distant, but there, although it's been long enough that it might be hard to track, especially if they dawdle.

"Mr. Stilinski," she begins, inhales very, very deeply through her nose, "I'm gonna need you to drive."
She needs to see that her friend is safe, after everything, her wolf won’t settle until they can see the **truth of it** for **themselves**, until she and Boyd and Isaac and Derek and Scott can all wrap him in their bodies, their scents. The instinct is so **strong**—and she’s too raw-ache to deny it, her soul **howling** for her Pack-mate, her **injured** Pack-mate, and she will not stop until she can drink in the sight of him, the smell of him, the **reality** of him, until she **has** him and he’s healthy and good and goddamn **okay**.

She knows Boyd feels the same way.

Stiles told them- the night after the rave and the day after that- about Pack-bonds, and how to foster them in a **strong** and **healthy** way. Derek, she thinks, knows a lot less about some of this stuff than he lets on, but after learning what happened to him and his family when he was **literally** the same age as she, Erica doesn’t think she can fault him for it. If he continues to be so hard-headed and ruthless and **heartless** about the **training** and everything else, though, she **is** going to call him out on it—she even went and got pamphlets for a boxing gym, a dojo, a knife fighting class, and a hunting class (the mundane kind of hunting, hosted by some park-ranger guy who probably knows shit-all about werewolves, but could teach them the more **human** version of tracking nonetheless).

She has faith in the idea that the Bite can be a **gift**, faith in the idea that they can learn to utilize their new species without all the **broken bones** and **screaming** and bitter, ill-conceived **rage** built on the foundation of terror and trauma. She has faith in Derek’s **potential** as their Alpha. She’s pretty sure she wouldn’t feel this way if it weren’t for Stiles having explained some of the more complex details of Pack dynamics and bonding to her, because it was **after** learning that, that she realized a lot of the fraught uncertainty she was feeling, a lot of the voracious **volatility**, the **explosiveness**, came from having **unstable** Pack-bonds. And knowing what to **do**- to **stabilize** them- helped **immensely**.

Her bonds with the other Betas are strongest, and she knows that it will probably take some time and a lot of brutal honesty to make their bonds with their Alpha clear and untangled and **healthy**. The bond she has with **Scott** is... It’s not **sickly**- like her bond with Derek- but it is **dim**, just barely there, like there’s a block, like she’s accepted **him**, but he hasn’t entirely **returned** the sentiment, and the bond she has with **Stiles** is **empowering** in a way she almost doesn’t understand, it sparkles and shimmers like moonlight in the depths of bleached out water, it’s **green** the way his **scent** is, like a seed taking root, **blooming**.

It had **hurt** to see him being **abused** by Gerard, hurt **worse** to have not been able to **do** anything—to help him, protect him, anchor him. And all she has to do to know Boyd feels the same way- the same devastation, yearning, soul-deep howl of overwhelming **need**- is look into his eyes.

And all Stiles’ **dad** needs to stop sputtering and stalling and assuring them that Stiles is in the house, even when they both know he most assuredly is **not**—is to see them flash **gold**.

"Sheriff," Boyd says, his tone gentle even though he’s gripping the man’s shoulder with supernatural strength, too anxious about their Pack-mate’s well-being to reign himself in. "**Drive.**"

Fighting the kanima always ends in him being paralyzed, vulnerable, but Derek decided the moment he realized two of his Betas were missing, the moment he realized that Peter was right and Gerard was forcing them to **rush**, the moment he realized they wouldn’t have enough **time** to get Lydia and save Jackson, that he was going to do what he had **wanted** to in the **first** place. The only thing that made sense in the long run, because when it’s **one** person’s survival pitted against the **many**, against **his** Pack’s, there’s only **one** choice to make:
Eliminate the threat.

Except the threat, in this case, seems to be so much stronger than him, and with Peter 'out of commission'- aka standing in the corner texting on his phone- Erica and Boyd disappeared, and Isaac fighting with Scott who's gone from Pack to traitor to tentative ally, who seems indecisive about everything concerning the other wolves in his life, and who is only really set on one thing. Trying to keep everyone he possibly can safe, and, while that's admirable, it doesn't seem realistic.

Not to Derek, not after everything he's been through.

And the way the boy can so easily associate with Argents is irksome and worrisome and more than a little terrifying.

Especially when, after Derek's been knocked down, Gerard shows up, has the kanima wrap its' hand around Allison's throat not three seconds after she's shot and stabbed Isaac to incapacity, and says Scott's name in that poison-silk way of his, all tantalizing lure.

Because Gerard is sick. Cancer. Incurable, terminal, dying.

Derek already knows that when it comes down to a choice between Derek himself, and Scott's own loved ones, his real Pack, his girlfriend—Derek knows that, for Scott, just like for him, there isn't a choice at all.

But still he protests, because he doesn't—Gods—he doesn't want this. There's something visceral, shrill, desperate scraping at his lungs with freeze-shock talons when he says, "Don't, Scott." And then, because he knows his life matters little, he tries to play off of the boy's morals, his intelligence. Because it's so obvious that Gerard will kill him after he turns, become an Alpha, and Gerard is so much worse than Derek could ever be.

(Isn't he?)

He'll kill so many with that power in his hands, Scott has to know that, that must give him pause.

Only... Only the most immediate threat is to Allison's life, and logic is only going to get Derek so far when the person Scott holds above everyone is in danger.

"He does this small task for me," Gerard says, "and they can be together. You are the only piece that doesn't fit, Derek! And in case you haven't learned yet, there is just no competing with young love."

Gerard begins to take his jacket off, and, looking at him, Derek can see the ghost of his daughter, the same confidence, the same slow, deliberate, telegraphed movement as he strips out of the article of clothing, as if that, in and of itself, is a command, an expectance of compliance, an arrogance that he will be cleaved to in this, that his needs will be satisfied.

"Scott," Derek heaves, "don't. Don't!"

"I'm sorry," Scott shouts, high and a little urgent, a little wavering, sincere, "but I have to." The Beta wrenches his head back, and the force of it, Scott's strength, Derek's own inability to fight this—is startling.

The word 'no' circles fruitlessly in his head, drowning out the world until it's all white-noise distance, but it doesn't stop him from tasting skin, gagging as the fine hairs of Gerard's arm scrape against his tongue like sandpaper. Derek wonders if he would scream if only he could, as his teeth sink in and
Gerard's blood bubbles, hazardously sickening, in his mouth, Scott's fingers a sharp pressure on the back of his neck, holding him open.

There's this distinct moment where he forgets to breathe, or his body just shuts down the function so he doesn't have to smell———

His dad used to press a gentling hand to the back of his neck like this, used to rub the rough pad of his thumb under Derek's jaw and smile at him like he was the sun. This strong, tender, supportive, tremendously positive influence on the world around him, the man who taught him how to hunt prey, how to run, how to be at peace with nature, and how to be just as human as he was wolf.

His father, who he killed, just like he killed the rest of them, like he let Laura get killed, because everything he touches turns to ash.

And he wonders- in a very distant place that makes everything sound off, like all his thoughts are the chaotic song of an out-of-tune piano being bashed thoughtlessly by a child, everything discordant keys and static dissonance- if this is his penance for standing there and letting Peter dig his claws into the back of Scott's neck all those months ago, letting Peter brutally attack the mind of a kid, because nothing, nothing justifies that.

(Maybe he deserves this.)

Gerard rips his arm away from Derek's teeth, and Scott tosses him to the ground like a dirty, used rag, and there's this ripple in his vision when he looks up at the boy. He sees a mass of thick, wild, ink-black curls, all done up in braids like she used to like. He sees eyes that match his, match his mother's, a violent tsunami of candy greens and sea-salt blues that swirl and shift with every trembling breath, pale skin all peach-fuzz soft, and a fury that could bring mountains down.

He blinks and the vapor of his elder sister dissolves in the air like so much smoke, leaving Scott-unsure, but grimly determined- in her wake.

(He deserves so many things, doesn't he?)

Gerard lifts his arm up in victory, and Derek, trying not to choke on the bile of it all, struggles to just get away. But the heartbeats change, then—the whole air of the room does, and Derek forces himself to look back, to see what's going on.

Blood turns to void-plasm, death-dark and culling, and oh. Oh.

It looks like Derek isn't the only one Scott planned to betray. He sucks in a deep breath and watches as the patriarch of the Argents seethes with impotent rage, it isn't nearly as vindicating as he'd like, because: "Why didn't you tell me?"

They could've worked together, he... He would have helped, he would have—

"You might be an Alpha," Scott says, and he's the one basking in victory now, "but you're not mine."

Whatever else could've been said, felt, realized in that moment gets eclipsed by Gerard, projectile vomiting the black-goop that signifies his body- his mountain ash infected body- rejecting the Bite.

After the old man buckles helplessly to the ground- thick, shimmering, obsidian liquid gushing from every orifice they can see- he rears up, sucking in a clogged, sticking breath, and screams, guttural and blood-soaked, dripping with haggard fury, "Kill them! Kill them ALL!"
The kanima, then, lets Allison go to do as he's bid.

Now.

Stiles floors it, crashing through the wall with a shriek of metal and Roscoe's growling engine. Lydia holds onto the handle above her and bites back a yelp, Stiles a curse, as Roscoe rails into the kanima.

Panting through the sudden course of adrenaline Stiles asks, "Did I get 'im?"

Scott huffs a little, the tiny smile blossoming on his face holds enough pride in Stiles and relief that he's alright to make Stiles' teeth ache; it's wiped away barely a second later when the kanima jumps up onto Roscoe's hood, all silver-sharp teeth, clicking claws, and primordial menace, its' hiss inspiring the kind of reflexive terror that pulls at you somewhere deep, makes the situation fight or flight and immediate.

"Go," Stiles squeaks, high pitched enough to hurt his own ears—because being trapped inside a car while there's a murdererous reptile out for your hide is the worst possible idea. He deftly unbuckles his seatbelt, shouting, "Go, go, go!" And climbing out after Lydia when she complies, stumbling past her when she stops, turns on her heel, and faces Jackson with tenacious, prim, daunted bravery. His brother uses his accumulated momentum to help put Stiles behind him, which is. Nice. There's something really, really settling about it, calm-soothe and safe, to be hidden behind the other boy, if only for a moment.

Maybe that's weakness, or maybe it's family, he doesn't know, but he just got tortured- not even two hours ago, now- at this point, he's resigned to feeling whatever he's going to feel and just go with it.

"Jackson!" Lydia calls, sharply, standing in front of the enslaved lizardman wearing Jackson's skin. The long, silent moment where it just stares at her, is unequivocally terrifying. Then it hisses, moves to lunge and Stiles lurches forward, halted only by Scott's arm across his chest, protective. And the slightest bit patronizing. Like, dude, thanks, but, c'mon. He likes feeling safe, but he also likes being able to keep other people safe.

"Jackson," Lydia breathes again, lifting up a key—the key to his house, she'd told him in the car, he'd been asking for it and she'd been holding onto it stubbornly for some stupid, petty reason, but he'd wanted it back, and maybe it will remind him. Of who he is. Of his own mind.

The kanima stops, stares at the thing like it stared at the water that day it trapped Stiles and Derek in the pool, curious and almost childish. Stiles clutches Scott's arm and Scott, because he is literally the best thing ever, rubs a gentling hand down his back, and Stiles breathes. Despite all her ferocious steel, Lydia still trembles facing the kanima down, grimacing with fear, her eyes squeezed tightly shut, tears tumbling down her flushed cheeks. Slowly, the kanima reaches for the key, cocking its' head in an alien sort of motion. Its' tail swings in the air, curls, begins to retreat into his spine as scales shift with a slick sound, ticking up a little before snapping down into skin, reptilian eyes softening, swirling, returning to human, from roast-egg yellow to their former ice-lake blue.

The kanima fades gradually back to Jackson as the boy takes his key from her, but it doesn't leave him entirely, and in jerky, harsh movements, he backs away from her, because for all his faults, he never wanted to hurt anybody. He never wanted to be this, and Stiles can already see Jackson's decision before it comes to fruition, see the resolved resignation, and he almost hates him for it, but then their eyes meet, and Stiles flashes through every memory, every twisted need, every night they
fought each others' minds and fell into each others' bodies and lost themselves.

"No," he whimpers. Jackson's face crumples a little, and he turns to Derek, who's already beginning to stand, already charging forward, claws out to dig into Jackson's belly barely a second before Peter's impaling the boy from behind, both of the men lifting him up a few inches, the weight of him making their claws pierce all the deeper. "No." Derek inhales sharply at that, slips his fingers away and draws back, Peter doing the same with far less urgency, far less remorse, but Stiles doesn't care, he——

They killed him. They killed him.

Stiles breaks out of Scott's arms, runs toward Jackson, who's choking, falling, and with something dark, all-encompassing, fathomless writhing within him, he screams, "No!" And the jar of mountain ash he'd gotten from Deaton after the whole rave thing- the jar planted firmly in the trunk of his car and nowhere near him- shatters, grey-velvet powder landing in a perfect circle around him, Jackson, and Lydia, before scattering explosively outward, throwing an intensely shocked Derek and Peter harshly back before the ash settles, the boundary nearly whirring with excess energy.

Chris is staring at him with a dangerous sort of focus—Peter is, too, but it seems much less kill the thing that is unknown and much more gut the thing that is unknown and look at its' insides. If Stiles were less upset, incensed, he might be unnerved by the attention. Scott, Allison, and Isaac are all wide-eyed slack-jawed surprise, where Derek's gone blank, buried, faux-indifference.

Stiles pants, shaky and hitching and so close to a sob because it doesn't matter, none of this matters, what he just did doesn't matter—Jackson does, and he's collapsed on the floor, head in Lydia's lap, behind him, and Stiles can't look, he can't process or reconcile or feel anything beyond the pounding in his head and the pit in his stomach.

"Stiles," Jackson rasps. Stiles swallows down the feeling in the back of his throat, the burning itch to fall apart and weep at the feet of whatever God might listen. "Stiles."

"Fuck," he sighs wetly, distressed, scrubbing his hands over his head and turning around to face the boy he loves. Half of Jax's body is still covered in scales, long, clear, poison-filled claws extending from his shaking fingers, the part of him that's kanima still surface-level.

Jackson's breath sticks with his own tears, with blood and pain and death, as he lifts a hand, too weak to stretch it toward him entirely. "Stiles," he repeats, and Stiles goes to him, kneeling close and taking the hand still reaching for him almost desperately.

"You're an idiot," Stiles seethes, all snot and salt and drenched with his grief. "We could've—you shouldn't have let them fucking——"

"I love you."

Everything stops for that, gets caught up in eyes, like glaciers melting under the beating war-drum of the sun, the water they give birth to gushing into rivers that run into seas that Stiles can do little more than drown in, a sharp, precarious, delicate hand tangling in his, and the sad quirk of an arrogant mouth that once held the whole of Stiles' being inside and would've rather suffocated on it than said those words.

Jackson squeezes his fingers, eyes fluttering on the edge of an exhale.

"I never—did I? I never told you that. But I love you," the other boy blinks, struggles to remain clear. "Do you—do you, still—?"
"Of course I do," Stiles whispers, rough. "I'll always love you." A small smile, a smaller sigh, and then he's gone. Lydia, beside him, whimpers, and Stiles curls down over Jackson's body, wrapping his arms around his middle and holding on as the emotion wracks through him, too-erratic color, high-pitched, numbing buzz, dazed and overwhelming—

It's waves, it's being caught under one, compressed, small against a vast ocean, distant, echoing, screaming terror before the light thought that if you don't come up for air you're going to die pulls you up, forces you to catch your breath, even when you don't want to, because every lungful is saturated with reality, with emotion, with the pain of a pick-axe being swung down to plunge into your chest, the point diving into your thudding heart, splintering bone and squishing organ, and then it's just water, and you're down again.

Spiralling.

---

Noah parks the cruiser outside the warehouse just in time for them all to see the haggard old man, their principal, their torturer, trying to crawl away from it.

Erica leaps out of the window she'd been leaning out of to—he isn't entirely sure, it seemed like she was sniffing the air for his son. Part of him is beginning to think this is all some elaborate dream, if only so he won't have to face whatever reality is being provided for him at the moment.

"Stiles is in there," Boyd tells him quietly as they round the car to stand next to Erica, who's emitting this low, purr-grumble grit sound as she looks down on Gerard, covered in some sort of black secretion.

"Sheriff," Gerard begins, his voice wet and sticking somewhere low, a bitten-down cough beneath it, "you brought the Betas; I assume that means your son's told you what's going on?"

"Not exactly," Noah admits, "but I do know that you had him in your basement, that you beat a sixteen-year-old kid- and that I'm putting you under arrest."

Gerard gurgles, pukes up some more of that thick onyx-slop, and Boyd raises an eyebrow as if the man is being intentionally offensive, but says nothing of it. Noah's about to suggest a hospital, first, despite all his paternal fury, because Gerard looks old and helpless and genuinely fucked up, but then, "You should know, Mr. Stilinski, that I could kill your son with a thought, right now, I could do anything to him; I suggest you leave me, before—" A scream, wretched and lasting and Stiles sounds out from within the warehouse, interrupting Gerard's monologue- which was bordering on ridiculous, anyway- and making Noah's heart clench.

Erica snatches his gun before he can stop her, points it at the old man on the ground, says, "Go. Go to him, make sure he's okay. Safe. Gerard isn't going anywhere, and Stiles is more important," her eyes flick from her target to Noah, catch the light to flash a glowing, startling, commanding gold. "I've got him; go."

Noah's hesitation lasts one more fleeting second, but gets dashed by Boyd rushing past him to enter the warehouse, heedless of any danger he might encounter—whatever danger made Stiles, who was meant to be home safe, scream like that.

The scene inside makes... no sense.

Chris Argent, Isaac Lahey, Derek Hale, Scott, Scott's girlfriend, Roscoe- rammed through the fucking wall- Lydia Martin with a boy he doesn't know's head in her lap, and Stiles crumpled over
this boy crying like every single piece of his heart has shattered, like this'll all be the death of him.

Lydia looks away from the powerful tableau, gritting her teeth against her own pain, and her eyes light on him, widening. "Stiles," she murmurs, tapping his son's shoulder urgently, everyone else in the room noticing his presence all at once with the same kind of red-handed, caught-out air.

When Stiles sniffs, pulls away from the body in his arms- Jackson, he realizes- and sees Noah, he looks like he's so utterly devastated he can't be anything else. With a strength Noah's pretty sure Stiles mustered up from wood-splinters and duct-tape, his son wobbles to standing, scrubbing at his eyes with his shirt-sleeves as he begins to walk toward him. "I can-" Stiles coughs a little, hiccupping through more helpless tears- "I can explain. All of this, I..." He shakes his head as if to clear it, knees nearly buckling as his breath, his whole body hitches on the beginnings of a sob, and he covers his face with shaking hands, trying to hold it all in, body curving down like the weight is just too fucking much.

Scott's brows furrow as his lips purse, and there's a delicacy in the way he says, "Stiles," that shakes Noah to his very core.

"Son," he begins to say, and he doesn't know what's going to follow, but it's obvious that, somehow, his son is grieving, although the chronology of it all- Jackson dying on the field, and then being here, amongst all these people, with a vaguely defeated looking Gerard trying to escape out the back- none of it makes sense, except for how unspooled Stiles is, overwhelmed and coming apart in every possible way, even though he's trying so hard not to. But Noah never gets to finish his thought, the sound of scraping causing everyone to go still, every breath to catch and hold.

Stiles turns on his heel just as Jackson's eyes pop open, and the sound Stiles makes is so much absolute ache, it hurts to hear.

Slowly, the boy who Noah is very sure died on the lacrosse field earlier tonight, begins to stand, his body enveloped in the jeep's headlights, but still visible enough for Noah to see his face, all fangs and contorted brows, sharpened ears, hairy, unnatural.

His roar, animalistic, terrifyingly loud, wolven and indescribable, carves its' place into the air, uniquely alive.

Stiles stares at him, at the boy he loves- who's looking back with just as much awed confusion as he feels- and consciously gives up on trying to understand what just happened.

He feels vulnerable and pained and worried, high-strung on his own pit-fall, like the whole world has gone oil-paint, something someone mad and long dead created with stained hands and a ragged brush; it's all too-bright washed-out, and maybe this isn't real, maybe he wrapped himself up inside the cocoon of his own mind to hide from—from everything.

Or maybe, just maybe, if someone like Peter fucking Hale can get a 'get out of jail free' card, so can Jackson. Maybe all those Gods of Luck he prays to—maybe they're giving him a goddamn break. He can have this, he thinks, and takes a staggering step forward. He can have him, he can have this one stupid fucking miracle in the absolute nightmare that his life has become.

His heart beats faster, like it's restarting, regenerating from the hollow monotonous thud that made him feel lost and wilting, and Stiles runs, like if he doesn't get to Jackson as fast as he possibly can the boy will just disappear. Pop like a pin-pricked balloon. An illusion looked at for too long, until it dissolves on the page.
He needs to touch him, drink in the reality of him, feel skin beneath his fingertips. Arms wind around his body, helping to hold him up when he jumps at the other boy, wrapping his legs around Jackson’s waist, hands cupping his stupid cheeks, muscles clamping down to feel the heat and the solid and the supple of him. He pulls Jax in to taste his gasp and swallow his tongue and bite his lips, and, if Stiles could, he swears he’d crawl inside, he’d hide behind ribs and curl under-heart and stay there forever, in the warm-dark, blood-thick, home of him.

The moment he has breath for it, he feels all the upset return, the exhaustive terror, the anger, and the sadness, and he’s pissed, and he’s so in love, and nothing makes sense, but he does know one thing: “You,” Stiles croaks into their kiss, tear-soaked husky, letting his legs untangle, Jackson setting him down with his feet on the ground, though both of them are still clinging impossibly close, "are an insufferable asshole."

Jax huffs a little, burnt just as raw at the edges, his hands rubbing up and down Stiles' back as he moves his head to nuzzle into the side of Stiles' neck, like he needs it just as badly, to feel every piece of Stiles he can, to reassure himself. "You might be right about that," Jackson murmurs, and Stiles nearly laughs, cuddling into their embrace, inhaling deep, soggy breaths. "You were right about a lot of things."

"I was wrong about a lot of things, too," Stiles sighs, sinks, melts. Jackson accepts his weight, all of it, and Stiles feels so suddenly, completely relieved, safe, whole.

"So was I."

And that's kind of amazing, isn't it? That he's even willing to admit that?

Stiles noses at the other boy's jaw, whispers "Jax," to get him more pliable, to get his face close enough that Stiles can press their lips together again, can open him up, lick into him with more lazy-happy affection than urgency, and taste, although he keeps hindering himself by smiling, and it must be infectious because Jax starts to smile, too, to giggle a little against Stiles' tongue, his teeth.

It feels all childish-joy, and he decompresses so fast it's almost dizzying. This is what rainbows feel like, sun and water and intangible sweet-pretty.

They don't pull apart until someone clears their throat, loudly, pointedly, and even then it takes them a moment, foreheads pressed together, resisting the urge to chase themselves back into it.

Stiles keeps his hands on Jackson, keeps himself flush to the other boy, even as he looks at his father over his shoulder, the sheriff a mix of the feeling any parent must get, watching their child make out explicitly with someone they only know vaguely directly in front of them, and distressed confusion. The man clears his throat again, more for himself than the situation this time, and begs of the room, "Can someone please tell me what the hell is goin’ on here? Stiles? Jackson? Who I was under the impression died earlier tonight, but who is, apparently——?" He seems at a loss for words about the whole lycanthropy thing he just witnessed, not to mention the PDA, and, Stiles has to admit, they couldn't possibly have gathered a more suspect group of people unless Peter had still been there, "Anyone?"

Before any of them can really, properly respond, a gunshot resounds.

His dad is immediately turning and rushing out the back, toward it, Stiles and Jackson and Boyd directly after him, everyone else hot on their heels to find Erica, just outside, stood over a very ectoplasm-y, goop-slop, extremely dead Gerard Argent.
His brains are literally splattered all over the crack-crumble pavement and gravel-litter next to him. She's got his father's gun in her hands and the most astonishingly unapologetic, unimpressed look on her face that warps down at the old man's body.

"Erica?" Derek's the one who asks it, sounding incredulous and something a little deeper, well-hidden.

The girl flicks her hair over her shoulder before elegantly clicking her heels over to the sheriff and placing his own gun safely back in his hands. "He attacked me," she tells them, innocence and pouty lips and a helpless little shrug, "tried to take the gun. It was in self-defense; I had no choice."

And Stiles, he's just so goddamned glad that she and Boyd and his dad are safe, here, where he can see them, he's so overwhelmingly overjoyed that Jackson's alive- their hands knitted tightly together-that Scott seems relatively safe, as do Allison and Derek and Lydia, and even fucking Peter, for all that he's apparently deigned to ditch. Everyone's alive and as safe as they can be and no one's dying or under intense amounts of pressure and the danger, for the most part, has passed.

Which is probably why the only thing he can think to do is rush over to the girl and hug the shit out of her, which has her bursting into pleased, surprised laughter.

"Thank you," he says, because he feels he has to, doesn't know if anyone would've done what she just did, would've had the balls to well and truly fucking end it. Then, "I am so, so glad you're okay." He turns away from her just enough to grab a vaguely startled Boyd into their embrace, Boyd barely huffing before returning the hug. "And you. God, I was so fucking worried."

Erica squeezes him, scratches not entirely human, not entirely animal, nails over his scalp and pulls back to grin at him. She looks so bright that he half expects her to sprout wings and a halo, goddamn avenging angel. "You're telling me? Stiles, you should be at a hospital, you've got at least two broken ribs, you could have nerve damage—" "Erica—" Maybe a demon instead of an angel, he thinks, trying to pull away, but she isn't having it. "Stiles."

Fierce, protective, worried, with mother written all over her hands on her hips and her demanding, judgemental eyebrows. It's too much, and he suddenly wants to cry all over again—he's emotionally capped out at this point, he must be.

"She's right," Boyd says, very quietly, and Stiles purses his lips together. Jax comes up behind him, presses a hand to the back of his neck, the weight of it, massaging and heavy is like a sedative.

"I didn't notice before," the newly-minted 'were murmurs, "but you smell like..."


"Alright!" The sheriff shouts, "Enough, enough of—of everything. Jackson, I don't know what the hell's going on with you, but it's obvious my son trusts you, so, Stiles: give him the keys to Roscoe, he's taking you to the hospital—" Stiles opens his mouth to protest at the same time Erica, Boyd, Scott, and Isaac all start clamoring about going with, or them being the ones who ought to take him, considering they're all in much better health than Jackson, and they're his best friends, etcetera-

"Erica and Boyd, you two can go with them. Lydia, Allison, Isaac call a cab, go home, or, if you absolutely have to, you can tag along to the hospital, I don't care.

"Chris, Derek, you're both the adults here, and you're both involved, the only thing that's keeping me from taking you to the station to get your statements—" "No! Dad—" "Is my kid." His dad, despite his lips being pressed into a thin, thin line, gives him a little nod, and Stiles leans further into Jackson, accepting the reassurance for what it is. "But the threat is still very much on the table, so I'd suggest
you both get your assed to my house and prepare an explanation for everything while I call this in. Am I making myself perfectly clear?"

Derek actually visibly swallows, Chris looks tense, grave, resigned; they both nod.

"And Scott, you're with me— whatever you've been keeping to yourself, you're going to lay it all out on the table- from your perspective- while we're waiting for the coroner and other units to arrive. Got it?"

Scott gives Allison a mildly longing look, and Stiles a slightly freaking-the-fuck-out look, before squaring his shoulders and moving to the sheriff's side.

"You've all got your marching orders," the man says, then, with all the air of someone who actually knows what he's doing, and, sensibly, they march.

Stiles is squished in between Jax and Erica on the hospital bed, cross-legged with Isaac nearly in his lap, Allison standing in the corner looking incredibly like she doesn't want to be here at all, like she's questioning every life choice she's ever made and is having horrible revelations about her capacity to handle grief.

He isn't judging, he remembers the bullies telling horror stories about him after his mother died, remembers it getting to the point where every day ended in a detention and someone getting a broken something. Remembers the principal of the elementary school suggesting therapy- and, upon smelling the whiskey on his dad's breath- for both of them.

Boyd's down the hall somewhere, waiting with stoic impatience for the doctor who's left them high and dry for the past thirty minutes—it may be a small town, but a lot happens in it, and the emergency room is surprisingly busy more often than you'd think. The person in the bed next to him is wheezing a little and bleeding, Stiles is pretty sure, and they've been waiting longer.

"What are you doing?" Jackson asks, lips brushing against Stiles' temple, both he and Erica curling ever closer to peer at him messing around on amazon on his phone.

"Buying my dad silver-sparkle pom-poms," Stiles murmurs back without looking up, though he melts further into their holds. Erica shifts to bury her snickers into his shoulder.

"Yeah," the other boy drawls, tone sparkling with good humor, for all that it's dry, "because that's what the sheriff needs after learning what's really going on in this town. I'm sure it'll be the most useful gift he's ever received-" Stiles slowly turns away from his phone to give Jax a look- "No, no, really. He'll be able to pursue his secret dream career as a cheerleader, you know?" He makes little cheering routine motions with his hands, "P-A-C-K, Go, Go, Hale Pack, Save-The-Day! Whoo! I'm sure it'll—"

In a very calculated move, as something like joy blossoms in his gut and warmth stains his heart giddy-soft, Stiles pecks a kiss on the other boy's nose, which silences him, another to his right cheek, which has him flushing a delicate pink, and the last to his left cheek, which has his eyes crinkling as a smile dances its' way across his face.

Allison is biting back a smile herself, despite everything, Erica's openly grinning, and Isaac's nose is scrunching up, even as he positions his head more fully in Stiles' lap so he can see the phone, too. "You guys are disgusting," he groused dramatically, and Jackson rolls his eyes as Stiles tugs a little on one of Isaac's curls before simply carding his fingers through the puppy's hair.
After the pom-poms have been bought—because his dad totally deserves them—Stiles gets a text from Scott, which he opens immediately, thirsty for any news about what’s going on on his brother’s end.

» omg, holy shit
» i was psychologically tortured
» like... i knew it was f’ed up g— was threatening mom
» but i didn’t kno it was that f’ed up, dude
» + am srry i didn’t tell u-- thought i could handle it on my own
» wanted to protect u

u can’t protect every1, bro
we’ve talked abt this
and i got tortured, too. i think even ally might’ve
i think g— was doing his level best to make sure we all knew that feel
but it still would’ve been better, for me, for Der, for ur mom, even- just, all around, if u’d told us

» i know man, i know-- i’m so sorry

ur forgiven
psychological torture + psycho-abusive manipulation, dude, i get it
dude, our lives

» i know, right?

Jackson snorts beside him at that before Isaac taps them, shifts to get up as Erica slips Stiles' phone out of his hands, prodding him until he’s sitting up more fully, too, Allison herself going more alert, keyed into their behavior.

Two clicks before the door opens for the doctor, the nurse, and Boyd after them, all five of the teens are already aware and prepared to receive them.

Stiles doesn't know if the hypervigilance or the synchronized reaction is more telling.

Boyd goes to Stiles' bed as the doctor and nurse head over to the other patient first, Boyd telling the group that they're next to be seen to before taking a place beside Isaac on the foot of the bed, one hand curled around Stiles' ankle, the other nestled into Erica's, his whole body pressed up against Isaac's.

Unfortunately, the puppy-cuddle-huddle gets separated by the doctor when he makes it to them, all of the Betas looking extremely discomfited, unwilling but understanding, as they're told to let go of the patient so he can be looked after.

Some of the cuts actually require a few stitches, but most of them can be handled with butterfly bandages, all of them washed and disinfected and wrapped up. The bruising is severe, and Stiles has two broken ribs, but he's not bleeding internally, and there’s no damage to his lungs or anything else that could be life-threatening. There are electrical burns on his chest and his thighs, a possibility of nerve-damage, long-term effects, all of this even more plausible and worrying considering Stiles has suspicious numb-tingle feelings in his extremities—but, his heart seems fine, despite the distress it most definitely went through.

The ER doctor prescribes him some things, recommends he make an appointment with his Primary Care Doctor to look into any long-term damage, and to make sure his heart came out of this
absolutely unscathed, not to mention his brain, Jesus—then he starts asking all the 'whodunit' questions, and saying he's going to need to file a report, call Stiles' dad, and get the police involved, since he's a minor and it's pretty fucking obvious he was tortured.

It's at that point that they wait for the first opportunity to get the fuck out of there, and then ditch. Stiles is pretty sure he and his dad will have to deal with the ramifications of that later, but whatever.

The whole group, sans Allison- who looked so fucking sad about everything that Stiles took mercy on her, hugged her, told her they'd all been mind-fucked to hell and back by Gerard, and that she should probably go crash that meeting with Scott, Derek, her dad and his, because she needed an info-dump as much as the sheriff did (and also maybe some Scott/Chris tlc), "Losing your mom sucks," he'd finished, squeezing her extra hard, and she'd laughed wetly, before pulling away, nodding, and departing- heads over to the starbucks on Avery, where Lydia's camping out with her car, Jackson's porsche, and everyone's order, since she'd been unwilling to spend an altogether unholy amount of time in the hospital without coffee- to which everyone had greedily replied, 'Get me something!'- they'd needed more vehicles than Roscoe for all the people they were transporting, and the timing just worked out this way.

"You're all awful," the fiery-haired girl tells them, before directing the tired group to the largest table, overflowing with cakes, muffins, and several different kinds of specialty drinks, along with a few straight-up coffees. The two workers, who look nearly as exhausted as they do, seem to share her sentiment.

Nevertheless, they sit- Stiles with Lydia to one side, Erica basically, and unabashedly, in her lap, so both girls can be close, Jax on his other side with Isaac beside him, and Boyd between Isaac and the blonde she-wolf- they eat their food and drink, passing different things amongst each other until they've each had at least one bite and one sip of everything on the table. Lydia, without even batting an eye, offers to buy them seconds, to which they are all very thankful.

They talk about everything the doctor said, and everything that happened; Lydia explains a little more about her situation with Peter, Boyd about Chris letting them go, Erica about tracking Stiles from the Stilinski house to the warehouse, Isaac about everything that was going on in the warehouse before they all showed up- Scotty's betrayal, and the stench of Derek's actual, visceral fear- Jax talks a bit about being under the influence of his 'masters', specifically how Matt had crawled inside his head and forced him, in his own body, without the scales, to accost Allison while he was naked.

They comfort, soothe, snark, bicker, settle into a lull after awhile. Stiles decides to take his cellphone back from Erica, checking to see if his dad has texted at all, and sending a mass-message to his brother, father, and Alpha that they're out of the hospital, at the starbucks, taking a little break and catching up.

All safe, fine, he's healthier than he thought he would be, but no more crazy bullshit until two full-moons from now, doctor's orders.

Opening his messages with Scotty he finds a lot more than he was expecting: at first it's lamenting being lectured by the sheriff, then freaking out about all the apparent consent issues, and how he'd been used- in a kind of textbook way- as a by-proxy abuser via Gerard, to turn Derek into a weapon against the wolf's will, which was rapey in all the bad-wrong ways, and then there's a lot of freaking out about how he's going to apologize for it all, and how he feels violated and ashamed and sorry, and how, even if he doesn't necessarily want Derek to be his Alpha, and he doesn't think Derek really handles things in a way that he can agree with, he also doesn't want the guy to hate him, doesn't want to be a traitor and——
And something much, much worse.

The last few texts just say that they're at Stiles' house, and Chris and Derek are there, and Scott's freaking out.

His phone dings with two new messages, one from his dad thanking him for the update, and a new one from Scott thanking him for sending Allison.

Stiles sighs, clicks his phone off, slides it into his pocket.

"We should go," he tells them all, the coffee has livened them up some, so getting them up and moving isn't as hard as he'd thought, though there's a little protest that Stiles silences with a: "We've given the adults long enough to explain all the important Werewolves Are Real stuff, but if we give them any longer, someone's gonna end up shot- or worse- and they're just gonna fuck it all up again."

Lydia nods sagely, putting the makeup tools she'd been using to give Erica a little once-over back in her purse before standing, stretching, saying simply, primly, "Adults are idiots. Never leave them alone for more than an hour, they'll make a mess."

Erica grins at her, all animal-bite enchanted, and Stiles wonders if Lydia realizes the effect she has on people, sometimes. Isaac snorts in agreement, Boyd just nods.

"Besides," Jax chimes, lacing their fingers together, and the rest he says in a soft undertone, hard-fought, hard-earned, "we can't just leave the rest of our Pack in the lurch, can we?"

Stiles grins up at the other boy, kisses him proud and sound, much to the delight and general disgust of the rest of their friends. Stiles kisses Jax again, middle finger to them all, just to be an ass, feels his lover smile into it, and is helpless to do anything but smile back.

End Notes

Let it be known that I was trying to write this for Jackson Appreciation Week, and I do realize that I failed proportionally, because the focus, most of the time, wasn't actually on him. But this is what ended up coming to bear, and I hope you enjoyed it, anyway. *sweats profusely as they bite their nails in a corner*

Lots of things have taken over my life lately, working and writing at the forefront, but I have to admit the biggest thing is my absolute shit time-management skills, so if you're commenting here, or if you've commented somewhere else, and I've yet to reply back to you, know that I will, and I read and cherish every kudos and comment. You guys are the epitome of awesome, and you're also, probably, a lot awesomer than I am, lol

In case you were wondering :: Yes, the ending is a little vague on purpose, I will be writing an epilogue eventually (where some people who need therapy will get goddamn therapy).

Yes, I renamed Harley Siobhan, deal with it. Yes, also, your mind was not deceiving you, Derek is totally low-key in love with Scott in this fic. And, do I have a problem with the lack of communication in Teen Wolf? Do I? Hmmmmmmmmmmmm, lol

[лапушка/ lapushka = darling (or some variation thereof)]
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!