A Desperate Arrangement

by mikkimouse

Summary

"I'm sorry, I believe there's something wrong with my hearing," Stiles said. "Because I could have sworn you just told me you set up a betrothal agreement with the Hales. A betrothal agreement involving me. Me."

Scott smiled his easygoing smile and nodded, which told Stiles no, he hadn't misheard a damn thing.

After seven years of lengthy negotiations, the treaty between the Hales and the Argents has fallen apart and the two countries fell into war.

Months later, there's an uneasy truce, thanks to the intervention of King Scott McCall, but it won't last. In a desperate attempt to maintain the peace, the Hales sign a treaty with the Mc Calls to marry Prince Derek to Prince Stiles Stilinski, King Scott's brother.

In the history of the world, there have been many better ideas.

Notes
So, last August I was futzing around on Tumblr (well before I had an account) and stumbled across [this post from Helenish](#). The idea grabbed me and wouldn't let me go. It turned into my NaNo novel for 2013, and eventually became over 100,000 words of an arranged marriage AU.

This story is completely written; I'm just posting a chapter at a time to make it a little easier on me in terms of editing, tagging, and HTMLing. Yes, I will be adding tags as I go, but if I miss one, please let me know in the comments or [on Tumblr]. **ETA:** Also, the rating will be increasing as the story goes. :-)

**ETA:** Updates will be Wednesdays and Saturdays.

A major, major thanks to [DomesticatedChaos](#) for her cheerleading and beta work. You're the best, dear! :-)

Hope you all enjoy!
Scott stared up at the ornately carved doors marking the entrance to Queen Talia's study and swallowed. It was ridiculous how nervous he was, the way his heart pounded in his chest at the thought of opening that door. He'd been king for nearly two years now; he ought not to be nervous about something as mundane as a treaty negotiation.

No, a few months ago, it would have been a mundane treaty negotiation, just a few hours he would have had to take out of his weeklong visit to the Hales. Now, after the breakdown of negotiations between the Hales and the Argents and King Bruce's death in an ambush not two months before, Scott wasn't sure what awaited him with Queen Talia, but he doubted "mundane" would describe it.

He wished Stiles were with him, but the queen had been insistent on speaking with him alone.

Scott took another breath to calm himself, and then knocked twice to announce his presence.

"Come in," a muffled voice said from inside the room.

He eased the door open and stepped inside the study. It was smaller than he'd expected, at least half the size of his own back home. Shelves crowded with books and scrolls rested against one wall, a paper-covered desk was shoved against another, and the center of the room was dominated by two chairs and a sofa with someone's needlepoint sitting discarded on one cushion. A table stood by the far windows, the center one a stained glass picture of two wolves and a full moon.

Queen Talia stood stiffly next to the window, silhouetted against the afternoon sunlight streaming through. With the black veil obscuring her face, Scott could see none of her features except for her vivid red eyes.

Scott bowed respectfully. "Your Majesty."

The corners of her red eyes crinkled, and she nodded in acknowledgement. "Your Majesty."

After two years, one would think he'd grow at least somewhat accustomed to hearing the term. It still felt like a pair of boots too big.

Queen Talia lifted her hand to the table. "Please, sit. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me."

"Of course." Scott skirted around the edge of the sofa and sat at the table, and decided it was best to just get to the point. "What did you wish to discuss?"

The queen pressed her finger to the edges of her eyes, as though wiping away tears, but her voice was steady when she spoke. "I wished to thank you in person for your intercession with King Gerard. I was not sure if you would come to our aid."

Scott had been worried when he'd learned that treaty negotiations between the Hales and the Argents had fallen apart, and later horrified when he'd learned King Gerard had actually attacked. He'd immediately drafted a letter, reminding King Gerard that the agreement between their own two countries forbade attacking allies of the other. He was just relieved it had worked, though not...
in time to prevent King Bruce's death. "Honestly, a failed negotiation is scarcely a reason to declare war," he said.

Queen Talia turned back to the window and sighed. "Unfortunately, many find it a perfect reason."

Scott scoffed, and covered it up with a cough. "I don't care what King Gerard thinks, Emperor Deucalion is a much greater threat. We're far stronger together than we are separately, and it's impossible to be together if Gerard sends out his army in a fit of pique every time he believes his family honor has been besmirched."

Queen Talia raised one dark eyebrow. "A fit of pique?"

Scott squirmed slightly at the faint amusement in her tone. "My brother's phrasing," he admitted. "I don't think it's entirely inaccurate."

She closed her eyes and shook her head, but Scott thought that faint exhalation might have been a chuckle. "Pique or no, it has placed us in an untenable position." The amusement faded from her voice. "Jason will be a good king, I know, but...my son is overconfident in our abilities."

"And you are not?"

She met his eyes with a look of resignation. "I am both queen and Alpha. Overconfidence is a luxury I have never been able to afford."

Scott nodded. Overconfidence had been one of his father's failings, as well, and he had a feeling he would spend most of his reign ensuring he never repeated those mistakes.

Queen Talia finally joined him at the table, spreading her fingers wide over the dark wood. The red in her eyes faded, leaving them a warm brown. "Your intercession has bought us a reprieve, but his men are still at our borders. And the treaty we signed with your father was only temporary, and it was far less thorough than I would have liked."

That was unfortunately accurate. After his father's death, one of the first things he and Stiles had done was to review every treaty they had to make sure they understood the terms. Stiles practically had the damn things memorized, but Scott knew them well enough. The betrothal contract they had with the Argents—to be sealed with Scott's marriage to Princess Allison, Gerard's granddaughter—was ironclad, but the alliance they had with the Hales was much less so.

"I fear as soon as the treaty expires, Gerard will attack us once again." Queen Talia said. "We are not weak, but his army is far larger than ours, and filled with people who know how to fight against werewolves just as well as they do humans. And with the number of my people that have gone missing these past months..." She trailed off. "I do not believe we will be able to withstand a full attack. Not for long."

Scott's instinct was to grab her hand, but he held back from the overly familiar gesture. Even if they were equals, they were not yet friends. "My lady, I will do everything in my power to help you, I promise. If we have a stronger alliance between our two countries, King Gerard cannot attack, not without breaking the betrothal contract he signed with my father."

"I agree," Queen Talia said. "However, I worry that the only agreement he'll truly honor is a bond that is at least equal to the one your family will share with his."

Scott could see where that was going. "A marriage would be best."

With the veil covering the lower half of her face, Scott couldn't make out much of Queen Talia's
expression, but she appeared to be deep in thought. "Unfortunately, I am not certain of how to make it work. I know of no one in your family who may be suitable, and in mine, Jason and Laura are already betrothed and Cora is not yet thirteen. And Derek..." Her eyes darted to the window, and her expression shifted from thoughtfulness to sadness. "I don't know."

He could understand her reluctance. Scott had only met Prince Derek briefly over the course of his stay with the Hales, but it had not escaped his notice how quiet and withdrawn the prince was. Scott didn't even know him, and he found himself wanting to put a blanket around Derek's shoulders and assure him things would be all right.

But that was, sadly, beside the point at the moment. If a woman like Queen Talia was asking for help, Scott knew it was because her family and country faced utter ruin without it. They had only a mere handful of days before the treaty would expire. He had to do something.

Damn, he wished he had brought Stiles. His ideas were unorthodox, but that was what they needed right now.

Wait.

An idea niggled at the back of his mind. It was probably not a good idea—Scott highly doubted that—and it would make a lot of people unhappy—he didn't doubt that at all. However, it would accomplish everything they needed in terms of an alliance. And he was fairly sure Stiles would forgive him.

Eventually.

"You seem pensive," Talia commented.

Scott nodded. "I'm thinking of our problems, my lady."

He swore he could read the question in her eyes alone. "And do you see any possible solutions?" she asked.

Scott fought a smile. Stiles probably was going to kill him. He shouldn't be this amused at the thought. "I might have an idea. Out of curiosity, do you know how Prince Derek feels about men?"

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Stiles loved his brother. Had loved him wholeheartedly for as long as he could remember, probably from the moment Scott had dubbed him "Stiles" when they were three years old because neither of them could pronounce Stiles's monstrosity of a given name. Scott was a good king with a generous heart, compassionate toward his people, fierce in his beliefs, and hopeful to a fault.

But sometimes—rarely, occasionally, more frequently than Stiles would like—Scott had Ideas.

In the nineteen years that they had been alive, Stiles could count on one hand the number of times Scott's Ideas worked on their own, without requiring either modification from Stiles or a lot of fast talking to keep them out of trouble.

Stiles loved Scott, but Stiles did not love Scott's Ideas.

He reminded himself of all this as he stood in front of his brother in a corridor of the Hale's castle, blinking in disbelief. "I'm sorry, I believe there's something wrong with my hearing," Stiles said. "Because I could have sworn you just told me you set up a betrothal agreement with the Hales. A betrothal agreement involving me. Me."
Scott smiled his easygoing smile and nodded, which told Stiles no, he hadn't misheard a damn thing. "I have discussed it at length with Queen Talia. It's the best solution either of us can come up with."

Stiles flailed an arm and narrowly missed sending a priceless vase crashing to the floor. "The best solution? Really? You two have been talking for four hours and this is the best you could come up with? What in Dante's hell do you think Gerard's going to say when he finds out?"

"A lot of far worse curses than you and I know," Scott said. "But you know the betrothal agreement as well as I do. It forbids attacking any countries with which either of us have alliances. If we seal our alliance with the Hales with a marriage, that's something even Gerard can't argue with."

All right, that was true enough. Even so, the failed negotiation between the Argents and the Hales had apparently pushed King Gerard to the edge, and Stiles didn't think bluster was all they would get in return. "Or he might declare war on us both."

Scott kept walking down the hallway. "Possible, but unlikely. The betrothal agreement between Allison and me has a number of very beneficial terms I doubt he'll want to risk just to soothe his pride."

"You're assuming he's reasonable," Stiles said.

Scott shrugged. "I have no reason to think he wouldn't be. Besides, we could probably negotiate another, equally beneficial treaty for them."

"You really think that would keep him from continuing this war of pride?" Stiles asked.

"With us to act as mediators?" Scott shrugged. "I think it stands a better chance than it would otherwise, don't you?"

All right, Stiles couldn't argue with that. He also knew that "us" meant "me," because Scott looked about two years younger than he actually was, was kind to everybody he met, and had the soul of a puppy. With very few exceptions, everybody loved Scott. If anybody could get an angry king to quit acting like a fool and see reason, it would be Scott.

"Fair enough," Stiles said, "but the point where I get stuck is why it has to be me."

"I'm betrothed to Allison," Scott said, as though that answered every question Stiles hadn't yet asked.

Being as that they were alone, Stiles gave into years of habit and friendship and smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Yes, I know you aren't on the table, but what about your mother?"

Scott's smile vanished, and Stiles regretted saying anything. "For political reasons, because she is the queen. We want the treaties to be equal, or as much as possible." Scott took a deep breath and said in a lower voice, "And because she already spent most of her life trapped in a marriage to someone who didn't treat her half as well as he should've, and I won't take from her the chance to be happy."

The reminder stung, and Stiles bit his lip and turned away. He and Scott had been not-so-subtly playing matchmaker ever since Queen Melissa's official mourning period had ended, and Stiles didn't want to take that chance at happiness away from Scott's mother or his own father. But... "So you'd ask me to be trapped in a marriage instead?"
Scott had the decency to look a little guilty. "I know what I'm asking," he said, "and I swear I wouldn't be asking it if I didn't think you'd be at least content in the end."

Stiles clenched a fist and turned away. He wasn't going to take a swing at his brother. He wasn't. "You promised me. You promised I wouldn't have to do this."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Damn it. He knew Scott meant it, just like he knew Scott wouldn't have asked him at all if they weren't stuck between a rock and a hard place. No, a hard place and an avalanche.

Part of him thought they ought to just leave, because God knew it wasn't their problem. Why should Stiles be sacrificed to save the Hales?

_Because it's not worth a war when we have so many other enemies waiting for us to fall apart up here. And because those negotiations were going on for seven years, a traitorous voice in the back of his head whispered. You want to know why they really fell apart._

Stiles raked a hand through his hair. There had to be a better solution, but even he wasn't coming up with one at the moment. "So you're asking me because I'm high-ranking enough that the alliance would be strong, but not so high-ranking that it would be a threat to yours and Allison's."

Scott nodded. "Right."

"And Her Majesty had no issue signing her son over to another man?" Stiles asked.

Scott shrugged. "Apparently his preferences run similarly to yours."

"What about heirs?" Stiles asked, and from the look on Scott's face, guessed the answer. "Ah. A marriage between a second son and the illegitimate son. Best there aren't any heirs, hm?"

"Stiles—"

He waved a hand to cut Scott off. "I understand, just as I understand that's the reason Her Majesty gave, not you, right?"

Scott sighed and walked over to stand by one of the windows overlooking the garden. "She wanted to ensure there wouldn't be any arguments as to succession, though I'm not sure why there would be." Confusion creased his brow. "I don't think Prince Derek and King Jason are as close as we are."

Stiles sauntered over to stand beside Scott and rested a hand on his shoulder. Despite their blood relationship—Scott being the legitimate heir and Stiles being the result of the late king's indiscretion with one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting—they'd become fast friends at age two and had remained close, despite any and all of His late Majesty's attempts to separate them. Stiles knew he was fortunate, knew they were fortunate, but Scott tended to assume all brothers had the same relationship they did, and never could seem to understand that wasn't the case.

Scott turned to him, regret and guilt warring on his face. "I know I promised I would let you choose. And that's the worst part of this whole thing."

Damnation. Stiles was angry, but he couldn't let his brother beat himself up over this. He half-hugged Scott. "But the needs of the countries outweigh the promises between two twelve-year-olds, right?"
Scott rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Yes, but I don't want—Listen. There's a luncheon tomorrow afternoon. Meet with them. Meet Derek. And if you truly believe you couldn't make it work at all, let me know. We'll find another way."

And that was enough to make Stiles feel petulant and childish for whining. Illegitimate or no, he was a prince, and he knew damn well Scott wouldn't have asked if there was another option. "All right, fine. I'll do it. Lunch with the potential family. Certainly nothing can go wrong there."

Scott smiled and the line of tension along his shoulders eased. "Thank you. I would go myself, but I need to leave for the port first thing tomorrow morning; our parents and Lydia will be arriving early."

Stiles grinned. "So are you the one who's going to tell my father and your mother about this plan, or are you leaving that delightful duty up to me?"

A brief look of panic crossed Scott's face. "We'll talk to them together."

Stiles rolled his eyes. "Because you think they'll be more amenable to the idea if we're both there?"

"Well, that, and if they do get angry, I can always claim it was your idea."

Stiles glared and dug his elbow into Scott's side. "Oh, no. You're taking full responsibility for this one."

Scott just laughed and pulled away. "I'm jesting. I also want them here because I know Mother will want to speak with Queen Talia immediately, and I'd like us to make sure everything is settled as quickly as possible." His face went pensive once again. "Our treaty with the Hales expires in less than two weeks."

Stiles heard what Scott wasn't saying: If they didn't get a new treaty signed, sealed, and married off before then, the current tentative truce would become much less truce-like.

He slung an arm around Scott's shoulder and ruffled his hair. "Don't worry, Scott. We'll take care of it. Besides, we're ignoring a bright spot to all of this."

Scott looked at him, a smile already playing at the corner of his mouth. "Oh? And what's that?"

Stiles positively beamed. "I'm going to lose my virginity before you are."

Scott groaned, but he was truly smiling now, at least. "Just promise you will never, ever let me know what actually happens behind closed doors."

"What, you don't want to know about my bedroom activities?" Stiles asked innocently. "You read me every nauseatingly adorable love letter Allison sends you. I think I've earned at least one psyche-scarring sex conversation."

"And if you and Derek start writing epic love poetry to each other, I promise to be a captive audience for each and every recitation."

"My epic love poetry will involve rhyming the word 'cock' in every language I know. And some I don't. I will learn new languages for this, Scott." Stiles jabbed his finger in Scott's face. "And you will have to listen to every single poem I write."

Scott groaned and elbowed Stiles in the side. "I can't tell you how much I look forward to it."
Derek was going to be sick.

He curled up in the back corner of the library and tried to focus on his breathing, tried to focus on the musty smell of books and the faint charred scent of the cold hearth, but nothing helped.

He wanted to run. He wanted to shift and bury himself so deeply in the wolf that he would never come out again. He wanted to feel the burning in his lungs from training, from pushing his endurance to its limits; he wanted to reach the point where he forgot everything, where his movements were so automatic he didn't have to think.

Derek didn't want to think.

But he couldn't have any of that, not now. No, right now, he was supposed to be readying himself for the luncheon where he would meet his intended. Because even after the disaster of his last betrothal, his mother had decided he needed another one.

Because she'd decided the safety of their family belonged in his hands, apparently, no matter how horribly he'd messed it up before.

Derek buried his face in his hands and tried to breathe. It was his fault the negotiations had failed, his fault Kate hadn't liked him, and his fault that his father was dead.

He couldn't even begin to think what had possessed his mother to think he could handle this.

"Derek?"

No, please, not now. He didn't want to see anyone right now, not when he was barely keeping himself together. Not even someone with good intentions.

Despite his internal wishes, Cora poked her head around one of the bookshelves. She was too young to wear a mourning veil, so Derek could see the concern etching her face.

Derek wanted to tell her not to worry, but he had a feeling she would see through the false reassurance before he could even get the whole thing out of his mouth.

She scampered to his corner and perched on the arm of the chair, and put her arm around his shoulders. "We should run away," she said conversationally.

Derek barked out a dry laugh. "Really?"

"Yes." Cora nodded, as though her mind was made up. "We can make it to the mountains before anyone realizes we're gone."

He knew Cora was trying to cheer him up, even if it wasn't working. Derek rested his head against her. "I think Laura would manage to track us before we even left the city."

Cora pouted and slouched against him. "Do you think she'll let us go if we ask nicely?"

"Not a chance," Laura's voice said.
Derek bit back a groan as Laura swept into the little library alcove and adjusted her skirts before settling gracefully into the chair next to him. "Mother sent me to make sure you hadn't run off," she said. "Which I do understand, but really, Derek, it's not that bad."

Yes, it was. Laura had no idea how bad, and Derek had very little desire to enlighten her. He just shook his head.

She looked from him to Cora and back. "Have either of you actually seen the prince?"

Cora flushed and ducked her head. Derek took that to mean yes.

He felt unreasonably irritated that both his sisters had seen the man he was supposed to marry before he had. He glared at them, but as usual, it had all the effect of flicking them with a feather.

Laura laughed. "Oh, good. That means I get to see your face when you do. Now, come on, we're going to be late."

The words sent a chill down his spine, and Derek wasn't sure if he could stand. He made himself do it anyway.

He didn't want to leave here and walk down to a luncheon where he would be forced to talk and be witty and be a thousand other things he wasn't good at. From what rumors he'd heard, King Scott's brother was quick and clever, and could talk circles around King Scott's entire council. There was no way he'd be even remotely impressed by someone like Derek.

Laura grabbed his hand. "You look like we're taking you to the hangman's noose. It's just a meal with the family."

It was "just" a meal with the family. It was "just" the first time he would meet the man he to whom he'd be betrothed. It was "just" the alliance that would save their country from King Gerard and his armies.

It wasn't "just" anything.

"I can't do this," Derek said. The luncheon, the marriage, any of it. He couldn't have his family's—his entire country's—safety depend on his ability to keep a foreign prince happy. If the past were any indication, he would fail spectacularly.

Laura squeezed his hand. "Derek," she said, in a tone that reminded him she would one day be the Alpha of their pack. "Look at me."

He did.

Her eyes, the same multi-hued green and yellow as his own, bored into him. "You can do this. Have a little faith."

Cora hugged him, hard. "It's not right," she said, but the irritated words were directed at Laura. "Mother can't send him off to be married, not now, not after—"

"Cora," Laura cut her off.

Cora pouted, but she quieted.

Derek hugged her back. He appreciated the attempt, anyway.

He followed his sisters out of the relative safety of the library and into the wide hallways of the
castle. Each step made the dread worse, solidifying it in his stomach until it felt like a cold black pit. No matter how he tried to stop it, Kate's voice came floating out of the depths of his memory.

*If our marriage is ever to work, you're going to have to make some changes. You're just a little too...eager, you know? Perhaps a bit more maturity will help you. Or...well, a lot more maturity wouldn't go amiss. You're lucky I'm so understanding; not everyone would be.*

No. He wasn't going to think about that. He wasn't going to think about her.

"Oh, did you finally fish him out of whatever hole he crawled into to mope?" another voice drawled when they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Derek didn't even bother to stop the growl in the back of his throat. "Peter."

His uncle shoved off the wall where he was lounging and smiled sharply. "You know, in many cultures, punctuality is considered an admirable trait. Fortunately, you have approximately three minutes before you make an absolutely unforgiveable first impression."

Derek considered what kind of first impression it would make if Prince Stiles saw him punch Peter in the face, and thought it might actually be worth it.

"Oh, be quiet, Uncle Peter," Cora said.

"And we won't be late if you quit standing in our way," Laura added sweetly.

Derek forced his hands to relax and strode toward the dining hall, ignoring his sisters and his uncle. He loved his family, truly, but sometimes he just needed space. Things had been so much simpler when they were all younger, before Laura had gotten betrothed and started her Alpha training and before Jason had turned into a junior version of Peter. Like their family really needed another one.

As if he sensed Derek's thoughts, Peter stepped forward and grabbed his arm. "You may want to put at least a little effort toward being charming, hmm?" he said, ostensibly low enough only for Derek's ears, but Derek had a feeling Laura and Cora could hear him anyway. "Seeing as how this arrangement is likely the only thing keeping us from ruin. Perhaps this could be the one thing you don't muck up?"

The words hit him low. Derek yanked his arm away and hoped Peter didn't see just how much it had shaken him.

"Peter," Laura snapped.

Peter looked back to her, eyes wide with fake innocence. "What? Just offering some friendly advice."

With that, he stepped on into the dining hall, leaving the three of them behind.

Derek felt Cora's fingers thread through his. "Derek..."

He couldn't take it right now. He *couldn't*. Derek pulled away. "I'm fine," he said, and didn't care that she could hear the blatant lie.

He wanted to escape, but there wasn't anywhere to escape to. All he could do was go on into the lion's den and pray it wouldn't be as bad as he thought it would be.
Derek was right about one thing: It wasn't as bad as he thought it would be.

It was worse.

He entered the room and immediately looked for his mother and Jason, where they sat at the head of the table. Mother sat in her usual place, but it gave him a start to see Jason sitting at her left side, in their father's seat.

Derek bowed instantly, partly out of propriety and partly out of the need to hide his face until he could compose himself. This was how it had been for the past two months, how it would be for the next several years: a thousand little reminders that Jason was the king now, that his father was gone.

A thousand little reminders of Derek's failure to protect him.

The sickness in his stomach returned with a vengeance, and it took everything in him not to bolt back to the library, to the garden, to somewhere he could be alone, someplace he didn't have to face this.

"Derek," Mother said.

Too late now, a sardonic voice whispered in the back of his head, and Derek straightened again to face her.

She stood and, for the first time, Derek saw the young man sitting to her right. "I'd like you to meet Prince Stiles," she said.

The prince scrambled to his feet and bowed, in a move that looked uncoordinated but still managed to get him upright without upsetting either his chair or anything on the table. He was pale, more so than King Scott, with messy dark hair and expressive brown eyes, long limbs and surprisingly broad shoulders. A handful of moles dotted his clean-shaven cheeks. He looked young, younger than Derek had been anticipating, even though they were of a height.

"Your Highness," the prince said, his voice deeper than Derek was expecting.

Derek froze, his heart hammering so hard he felt light-headed. For a split second, he couldn't remember what he was supposed to be doing.

You're lucky it's me, and not a man to whom you're betrothed. You have no idea how brutal human men can be.

He tried to banish Kate's voice, but it did little good and even less to calm his nerves.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Laura and Cora dip into curtsies, and belatedly Derek broke his inaction and gave his own bow, murmuring "Your Highness" slightly behind his sisters.

Wonderful. He'd said but two words and already he was making a mess of things. If he opened his mouth at all, he'd probably manage something spectacularly offensive, and damage the relationship between their families irreparably.

As he rose from his bow, Derek chanced another glance at Prince Stiles. He was staring at Derek with a surprising amount of scrutiny.

Derek dropped his gaze back to the table and slid into his spot, unable and unwilling to look anymore at the prince. He fixed his eyes on the place setting in front of him. If he kept his mouth
shut and did little more than study the engraved pattern on the handle of the silverware, he might just survive this luncheon without ruining everything.

Cora sat next to him and surreptitiously squeezed his hand. Derek looked over just long enough to give her a grateful smile in return.

Laura sat on his other side and batted her lashes flirtatiously at Prince Stiles. Anyone looking at her would've thought she didn't care that she'd lost her father just a scant two months before, but Derek knew better, knew well that this was almost an act she forced onto herself.

They each dealt with their grief in their own ways: his mother became more regal, Laura became more outgoing, Jason and Peter became more insufferable, Cora became more concerned about everyone else, and Derek became more withdrawn.

Jason started speaking before the servants had even finished laying out the first course. "So, how have you found your stay with us, Your Highness?"

Derek caught the faint disdain on the last two words, and barely kept himself from sending an incredulous look at his brother. Did he want to offend the prince?

Either Prince Stiles didn't hear it or didn't care, because he beamed. "Your hospitality has been everything I could have asked for. I just wish it had happened under better circumstances."

Jason waved the comment away. "Please, let's not speak of the circumstances now. We should be celebrating, shouldn't we? The union between our families. And on that note, I would like to review a few of the terms from the agreement with you."

Oh God. Derek wasn't sure what Jason intended, but it couldn't be good. Maybe he wouldn't have to worry about ruining everything if his brother's pride did the job instead.

He looked again at the prince, whose attention was fortunately on Jason rather than Derek. Prince Stiles sipped his wine and raised his eyebrows. "Oh? I was under the impression that the most important terms had already been settled between my brother and Her Majesty." Stiles sent a winning smile toward Mother at his last words.

Laura groaned. "Must you talk politics at lunch, Jason? It spoils everyone's appetite."

Jason glared at her, though Derek imagined it was at least in part because she hadn't used his proper title. "The treaty was signed after a mere few hours' discussion yesterday. It certainly can't hurt to review a few of the points before we move forward."

Jason flicked a glance at Derek, and Derek did his best to shrink into his chair without actually hunching. Cora grabbed his hand and squeezed it again, and Derek squeezed back.

"You have had a chance to review the treaty, haven't you?" Jason asked, his attention back on Prince Stiles with a steely gaze designed to make most people squirm.

Apparently Prince Stiles wasn't "most people," though, because he didn't appear affected at all. "I assure you, I make it a point to memorize the documents that will have any sort of effect on my life, particularly in regards to who I'm bedding."

Derek felt his face heat, and was extremely glad he hadn't started eating yet. Beside him, Laura nearly spat out her soup, and covered her laughter with a coughing fit. Cora was doing the same. Jason, meanwhile, had turned scarlet, and Mother covered her eyes with one hand, though Derek couldn't tell if she was hiding a grimace or a smile.
"That seems like an excellent policy," Peter drawled. "Are there many documents that affect who you'll be bedding?"

Derek was going to die.

"Just the one, as far as I know," Stiles replied smoothly. If he was feeling any embarrassment about the direction of the conversation, Derek couldn't see it or smell it.

Laura practically shoved her veil into her mouth in an effort to muffle her laughter. Stiles winked at them over the rim of his wine glass.

His heart skipped a beat, and Derek felt his face grow even hotter. He immediately went back to spooning at his soup.

Jason opened his mouth again, but Laura jumped in. "So, Your Highness, is it true there's a fairy in King Scott's court?"

That time, Prince Stiles did choke on his wine, and he set it down. "A word to the wise: never let Lydia hear you call her a 'fairy.'" His smile took on a self-deprecating tilt. "I made that mistake the first time I met her, and never again. She's a banshee."

Derek blinked in surprise. He'd heard the rumors, but he'd never suspected them to be true. "How did a banshee come to be at your court?" he asked before he could think about it.

Prince Stiles grinned at him. "Because court would not be half so interesting without her, as Lydia herself will tell you. She'll arrive with the queen tomorrow, so you'll get to meet her then."

Derek recognized a deflection when he saw it. He bit his lip and went back to his soup. The only reason his stomach had eased enough for him to eat was that Peter and Jason were being more boorish than him.

"I noticed you have a copy of Saint-Marceaux's book of early lycanthropic cave paintings," the prince said.

Mother nodded. "That would be Cora's."

Out of the corner of his eye, Derek saw Cora perk up. "I've been studying for the past few years," she said excitedly. "Have you read it?"

Prince Stiles nodded. "The best history I've ever read. One of the caves she mentions isn't far from Beacon Hill. Our castle," he clarified.

Cora fairly vibrated with excitement. "Really? You're that close? Have you seen it?"

"Yes, several times. You'll have to come take a look for yourself sometime."

Derek grabbed Cora's hand to keep her from leaping out of the chair with glee. "I'd like that!" she said.

The servants came to whisk away the first course and deliver the second, and Stiles moved from the art discussion with Cora to a discussion of the history of the castle with Mother. Every time Jason attempted to drag the conversation back to the treaty, Stiles or Laura deflected it easily, and approximately halfway through the third course Derek could see they'd engaged in a game to see who could instigate the deflection faster. Even Peter appeared begrudgingly impressed, as evidenced by his uncharacteristic lack of snide remarks since the first one.
Derek let each of his plates go by with the food hardly touched, the knot in his stomach intensifying with each passing minute. Stiles clearly had far more in common with Laura and Cora than he did with Derek. Derek couldn't control a conversation like that; he was more apt to get angry and solve the entire thing with his fists. More than a few arguments with Jason had ended that very way when they were growing up. Words just seemed to be beyond him, more often than not.

What was Stiles thinking now, of being stuck with him for the rest of their lives?

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Stiles was seriously contemplating regicide.

Not Scott. He wasn't angry about the betrothal agreement anymore, once he'd gotten over the initial shock.

No, it was dealing with His New and Royally Annoying Majesty that prompted Stiles's uncharitable thoughts.

Of course, given what Scott had told him, the new king was less than thrilled Queen Talia had gone running to allies for help on what he perceived to be a private problem. So it wasn't terribly surprising he was doing his best to offend Stiles.

Fortunately, Stiles wasn't the type to let personal offense get in the way of duty to his brother. He'd promised Scott he would go through with this, and by God, he would, no matter what King Jason said or did. Stiles didn't have to marry him.

No, his actual intended had spent most of the luncheon glaring intently at his plate and studiously avoiding Stiles's eyes. Prince Derek had asked precisely one question and that had apparently been more than enough.

It was frustrating, to say the least. Stiles had hoped they'd have at least a little time to get to know each other before being forced into...well, knowing each other. As it was, he knew more about the princesses Laura and Cora than he did about the man he was supposed to marry.

Although Stiles did know the sight of Prince Derek's shoulders in that fitted coat gave him palpitations. That was something, at least.

The dessert course arrived, and King Jason cleared his throat and pulled out a copy of the treaty when both Stiles and Laura had their mouths full.

 Damn it. And they'd been doing so well at keeping the talk away from politics. Stiles attempted to swallow an entire bite of tart after chewing it once, an action that worked about as well as it had when he was younger and the etiquette master was trying to get both him and Scott to take smaller bites, for God's sake, you're princes, not heathens. At least this time he managed not to choke himself.

Where in the hell had the king gotten a copy of the treaty to have it at the bloody dining table, anyway?

"I was reviewing this earlier," King Jason said, "and under one of the terms of the agreement, it says that one thousand men of the McCall hold will arrive within two weeks of the wedding to set up two fortresses along our eastern border. To your knowledge, is that accurate?"

It was, and Scott had tried to insist on three forts and fifteen hundred men. Emperor Deucalion had
left them alone so far, but given his expansion in the south and east, Scott believed it was only a matter of time before he turned his attention to the three northern kingdoms. Stiles agreed with this assessment wholeheartedly.

"Jason," Queen Talia said, and even Stiles heard the note of warning in her voice.

King Jason waved her off. "We're just discussing it, Mother. Between men." He turned his attention back to Stiles. "One thousand is accurate?"

*Between men.* That seemed a dangerous thing to say when the woman had far sharper teeth and claws than you did. Stiles finally swallowed the tart and took a drink before speaking. "Yes, from what I recall."

Jason set the treaty on the table and plastered a patronizing smile on his face. "And doesn't that seem a little..."

Stiles jumped on the opening before Jason could finish. "Low?"

"Low." Jason nodded, and then seemed to realize what he'd just agreed to. "Wait, low?"

Too late. Stiles took his opportunity and ran with it. "Oh, I quite agree, Your Majesty. The betrothal treaty with the Argents mandates a minimum of fifteen hundred men, should they ever require it, as well as three fortresses along their southeastern border." It actually only mandated one, but King Jason didn't need to know that. "I have no idea why this agreement wouldn't at least match that minimum. And with Emperor Deucalion's inroads in the south, it just seems blatantly irresponsible not to have *some* protection at those borders, wouldn't you agree?"

King Jason looked flabbergasted. "Well, of course, but that's not—"

"Necessary?" Stiles put in before he could finish. "I think it is. It is absurd this treaty didn't specify at least fifteen hundred men and three fortresses." He turned to a servant. "A quill and ink, if you please? I'll just write it in at the proper spot."

Stiles turned back and grabbed the treaty from King Jason. "I thank you *profusely* for pointing it out, Your Majesty. This oversight must be rectified immediately to ensure the protection of your country. My brother would have been horrified if this had remained and—"

A servant placed the quill and ink on the table and Stiles paused in his rambling just long enough to thank the servant and find the proper line in the treaty, where he scratched out "1000" and started to scribble in "1500" over it, but he stopped. "Do you think it ought to be two thousand, Your Majesty?"

King Jason looked as though he was trying to figure out when he'd lost control of the discussion. "No! No, I don't—"

"All right, all right, that's too many, you're quite right. This is a minimum, after all." Stiles made the changes and a mental note to share this entire conversation with Scott in excruciating detail. "There, all settled. And again, Your Majesty, I can't thank you enough for bringing that to my attention." Stiles gave his most innocent smile and took another sip of his wine. "Was there anything else you wished to discuss?"

What he actually meant was "Is there anything else you'd like to renegotiate in my favor, because I could do this all day." Even if the fortresses were truly for defense, it still allowed them a physical presence in the Hale lands, and Stiles couldn't deny that was an advantage. Regardless, he felt fairly certain King Jason got the hidden message.
This supposition was enhanced by the look on the king's face, as though he were trying to decide whether it was worth it to attempt to out-talk Stiles. It wasn't, but it was rather adorable watching him figure that out.

For approximately the fifth time that meal, Laura was muffling her laughter in her veil, and Cora had turned her head away from him, her shoulders shaking with her own barely repressed laughter.

None of that was as valuable to Stiles as the faint smile that ghosted across Prince Derek's face.

Oh dear. Stiles suspected things would get very bad for him indeed if he ever saw Prince Derek's smile full-on.

Queen Talia touched his arm. "Perhaps you and Derek should take a walk around the gardens. Get to know each other a little better."

Oh, thank God. Stiles suspected the walk would be awkward, but he could handle awkward much better than he could handle patronizing kings and surprise political discussions. "I'd be delighted to, Your Majesty."

Across from him, Stiles saw Prince Derek stiffen, and he wasn't quite sure what to make of that particular reaction to a walk.

He took the excuse the queen had given him and stood, bowing as politely as he could. "If you all would excuse us, then?"

Prince Derek stood as well, far more gracefully than Stiles had, and wordlessly led the way out of the dining room.

They had nearly made it to the rear doors when King Jason appeared. "Wait just a moment, Prince Stiles."

Damnation, and they'd almost made it outside. Stiles groaned internally and turned, because he sadly couldn't pretend he hadn't heard. He plastered a polite smile on his face. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

From the thunderous glower King Jason was sending his way, Stiles was guessing this conversation wasn't going to be nearly as pleasant as the previous one. King Jason seethed. "You think you're so clever, don't you."

So that's how this was going to go, then. Stiles was more than happy to drop the pretense of politeness. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about," he said blandly.

King Jason was standing almost uncomfortably close and spoke low enough that Stiles guessed it was supposed to be only for his ears. "It's not wise of you to make an enemy of me."

"I've only rarely been accused of wisdom," Stiles said.

King Jason's eyes flashed yellow, an unsettling reminder that Stiles wasn't dealing with another human. He had magic, yes, but he wasn't sure how effective his talents would be on a werewolf, particularly at close range. "This treaty is not a good idea. I had hoped I could make you see that."

Based on what Scott had said, Stiles wasn't surprised King Jason opposed the treaty, but the vehemence of that opposition did. "That's odd, because it seemed to me that it was the best idea of a depressingly short list."
"I will not have my decisions questioned or undermined by a bastard."

The familiar word still cut, but Stiles was a master at hiding that by now. Before he could snap back, something growled low and right in his ear.

Stiles jumped and spun around. Derek was standing right behind him, matching King Jason's glare with an equally stony one, growling just short of threateningly. King Jason blinked, and half-took a step back before he caught himself. Stiles saw the aborted motion, though. *Interesting*.

He took advantage of the momentary silence. "I'm illegitimate, not a bastard. Get your facts right." He met the king's eyes without blinking. "And if you wish to insult me, Your Majesty, you're going to have to be more original than that. Scott calls me a bastard all the time, though I'm reasonably sure he isn't referring to my parentage."

It wasn't horrifically insulting, but the king still reddened at the words. Stiles allowed himself to enjoy that little victory before he turned on his heel and followed Prince Derek out the garden door.

Chapter End Notes

There is both an intentional and unintentional Batman reference in these first two chapters. Intentional, because when I was naming characters, I went back and changed Derek's father's name to Bruce because his mom's name is Talia and my inner superhero dork couldn't resist. Unintentional, because I had already dubbed his older brother "Jason" and the connection didn't occur to me until I was talking about this story with a few of my fellow WriMos at our kick-off party last November, and the following conversation took place:

Me: "Yeah, the mom's name is Talia, so I kind of had to give in and call her husband Bruce."
WriMo: "Oh my God, that's great! Is one of their kids named Jason?"
Me: "...As a matter of fact, yes."
WriMo: "Is he a complete asshole?"
Me (gleefully): "YES HE IS."
*cue peals of laughter from both of us*

(As before, if I've missed any tags, please let me know and I will add them.)
If Derek thought lunch had been bad, nothing had prepared him for how difficult it would be to walk with Stiles in the gardens without Laura or Cora to act as a buffer for the awkwardness between them.

Fury and shame burned low in his stomach from the way Jason had acted. Derek had been worried he would be the one to mess everything up, but from the sound of it, Jason was actively trying to.

At least the air in the gardens was cleaner, and Derek felt less like each breath was going to suffocate him. The smells here were so familiar he could lose himself in them, and he inhaled deeply.

"Thank you for standing up for me back there," Prince Stiles said when they were well away from the house.

Derek started. He hadn't been expecting thanks. "Jason—His Majesty was out of line," he said, once he managed to get his mouth working again.

Prince Stiles smiled, and it brightened his whole face, making him look even younger than he already did. This close, Derek could see his eyes were a lighter brown than he'd previously thought, dark amber in the afternoon sunlight.

"I'm thinking His Majesty may not want the treaty to go through," Prince Stiles said. "Do you have any idea why that might be?"

As if Jason would actually speak with him on anything deemed important. Derek shook his head and focused at the ground. "I wouldn't know."

"Hmm," was the response. Derek could only see him out of the corner of his eye, but he could feel the prince standing an arm's length away, a perfectly respectable distance, but Derek was still aware of him. Of how he moved, how he breathed, how his heart beat, how he smelled.

Ordinarily, once Derek got used to people, he could put all that aside, but they had sat across from each other for an entire lunch and he still couldn't stop being aware of every microscopic move Prince Stiles made.

Silence stretched between them, tense and awkward, and Derek had no idea how to make it stop being so. Should he say something? No, likely not. Better to be quiet and avoid sticking his foot so far into his mouth he'd be tasting shoe leather for a month.

"Do you spend a lot of time here? In the gardens?" Prince Stiles asked.

He would spend all his time in the gardens or the library, if he could. Derek shrugged. "Some."

Prince Stiles sat on a stone bench, surveying the plants surrounding them. Derek stopped, but couldn't decide whether he ought to sit as well. It seemed presumptuous to do so. He stayed standing and hoped he didn't look too awkward while doing it.

Prince Stiles bounced one leg restlessly. "So what do you think of all this?"
Derek didn't have the faintest clue what he meant. The gardens? "Think of what?"

"This." Prince Stiles waved a hand between them. "This... arrangement. What do you think of it?"

Derek froze. No one had asked him what he'd thought about this before. He was being tested somehow; he just knew it. What if he said the wrong thing? "It's a lot to take in," he finally said. That was diplomatic enough, right?

Prince Stiles snorted. "A lot to take in, there's an understatement for you. And you don't have to stand on any kind of ceremony with me. Here." He scooted to one end of the bench and patted the stone next to him. "Sit. It's putting a crick in my neck to look up at you."

Cautiously, Derek sat. Even though Prince Stiles had moved to the other end of the bench, it still wasn't large, and they were very close together now, close enough Derek could smell him better, or at least pick up more of his scent than whatever had been mixing with the wood and floral tones of the garden around them. He didn't know how to describe it. It was like nothing he'd ever smelled before, something sharp and cold and foreign and wild.

His instinct was to lunge forward and press his nose to Stiles's neck, to breathe the scent in deep to decipher it, to decipher him, but Derek held it in check. Scenting was not something one did when one had only known one's betrothed for a spare handful of hours, and a horrible, treacherous part of his mind delighted in reminding him that Kate hadn't cared for it at all.

Prince Stiles leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, letting his hands dangle between them. "I don't know about you, but this wasn't exactly what I had in mind for marriage."

The sick feeling Derek had been keeping at bay surged back at the words. Why was he surprised at all? He'd known Prince Stiles would be disappointed in him. Derek just hadn’t been expecting him to be actually blunt about it.

"Or... wait, damn it." Prince Stiles winced and rubbed a hand over his face. "You were betrothed before, right? So maybe this is exactly what you were expecting. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of me—well, most of the time it does. That's my natural state. It takes a tremendous amount of concentration to keep it from happening. I really am sorry."

Derek didn't have the faintest idea of what to do with the apology. "It's all right," he said.

Prince Stiles blew out a breath. "Right. So. I was thinking, since we're in this together, maybe we ought to talk about ground rules for the marriage. So we're on the same page."

Rules? Derek's stomach twisted at the thought. What would Prince Stiles expect of him? Kate had warned him about human appetites, told him that he should’ve been glad she was a woman because the men were much more brutal. Some part of his mind couldn't quite reconcile "brutal" with Prince Stiles's earnest face, but looks were deceiving. That was a lesson he'd learned all too well.

"I just want to make sure we're both going into this with eyes open," Prince Stiles said. "I mean, the treaty is all well and good for the big things between the countries, but we have to make this work on the personal level, right?"

Derek nodded, mostly because he didn't trust himself to speak.

Prince Stiles smiled. "Good. Glad we agree. Is there anyone you're in love with?"

Derek almost choked at the question. "What?"
"Is there anyone you're in love with?" Prince Stiles repeated, a little slower, as if he wasn't sure Derek had understood him.

Heat rushed up the sides of Derek's face, and he focused very intently on a striped pebble on the path in front of them. "Why would you ask that?"

"How is that a strange question?" Prince Stiles sounded as though he thought Derek was the mad one. "For all I know you've someone here you love very deeply, and this whole arrangement is ruiniing that. If there is, I wouldn't mind you having a lover on the side."

Oh God, this conversation wasn't happening. Derek shook his head vehemently. "No. No, there isn't anybody else. And... I couldn't." The thought of breaking marriage vows made him more ill. And then another thought occurred to him. "Is there someone for you?"

"Me?" Prince Stiles scoffed. "No. Well, there was Lydia at one point, but let me assure you that is never happening, for a number of very good reasons."

Lydia? Wasn't that the banshee?

"Regardless," Prince Stiles continued, "there isn't anyone for me, either. So it sounds like we each have to worry about that. Still, if it comes to that, I wouldn't mind if you had an affair, so long as it was discreet. No need for either of us to feel trapped in this."

Derek whipped his head back to gape at Prince Stiles. Surely he wasn't suggesting... but he looked completely serious. So he was suggesting adultery.

His stomach sank and Derek turned his attention back to the pebble. "Of course." How he got the words out, he didn't know.

"And I thought it would probably be easiest to have separate chambers. You know, so we each have our space." A small smile tipped up the corner of Prince Stiles's mouth. "As I'm sure you've figured out, I can be a handful. I shouldn't want to inflict myself on you anymore than necessary."

Derek had no idea what to say, so he just nodded. A perfectly businesslike arrangement, then. He could handle that. He thought he could handle that, at least.

"There's one more thing," Prince Stiles stopped, and took a deep breath. "And it's an important one, so..." He pressed his lips together in a thin line and turned to Derek. His eyes were surprisingly earnest. "I will never ask you to do anything you don't want to do. And I expect the same in return. If I ever do, tell me, and I'll stop."

Derek blinked. That was a rule he hadn't expected, and the insistence of "tell me" took him aback.

His confusion must have shown, because Prince Stiles let out a little huff of a laugh and ran his hand back through his hair. "Well, obviously, any time, but particularly in the bed. Anything we do, we agree on—if you even want to do anything, that is. If you'd rather not, I completely understand." He flushed. "I don't... expect anything from you. This is a completely ridiculous situation and I'd just like it to be a painless as possible. For both of us."

A ridiculous situation. That was one way of putting it. A ridiculous situation of Derek's own making, and now Prince Stiles was getting dragged in to fix it. He ducked his head to hide the shame undoubtedly bleeding across his face and dug his fingers into his knee. "Of course, Your Highness," Derek mumbled. "Makes perfect sense."

"Oh, for..."
Derek felt Prince Stiles's hand a split-second before he saw it, a sudden warmth over his own, long fingers curling over his in what was probably meant to be a reassuring squeeze but really, really wasn't. They should have been wearing gloves, but they'd both taken them off for lunch and apparently had forgotten to put them back on.

It was a terrible mistake, Derek realized, because he could not stop staring at Prince Stiles's fingers. They were long and lithe and beautiful, which felt like an absolutely ludicrous thing to think about fingers, but there it was.

"Please, call me Stiles," he was saying. "I by far prefer it; I'm not nearly mature enough to have 'prince' as an official title. And may I have permission to call you Derek? We ought to be on a first-name basis, don't you think?"

Derek wanted to turn his hand over, thread his fingers through Stiles's, run his thumb over the pulse he could barely feel. He wanted to kiss the back of Stiles's hand, had an absolutely lunatic desire to lick his way up those long fingers and suck on them. Derek pushed back against the desire as hard as he could, because there were a number of things one was not supposed to do in the middle of the damned gardens, and he imagined licking the fingers of your betrothed was on the
Stiles quickly lifted his hand away. "Sorry," he said. "That was... forward of me, touching you. I just... sorry, I'm used to it—not with you, obviously, but with other people—and I didn't think, and —"

"I don't mind," Derek said, cutting off the stammered apology and ignoring how cold his hand felt. "We're to be married; why should I mind if you touch me?"

Stiles smiled again, but this one was small and touched with sadness. "You should never be touched without permission."

Even Derek could see there was a story behind that answer that he shouldn't ask about, not now. Perhaps not ever. So he just said, "It's all right."

*It's all right that you don't elaborate on that statement, and it's all right that you touch me. I can't offer you much but I can offer you this: I will not turn you down.*

Of course, that conviction was marred by Kate's voice, sweet and sharp at the same time. *It's all right, Derek, I understand you can't help it. Some people are just a little more... eager than others. It's a good trait, really.*

Meaning, perhaps, that it really wasn't a good trait at all.

Stiles peered at him. "Are you all right? You look... pensive."

Derek frowned. "Pensive?"

"It seemed nicer than saying you're glaring at those flowers as though they've personally offended you." Stiles pointed at the pink roses lining the edge of the garden path. "Did they? Perhaps they're spies for your brother? Will they report this conversation back to him, that I've already told you to call me by my name?"

The thought of being angry with flowers was so absurd that Derek chuckled. "I think he would be more likely to use crows."

Stiles nodded sagely, as if that made sense. "Naturally. Using something black like his soul."

That time Derek hid his laugh behind a cough.

Stiles beamed at him, and it made Derek feel a little light-headed and more than a little breathless. "So, are there any rules you have? Or would like to have? You don't have to just go along with everything I say."

His mind went completely blank. Did Stiles want him to have rules? Or was he just asking to be polite? And what kind of rules did one even have for a marriage? No, this wasn't really a marriage, not like his parents' was, but a business arrangement. Not that Derek knew a damn thing about either. "I don't know," he finally said. "I can't think of any."

Stiles shrugged, as if it mattered little to him either way. "Well, if you do think of something, just tell me. Even after we're married." He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "I know this isn't an ideal situation, and I'd rather us not resent each other."

"I don't think I could ever resent you," Derek said, and immediately clamped his mouth shut. *Why had he just said that?*
Stiles blinked in surprise, and then rubbed a hand through his hair and laughed. "And that's how I know you haven't known me very long. But I appreciate the thought." He stood, bowed, and held out his hand to Derek. "We probably ought to get back. Would Your Highness like an escort?"

Touching Stiles's hand again was everything he wanted, but Derek wasn't sure he could maintain the businesslike arrangement if he did. Still, it would be rude to refuse.

He took Stiles's proffered hand, relishing the warmth of the touch. "You can call me Derek."

Stiles smiled again and squeezed his hand. "Derek, then. Is there anything else I ought to know about you?"

What should Stiles know about him? That he was terrible with words and worse with politics? That the only thing he brought to the marriage was his status within his family, and even that was debatable? That he was going to be ill with the thought of the responsibility sitting on his shoulders, that he didn't want to fail at yet another thing after pushing his family—his country—to the point where they had no choice but to agree with this alliance?

Derek swallowed the lump in his throat and dropped his eyes to their joined hands. "No. There's really nothing interesting about me."

Stiles scoffed. "Somehow, I doubt that."

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Stiles paced in his chambers, grumbling to himself. As far as he could see, he had four problems, and no immediate solutions.

Problem the First: King Jason was unexpectedly opposed to this agreement, to the point of open threats and insults, which was not a level Stiles had been prepared to deal with.

Problem the Second: After hashing out the initial treaty with Scott, Her Majesty seemed willing to sit back and let King Jason handle everything else. As Her Majesty Queen Talia was, in fact, the one who'd agreed to this damned betrothal in the first place, Stiles was confused, to say the least.

Which led him to Problem the Third: He had a significant lack of understanding of how werewolf pack dynamics worked in practice. Was that why the queen was standing back? She'd done her part as Alpha, and now the treaty had slid into the king's purview?

And of course, Problem the Third was part of Problem the Fourth (which, in Stiles' mind, was the largest problem): What the bloody hell was he supposed to expect, being married to a werewolf? And not just any werewolf, but one who was apparently quiet to the point of reticence and communicated primarily by facial expressions ranging from "surly" to "irritated" to "barely contained fury"?

Stiles could count on a single hand how many times he'd seen Derek smile. If the man actually managed a full smile, his face might break in half. Which would be a shame, because he had a stupidly beautiful face.

No, Stiles scolded himself. Now was really not the time to be thinking about Derek's stupidly beautiful face or stupidly beautiful shoulders or arms or... anything else, really. He should be reading the books he'd requisitioned from the library in the hopes of solving Problem the Third.

He rubbed his hand, the same one that had held Derek's earlier that day, and told himself it was his imagination that he still felt the ghost of a touch against it.
Stiles flopped into the desk chair, accidentally sent two books toppling to the floor, and dropped them back on the desk with a loud thump. He was frustrated. He had to take his frustrations out on something.

In addition to the books from the library, he had a copy of the betrothal agreement, which he’d practically ordered Scott to give him before he’d gone traipsing off to the port earlier this morning. Even though Stiles just about had the damn thing memorized, he went over it again, this time with King Jason’s reactions in mind.

The terms weren't anything terribly out of the ordinary: the usual bits about soldiers and forts and trade routes and who was paying for what with the wedding, and a bit about helping the Hales find out why some werewolves had gone missing.

He updated his copy of the treaty to include the minimum fifteen hundred men and three fortresses he’d talked King Jason into, and made a note to ask Scott and Queen Talia about the missing wolves, and what level of aid they were supposed to provide in that hunt.

Other than that, he couldn't find anything objectionable about the treaty. He didn't think His Majesty would be terrifically concerned about a few percentages of tariffs one way or the other.

Stiles tapped his quill against a spare bit of paper and chewed absentmindedly on the corner of his thumb. Perhaps he was looking at this from the wrong perspective. Perhaps it wasn't this treaty King Jason was concerned with. Perhaps...

Stiles shot across the desk, once again sending books toppling to the floor, and grabbed another sheaf of parchment. This was another copy, one of the betrothal agreement between the Argents and the Hales—well, the last one they'd had before negotiations had fallen apart.

He dove into the treaty, intending to skim the high points first and then reread it for the minutiae. But halfway through the stack of paper, even with skimming, Stiles felt he was reading the same thing over.

Wait. He rubbed his eyes. They weren't playing tricks on him; he was reading the same thing over.

He had two copies of the treaty, not just one.

Why would Scott have given him two?

He hadn't, Stiles soon realized. The treaties weren't identical. They were both agreements between the Hales and the Argents, with one significant difference: In one, the section regarding the marriage between Princess Kate and Derek had been removed.

Stiles frowned and reread them again. The one without the marriage clause was the last one before negotiations had failed, and favored the Argents, at least monetarily. The Hales had nearly doubled the amount they offered to pay in reparations for the hunters that had been killed by werewolves, and reduced what they'd asked for werewolves killed by hunters.

From this, it appeared Queen Talia and King Bruce were determined to keep the treaty from being sealed with a marriage.

Not that Stiles could see why. Not much was different between the betrothal between Princess Kate and Derek and the one between Stiles and Derek, except for two points: One, it specified Derek would live with the Argents, and two, children were required, at least two, though it was heavily implied more would be better.

Now that was strange. Queen Talia had been insistent this new marriage not produce children, for
the purpose of not having any arguments as to who the heir would be. Princess Kate was a second child as well—her elder brother, Chris, was the crown prince, set to inherit the throne on his father's death. Though God knew Gerard didn't appear to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Was that something the Argents had requested, then? And if so, why?

A headache pounded at the back of his eyes, and Stiles dug his fingers into the sides of his head to relieve the pressure. Good Lord, what time was it?

He glanced at the clock on the mantle and got his answer: very late, apparently. He'd been reading books and treaties by candlelight for more than five hours, and had no more answers to his problems than he'd had at the beginning of the night.

Thinking of all his problems reminded him of Derek, and thinking about Derek just...

Stiles groaned and rested his head on the desk. He didn't want to think about that right now. These other things were problems he could potentially solve, and Problem the Fourth would require help from Derek, who seemed neither helpful nor particularly communicative.

What if there were things he wanted to do—needed to do—that Stiles couldn't? Of course, he couldn't think of anything, and Derek hadn't said anything when he'd asked, but that might have been because Stiles caught him unawares. There might be a lot of things he needed to know about being married to a werewolf, but it wouldn't occur to any of the wolves to actually tell him.

Ugh. His mind was spinning in circles now, coming up with worst-case scenarios that involved a lot of biting and blood. He didn't think he'd mind biting. Blood, however...

No. No, he wasn't going to let his mind run away with him right now, not when he was so tired anything seemed plausible. He'd just get a good night's sleep. Scott would be back tomorrow, Stiles could plot with him about King Jason's objections, and then perhaps he could corner Derek and see if he could get any answers to his questions about being married to a wolf.

It was as good a plan as any.

That settled, he shed his shirt and flopped into bed.

***

It was half past two in the morning when Derek woke in a cold sweat with the realization he'd completely misread Stiles's question in the garden. What if what he'd meant by "anything else" was actually "are you a virgin"?

Because he wasn't. And his mother didn't know. And if that was something that had been specified in the betrothal agreement...

Derek sat up and buried his face in his hands. Oh, God, if that were the case, then he'd managed to mess things up even more than he could've imagined. This could break a betrothal agreement, ruin the alliance between their countries. And it would be his fault. Again.

He swore he could hear Kate laughing at him.

Derek dragged on a shirt and a dressing gown. He probably ought to wait until the morning, but there was no telling if he'd get a chance to talk to Stiles alone, not with Scott returning and the entirety of the McCall court arriving, and this really couldn't wait.
The palace was dark and nearly silent, and Derek moved through it without making a sound. That, at least, was something he could do well, thanks to years of training.

The guest chambers were in the opposite wing from his. Stiles's room was the last one on the right, next to the rooms Scott had taken. Derek eased open the door and slipped inside. Thank God, he'd made it without waking anyone.

Including Stiles, apparently.

Stiles was sprawled face-down on the bed, one arm tucked under the pillow, the other arm and both his legs splayed out under the sheets. Even with the only light coming from the half-moon shining through the window, Derek could see his face, slack with sleep. If possible, he looked even younger, almost innocent. Hell, compared to Derek, he was innocent.

He leaned over, taking a better look at Stiles's face, some idiot part of his mind memorizing the pattern of moles dotting his jaw and cheeks. Derek wanted to crawl into bed with him, bury his nose in Stiles's neck and smell the sleep-scent, find out how many other moles he had and where and—

Stiles moved.

Out of the corner of his eye, Derek saw his arm jerk out from under the pillow and slash out, knife in hand. Instinctively, Derek blocked, grabbing Stiles's wrist. His hand burned as though he'd pressed it to a branding iron, and Derek let go and stumbled back.

Stiles crouched on the bed, still holding the knife, blinking at him incredulously. "Derek?"

Derek cradled his hand and took another step away. This had been a terrible idea. What was he thinking? He should leave. He should leave now.

Stiles dropped the knife and scrambled off the bed. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry, I didn't think it was you; I just knew someone was looming over me and I thought Jason had finally given in and sent an assassin or something. You scared me half to death." He rubbed a hand over his face, and then held his hand out. "Come here; let me see your hand."

The rambling stopped Derek in his tracks, and at that point he realized Stiles was wearing only a pair of trousers. But that wasn't nearly as shocking as the realization that he had tattoos.

The blue bands of them wove all the way down his chest, past the top of his trousers, over his arms, stopping at his wrists and just under his neck, where they'd be hidden under his clothes. Though Derek couldn't see his back, the tattoos ran up Stiles's sides in such a way that Derek guessed they continued there as well. Two dragon heads met in the center of his chest in profile, mouths open to reveal vicious teeth and a curling tongue.

Derek was so taken with staring at them that he didn't notice Stiles had grasped his hand or that Stiles was speaking to him until he heard "What are you doing here?"

That pierced his distraction, made him realize he was just standing there ogling Stiles while he poked at Derek's palm, which was already healing from whatever had burned him. Derek yanked his hand back. "I'm sorry. It was nothing. I'll just—"

Stiles raised an eyebrow. "You came all the way to my chambers in the middle of the night because of 'nothing'?"

Derek's face heated unbearably, all the way to his ears, and he found himself outrageously grateful.
the room was dim enough that Stiles probably couldn't see it. "I'll just go," he mumbled.

Stiles grabbed his arm. "Derek, wait. Tell me. It's not nothing, is it?"

Derek drew back, shrinking away from the gentle heat of Stiles's hand. He wanted it too much to stay there. "It could wait. I don't know what I was thinking."

Stiles pulled his hand back and shrugged. "You're already here. We may as well talk. God knows I'm not going back to sleep for another hour."

Even through his flippant tone, Derek could hear Stiles's pulse, far too fast and slightly unsteady. "I'm sorry," he said again, genuine guilt filling him. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Stiles let out a soft laugh. "Seems like it would be difficult to avoid frightening someone if you're just appearing in their bedroom out of nowhere. Do you do this often?"

Derek opened his mouth to say of course not, and then closed it. "More than I should have," he admitted. "Though previously, she knew I was coming."

Stiles's eyes went sharp. "She?"

_Do it fast and get it over with._ "I'm not a virgin," Derek said, in a rush before he could lose his nerve. "And if that was something specified in the agreement... I thought you ought to know."

Stiles blinked at him again, this time in disbelief. "You're not a virgin? That's what you're doing in my room in the middle of the night? You came to tell me you're not a virgin?"

Well, when he said it like _that_, it made Derek sound unbelievably foolish. "I didn't want to lie to you," Derek said, and hated how quiet and gruff his voice sounded. "That's all. I'll go."

Before he could turn to leave, Stiles grabbed his arm again. "No, wait, wait. I... thank you. I appreciate that. You not wanting to lie to me, that is. The looming over my bed in the middle of the night, I would prefer to have some warning on." He smiled, a small one that didn't show his teeth. "Don't worry about the agreement; virginity's not specified. Scott knew I wouldn't give a damn either way. And if you or your mother did, well," he snorted a laugh, "you don't have to worry on my account. My experience is limited to my hand."

If possible, Derek blushed harder, and he wondered if Stiles could see the undoubtedly fierce red on his cheeks.

"Well," Stiles said, and the corner of his mouth twitched up, "at least one of us will have some idea of what we're doing on the wedding night." He made a face. "It's not like inexperience is fun."

Derek fidgeted. He hoped Stiles wouldn't be dependent on him to do everything. Even though he and Kate had been intimate together, he still had the feeling he'd done everything wrong, like he could never please her the right way. "No," he murmured, half to himself. "It really isn't."

Stiles ran his hand down Derek's arm, leaving a trail of heat in its wake, and took his hand once again to examine it. "Already healed," he said, tracing the palm of Derek's hand with one long finger. "That's good. I was worried it wouldn't."

Derek thought he should tug his hand away again, because they shouldn't be touching like this, and he shouldn't even be here, but... Oh, forget it. He wanted Stiles to touch him, and if he stayed very still, that might happen a few more times. "What was that?" he asked.
"What was what?"

Derek wiggled his fingers. "What you did to my hand."

Stiles hesitated, and then let go of his hand. "That was magic."

"Magic?" Derek repeated, not quite sure he'd heard correctly.

Stiles nodded, and gestured a hand over his torso and the blue tattoos there. "If we're to be married, you should know. I've been training with Deaton—he's one of the druids on Scott's council—regularly since I was eleven. It's small things, mostly—I made a charm for Scott that lets him know when food or drink is poisoned, for example." He shrugged it away, as if it were no big deal.

A thousand questions battered at Derek's mind. Could he do larger things? What other "small" things could he do? Did he feel magic singing in his blood the way Derek felt the tug of the moon? Lore held that werewolves had been created by magic thousands of years before, and that bound them to it in some ways, but they also couldn't manipulate it the way druids could.

He bit his lip against the desire to pepper Stiles with questions and instead said, "A charm like that seems a good idea."

Stiles grinned. "You've no idea. Especially when Scott first took the throne. Everybody argued that a seventeen-year-old boy had no business on the throne, tried to talk Queen Melissa into making one of them the regent, but she wouldn't hear of it. The first eight months were rough, but he made it through. It's actually impossible to hate Scott, once you get to know him." Stiles rubbed a hand over the back of his neck and chuckled. "I can't tell you how many times some noble would come to the palace, having decided they were going to give the king a piece of their minds, and then ended up walking out having invited Scott to dine with them and an invitation to a ball next week and no one being the wiser as to how he'd turned it around."

"Like you and Jason?" Derek asked.

Stiles laughed and looked surprised. "What do you mean, like me and Jason?"

"I've never seen anyone talk to him like you did at lunch." Derek gripped the edges of his dressing gown sleeves to keep from fidgeting. "Taking what he wanted to do, and making it what you wanted, and making it all sound like his idea."

Stiles looked surprised and pleased. "Well, thank you, but it's not quite the same." A slightly sardonic smile touched his lips. "I just talk until they have no choice but to accept the way I see things as accurate. A bit like a battering ram, Scott's..." He trailed off and his smile faded, as though he were considering his next words. "He'll get back, His Majesty will try what he just pulled with me, and Scott will smile and nod and agree with everything he says and still get his way. And King Jason will be happy about it."

Derek couldn't begin to fathom it, just like he couldn't quite fathom the fondness in Stiles's voice when he spoke of his brother, when a mere accident of birth could have reversed their positions. "Does it ever bother you?" he asked, and immediately wished he hadn't.

"Does what ever bother me?" Stiles asked.

How could he have slipped up and asked something so personal? They scarcely knew each other. Derek clamped his mouth shut and shook his head. "Nothing."

"You asked it," Stiles pointed out. "And I can almost guarantee you that I won't mind answering.
What did you mean?"

Derek resolutely refused to clarify. Damn it, he really wasn't good at this; he wasn't like Laura or his mother, who could steer a conversation like they were ship captains. He stumbled over his questions and always said the wrong thing, too blunt and too short. "Are the tattoos magic?"

Stiles chuckled. "Subtle way of changing the conversation, there."

Derek pressed his lips together. "Subtle as a hammer, that's me."

Stiles's laugh surprised him. "Fair enough. Yes, they're magic. In a way, they're an indicator of how much I can use. They fade as I use it. When they're gone, I've got to rest and let them build up again." He held out his arm to Derek. "You can touch them, if you want. I promise, they won't burn you this time."

He ought to walk away, but instead, Derek stepped forward to rest his fingertips on Stiles's outstretched arm and traced the patterns of the tattoos weaving over his skin. They glowed faintly when his fingers brushed over them. "Why did they burn me?"

"Defensive tactic," Stiles said lightly. "Prevents someone from touching me when I don't want to be. Same reason I sleep with a knife under my pillow."

Derek couldn't take his eyes off Stiles's skin, the pale white crossed with the blue ink of the tattoos, the way his arms were more muscled than they appeared under sleeves. It was beautiful and breathtaking in a way he'd never expected. "Did you really fear someone would try to kill you?"

"Can never be too careful," Stiles said.

Derek dragged his eyes away to meet Stiles's, shadowed in the darkness of the room. "Do you really think Jason would?"

"Do you?" Stiles countered.

That made Derek stop and consider. "He's my brother. I can't imagine he would do that."

"Hmm." Stiles shrugged a shoulder. "I may well be wrong, then. Or you may need a better imagination."

Derek couldn't believe what he was hearing. Jason could be a prat of the highest order, but he knew better than to resort to assassination. "Or maybe you're far too suspicious."

Stiles arched an eyebrow and smirked. "Being suspicious helps keep you alive. Particularly in... delicate situations."

Derek was finding it difficult to breathe. "And this is a delicate situation?"

"You have no idea," Stiles whispered.

Something in his tone told Derek that Stiles was no longer talking about Jason. Derek suddenly realized how close they were standing, his hand still on Stiles's arm, no longer just touching but holding, gripping, as if it could anchor them together. Derek was close enough to count Stiles's lashes, close enough to smell the fading scent of the bed and sleep on his skin. He could hear the rapid beat of Stiles's heart and his quickened breath, almost as fast as Derek's own.
Stiles's tongue darted out between his lips, and Derek followed the movement, memorized the shape of Stiles's mouth and how it was near enough to kiss.

Stiles leaned forward, almost imperceptibly, but they were so close right now that Derek could sense the movement. It would be so easy, so simple. All Derek would have to do was lean forward a little more...

*Perhaps we should just skip the kissing, hmm? I really don't think it's possible to teach you. But it's all right! You're quite good at other things.*

Derek released Stiles's arm and jerked away like he'd been burned, took another step to put himself a respectable distance from Stiles again. Stiles would figure out he was bad at kissing eventually, but it didn't have to be now. Not before they were even wed.

Delicate situation, indeed. He wasn't even supposed to *be here* right now.

Stiles stared at him, lips still parted, as if he were trying to figure out how Derek had gotten two steps away from him.

"I'm sorry," Derek said, because he had to say something to diffuse the awkwardness that came from breaking the moment. "I wasn't—I should—"

Stiles shook his head. "No, *I'm* sorry. I have absolutely no idea what I was thinking. Well, I take that back. I know exactly what I was thinking, but the fact remains that I got carried away. I do that, sometimes, get carried away—with talking or with other," he waved a hand in a circle, "things."

"No, I—" Derek cut himself off, because there was no way to explain that it was his fault, that he was far, far too eager. For everything. "I should go," he finished lamely.

Stiles nodded, his hand resting on his forearm where Derek had grabbed him. "Yeah. Yes. Wouldn't want to get in trouble. This close to the wedding."

Derek nodded, and some part of him realized how completely idiotic it was that they were both nodding at each other like this. He backed away to the door as fast as he could. "I'll, um. See you tomorrow?"

Stiles smiled, small and soft. "Tomorrow. Good night, Derek."

Derek bowed and backed out the door. "Good night... Stiles."

He didn't miss the look of surprise and pleasure that crossed Stiles's face before Derek closed the door.

Chapter End Notes

The art in this chapter is by the absolutely fabulous [geeky-soya](https://www.geeky-soya.com). Isn't it gorgeous?!
The next morning, the palace was a flurry of activity before Derek had even made it out of bed. He dragged his pillow over his head, trying to ignore the patter of feet as servants rushed back and forth through the palace halls and their hidden corridors, but it was no use. Then his mind saw fit to inform him that he would be meeting his betrothed's entire family today, and well, there was no going back to sleep after that.

He snuck downstairs to the training yard and spent nearly two hours practicing with his staff, until his body ached and sweat plastered his clothing to him. It worked to drive the anxiety away, at least for a while.

He stumbled back to his room to wash and dress. Boyd, his valet, had laid out his clothes, nicer ones than Derek would normally wear. Apparently Boyd had recognized the significance of the day as well.

"You should shave, sir," Boyd said.

Yes, he definitely had.

Derek scowled in the mirror at the dark face hovering over his shoulder. Boyd was slightly taller than him and slightly broader, just enough that he could look imposing when he wanted to. "Do you think shaving would make me look more respectable?" Derek asked, a bit of sarcasm seeping into his voice.

Fortunately, Boyd was used to him. "Much more so, sir."

Derek sighed and let Boyd mix up the soap, but he shaved himself. Even with shaving, it was unlikely his face would stay smooth much past midafternoon. It was one of the first things his father had explained when he'd taught Derek how to use a razor, how the men in their family grew full beards and grew them quickly.

The grief hit him like a physical blow, hard enough that his hand slipped and the razor nicked his neck. Derek cursed and wiped at it, but the wound healed quickly, the only sign it had even been there a drop of blood mixing with the lather on his skin. He picked up the razor to start shaving again, but his hands shook so badly he couldn't hold it properly.

Boyd pulled it from his grip before Derek could cut himself again. "Allow me, sir."

Derek wanted to protest—he'd been shaving himself since he was thirteen, damn it, he could do it—but his throat was tight with tears he refused to let fall. He was in no position to argue.

He hated this: hated that the grief hit him at unexpected times, hated that it left him shaking and unable to speak without breaking down. He was supposed to be holding it together, supposed to be stoic. But every time he made it a few hours, a few days, something happened to remind him that his father was gone, and it left him feeling as brittle as thin glass.

Boyd made quick work of his beard, and then stepped away to let Derek wash the lather from his face and wipe it down. He almost didn't recognize the man staring back at him.

"I look five years younger," Derek muttered, his voice coming out far rougher than normal.
Boyd, as usual, completely ignored it, as he did most of Derek's moods. "Then you and His Highness may as well be the same age."

Derek closed his eyes and stifled a groan. He might look younger, but he would never look innocent.

"And perhaps it would be best to end the midnight visits while His Highness's family is here?" Boyd suggested.

Derek started and upset the basin, splashing water all over the table.

Boyd picked up a towel and continued mildly, "At least until you're wed."

Derek ran a hand over his face. It was a good thing he'd already finished shaving; his skin was so hot with embarrassment it would boil all the water off. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Very good, sir."

On the plus side, it had gotten his mind off his grief.

Trumpets sounded outside, and Derek heard the main gate of the castle wall grinding open. He went to the window and saw a veritable herd of horses and carts pulling into the courtyard, with King Scott at the head of them. It didn't take him long to spot Stiles's lanky figure racing across the courtyard to greet them.

"Time to meet the new family, sir?" Boyd said.

He'd barely been ready for Stiles. He certainly wasn't ready for this. Derek turned his attention to his clothes, dressing as quickly as possible. "They must have left quite early to arrive now."

"Indeed." It sounded like Boyd was smirking, but Derek couldn't be sure.

Derek growled and shrugged into his black coat. "Don't you have something better to do?"

"Better than watching you work yourself into a state over this?" That time Boyd did smile. "Not at all, sir."

Boyd was one of a handful of people who could speak to him like that and get away with it. And if he stayed here any longer, Derek would have to continue to put up with it. He made the decision to get the meetings over with and stalked toward the door.

"I'm getting a new valet," he called back over his shoulder. "I shall expect your resignation when I return."

"Just as the last four times, sir?" Boyd called back.

"Precisely."

***

The courtyard was an absolute madhouse. Servants from both households swarmed the area, unloading trunks and stabling horses, moving back and forth between the outbuildings and the main castle, giving the whole area a feeling of barely controlled chaos. Derek hoped the nigh-casual air of everything wouldn't offend the visiting royal family, though if Stiles was any indication, they ought to be fine.
"Ought" being the operative word in that sentence. Derek had barely met King Scott and knew nothing of Queen Melissa.

Inside, his wolf practically scrambled to return to the quiet of the inner gardens, the library, the woods, anything other than dealing with this. Derek forced himself to breathe, to walk measuredly across the courtyard where he had last seen Stiles. He could handle this. He would deal with it quickly, politely, and then he would either lock himself in the library for the rest of the day or go out and train again, just fight until he couldn't think of anything anymore.

He arrived just in time to see Stiles launch himself at a sandy-haired man who wore the uniform of a guard captain. Even over the noise of the crowd, Derek could pick out Stiles's cry of "Father!"

*Father?* That was unexpected. Derek had been sure the late king had been his father; Stiles had said as much himself.

*Don't ask, don't ask, don't ask. Don't say a damn word about it. It's not any of your business.*

Behind them, Derek saw King Scott deep in conversation with a lovely, regal woman who shared his olive skin and black hair, though hers was a tumble of dark curls bound up atop her head. That had to be Queen Melissa.

Derek fidgeted. Now that he was here, it was starting to feel awkward. Should he go introduce himself? Stand here until someone noticed him? Give in and go hide in the library?

The last one appealed to him far more than it should've.

But then Stiles saw him, and the happiness on his face dropped into a look of incredulity. "Derek?"

"Derek?" the man Stiles had called "Father" repeated, in a tone that bordered on disapproving. "That's awfully familiar."

If Stiles heard the comment, he didn't give any indication of it. His eyes raked over Derek's face. "You shaved."

Derek felt his face warm at the unanticipated scrutiny. "Boyd said I should look more respectable."

"Boyd?"

"My valet."

Stiles grinned. "I think I like Boyd."

"Stiles," his father said sharply.

Stiles jumped and then hunched guiltily. "Sorry!" He bounded—practically bounced—over to Derek and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Father, this is Der—I mean His Highness Prince Derek, of the Hale family." Then Stiles swung back around to stand next to his father. "And Your Highness, this is my father, Captain John Stilinski of the Royal Guard."

Immediately, Captain Stilinski stood at attention and bowed to Derek. "Your Highness, a pleasure to meet you."

Derek bowed in return. "Likewise, sir."

"I feel I should apologize for my son's familiarity," the captain said, with a sharp glance at Stiles. "He knows better."
"It's all right," Derek said, hurrying to keep Stiles out of any trouble. "I gave him permission. Since we're to be married."

It was the wrong thing to say, if the sudden shock on Captain Stilinski's face was anything to go by. It darkened quickly to anger. "Excuse me?"

_Uh-oh._ Derek hadn't expected a pleased reaction, but he'd expected Stiles's father to _know_ about it. "Um," Derek said, trying to figure out how he'd managed to mess this up.

Before he could say a word, the queen stepped forward, looking puzzled. "What's going on?"

Captain Stilinski crossed his arms and pinned Derek with a steely blue stare. "Apparently my son is betrothed."

Queen Melissa whirled on Stiles. "You're what?"

"Remember how I told you there was something we needed to discuss when we arrived?" King Scott said, a pleading tone in his voice.

Now the queen turned her incredulous stare on him. "And this 'something' is that Stiles is _betrothed?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," King Scott protested.

"Were you compromised?" Captain Stilinski demanded of Stiles, and then advanced on Derek. "Did you compromise my son?"

Derek took a step back, even though there wasn't anywhere to go. He shook his head ferociously. "No! I swear, I haven't—" The memory of last night surfaced in his mind, and Derek felt his face heat like a bonfire.

Stiles jumped between them, arms outstretched. "Father, _no._ It's not like that. You don't have to defend my honor; it's still intact. Or at least, as intact as it ever was."

Captain Stilinski stopped moving, but he didn't stop glowering at Derek. It was, perhaps, unmanly to cower behind Stiles, but at that moment, Derek didn't care. He was reasonably sure Captain Stilinski wouldn't hurt his son, and was equally sure he would run Derek through with a spear the second he got a chance.

The queen looked pointedly to King Scott and Stiles, and then nodded toward a flowering tree at the edge of the castle. "You two. Over there. Now."

"Mother—" King Scott began.

Queen Melissa simply arched her eyebrow at him. " _Now._"

"But—" Stiles said.

Captain Stilinski grabbed both King Scott and Stiles by the shoulders, spun them around, and shoved them in the direction of the tree. " _My lady said now._"

Derek thought he ought to leave—he wouldn't think of it as "escaping"—but the captain's hand shot out and snagged his shoulder before he could make a move. "You too, Your Highness. This concerns you as well."

When he'd thought about his death, "killed by the angry father of his betrothed" had never been a
way Derek had considered seriously. He was considering it now, as Captain Stilinski marched them all to the tree and herded Derek, Stiles, and Scott to a bench half-hidden behind it.

It was remarkable how facing the twin looks of disapproval on Queen Melissa and Captain Stilinski could make Derek feel twelve years old again. Next to him, King Scott and Stiles hung their heads and shuffled their feet. They may not have looked much alike—King Scott was darker and slightly shorter, Stiles was paler and lankier—but the similarity in their mannerisms reminded Derek that they were, in fact, brothers.

Queen Melissa crossed her arms and looked between them. "Now just what is going on? Why is Stiles getting married?"

Stiles and King Scott started talking at the same time, so fast Derek couldn't tell who was saying what.

The queen held up a hand. "One at a time, Scott."

He straightened and spoke quickly. "Ever since the negotiations between the Hales and the Argents fell through eight months ago, King Gerard's been trying to take over their country by force. I was able to talk King Gerard into pulling back because of our alliance with the Hales, but that treaty expires in less than two weeks."

Queen Melissa did not look terribly sympathetic. "And Stiles is getting married because...?"

Stiles spoke up. "Because according to the betrothal agreement between Scott and Allison, neither the Argents nor the McCalls are allowed to take military action against an ally of the other. If I marry Derek, it's a strong enough match that King Gerard will have to recognize the alliance."

The queen closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "And do you really think he'll see it that way? Because given the situation, he may well just declare war on us both."

Scott nodded, face serious. "I know. It's a calculated risk, but one we're willing to take, especially considering the inroads Emperor Deucalion has been making to the south. It's only a matter of time before he turns his eyes to us, and I would much rather our countries be standing together than clawing at each other's throats, making us easy pickings for him."

Queen Melissa exchanged a look with Captain Stilinski, one Derek couldn't quite read. Then she turned her dark eyes on him. "And your family agreed to this?"

Derek's throat suddenly felt dry. He managed to nod. "My mother did."

"And His Majesty?"

Queen Melissa may not have been an Alpha werewolf, but she did an admirable job of duplicating the power. Derek tried not to shrink under her scrutiny. "Jas—King Jason does not believe it's necessary," he said, as diplomatically as possible.

"Which is a very kind way of saying he's adamantly opposed to the entire thing, to the point of insulting me to my face in an effort to break it off," Stiles put in.

King Scott spun to Stiles, eyes wide and furious. "What did he say to you?"

Stiles waved it away. "Nothing that creative. I'm sure you can guess."

Queen Melissa didn't break her gaze from Derek. "And what do you think, Your Highness?"
For a moment, Derek was certain she couldn't be talking to him. Save Stiles, no one had asked him what he thought about the situation and the solution; the closest anyone in his family had come had been to order him not to mess it up further.

But now Queen Melissa was looking at him, along with Captain Stilinski and King Scott and Stiles, as if they wanted to hear what he had to say. As if his opinion actually mattered.

"I," Derek began, and then closed his mouth because he really didn't know what to say. "I don't know if it's the best solution. But I do know that we can't hold back King Gerard's army on our own. I know that more werewolves have gone missing the further they break into our borders." He clenched his jaw at that one; Boyd's betrothed, Erica, had been taken not two months before. "I know that if he doesn't stop, we most likely won't last the summer."

Derek stopped and waited, waited for one of them to scoff or laugh at him and tell him he didn't understand, but they didn't. In fact, Queen Melissa looked at him expectantly, as if she wanted him to continue.

He made himself stand still and not fidget. "Given what I know... I don't think we can wait for a perfect solution. And given everything else," my father is dead because of this, because of me," I think it's the best idea of a depressingly short list," he finished, with a sideways glance at Stiles.

To his surprise, Stiles smiled, the same small one that seemed as though it were meant for just the two of them.

And, if Derek were being perfectly honest with himself, any plan that ended in him getting to see Stiles without a shirt on again was a plan with which he would be happy.

The queen sighed. "Very well. I would still like to meet with Their Majesties and hear King Jason's objections for myself, if you don't mind."

"So would I," King Scott said darkly.

Derek wondered if King Scott's desire to meet had less to do with Jason's objections and more to do with Jason's insults to Stiles. Regardless, he inclined his head toward the queen. "Of course, Your Majesty. I'm sure my mother would be delighted to meet with you."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Queen Melissa smiled. "And I should like to see a copy of the betrothal agreement."

"You'll have it by the time you're settled in your chambers," Stiles said.

"And how many copies do you have?" Captain Stilinski asked.

Stiles looked offended. "Just the one! Right now, that is."

Captain Stilinski rolled his eyes and held his arm out to the queen. "Shall we get settled, my lady?"

Queen Melissa accepted his arm and pinned Stiles with a look. "Next time, I would thank you to think your ideas through a little bit more before they result in marriage."

Stiles flailed. "This one was Scott's!"

Both the captain and the queen looked skeptical at that pronouncement, but when King Scott nodded sheepishly, they sighed in unison before heading back to their horses and the team of servants unpacking the carriages and carts.
Stiles rolled his eyes. "Well, that went swimmingly."

Derek wanted to sink into the ground. If he hadn't said anything, that entire conversation wouldn't have happened. He had a thousand other places he would rather be. And one, somewhat fortunately, that he had to be: delivering Queen Melissa's message to his mother. "I'm sorry." He jerked his head toward the palace. "I'll go. I must let Mother know Her Majesty Queen Melissa wishes to speak with her and Jason."

Stiles spun around to him. "Wait, no, this isn't—"

He couldn't hear it. Derek couldn't stand to hear Stiles patronizing him. "I should have waited," he said, and hurried off, back to the palace and away from the terrible, terrible first impression he'd just made on Stiles's family.

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Stiles stared at Derek as his betrothed beat a hasty retreat away from them, his back hunched slightly as though he was expecting some kind of attack. Though given the way Father had been glaring, perhaps it wasn't so absurd an idea.

Stiles dragged a hand through his hair, trying to figure out where everything had gone so wrong. "Damnation and bloody hell."

Scott scowled. "What were you thinking? I'd hoped to tell them before you went around making introductions."

Stiles debated the wisdom of strangling his brother. "And what was I supposed to do? I wasn't going to lie to my father!"

Scott raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

"About this," Stiles amended.

The other eyebrow went up.

Curse people who had known you for too many years. Stiles ground his teeth. "This time."

"You know, he wouldn't have had to explain if you hadn't called him by his name," Scott pointed out. "I didn't know you two had gotten that close in the twenty-four hours I was gone."

Heat raced up the sides of his face, and Stiles had to remind himself that Scott didn't actually know about Derek's midnight visit. "We're to be married," he muttered. "I didn't think we needed to stand on ceremony with each other."

"'Each other' being the operative words in that sentence," Scott said. "Not in front of your father."

He knew that, dammit. Stiles was well aware they needed to keep themselves on the right side of propriety, even more aware that this arrangement was just that: an arrangement.

His arm tingled where Derek had touched him the night before, and Stiles rubbed the offending area. He didn't need to think about Derek's hand on his skin, the intent expression on his face as he'd traced the lines of Stiles's tattoos. He didn't need to think about how close they'd been standing, how close they'd come to kissing.

Or at least, he didn't need to think about it until they were married, at which point he would be able
to think about it a lot more.

"Dare I ask what you're thinking?" Scott said.

The question snapped Stiles out of his thoughts. "No, you daren't."

Scott regarded him with a surprisingly shrewd look. "Hmm," was all he said in response.

"And just what are you two doing, skulking over here?"

Stiles jumped at the new voice, but he was not terribly surprised to see Lydia standing before them, arms crossed and her hazel eyes simmering in disapproval.

He smiled and swept into a bow. "Just some brotherly discussions while waiting on you, o lady and love of my life."

By the arc of her eyebrows, Stiles could tell she didn't believe him for a moment. "And just why did Her Majesty and the captain drag you two over here for a reprimand? Aren't you supposed to stop getting into trouble at some point? It can't be very good for the servants to see their king getting scolded like a child of five."

Scott rolled his eyes. "Most of them knew me when I was a child of five."

"We had to sign a betrothal agreement with the Hales," Stiles said. "To keep His Majesty King Gerard from taking over the damn country."

Lydia gasped. "You leave us for two weeks and you get betrothed? To whom?"

"Prince Derek," he said.

"Which one is he?" Lydia asked.

"My height, dark hair, pale eyes, gorgeous face with a permanent scowl?"

"Oooh." Lydia's eyes lit up. "Broad shoulders, the one I saw walking back to the palace a moment ago? Very nice." She patted his arm. "I approve."

Something in Stiles's gut loosened at the casual statement. For the briefest moment, he felt like this was perfectly ordinary, that he'd met someone he truly cared for, and now he was sharing his excitement with his closest friends.

Then he remembered the rules of the arrangement, the guidelines he'd put into place to make things easier on both him and Derek, and the tension returned. He was less than a week from getting married and he had no idea if his husband-to-be even liked him.

"Oh, don't look so worried." Lydia linked her arm with Stiles's. "Everything will be fine. As soon as he gets to know you, he'll love you as much as we do. And if he doesn't, he's a great idiot." She linked her other arm with Scott's. "Now. Why don't you two escort me inside and let me know if Prince Derek has any unspoken-for brothers?"
Scott waited impatiently inside the king's study with his mother. Stiles had filled him in on everything King Jason had said while Scott was away, including some of his own suppositions as to why the new king was so opposed to the treaty. A lifetime of friendship had taught Scott to listen to Stiles's hunches, but he was willing to give the benefit of the doubt and listen to Jason's objections.

And then, Scott thought, he would inform King Jason that if he ever wished to denigrate Stiles's parentage again, he would do so to Scott's face and deal with the consequences.

Queen Talia and King Jason swept into the study, accompanied by servants bearing trays of food and drink. Scott introduced his mother and they exchanged pleasantries until Queen Talia waved the servants away.

As soon as the door was shut, Mother set down her cup of tea and regarded Queen Talia steadily. "So, it seems I should offer you both my condolences and my congratulations."

Queen Talia smiled faintly behind her veil, her eyes touched with sadness. "Both are appreciated."

Scott sat back, content to let his mother handle this for the time being. She pulled out her copy of the betrothal agreement, which they'd already looked over together. It was somewhat gratifying Mother hadn't found anything objectionable about the treaty itself, beyond simply the fact that it required Stiles to marry in order to be valid.

She smoothed the pages out on her lap. "I'd like to review the betrothal agreement, if that's all right?"

King Jason sat straighter in his chair. "Do you have objections to the treaty, Your Majesty?"

Don't sound so excited about it, Scott thought.

Mother smiled and folded her hands over the treaty. "Actually, I have none. I was hoping you could tell us what your objections were."

Scott took his cue. "We'd like to make sure we address any and all concerns you have. This agreement should be a mutually beneficial one."

"It is mutually beneficial," Queen Talia said from where she stood behind Jason. "It's more than fair for both of us."

King Jason leaned forward and rested his hands on his desk. "I disagree. I think it's a little... much."

"Much?" Mother peered at the agreement. "The terms here are fairly standard from the other agreements I've studied, including the one you had with the Argents."

King Jason nodded. "Precisely. And, no offense intended, I find myself wondering why we could not simply renegotiate our treaty with the Argents."

Scott sat forward a little. That was unexpected.

"No," Queen Talia said.

King Jason dug his fingers into the desk, and Scott didn't miss the slight grimace that he quickly
smoothed away. "The failure of negotiations put their armies at our borders in the first place. I see no reason a renegotiation couldn't—"

"A renegotiation is out of the question," Queen Talia said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Scott took a deep breath and decided to take his chances. "Why is that?"

Though he couldn't see most of her face, Scott recognized the flash of red in her eyes as a warning. He continued, in what he hoped was a reasonable tone. "My lady, reforming the treaty with the Argents would, most likely, be a surer way of securing the safety of your borders. Certainly surer than the agreement with us."

Queen Talia folded her hands in front of her and stood a little straighter. "The Argents asked for something we could not give. We offered them other concessions, but it appears that was a breaking point for them as well." She turned her gaze back to King Jason. "We will not renegotiate a treaty with the Argents. Not unless Prince Chris takes the throne."

King Jason shoved his chair back and stood. "This is unreasonable, Mother. What's so important that you and Father chose to break off negotiations we had been working on for seven years? And why can't we just talk—"

"Because he will not listen," Queen Talia cut him off. Her voice took on a guttural growl and her eyes glowed even brighter. "And I have spoken. That method is no longer up for discussion. Is that clear, my son?"

Scott could feel it—the power in the air, thrumming between them. He had never seen the queen act as Alpha, but this was almost enough to cow him, and he had no bond to her beyond the one on paper.

King Jason lowered his eyes and bent his neck slightly to one side, baring his throat. "Forgive me, Mother. I have spoken out of turn."

Queen Talia nodded, the Alpha red glow slowly fading from her eyes. "Thank you."

Scott wondered how the werewolf pack hierarchy mixed with the hierarchy of the royal family, what it meant that Queen Talia had relied on her Alpha status to get her son to capitulate, what it meant that he had capitulated. And for the first time, Scott felt a sliver of fear at sending his best friend, his brother, into a family where they both knew so little about the power structure.

Beside him, Mother cleared her throat and rolled up her copy of the treaty. "So the betrothal agreement between our families stands?"

Scott half.expected King Jason to argue, but he did not. He simply returned to his seat behind the desk. "Yes. It stands. I shall sign it tonight."

"There is one thing I feel I should note," Mother said. "The agreement specifies that Stiles and Prince Derek are to be married before the wedding between Scott and Princess Allison."

Scott nodded. "It's the best way to ensure recognition of the treaty."

"Yes, but we must leave within the week to arrive at the Argents' palace in time for your wedding to Princess Allison, and you," Mother inclined her head serenely to Queen Talia and King Jason, "are still in mourning."

Oh. Scott hadn't thought about that.
Queen Talia waved her hand, as if dismissing the problem. "Special dispensation can be made to allow Derek to marry while in mourning. And I believe the safety of our country counts as special dispensation." She bowed her head, and added softly, "Bruce would understand, I am sure of it."

"Excellent." Mother stood. "Was there anything else you wished to discuss? Any other objections? I would be more than happy to review the treaty in more depth, if you would like."

"I am satisfied, Your Majesties," Queen Talia responded.

A moment later, King Jason said, "As am I."

Scott stood and bowed. "Then we shall take our leave, and I will ensure my mother is settled properly."

His mother curtsied, with a gleam in her eyes. "And first thing on the morrow, we ought to start planning the wedding."

Queen Talia's eyes crinkled in the way that Scott now recognized as a sly smile. "Will three days hence be enough time, do you think?"

"We shall make it be enough time," Mother said decisively. "Shall we discuss it at breakfast?"

"That will be perfect."

Scott felt a little tendril of fear in his gut. He had very rarely heard his mother speak like that, and if he didn't know better, he would think she was planning a military campaign, not a wedding. He decided it would be best if he avoided getting involved with this particular aspect of the treaty.

They bid their farewells to Queen Talia and King Jason, and Scott escorted his mother to her room. As soon as they reached the other wing, she turned to him. "Now what was strange about that?"

Scott felt his lips twitch at the familiarity of the question. She'd been asking it of him after every meeting since he'd been ten years old. "Queen Talia was adamant about not treating with the Argents, but noticeably vague as to why."

His mother nodded. "And?"

Scott took a deep breath and ran back over the meeting in his mind. "It's not just what they wanted. It's something King Gerard wanted, specifically. And she believes if Prince Chris were on the throne, he would not want the same thing."

Queen Melissa smiled at him. "Anything else you noticed?"

"Many things, some of which are relevant and some of which probably aren't," Scott said, earning a little laugh from his mother. "King Jason postures, I think because he's trying too hard to fill his father's shoes. Queen Talia's willing to let him, but pulls back hard when she believes he's going too far in the wrong direction. I'm not sure how their relationship works, with him as king and her as Alpha, in addition to being mother and son."

Mother hugged his shoulders. "We manage it, don't we? Well, I'm not an Alpha werewolf, but..."

Scott grinned and hugged her back. Yes, he had to be king, but that didn't mean he couldn't be a son occasionally as well. "While you and Queen Talia are meeting about the wedding, I'm going to talk to Stiles about this. He'll be able to extrapolate more from it."
He turned to leave, but his mother caught his arm before he could. "Scott."

The concern in her voice stopped him, almost more than the hand on his arm did. "What?"

Her face was unnaturally grave. "You do understand there is a very good chance King Gerard will choose war over this, don't you? This is a very delicate line we walk."

He knew that, had known that, felt the weight of it if he thought about it for too long. Still, Scott took his mother's hand and squeezed it to reassure her. "I'm aware. But... if this is the most likely path to unite us all, then I'm willing to walk it. Even if it's a tightrope across the ocean."

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The McCallss had been in residence for two days, and thus far, Derek had managed to avoid... well, everyone. He was not entirely ashamed to admit he was a little terrified of Stiles's father, and after their poor first meeting, Derek would have been perfectly happy not to speak to him ever again.

He had also managed to avoid his mother and Queen Melissa, who had joined forces to plan his wedding. Laura and Cora had jumped into the planning as well, with rather more excitement than the occasion called for, Derek thought.

So far he'd been able to maneuver himself out of the worst of it. The only thing that had really required his presence was a fitting for a suit for the occasion. And by applying the right amount of snarl at the tailor, Derek had kept that particular torture to a blessed few minutes.

Now, he rested in the corner of the courtyard after a grueling training session, doing his best to burn off excess energy and get his mind off everything. Like his father, who would be scarcely three months dead when Derek was married. Or the getting married, which reminded him of the rules Stiles had set down. Or Stiles himself, whom Derek had done an equally good job of avoiding because he didn't trust himself to be around his betrothed for five minutes without attempting something abominably stupid, like tracing the outline of those blue tattoos with his tongue.

The thought of the tattoos was almost enough to have Derek scrambling to his feet for another hour-long training session.

As if God had read his mind, a staff clattered to the ground next to him. Derek shaded his eyes against the spring sunlight and peered up.

Above him, Captain Stilinski stood with a glare on his face and arms crossed in disapproval.

Derek felt his stomach drop, and wondered if it would be cowardly to scramble away before the captain attempted to turn him into a rug.

"I've heard you're good with a staff, Your Highness," the captain said.

Derek nodded, unsure where this line of conversation was going and absolutely certain he would not like the result.

Captain Stilinski kicked the staff closer to Derek. "I'd like to see for myself, if you don't mind."

Derek looked from the staff back to the captain, not entirely sure he'd heard correctly. "You... want to see me train?"

The captain shrugged out of his cloak and picked up another staff. "No. I'd like to spar with you."
His grin was genial and his tone was light. So why did Derek get the feeling he was being tested? And why did he have the equally certain feeling that if he failed, he was going to die in a very painful way?

The captain spun the staff easily in his hands. "Surely you're not worried about fighting an old man like me? What with your werewolf strength and all?"

Slowly, Derek stood and picked up the staff beside him. "No, that's not what I'm worried about."

*I want you to like me,* came the absurd thought, *and if I beat you, you won't.*

Captain Stilinski smiled and strolled to the center of the fighting ring in the courtyard and settled into a fighting stance.

Derek stepped into the dirt across from him and readied his own staff. He would have to be careful, and he certainly couldn't fight at full strength. Was there a way for him to lose in such a way that Captain Stilinski wouldn't know he'd been allowed to win?

"Go," the captain said.

Derek slid one foot forward, and the next thing he knew, a staff caught his ankle and he was on his back in the dirt. Captain Stilinski stood over him, the same genial smile on his face. "Did you slip?"

His instinct was to growl. Derek pulled it back and got back to his feet. "Again."

This time, he made sure his stance was solid before advancing. He swung, but the captain blocked it easily, sidestepping Derek's attack. Derek overbalanced and stumbled, and the captain swatted his knee. Derek cursed.

Maybe "going easy" wasn't the best idea.

Captain Stilinski sighed and shook his head, rolling the staff between his hands as though he'd been born with it. "I've been fighting with staves for nearly thirty years, Your Highness. You'll need to do a little better to impress me."

Derek straightened again and assumed his stance again. "I don't want to hurt you," he said. It was half the truth, anyway.

The captain's genial smile widened. "Is that so?"

That made Derek think he'd said the wrong thing. It was a little too close to Laura's smile when they were younger, and Derek had done something to get into a massive amount of trouble.

Derek took half a step forward, and Captain Stilinski attacked.

Derek immediately went on the defensive, but the captain seemed to know how to turn each parry into another attack. If Derek pinned the staff to the ground, the captain slid forward to kick Derek's knee. If he knocked the staff to one side, the captain rolled it across his back and came at him from the other. And when Derek aimed his staff at the captain's legs, trying to knock him off-balance, the captain slammed his staff into the ground and used the momentum to swing himself around and kick Derek in the hip.

Derek couldn't get a hit in. Well, he probably could have, but if he hit the captain too hard, he would break bones, and that was not an acceptable outcome to this fight.
"You're holding back too much," the captain said.

That time, Derek did growl. "I said I didn't want to hurt you."

Captain Stilinski rolled his eyes. "Have a little faith in my ability to avoid getting hit. Or, failing that, my ability to take a hit."

"I don't know that you'd be able to take my hits."

"You can hold back with strength and not with speed." Captain Stilinski stepped back and reformed his stance, holding the staff out and down. "Or do you rely on your strength more than your skill?"

Derek opened his mouth to respond, and then closed it again. It wasn't entirely accurate—good technique had been drilled into his head—but in the heat of battle, it was easy to let his strength take over. Had he gotten lazy about his technique?

He set his jaw and brought his staff up in front of him. "All right. Again."

Captain Stilinski grinned and attacked. This time, Derek paid more attention to his own stance, his own technique, and gave less attention to the part of his mind worried about hurting the captain.

The captain was fast enough—or at least skilled enough—to keep pace with Derek, even though he was human. And slowly, Derek found it, the mindset that came upon him during training, when there was nothing but his body and his weapon and his opponent. The rest of the world didn't exist, and at the moment, he was happy to stay here and leave the world away.

He didn't land a hit, but neither did the captain. Derek moved more surely now, and then spotted his opening. He swept his staff at the captain's leg just right, pulling his ankle out from under him. The captain stumbled, but didn't fall. However, it was enough for Derek to bring his staff around and stop it mere inches from Captain Stilinski's face.

Derek felt fierce pride at himself for winning for a grand total of two heaving breaths before he remembered this was his betrothed's father, and Derek was trying to make a good impression.

_Damn it._ He dropped his staff and slid back. "I, um—"

Captain Stilinski laughed. He actually laughed, and picked up the staves to put them back with the other weapons. "It's been awhile since I've had a fight that hard."

Derek blinked and straightened. "You aren't... angry?" he asked cautiously.

"Angry?" The captain shook his head. "Why would I be angry? We both fought well. You're a strong opponent when you stop thinking about it too much. Besides," he clapped Derek on the shoulder, "I want to be sure you can protect my son, Your Highness."

"Does he need much protection?" Derek asked, and then wished he hadn't. He didn't want to imply that Stiles was trouble.

The captain sighed and rubbed his shoulder, his gaze fixed somewhere in the distance. "He's not as breakable as you think he is, but he's not as impervious as _he_ thinks he is."

Unbidden, Derek remembered the burning on his hand, faintly glowing blue tattoos, and the sight of Stiles crouched on his bed, armed with a knife and prepared to fend off whoever had come for him. "Why do you say I think he's breakable?"
If the captain thought it strange or uncouth that Derek was questioning him, he didn't show it. "Because he's human. And I'm guessing you believe, on some level, that we're all more breakable than you."

Don't argue with your betrothed's father, not when he's just getting to like you. "But you are," Derek said. You complete and utter moron, can you not keep your mouth shut?

Captain Stilinski scoffed. "We don't heal as quickly as you do. That's the largest difference. And..." The captain trailed off and sighed, looking frustrated with himself. "I can't believe I'm telling you this, but if you treat him like he'll break at the slightest touch, like he can't take care of himself, Stiles will resent it. And then he'll set out to prove you wrong, and probably be more reckless in the process. Contrariness is his most consistent personality trait."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because you're going to be my son-in-law. And all I really want is for Stiles to be happy." Captain Stilinski looked straight at Derek, and there was no trace of mirth on his face. "Can you make him happy?"

Shame swam in his stomach, but Derek didn't let himself look away. If he were a good person, he'd tell the captain the truth: Stiles could never be happy with someone like him, someone who wasn't half as clever, someone who bungled everything he touched.

But he was a coward with this. "I don't know," Derek said, "but I will try."

The captain smiled. "That's all I ask. And you understand that if you ever hurt him, no one will ever find your body, right?"

Derek swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Captain Stilinski clapped him on the shoulder again. "Good man. I'm glad we had this talk."

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"I think Derek is scared of my father," Stiles said.

"Because unlike you, your betrothed is sensible," Scott said.

Stiles made a face. "Father's not scary."

Scott sprawled back in his chair and regarded Stiles intently. "You are aware he's been the captain of the guard for nearly fifteen years for a reason?"

"Because everybody likes him, particularly your mother."

Scott neither rose to the bait nor disagreed with him. "He's extremely kind and generous. He's also absolutely terrifying when you get on his bad side."

Stiles made to scoff, but he'd seen the looks on a few of the lower-ranking guards' faces after his father had given them a dressing-down. "You don't think he'd actually threaten a prince, do you?"

Scott sat up to stare at Stiles incredulously. "Did you not see him when he thought Derek had compromised you? He was prepared to commit homicide in front of three witnesses."

Stiles ran his hands through his hair, which was hopelessly mussed now, and dropped into the chair next to Scott. Scott had asked to talk to him in private two days before, and this was the first
time they'd managed to escape from their respective duties long enough to have the conversation. Scott had finally ordered everyone to leave them alone and had forcibly dragged Stiles away from the books and to his chambers, and now they lounged in the small sitting area just adjacent to the bedroom.

"So what is it that we needed to discuss?" Stiles asked. "Because I'm fairly sure it wasn't the dodgy relationship between Derek and my father."

"You're the one who brought it up," Scott pointed it out.

All right, Stiles wouldn't argue with that. He hadn't expected his father to react as poorly as he had, and now Stiles was just hoping he could get Father and Derek to tolerating each other before the wedding on the morrow and their cross-country travel the day after that. Of course, that seemed vanishingly unlikely.

Scott leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. He had his serious king face on now, and that did not bode well for their conversation. "Her Majesty has not told us the whole truth behind the broken negotiations."

Stiles frowned. "Was it not political? I thought—"

Scott shook his head. "From what she said, it was something they only became aware of shortly before negotiations fell through. And it was something King Gerard wanted. Have you read any of their betrothal agreement?"

Had he read any of it? Stiles was insulted at the insinuation that he hadn't. "Four times. And there's only one notable thing I saw. Between one draft of the treaty and the draft that ended negotiations, the marriage clause between Princess Kate and Derek was removed."

Scott's mouth dropped open. "What? How did you find that out?"

"I had a copy of both treaties on my desk, of course," Stiles said. "Thank you for that, by the way."

Scott's brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Stiles, I didn't get you copies of those treaties. I just had the one between us and the Hales."

"Then how—" Stiles shook his head and pushed the questions away. "All right, no, I'll worry about how I got copies of those later. The point is, I did, and I looked at them, and that marriage clause is the largest difference between the two."

Scott settled back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the arm. "Do you think that's what broke up negotiations?"

Stiles shrugged. "Seems likely."

"Did anything strike you as odd about it?"

Stiles closed his eyes and mentally reviewed the treaty. "Only the part that specified Derek was to live in France with the Argents, and the bit about mandating how many children they were to have. And neither of those clauses is out of the ordinary; I just found it interesting they were specified in the agreement with the Hales but not the one between you and Allison."

"Maybe because it would be impossible for me to live in France," Scott said. "Derek's a second son; they would have known he wasn't an heir."

"Yes," Stiles agreed. "But that doesn't explain why they didn't repeat it in the treaty with us.

"I'm sure that will be explained," Scott said. "But in the meantime, let's focus on the wedding and the travel."

"That's true," Stiles said. "But I think we should also talk about how we're going to handle Derek and Father."

"I think we should talk about how we're going to handle Father and Derek," Scott said. "But let's not forget that we have a wedding to plan and a cross-country trip to arrange."
Stiles stood up and paced, gnawing on the corner of his lip as he did so. He thought better when he was moving. "True enough. But still, something seems off about it."

It was a puzzle; of course it was. And it was just like Scott to get them in the middle of something without fully understanding all the whys behind it. Stiles absentmindedly rubbed his thumb against his lip and continued pacing the room. Why had the Hales changed their minds about Derek's betrothal to Princess Kate?

He banged his leg against a low table and cursed. "How much bloody furniture do you have in this room?"

Scott chuckled. "If you'd pay attention, you wouldn't run into any of it."

Stiles hopped his way back to Scott, wincing at the throbbing in his shin. "So the Hales took out the marriage clause, negotiations broke down, and King Gerard got angry enough about it to start a bloody war. Why?"

"Well, whatever the reason, it's apparently not a desire Prince Chris shares," Scott said. "Queen Talia said she would treat with him, were he in power."

That was interesting. Of course, King Gerard had been in power as long as Stiles had been alive, and he felt fairly certain the man was too damn spiteful to die. "I wonder what gave her that impression. Unless..." Stiles stopped his moving, grabbing the mantle to hold himself up. "Scott, what if Prince Chris knew the reason King Gerard wanted the marriage? And then told Queen Talia about it?"

Scott's eyebrows shot up to hairline. "Do you think he would've?"

"Think about it." Stiles hopped back to the chair next to Scott and sat. "That would explain why she wouldn't treat with Gerard but feels safer treating with Prince Chris. Not to mention the prince and the king have never exactly seen eye-to-eye."

"Allegedly," Scott put in. "Those are mostly rumors, Stiles."

Stiles waved the objection away. "You'd be surprised at how much truth you can glean from rumors."

"If it were the prince, there's always a chance he was lying," Scott said.

"True, but can't werewolves hear a lie?" Stiles said. "I'm not sure if Prince Chris would be able to fool two of them. Besides, it might also explain why she's reluctant to elaborate on the why: she might not want to implicate him. Or the prince might deny it if she did."

Scott seemed to consider this, then finally nodded in agreement. "So... do you think we should pay a private visit to Prince Chris upon our arrival next week?"

Cornering the crown prince and asking if he'd given the Hales inside information about his father? It sounded terribly dangerous. Stiles grinned. "I think that sounds like an excellent idea."
"So there you are."

Derek beat his head against the book he had opened on the desk at the sound of Peter's voice. It was nearly ten at night, and most everyone else was preparing for bed, as the wedding was tomorrow afternoon. As Derek had been unable to even consider sleep, he'd asked Boyd to tell everyone he was walking about the garden and immediately ensconced himself in the library instead.

Apparently Peter hadn't been fooled by the ruse.

He slid into the chair opposite Derek, sly smile playing about his face. "Why, nephew, you seem almost restless. Nerves before the big day? Cold feet?"

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Derek went back to his book. "Small children to frighten, perhaps?"

"Oh, you know you're my favorite small child to frighten." Peter linked his fingers behind his head and smiled. "Alas, that's not why I'm here. There's something of importance I need to discuss with you. Or rather, there's something of importance that needs to be discussed with you, and I'm afraid I'm the only one with the... experience, as it were."

"Peter, I assure you, there is absolutely nothing I need your advice on." Derek flipped to the next page before he realized he hadn't actually read a single word. "And if I did, for some unfathomable reason, need your advice for something, I would quickly reexamine my life choices and exhaust all other opportunities first."

Peter laughed, the smarmy bastard. "Very well. Let me know just who you intend to ask about being with another man in bed, hmm?"

Derek felt all the blood drain from his face, a slow sinking sensation that left him feeling vaguely ill. He hadn't considered that.

"Ah, yes, that is what I thought." Peter kicked his feet up on the desk and crossed his heels. "And since you know as well as I do that sex is about the only thing you're bringing to this relationship, it might behoove you to listen to me without the... commentary. For at least a few minutes."

"We'll figure it out," Derek said, but his voice sounded weak and hollow even to his own ears. "It's not... it can't be..."

It can't be that hard, he was going to say, not when both their bodies worked generally the same way, but before he could even get the words out, he heard Kate's voice in his head again.
No, Derek, not like that, God, don't you have any idea what you're doing? Can't you do anything right?

Something inside him twisted, and Derek wished he could disappear into the floor.

"There, there," Peter said, with a complete lack of anything resembling sincerity. "Just listen to Uncle Peter and everything will be all right."

Derek had a hard time believing that. "I've read about it," he said, though he knew damn well theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge were far from the same thing.

"Uh huh." Peter did not sound impressed. He took his feet off the table and sat up, fishing around in his pocket. He pulled out a glass vial and set it on the table. "Do you know what that's for?"

Derek peered at it. "It's oil."

"Observant." Peter smirked. "I asked if you knew what it was for."

Derek ducked his face back toward his book to hide the red he knew was creeping up his neck. This was already going to be hard enough without Peter teasing him unmercifully.

"Oh, don't be so bashful about it, Derek; you're going to be a married man soon." Peter nudged the oil toward him. "It's for... lubrication."

Oh, God, he wasn't going to survive this conversation, because he was going to spontaneously combust from humiliation. Derek rested his head on his book and tried to pretend he was somewhere, anywhere, else.

"Now, obviously, lubrication is a good idea at nearly any time—I know I much prefer it when I take myself in hand—"

Derek wished he could set his mind on fire to get rid of that mental image.

"—but unless you're even more useless at this than I imagined, then I would hope you could figure out how to toss your husband off."

"Please stop talking," Derek said into the book.

Peter continued as though he hadn't heard a thing. "However, if you wish to fuck him—or vice versa, I don't judge—then this little bottle is quite literally a necessity. I also don't think I can emphasize enough that it's best you boys clean yourself very thoroughly before engaging in that particular activity."

Derek wondered if God would strike him deaf for the next five minutes if he prayed hard enough. He thought about leaving, but he was pretty sure Peter would follow him. Worse, he was pretty sure Peter would follow him and keep talking, no matter who they came across.

"And you should never, ever simply slick up your cock and shove it in. Ghastly. And quite painful, I'm assured. No, you should always take your time. Open him up with your fingers, first, one at a time. Then you ease your way in. At least at first. At that point, you can set the pace to whatever you like." Peter paused. "Also, I do hope you've learned to swallow."

Derek grimaced into the book and finally raised his head, though he still couldn't bring himself to look Peter in the eye. "Can we please stop talking about this?"
Peter had his chin in his hands, eyes wide and innocent. "You're not talking, you're just listening. And frankly, if you can't even say the word 'sex,' you shouldn't be having it."

Derek groaned. "I don't want to listen to you. Not about sex. It's," he dropped his eyes back to the book, because he didn't think he'd ever been so embarrassed, "private."

Peter rolled his whole head along with his eyes. "And just how do you intend to find out about it? Do you think the universe will bestow this knowledge upon you on your wedding night? That you'll get into the bedchamber tomorrow and know exactly what to do?" His smile went predatory. "Or perhaps you're hoping your betrothed will know exactly what he's doing? Of course, that's doubtful, given his lack of experience, but I certainly wouldn't mind giving him a bit of advice, especially if we got to be a little more hands-on—"

Rage surged through Derek like a wave, and he lunged halfway across the table and snarled, fangs bared and claws scarring the wood.

Peter didn't move but for a slight uptick of his eyebrows, but Derek heard his heartbeat skip.

"Touch him," Derek growled around his fangs, "and I'll rip out your throat."

Peter crossed his arms across his chest and leaned back in the chair again. "Temper, temper," he said mildly. "Tell me, is this how you're going to deal with uncomfortable situations when you're married? Threaten to rip your husband's throat out?"

Derek let out another, lower growl. "No, but it's effective in this situation."

Peter snorted. "Hardly. Now, regarding the fine art of sucking cock and the eternal question of what you do with your teeth—"

Derek slammed his book shut and stalked out of the library.

"I'm just trying to help!" Peter called after him.

"I don't care!"

"You'll thank me tomorrow night."

No, Derek decided, he really, really wouldn't.

***

It was after midnight, and Stiles was pacing.

This was not a terribly uncommon occurrence. His mind tended to be scattered at the best of times, unless he had something with which to occupy it. Research was usually a good distraction, as was magic. It gave him something to focus on.

But as of right now, he'd read everything he could get his hands on regarding werewolves and their... mating habits, for lack of a better term. He'd also reread the betrothal agreement six times. He'd mentally reviewed the rehearsal they'd finished earlier in the evening a few hundred times, so he was fairly sure he was as ready for the ceremony as he could possibly be.

And the rehearsal itself had done a brilliant job of keeping his mind from wandering, particularly the forty-minute "discussion" (Queen Melissa's word) or "argument" (Stiles's word) that the two queens had had regarding how to best integrate the werewolf and human ceremonies in such a way
that both cultures would feel they'd attended a wedding. At least it didn't seem that he and Derek would have to do any ritualistic nude dancing about the chapel; Queen Melissa had thrown that idea right out, bless her.

There was nothing else he could do to prepare for the morrow, and the nerves he'd been able to keep at bay with reading were returning full-force.

And he couldn't sit still, so he paced.

"What's wrong with you?" he muttered aloud, because it was better than muttering in his head. "It's just a wedding. Just an... arrangement. Nothing will change."

Yes, nothing would change, except that Stiles would be married to a taciturn werewolf he barely knew. He couldn't even begin to fathom how this arrangement would work. He'd figured at first, at least, it would be easiest on both of them to keep it as businesslike as possible.

Businesslike. Stiles shuddered at the word. He'd seen political marriages at court, had seen two people who'd been married for decades barely speaking to each other, doing everything they could to keep from interacting. He'd seen what marriage to the late king had done to Queen Melissa.

And when he compared that to his parents, to the love and devotion and partnership he'd seen every day of his life growing up, to how much it had hurt his father when his mother had died...

The thought of being trapped in a marriage without love sickened him. He'd never, ever wanted that for himself. Had begged Scott not to do it to him.

Yet here he was, mere hours from doing that very thing.

Stiles scrubbed shaking hands through his hair. Would Derek even want to try and have a marriage? What if they ended up hating each other? What if, even after they got to know each other, Derek never wanted more? Neither of them ever wanted more?

Lydia had once told him that her mother's only advice about sex was to "lie back and think of your duty." What if that was what sex ended up being for them: something they did because it was expected of them, and not because they were so passionate they couldn't keep their hands off each other?

His left arm tingled, and Stiles rubbed it ruefully. Even after days, he could still feel Derek's touch on his skin, still remembered how close they had been to a kiss, how close he had been to being compromised and how damn much he had wanted to be.

All right, maybe passion wouldn't be their problem. At least, Stiles could hope on that account.

Someone knocked on his chamber door, and Stiles stared at it, wondering who the hell was up and around at this time of night. Besides him, of course. "Who is it?"

The door opened enough for his father to stick his head in. "I saw the light."

Stiles sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm going to sleep soon, I promise. What are you doing up?"

Father stepped into the room and closed the door. "Too used to walking the halls at home. It's hard to break the habit."

"So you thought you'd check in on me?" Stiles asked.
Father smiled. "Like I said, I saw the light." Then his face grew concerned. "Are you all right?"

Stiles nodded and went back to pacing. "I'm fine. Just, you know..."

"Nervous?"

It seemed far too minor a word to describe the feelings churning in his stomach. Stiles smiled weakly. "Close enough."

"Want to talk about it?"

Stiles opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it again because he couldn't think of what. Of all the times for his rambling mouth to quiet, it was when he had too much to say.

Father leaned against one of the chairs. "His Highness seems like a good man."

That got Stiles's attention. "Three days ago you were ready to kill him."

"Three days ago I thought you were getting dragged into this against your will."

Stiles rubbed the back of his neck and winced. "No. No, I told Scott I would. I'm a fully consenting individual in this situation. It'll be fine."

Father raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to reassure me or yourself?"

Stiles gave what he hoped was a carefree smile. "I'm fine, really."

"Right." His father sighed. "Well, you should get some sleep. And so should I, for that matter. Big day tomorrow."

Oh, was that ever the truth, and just the thought of it sent Stiles's heart galloping again. "Big day," he agreed weakly.

Father made to leave, but Stiles stopped him. "Wait. Um... have any advice for me? For marriage?"

Can you tell me how to make this work, how to make it so that we might be friends by the end of it, and not two resentful people sharing a house but not a life? He didn't hold out much hope for "in love," but "friends" didn't seem too much to ask from the powers that be.

Father ran a hand through his sandy hair and didn't speak for the longest moment. But he had his thinking face on, so Stiles waited.

"Ask questions," Father finally said. "Listen more than you talk. And be just as honest with him as you want him to be with you."

It sounded so bloody simple when put that way. Stiles didn't know what he'd been hoping for. Maybe something more direct, like "sex twice a day and always make sure he gets his favorite dessert with dinner." Stiles could work with rules like that.

Father rested his hand on Stiles's shoulder. "It won't be easy," he said softly. "Even for people who marry for love, it's not easy. Some days you'll want to just throw the whole thing away. Don't. Don't give up, and always treat each other with respect. Do that, and you'll have a partnership at the very least. And who knows? Maybe it will turn into something more."

Stiles nodded. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."
Father squeezed his shoulder. "I know. Good night, Stiles."

"Good night."

Father left as quietly as he'd come, and Stiles went back to pacing.
For the second time that week, Derek had to let Boyd shave him because once again, his hands were shaking too hard to do it himself. Not that he hadn't tried valiantly before Boyd snatched the razor away in a huff.

"Just give me the razor, sir, before you cut yourself too many times for it to heal before the ceremony."

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. He was vaguely aware that he got dressed and that somebody, most likely Boyd, forced him to eat something.

His stomach churned and he felt dizzy, and all Derek really wanted to do was either run away or hide in the library until everything was over, until the problem went away.

But it wouldn't, because the only way to make the problem go away was to pledge himself to Stiles for the rest of their lives.

Laura and Cora came to his room later in the day, both covered in layers of lace and silk the likes of which Derek had never seen on either of them. Their dresses were still mostly black, but Laura had been allowed to put away her mourning veil and both of their dresses had been sewed with an underdress of gold silk, considering the occasion.

"You look beautiful," Derek told them, because they did. His sisters looked positively radiant.

Cora beamed and spun, letting her dress whirl around her. "Can you even believe it? I didn't think Mother would let us have the gold, but Queen Melissa talked her into it. Have you met her, Derek? She's wonderful!"

He thought about the dowager queen, who had looked at him with genuine interest when she'd asked what he thought about this arrangement. "Yes, she really is."

Laura did not spin. Rather, she walked around Derek, eyeing him critically, tapping a finger against her painted lips. "You look quite handsome, little brother," she finally said.

The back of his neck heated at the compliment. "Thank you."

"Oh, Derek, don't scowl so much." Laura patted his cheek, and Derek swatted her hand away. She grinned, and then it faded to a smaller smile. "Really, try and look a little happier. Stiles isn't that bad, is he?" She gripped his hand. "Do I need to have a talk with him?"

Even though it was light and teasing, even though she was just trying to get him to smile, he could hear the honest question there. If Derek said yes, Laura would have a talk with Stiles that would probably put the conversation Derek had had with Captain Stilinski to shame.
Derek shook his head. "No, no talks. You're right. He's..." clever and funny and beautiful and far too good for me ". . . it'll be fine. I'll be fine."

Laura's shoulders relaxed a little, as if his words had eased some tension she'd been carrying for some time. "Good. That's good."

And then, very cautiously (probably so as not to muss up her dress), Laura hugged him. "I love you," she whispered fiercely. "If you need anything, you let me know. No matter what. And if that boy hurts you, so help me, I will dismember him. Slowly."

Derek nuzzled her neck, breathing in the familiar smell of sister and family and pack, because he wasn't sure how much longer he would have it. He would be leaving with the rest of the McCall court in the morning. While he had known it was coming, he desperately didn't want to leave his family right now, leaving behind the comforting scents of his mother and sisters when he was getting married to someone he barely knew and they were all still grieving. Boyd would be coming with him, but that was a small comfort at the moment.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat a couple of times before he could speak. "Love you, too."

Cora plastered herself to his side, and Derek lifted his arm to hug her as well. The three of them stayed like that, not speaking, just holding each other.

"I'll miss you," Derek said.

Laura squeezed him harder. "And we'll miss you." Her voice wavered slightly as she said it. "So will Jason, even if he'll never admit it."

Derek had a hard time believing that, but her heart didn't stutter. Laura, at least, didn't think she was lying. He'd take the comfort, right now.

Laura sighed and stepped away, tugging Cora's arm. "Well, we have to go. Mother has another few thousand things for us to do before the ceremony. We'll see you then."

Derek just nodded and watched them leave, feeling even more inexplicably alone when they did.

***

The ceremony was beautiful, Derek thought, from a somewhat detached perspective. How his mother and Queen Melissa had managed to orchestrate a wedding like this in less than three days' time, he didn't have the faintest idea, though he imagined his sisters and a fearsome-looking redhead from the McCall court had something to do with it.

He couldn't pay attention to any of it, because he was completely focused on not throwing up what little he'd eaten. He had never been so grateful to not have to think; all he had to do was repeat what the priest said whenever his name was mentioned.

Derek didn't hear a word of the actual sermon, just the droning of the priest's voice filling the chapel. He was overwarm, his natural body heat working constantly thanks to his nerves, and beads of sweat trickled under his collar and down his neck. It was too hot, and Derek desperately wanted to shift and run, if only to feel the breeze in his fur for just a few minutes.

The only other part of his body he was even remotely aware of was his hand, clasped in Stiles's.

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately, given how much Derek was sweating), they were both wearing gloves, the thin scraps of cloth preventing them from actually touching, but his skin still
tingled with the memory of Stiles holding his hand, however briefly, in the garden.

They would be touching tonight.

Just that thought was enough for another attack of nerves. Derek closed his eyes and focused on keeping his breathing even. He would be fine. It would be fine. They would be fine.

Why did he hear Peter's voice mocking him in the back of his mind?

After an interminable amount of time, and yet far sooner than Derek was ready for, he and Stiles turned to each other and repeated their vows after the priest, and they were pronounced married before the assembled congregation.

Now was the tricky part. While humans sealed the pledge in a wedding ceremony with a kiss, werewolves did so with a bite. Yesterday at the rehearsal, it had been decided they would do both: Derek would bite Stiles on the neck, without breaking skin, and then they would kiss.

And now, that moment had arrived.

Derek's mouth felt dry, his skin too tight. After spending most of the ceremony in a fog, he was suddenly aware of all the eyes on him, particularly Stiles's, wide and trusting and waiting. He fumbled with the buttons at Stiles's collar, trying to open them. They were too small for him to get a good grip through his gloves, and his hands were trembling as well. He muttered a curse.

Stiles reached up and wrapped his fingers around Derek's, as if to steady him, but then he unbuttoned just enough of his shirt to pull the collar aside and bare his neck.

The sight of it, long and pale just like the rest of him, had Derek taking a steadying breath, which was probably an even worse idea because it brought Stiles's scent to him, the same strange and slightly wild smell, tinged now with a bright nervousness. Derek wanted to breathe him in, lick his way up that beautiful neck, but he couldn't, not here in front of everyone.

Stiles had pulled the collar down just enough that Derek could see the blue edge of a tattoo. He clenched his fists a little tighter, focused on not thinking about those tattoos and how they wove over Stiles's skin, the way they'd glowed faintly in the moonlight.

Derek kissed the skin at the juncture of Stiles's neck and shoulder, and then bit.

It wasn't hard, or at least, he was trying not to make it hard—enough that his wolf would recognize it as a claiming bite but not enough that it would hurt Stiles. But it was apparently hard enough, because Stiles let out a little gasp and tightened his grip on Derek's fingers.

Derek pulled away and rearranged Stiles's collar as best he could, studiously avoiding looking at the harsh red bite now marring his beautiful neck. But a primitive, possessive part of him wanted to show that mark to everyone, show them all he had laid claim here. He's mine, mine now.

Stiles was looking at him, amber eyes slightly dazed, but then somewhere in all of it the priest said, "You may now kiss," and then Stiles leaned forward and placed his lips on Derek's.

It was a perfectly chaste kiss, just a gentle press of their lips together. Nothing out of the ordinary for a wedding ceremony in a chapel. But Derek felt as though he were being marked as surely as if Stiles had bitten him in return.

Stiles's lips were soft, a line of heat against Derek's, and then he was pulling away, squeezing Derek's hands as he did so. Derek thought he felt a slight tremor in them.
And then it was over. The priest was presenting them to the gathered assembly, music was playing, and then someone was nudging them back down the aisle. Derek practically clung to Stiles's hand. It felt like the only thing anchoring him to the world right now, and if he let go, he would be sucked up into the sky.

His lips still felt hot.

***

Stiles had learned a number of things about himself in the past few hours.

One: He could stand still for an extended period of time, given proper motivation.

Two: Being close enough to feel the heat of Derek's body and being in public and therefore unable to do anything about it was classified, in his mind, as "proper motivation."

Three: He liked being bitten. He liked being bitten a lot.

Four: He could, in fact, hide an extremely inappropriate erection in front of an entire chapel full of his friends and family.

His neck tingled where Derek had bitten him, and just thinking about it had Stiles clenching his jaw against an involuntary moan. He'd been shocked at how much he'd wanted to fist his hand in Derek's hair and hold him there, at how he'd almost arched into the bite, at how he'd almost groaned out loud in front of the entire bloody congregation. As it was, he'd managed to keep his mouth shut and didn't even whimper at the loss when Derek had pulled away from him.

He wanted to touch it, see if he could still feel the marks of Derek's teeth, and had to fight to keep his fist at his side.

He wondered if Derek would think it strange if he asked to be bitten while they were in the bedroom. Given that Derek was a werewolf, Stiles guessed probably not. He hoped, anyway.

For now, though, they were trapped in the reception as everyone filed by to wish them well. Any smile Derek gave seemed like he was in the greatest pain, so Stiles did his best to be the friendly one.

Which was easy with most of Derek's family. Queen Talia was regal as always, King Jason looked grudgingly accepting, and Cora kissed Stiles's cheek to welcome him to the family.

Peter actively leered at both of them, and Stiles was more than happy to send him on his way, especially considering the way Derek's usual glare intensified from "irritated" to "murderous" when Peter was giving Stiles a congratulatory handshake.

Then Laura came up and hugged them both, which Stiles thought was nice until she whispered in his ear, "Hurt my brother, and so help me God, I will carve out your kidneys and eat them in front of you, and use your bones to pick my teeth afterward."

She gave Stiles a toothy smile far sharper than it had any right to be. All right, so werewolf sisters: protective and frightening, all in one package.

Stiles hoped the smile he gave her in return was either confident or soothing, and not quite as unsettled as he was feeling.

Beside him, Derek muttered, "Laura."
Laura's teeth went back to a normal size and sharpness, and she patted Derek's cheek. "Just looking out for you, baby brother," she said, and then sauntered off.

"Your sister is terrifying," Stiles whispered.

Derek huffed, which could have been a laugh or a hard exhale; it was difficult for Stiles to tell. "You should try growing up with her."

There wasn't much more to the reception than that, little food and no dancing, because while Queen Melissa and Queen Talia had been able to work miracles with the ceremony itself, the celebratory nature of a reception would have clashed with the mourning period for the Hales. Not to mention, everybody in the McCall court had to prepare to leave early the next morning to travel to France for Scott's marriage.

And then, Stiles supposed, they'd see how well this bloody thing had worked.

He'd been separated from Derek at some point after the reception, and squelched his unexpected disappointment. They would see each other later tonight, and besides, Derek was still glaring. Maybe by the time they met up again he would have stopped.

He was making his way back toward his room when an iron grip latched onto his arm.

Stiles jerked and spun, and narrowly missed hitting Lydia in the face with his free arm. "Whoa! Lydia, what are you—"

She gave no indication she'd heard him, not even an eyebrow twitch. Her gaze was fixed just over his shoulder, and her eyes were solid black.

A cold, creeping sense of dread slithered down his spine. Stiles tried to free his arm from her grip, but he couldn't move. "Lydia?"

"Protect your wolf," she said in an unrecognizable voice, deeper and raspier than her normal one, almost guttural.

But no, it was recognizable. Stiles had heard it only a handful of times before. It was the Sidhe. "What?"

"Protect your wolf."

He knew far better than to argue with whichever one of the Sidhe was using Lydia to deliver the message. Stiles took a deep breath. "How?"

"Protect your wolf."

Well, that was terrifically descriptive of them. "Protect him how? From what?" Stiles asked.

Those pitch-black eyes snapped from the point over his shoulder to meet his directly, and Stiles fought to stand still against the complete power and... otherness he saw there.

"Protect your wolf," she said again, and then her eyes fluttered shut and Lydia collapsed.

Stiles caught her before she hit the floor and half-carried her to the nearest chair. He sat her down and brushed a lock of red hair out of her face. "Lydia? Are you there?"

She shook her head and blinked, and when her eyes opened, they were hazel once again. "Stiles?" she said, her voice touched with uncharacteristic uncertainty. "Where are we?"
"In a hallway of the Hale palace, in the corridors of the guest wing, specifically," he said. "You had a message for me."

Lydia's face went from uncertain to bitter. "Oh really? And what was that?"

"You asked me to protect my wolf," Stiles said. "Do you have any idea who was delivering the message? Or what it meant?"

Lydia waved him off and sat up, straightening her dress as she did. "You know I don't. Probably means something horrible is going to happen to your new husband and you have to protect him somehow."

"Yes, so I gathered," Stiles said dryly. "I was hoping for a bit more clarity than that."

Lydia glared. "Well, you certainly aren't going to get it from me." She shoved him aside and stood, rearranging herself until her dress looked perfect once again. "I'm just the messenger, remember?"

Stiles cringed at the reminder. "Lydia—" he began, but she spun on her heel and sauntered down the hall, skirts swaying behind her.

He cursed under his breath. Why had the Sidhe seen fit to deliver him a message now? What did they see happening to Derek? And what in the world did they think Stiles could do to stop it?

Damn the Sidhe and their nigh incomprehensible messages. Because what he needed right now were more puzzles and problems.

Stiles put the warning out of his mind for the moment and headed back to his room. Right now, he was less concerned about protecting his wolf and more concerned about their wedding night.

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Derek dug his claws into his thighs so hard he felt the skin break, saw the blood welling up to stain his trousers. He should have stopped, should have let the marks heal, but the pain was keeping him from panicking at the reminder that it was his wedding night, and Stiles was waiting for him.

His stomach churned and heat raced over his skin, quick as a forest fire. Just as suddenly as it started, it stopped, leaving him cold and shaking.

He dug his claws in even harder.

He'd never been so loath to leave his room in his life. He wanted to stay here, perched in a chair by the hearth, where it was safe and warm and he couldn't ruin anything.

But even worse, he wanted Stiles, wanted to taste him, touch him, memorize the paths of the tattoos and find out how much of his body they wove over. Derek wanted to please him, was embarrassed at how eager he was for it.

And he was terrified at how Stiles would react to it all. He'd said he wanted to keep this businesslike. Perhaps he'd be disgusted about how eager Derek was. Or, more likely, he'd just push Derek away when he realized how terrible he was at kissing. Scoff at him, like Kate had, when Derek had done something she didn't like. Or perhaps Stiles was expecting Derek to actually know what he was doing, in which case, maybe he should have listened to Peter a little more. And then he immediately wanted to dash his head against the mantle for even considering that.

He could only imagine his father's disappointment if he could see Derek now.
Damn it. He had made a pledge. He was wed, now. He would go to Stiles, he would stay long enough to perform his husbandly duties, and maybe it wouldn't be too bad. Maybe Stiles would ask him to stay for the whole night.

No. He knew better than that. The best he could hope for was to make it as good as he could, do whatever it was that Stiles wanted.

Derek pried his claws out of his legs, changed into clean trousers, and tied on his wrapper. Boyd was already asleep, thank God, so Derek didn't have to deal with any comments or those knowing looks his valet was so damn fond of.

And then, for the second time that week, he slipped out of his room and down the corridor to Stiles's, and knocked on the door.

He heard Stiles's grumbling from inside. "For the last bloody time, Scott, I'm fine, I don't need anything, now go to bed, for the love of—"

Stiles opened the door, and Derek caught a glimpse of irritation on his face before it melted into surprise. He recovered quickly, at least on the outside. Derek could still hear the galloping of his heart.

"You... are not Scott," Stiles said.

Derek shifted his weight under those bright, sharp eyes. "No."

Stiles hesitated, and then stepped aside and opened the door wider. "Come on in."

Derek swallowed the fear coating his throat and followed Stiles into the room. It was only a little smaller than Derek's own room, but considerably messier. Books and papers were piled on the writing desk—in fact, on every available flat surface—spilling over onto the floor in haphazard piles. A trunk was open at the foot of the bed with clothes hanging over the edges, as if Stiles had been in the midst of packing. He'd also lit four lamps around the room, in addition to the burning hearth, filling the chamber with a steady orange glow. Derek spotted a box of what appeared to be small rocks and thin rope, along with handmade bracelets or something of the sort.

Even though Stiles hadn't been here very long, the room already had taken on his scent. Derek half-closed his eyes and took a deep breath, but it wasn't as calming as he'd hoped.

"I appreciate the knocking this time, by the way," Stiles said over his shoulder with a quick grin.

Derek ducked his head. Because I'd really rather not take a knife to my gut on our wedding night was what sprang to mind, but he bit his lip to keep it from coming out. "You're welcome," he said, because that felt safe.

Stiles crouched and piled more of his clothes in the trunk, the action pulling his thin shirt tauter against his body. Derek could see the outlines of the tattoos on his back.

"That was a jest, silly," Stiles said. "You can laugh."

Derek tried to smile and hoped it didn't look pained.

Stiles slowly straightened, his eyes never leaving Derek's. "We don't have to do this, you know," he said, suddenly serious. "There's no law that says we must bed on our wedding night."

"Actually, there is," Derek said.
Stiles rolled his eyes. "All right, maybe, but that section was also conveniently left out of the marriage contract. If you'd prefer to wait—"

"No," Derek said, because if Stiles gave him a way out he was terrified he would take it.

Stiles regarded him steadily. The only thing that belied his nerves was the rapid beat of his heart, which Derek could hear even across the few feet of space separating them.

Stiles took a step closer. "Are you sure?"

Derek nodded, and then said "Yes" out loud in case Stiles doubted it.

"And do you remember what I told you the other day in the garden?" Stiles asked. "If I do anything you don't like..." He trailed off and eyed Derek expectantly.

"Tell you and you'll stop," Derek said. He didn't think it mattered. He'd let Stiles do whatever he wanted.

The edge of Stiles's mouth twitched up a little, and a bit of tension seemed to ease from his shoulders. He stepped forward again, dropped his hands to the tie at Derek's waist. His shirt collar slid to one side as he moved, and Derek could see the red bite mark still emblazoned on the pale skin there. He reached up to rub his thumb over it, then froze as he realized he had no idea if Stiles would mind the touching. He hadn't so far, but...

That thought trailed off as Stiles leaned into his touch. "You can, um, do that again. Bite me. If you want."

Was he just imagining the stronger scent of desire, or did Stiles mean it? Derek hesitated, though he didn't stop moving his thumb over the bite mark. "You... liked it?"

Stiles lowered his gaze and laughed a little, and Derek caught the way his cheeks and neck reddened. "Let's just say you should never bite me in public ever again. Unless you want everyone to know how much I like it."

_Oh._ Derek remembered the way Stiles had gasped at the wedding, how his fingers had tightened on Derek's. At the time, Derek had assumed he'd bitten too hard, that he'd hurt Stiles, but now...

Before he could think too much about it, Derek bent his head to Stiles's neck and gave into the desire he'd been fighting since the ceremony.

Stiles moaned and arched into Derek, pressing up into his teeth. His fingers found their way into Derek's hair and gripped, as though holding him in place. As if Derek would go anywhere, not when he'd been thinking about this neck for _hours._

He let himself fall into Stiles's scent, like the smell of a forest after a thunderstorm, slowly warming with the potent spice of arousal. He licked his way up Stiles's neck and bit at the tender skin there, gently this time, and then sucked at it.

Stiles whimpered and writhed, like he was trying to get closer, and Derek dropped his hands to Stiles's bucking hips and pulled him in, held him still. Even through his wrapper and both their trousers, he could feel the Stiles's hard length against his thigh. Derek bit harder to hold back his own moan at the sensation.

Stiles actually _whined._ "Oh my God, I'm going to come embarrassingly fast."
Oh no. Derek straightened, though a part of him felt bereft at taking his mouth off Stiles. "I'm sorry, I—"

Stiles blinked at him incredulously, eyes wide and dazed. "Why are you apologizing? No, why are you stopping? Stopping is bad."

Derek flinched a little at the words, the sick nerves creeping back into his gut. "But... you said..."

"I didn't mean stop," Stiles said. "I just meant I'm nineteen and a virgin and thus have absolutely no control, and you shouldn't laugh when I come in my trousers just from you biting my neck."

Was he really worried about that? Derek shook his head. "I wouldn't. I've been there."

He'd come embarrassingly fast his first time with Kate. She had laughed.

Stiles brushed his fingers along Derek's hairline and frowned. "What's wrong?"

Derek shifted uncomfortably, locked away the memories. Kate didn't belong here, not with this, not when he was trying so hard to do it right. "Nothing."

Stiles's frown deepened, and some small part of Derek thought he'd been able to hear the lie. But that wasn't possible.

Before Stiles could ask him another question, Derek nuzzled the other side of his neck, then bit him again.

Stiles grunted and tugged on Derek's hair. "Are you trying to distract me?"

Yes. "No," he murmured against Stiles's neck, and kissed the mark he'd just made. "Bed?"

Stiles stilled against him. "And just what would you like to do in bed?"

That question, Derek knew the answer to. "Whatever you want. Anything you want."

"Hm." Stiles tugged on Derek's hair again, pulling his head up. "Anything I want?" he whispered, running his nose along Derek's.

Derek's heart thudded hard, though whether in excitement or fear, he couldn't say. They were close enough to kiss, and God, how he wanted to. He wanted to feel Stiles's lips again, that heat and spark that had made him feel branded. He also desperately, desperately did not want to see Stiles's face when he realized Derek couldn't kiss worth a damn.

Should just skip the kissing, he heard Kate's voice say.

Go away, go away, go away, he thought back.

He moved away from Stiles, to get some air and break the moment, and walked to the bed. Once they were in bed, they could do... other things. And Stiles would forget about kissing, Derek was fairly certain.

With shaking hands, he untied the belt of his wrapper and slid it off, and then pulled his shirt over his head. Stiles watched with sharp scrutiny. Derek wasn't sure what it meant, but it sent a cold feeling up the back of his spine, one he resolutely pushed out of his mind. He tried to listen for Stiles's heartbeat, but his own was so erratic and unsteady it was difficult to focus on anything else.

Something's wrong. I did something wrong and I don't know what it was.
His stomach clenched, and Derek was overwhelmingly aware of the silence in the room, broken only by ragged breathing and even more ragged heartbeats.

He finished undressing and sat on the edge of the bed. Stiles hadn't moved, was still watching him with those sharp amber eyes. The sick feeling that Derek had done something wrong intensified.

Why was his mouth so dry? Derek made himself swallow a few times before he could speak. "Aren't you coming?"

Stiles laughed mirthlessly and ran a hand through his hair. "Not tonight, I don't think. In any sense."

Fear slicked the back of his throat. Derek dug his fingernails into his thighs, tried to breathe through his suddenly tight chest. "Why? What did I—"

"Because you look absolutely terrified," Stiles burst out. "Your skin's the color of chalk, for God's sake. Even I'm less pale than you right now, and that's saying something. And forgive me, but I don't get excited about bedding someone who looks two steps from vomiting all over the floor."

"I'm not scared," Derek said, and thought he did a remarkable job of keeping his voice steady.

"Oh really?" Stiles crossed his arms. "Then you want to do this? You're ready to take whatever it is that I give you? Or are you just prepared to endure it because you think that's what I want?"

"That's not it," Derek said, but his heart skipped at the words, betraying him as a liar.

Stiles couldn't hear it, not with his human ears, but his eyes narrowed all the same. "Then tell me that's what you want."

Derek dropped his gaze to his hands. He could feel his claws pushing through; he concentrated on pushing them back.

Long fingers touched his chin, bringing Derek's face back around to Stiles so their eyes met again. "Look me in the eye," Stiles said, his touch impossibly gentle, at odds with the hardness in his voice and eyes, "and say, 'Stiles, I want you to fuck me.'"

It should have been easy. All he had to do was repeat the words Stiles had just said, hope that it would chase the hardness out of his eyes. But Derek's mouth was dry, blood pounded in his ears, and the scent around him had changed, from sex and arousal to anger. Stiles was angry with him. He had ruined it, though when or how, Derek wasn't certain. He couldn't speak, couldn't make a single sound.

Stiles ran his thumb over Derek's bottom lip, his eyes searching Derek's face. Then he sighed and sat back, dropping his hand away. "That's what I thought."

Shame burned up the sides of his neck, and Derek looked away. He couldn't do it. He couldn't face Stiles like this. "I'm sorry." He grabbed blindly for his clothes, dragging his shirt back over his head, pulling his wrapper back on and tying it up. "I'm sorry," he repeated, because they were the only words in his head.

Stiles stepped closer to him, arm outstretched. "Derek—"

Derek recoiled, pulling his wrapper tighter around him, as if that would somehow protect him from Stiles's anger. "I'm sorry."
I'm sorry for ruining it; I'm sorry you're married to me; I'm sorry you got dragged into this and can't be with someone better for you; I'm sorry I can't do what you want me to.

And then he fled, like the coward he was.

Chapter End Notes

Derek tries to make himself spend his wedding night with Stiles, consenting verbally, even though he really doesn't want to. Stiles calls him on it.
It was amazing how much sheer frustration and anger could keep you awake and how much you
could accomplish when it did.

Stiles had packed his entire room, copied a few more salient bits out of the books he'd have to
leave here and packed all his papers, and was now back to weaving charm bracelets. He was
making protection charms, healing charms, things that required peace of mind, and his mind was
far from peaceful right now.

Derek was terrified of him.

If you had told him three days ago that a bloody werewolf would flinch away when Stiles tried to
touch him, Stiles would have laughed himself sick. He was a human, for pity's sake; he could
scarcely be any sort of threat.

And yet at some point, Derek had gone from enthusiastic and active participant—given the bites on
Stiles's neck—to white-faced and frightened and trying to pretend he wasn't.

Did he really think Stiles was going to just shove him on the bed and do anything when he looked
like that?

Well, apparently he had, the bloody idiot.

"We could have just talked," Stiles muttered to the charm he wove. "We didn't have to do
anything. Or the biting! The biting was good. I liked the biting, he liked the biting. I can have a
relationship based on biting!"

The charm didn't respond, but Stiles thought the twine bent encouragingly in his direction.

"My husband is scared of me," Stiles said, and laughed at the absurdity of the idea. It didn't sound
any less mad when he said it out loud. "My husband, who could break my arm with a hand, is
scared of me."

How was that even possible?

His fingers slipped in their weaving, and the charm unraveled in his hand. Stiles cursed and tossed
it back into the box; he'd gotten halfway through two of them. Any more could wait until he was
less bewildered and frustrated and angry and hurt.

Because yes, he was hurt. He'd told Derek to tell him about things, dammit. Tell him if he didn't
want to do something, tell him if he did. But either Derek didn't want to or Derek didn't trust him
or...
Or you could just go and ask what he was thinking instead of making wild guesses. Given that you don't expect to be a mind-reader in bed, why would you expect to be one now?

Stiles scrubbed his hand through his hair and blinked blearily at the clock. Dawn was rapidly approaching. He should try to get some sleep, even if he had to be up in less than two hours to start preparations for travel.

Instead, he shoved his box of materials aside, grabbed his own wrapper, and stalked into the corridor. Time be damned; he was going to find out what in Dante's hell was going through Derek's mind, if it was something Stiles had done or something else, something...

He slowed a little in his angry walk. Was Derek acting that way because he was genuinely afraid of Stiles, or because someone else had made him feel that way?

Stiles stopped and rested his hand on a wall because he suddenly couldn't breathe. What if... What if... What if...

No. No, he wasn't jumping to conclusions. He had no idea what Derek was thinking, so that's why he was asking.

Ask. Listen. Never let it be said he couldn't follow his father's advice.

Stiles reached Derek's door and knocked sharply, before it occurred to him that while he might be awake at five in the morning, that didn't mean Derek would be.

Oh well. His bloody reticence was the reason Stiles was here in the first place; Derek could damn well shake himself into wakefulness long enough to talk.

Nobody answered, so he knocked again. And then just kept knocking. Where was a convenient open window when you needed one?

The door opened and Stiles found himself faced with someone who was definitely not Derek. He was tall and broad and so dark-skinned that it took Stiles a moment to discern the actual person from the black room behind him. The easiest thing to see was the pair of gleaming yellow eyes.

His courage started to fail, and Stiles made a wild guess before it could vanish entirely. "Are you Boyd?"

The wolf folded his arms across his chest and growled in response.

Stiles couldn't decide if that was affirmative or not. He chose to assume it was. "Excellent. I'm Stiles. I'd like to speak to my husband, please."

Boyd didn't move a muscle. "His Highness is asleep."

Stiles crossed his arms to mimic Boyd, though he was fairly sure he didn't look half as imposing. "As are most sane people, but I'm afraid this can't wait."

Boyd growled again, low and threatening, and now Stiles could see fangs.

His heart jumped and Stiles gulped, but he held his ground. "All right, I see you are prepared not to let anyone into the room, and that's very good, admirable job, but as I've explained, I am actually married to Derek, unless I dreamed standing in front of a priest for two hours sweating through a new pair of breeches and getting bitten on my damn neck in front of God and everyone. And this is a somewhat private conversation, so if you could just..."
Stiles tried to ease his way around Boyd, but there really wasn't anywhere to ease. Boyd filled the entire damn doorway.

"His Highness does not wish to see you right now," Boyd said.

Stiles gritted his teeth in frustration. "Did he actually say that? Growl it? Communicate it by glaring and wiggling his eyebrows?"

Boyd continued to stare him down. "When His Highness returns in the middle of the night looking as he did, I choose to assume he does not wish to be disturbed. By anyone."

Stiles gaped a little, almost offended, but then his mind latched onto the words looking as he did and Boyd's clipped tone, just short of warning. "Wait. Do you think... Do you think I did something to him?"

Boyd said nothing in response.

*Of bloody course.* Stiles groaned, frustrated, and raked his hands through his hair. "Can you tell if I'm lying?"

Boyd nodded once.

"Good," Stiles snapped. "Then listen, because I didn't do one damned thing. He's the one who started looking like he was going to retch over the sheets and then ran off when I wouldn't get into bed with him. I know my experience is limited, but I'd like to think both partners are supposed to enjoy themselves. Just my personal opinion. And right now, I'd like to find out why he ran off, so I can maybe not do whatever I did that has my husband terrified of me."

Those yellow eyes blinked at him, and for a moment, Stiles thought Boyd might throw him halfway across the hall and slam the door.

Instead, he stepped aside with a bow. "Forgive me, Your Highness. I apologize for my rudeness."

Oh. That had worked. Stiles scuttled over the threshold into the room before Boyd could change his mind.

Boyd shut the door behind them, plunging the room into darkness. Stiles couldn't see a damn thing. "Um..."

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder and steered him through the room. Damn werewolves and their eyesight.

His legs bumped against something, a bed by the feel of it, perhaps a little harder than was strictly necessary. Stiles scowled over his shoulder, but couldn't see if Boyd gave him any reaction to it. He decided to imagine Boyd had scowled in return.

Boyd let go of him, and then a match flared to life, surprisingly bright after Stiles's eyes had half-adjusted to the pitch black room. Boyd lit a candle on the table by the bed, bowed once again to Stiles, and backed out of another door without a word.

No wonder he was Derek's valet; they probably got along quite well standing around in absolute silence.

Stiles turned back to the bed. Derek was on the other side, turned away from him, curled up into a tight little ball. At least, he assumed it was Derek; he couldn't make out anything other than the
lump under the covers.

With a muttered oath, Stiles hoisted himself onto the bed and started to crawl toward Derek.

In a flash, he found his legs swept out from beneath him, and he was flat on his back, arms pinned over his head and a half-shifted werewolf snarling over his face.

Stiles's first instinct was to send magic through his tattoos, but with two layers of cloth over them, the burn would be less effective. And besides, he deserved this a little, didn't he, for looming over Derek while he was asleep? Stiles had pulled a knife on him for the same reason.

So he took a deep breath to calm his rabbiting heartbeat and said, "Good morning, husband."

Shock and recognition warred on Derek's face, and he sat back so fast Stiles felt the wind of it more than he saw the movement. Stiles sat up, slowly, moving as he would around a skittish colt. Derek was back on his side of the bed, where he'd been sleeping, and his face was human once more.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered. "I could've—"

Stiles waved it away. "In retrospect, silently approaching a sleeping werewolf is not the smartest thing I've ever done. However, now I know you sleep almost as lightly as I do, so I will not be doing that in the future."

Derek was breathing heavily, and even in the candlelight Stiles could discern the definition of his bare chest and arms. God, he was beautiful. It was painful that they hadn't really done anything yet.

Which reminded him why he was here, though how he was expected to have a coherent conversation on no sleep, no sex, and staring at a shirtless, panting Derek, he had no idea. Because he's scared of you, you dolt, and yes, right, that.

"What are you doing here?" Derek asked again, still quiet and still not looking at him.

"I wanted to talk to you," Stiles said. "What's wrong? Why did you run off?"

He could see the way Derek drew in on himself, putting up a wall before they'd even begun to talk. "I'm sorry."

I'm sorry. Good Lord, more than half their conversations had involved those words on one side or another. Stiles was beginning to wonder if they'd ever get past it. "So you've said. But for what?"

"For making you angry. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Stiles blinked at the quiet words. "Do you know why I was angry?"

Derek fisted his hands in the covers, glaring so hard at them Stiles thought they might be set alight. Stiles reached toward him, intending to rest a hand on his leg, then held back. Derek might not want to be touched right now. "Derek," he said as gently as possible.

"Because I ruined it."

Of all the responses, that was not one Stiles had been expecting. "Ruined what?"

"Our wedding night," Derek said in a very small voice.
Stiles shifted so he was sitting against the headboard, next to Derek but nearly an arm's length away. "That's not why I was angry."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Derek stiffen slightly. "It's... not?"

Stiles resisted the urge to sigh. "Why don't you try asking me why I was angry, instead of assuming?"

Ah, damn, that had come out much harsher than he'd meant it to. Derek shrank from him, and Stiles muttered a curse. "Sorry. It's late—or early—and I haven't slept. But that's no excuse for snapping."

"You... we don't have to talk right now," Derek said. "You should rest."

That time, Stiles did sigh. "Yes, we do, and I'll sleep on the road." He reached out with his foot and nudged Derek's leg. "Now, ask me why."

Stiles waited what felt like an hour before he finally heard Derek whisper, "Why?"

Thank God, at this rate, they might be able to communicate while they were both still young. "Because I asked you what was wrong and you lied to me. You said 'nothing,' but whatever 'nothing' was, it made you look sick. And scared." Stiles never wanted to see that look on Derek's face again as long as he lived. "I don't want you to lie to me, for a number of reasons, but one of those being that if I mess up and do something to hurt you, you need to let me know so I don't do it again." He rested his hand in the space between them. "I don't want you to be scared of me."

Derek shook his head. "I'm not. Scared of you, that is."

"Really?" Stiles felt his eyebrows shoot up his forehead. "Because I have quite a bit of evidence to the contrary."

"It's not..." Derek trailed off and went back to glowering at the foot of the bed. "It doesn't matter. It's not important."

Stiles couldn't believe his ears. "Doesn't matter? I beg to differ. I'd say anything that leaves you like that is pretty damned important."

"It doesn't matter because it won't happen again. It won't," Derek said fiercely.

A headache pounded behind his eyes, a combination of irritation and a lack of sleep. He wasn't awake enough to deal with Derek's nigh-stubborn lack of communication, but he didn't want to just leave. Not until he'd gotten some kind of answers.

Stiles scooted closer and swung his leg over Derek's outstretched ones, and perched on Derek's thighs. Derek grunted and didn't meet his eyes, but didn't try to throw Stiles off. He'd take it, for the time being.

"Derek." Stiles touched Derek's chin, raising his face so they were actually looking at each other. "It matters to me because it matters to you."

"I thought this was just an... arrangement, to you," Derek said, his voice low but harsh.

Stiles's initial reaction was to snap back, but he physically crammed his hand into his mouth to stop from blurting it out. Because Derek had said to you. Meaning, perhaps, it was something different to him.
Maybe something more.

He could get his hopes up about that later, if they were ever to have a conversation that didn't end in Derek refusing to talk to him.

"That doesn't mean I don't care." Stiles failed utterly at keeping the frustration out of his voice. "I... I'd like us to get to the point that we could at least be friends. And sex would be nice too, but... if you're not comfortable with it, I understand." He rubbed his hands over his face, trying to wake himself up. "You came to my room in the middle of the night to be honest with me before we were married; why are you lying to me now?"

Derek stared at him, like Stiles was a puzzle he was trying to figure out. "I'm not lying."

"Evading, then. Hedging. Not answering a direct bloody question."

Derek looked away from him. "Why do you care?"

"Why do I—Because you know what I don't want? I don't want to end up one of those couples who hates each other after a scant few years of marriage. I don't want to be a man who just takes what he wants and damn everyone else. I don't want..." Stiles bit it back, because it was too close to his core, but he could hear his father's voice: Be as honest with him as you want him to be with you. If he was asking Derek to strip himself open, he could bloody well do the same. "I don't want to be my sire."

Derek jerked his head up to look at Stiles in disbelief, but at that point, all his anger drained from him, leaving him exhausted. His headache surged back full-force, and he slumped to the side. Derek grabbed his shoulder, but Stiles shrugged him off and stumbled off the bed. He was too damn tired to deal with this right now. "I just... I can't do this, Derek. Not if you aren't going to talk to me, not if you're just going to endure it, not if you can't even try."

Derek made an aborted motion toward him. "Stiles..."

Stiles stopped, waited. Hoped. Maybe not for a full confession of everything going on with him, but something.

Instead, Derek dropped his gaze back to the bed. "You should get some rest."

Stiles wanted to scream. He held it back by sheer force of will. "Oh believe me, I intend to."

With that, he stormed out of the room.

***

Derek was impressed with how quickly everyone managed to pack the carts and carriages and prepare the horses before morning had fully given way to afternoon. According to Captain Stilinski, it would take them nearly a week to reach the Argents' palace. Scott's wedding to Princess Allison would take place a mere two weeks after that.

The idea of spending half a month at the mercy of the Argents' hospitality made Derek's skin crawl. However, his mother had been insistent.

"You have to go with them," she'd said. "We can take care of things here. Your job is to be a good husband and a visual reminder of our treaty with the McCalls."

Derek couldn't help but notice the order she put those duties in.
And he was failing miserably at the former. Stiles had, true to his word, gotten inside a carriage and promptly fallen asleep. The thought of being stuck in a carriage for hours rankled Derek, so he rode alongside and focused on banishing the sight of Stiles sitting on top of him, hair wild and eyes exhausted, begging him to talk.

Of course, he couldn't banish it. He couldn't forget, because no matter how tired and frustrated Stiles had been, he hadn't lied once.

*I don't want to be my sire.*

A deliberate choice of words, one Derek felt he had no right to ask about. But he could guess, and it cleared up some of the confusion he'd felt upon hearing Stiles call the captain "Father." A confession offered, he imagined, partly in hopes of obtaining one in return.

Derek had tried. He'd almost said "I'm afraid of ruining this and failing my family," or "I could never please Kate," or "my father is dead because of me," or even just summing it all up with "it was my fault," but he hadn't been able to form the words. The idea of Stiles looking at him with scorn and pulling away was too much to bear.

But that look of utter hurt and exhaustion, pulling away because Derek couldn't give him anything in return, wasn't much better.

*I can't do this.*

Derek wasn't sure he could, either.

He did his best to take his mind off his failure of a marriage. The road they were taking was fairly well-traveled, but there was a good chance they would be sleeping outdoors on the full moon.

Normally that wouldn't be a problem, but they would be just past the border. Most wolves had enough control not to go mad on the full moon, but violent incidents increased the farther from the capital they got. And since they were basically one large, slow-moving caravan with several horses, more humans, and only two werewolves as protection...

It took Derek approximately ten minutes to work up the courage to approach Captain Stilinski. It was important, he knew, but he also had a very vivid memory of the captain being prepared to run him through. And if Stiles had mentioned anything to his father about the previous night, well... Derek would not be surprised if he ended the day in a ditch.

He rode his horse up so he was riding even with Captain Stilinski, who gave him an appraising look before lowering his head in deference. "Your Highness."

"Captain," Derek said by way of greeting. "Is there someone in this court who knows how to use mountain ash?"

The captain's eyebrows went up a little, but he didn't seem too surprised. "Worried about the full moon?" Then his eyes narrowed. "Should we be worried about the full moon? Her Majesty Queen Talia gave me the impression we wouldn't run into any trouble. At least, nothing that can't be handled with a few precautions."

"We shouldn't," Derek said. "But we'll be across the border, and there's a good chance we'll be outside of a town. It can't hurt to be careful."

The captain nodded. "Knowing Stiles, he has enough mountain ash to circle every tent and the entire camp besides. For the whole week. And if he doesn't, he will by the full moon."
Derek hadn't realized Stiles would be the one responsible for magical protection, but then, he was the only mage in their group. "Comes prepared, does he?"

"You have no idea." Captain Stilinski eyed him up and down. "Do we have to worry about you and your servant?"

An understandable question, and Derek respected the directness of it. He shook his head. "Boyd and I will shift, but we have enough control to maintain sense. We can stay outside the camp, patrol the borders."

"If we lay down a line of mountain ash, you won't be able to get back in."

Derek shrugged away the concern. "We'll be fine. Won't be the first full moon we've spent out here." Besides, it was doubtful they'd run into something he and Boyd couldn't handle.

Captain Stilinski inclined his head again, half-bow, half-nod. "If you're concerned about the ash, you should let Stiles know. And you should also let us both know if there's anything specific we need to be on the lookout for."

Derek nodded. "Naturally, Captain."

***

He didn't go to Stiles. At least, not immediately. Derek preferred to think of it as carefully preparing a report of everything Stiles would need to know in order to build the best magical protection for the camp. After all, Derek was one of the few familiar with this area. It would be best and most efficient if he could deliver everything in one go.

He refused to think of it as cowering.

By the time they were setting up camp for the evening, Derek finally admitted he could delay no longer. He stopped by his tent before venturing out to find Stiles, ostensibly to clean off a bit of the road dust but really to give himself another moment alone.

Naturally, that meant Boyd was waiting for him, holding a folded piece of paper out to Derek as soon as he walked into the tent.

"I was instructed to give you this, sir," Boyd said.

Derek eyed the note. "By whom?"

"I imagine the note will tell you, sir."

Derek glared at Boyd, which it had the same effect it always did (that is to say, none whatsoever), and snatched the paper. It wasn't just a note, he saw as soon as he had it in his hand. There was something else inside.

Derek unfolded it, and a brown bracelet woven with tiny red stones fell into the palm of his hand. It was only about the width of his thumbnail, and Derek couldn't fathom who would have given him a bracelet, of all things.

Then he read the note.

*Wear it, husband. For me?*

Derek's heart beat a little faster at the words, and he studied the sharply scrawled letters. This was
Stiles's handwriting. The bracelet was a gift. From Stiles.

Derek had never received a gift before. From family, yes, but not... not like this.

It took him a moment to figure out how to tie the bracelet on one-handed, but he managed. Boyd watched him placidly. "You know, I could help you with that, sir."

Derek growled around the end of the bracelet he had clamped between his teeth. "I've got it."

"Indeed you do, sir."

"Quiet, Boyd."
Stiles grudgingly got his bed and tent ready. It wasn't the first time he'd had a bloody tent to himself, oh no, but he was married now, and something grated inside him at having to sleep alone when there was a perfectly acceptable reason for him not to.

Of course, given Derek's reaction to him last night, it was probably best he had suggested they maintain separate chambers, which included separate tents. It didn't seem like Derek would be able to sleep around him at all right now. In fact, his so-called husband had been avoiding him all bloody day.

Stiles stashed his box of twine and stones in a corner of the tent—he intended to work on some other charm bracelets later—then straightened and saw Derek standing at the entrance.

Stiles jerked in shock, tripped over a blanket, and landed on his ass.

Beautiful form, he scolded himself, and ducked his head to hide the embarrassment creeping up his cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Derek said, and only sounded a little bit guilty.

Stiles raised his head to see Derek holding a hand out, presumably to help him up. At first Stiles thought about waving it away, but he wasn't going to be that petty. He took Derek's hand and did not jolt or react at all to the warm touch, and he did not think about that touch on his arm. Or his hips. Or...

"What brings you here?" Stiles asked, before his mind could run away with him much more.

Derek held out a sheet of paper, covered with neat, precise handwriting. "The captain told me you're responsible for the magical protection of the camp. This is a list of everything you might need to know in order to protect the camp properly, especially since the chance is high we'll be out in the open on the full moon."

Stiles stared at first the paper, then at Derek. "Why, Derek, I think that's the most you've ever said to me at once. I almost don't know what to do with myself."

Derek fidgeted and looked away, the tips of his ears turning pink. "I just... wanted to be thorough."

All right, so this was to be a purely business meeting. Stiles squelched the bit of disappointment in his chest and turned his full attention to the paper, scanning it to see what Derek deemed important. "How likely is it that we'll run into rogue wolves?"

"Not terribly, but there do tend to be more of them around the borders. Those closer to the city live under Mother's rule, and the Argents' hunters typically don't come quite that far out."

"At least, they didn't use to."
Until negotiations failed, Stiles heard. He went back to the list, chewing on the corner of his thumb as he did. Then he saw the word *pixies* and groaned. "Pixies? Really? Can't we just set *fire* to them all?"

Derek bit his lip, but Stiles caught the slight upturn at the corners of his mouth. "Whatever you think is best."

All right, they probably shouldn't set fire to the pixies then. Bloody annoying, the lot of them. "If they become a nuisance, I'll see if Lydia can let off a good scream. Pixies tend to stay away from a banshee. And the mountain ash should keep them from messing with any of our supplies. But I reserve the right to set fire to them if they become more than a nuisance," he added quickly.

Derek nodded. "A sound plan. Do you have enough ash for the whole camp?"

Stiles scoffed at the insinuation that he didn't. "Please. I had enough ash before we left the capital. And mistletoe. And rowan. I am prepared. If any werewolf or pixie or Sidhe or elf attempts to harm any person in this camp, they'll have to get through me and my eight thousand, five hundred and twenty-two precautions."

Derek's eyebrows raised in such a way that Stiles couldn't tell if he was amused by the rant or not. "Fortunately, I don't think we'll have to worry about all of that." Then he frowned a little. "You have... done this before, right?"

Stiles crossed his arms and harrumphed. "What do you mean, have I done this before? Of course I've done this before. I've been training for eight years, or did you forget that part?"

"Training and practice are two different things," Derek said softly.

The truth of it struck him uncomfortably, right under his heart. "All right, so maybe I haven't done protection on this level before," Stiles admitted, "but I can do it. I'm prepared. I won't let anyone get hurt."

Suddenly, Derek looked stricken. "I'm sorry. Of course. I didn't mean to imply that you would."

"You didn't..." Stiles sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. It must be a mess by now. "I know. It's all right. You're just worried about the protection of the camp as well, right?"

A brief hesitation, and then Derek nodded.

"Well, good," Stiles said, and then they lapsed into silence.

How did it always come to this? How did it always seem they ended up with mixed communication and awkward silence, stretching between them as cold and deep as the sea? Stiles wished he knew what to say to fix it, but maybe there was nothing. Maybe this was something all the words in the world couldn't fix.

Which would be a shame, because words were about all he was really good at. He hoped he wasn't supposed to be learning to read Derek's eyebrows.

Stiles held out the paper. "Thank you for bringing this. I... it'll help me. A lot."

Derek made to take it, and then shook his head. "Keep it. And ask me if you have any questions. I think everything's on there, but," he shrugged, "you never know."

Stiles folded the paper and stuck it back with his things. He wished he knew why Derek was so
tense. He wished he knew why Derek was so determined to hold himself back.

He could ask, but he didn't think he would get an answer.

"Stiles."

He looked up at the sound of his name, because for some stupid reason, the sound of his name in Derek's voice made his heart do acrobatic leaps. "Hmm?"

Derek shifted his weight and didn't quite look at him. "Did you mean it, that I could ask you for rules as well?"

Stiles shot to his feet, tried to find something to do with his hands, and then shoved them into his pockets to keep them from shaking too much. "Yes. Of course. Please. This marriage is supposed to be a partnership, right?"

Derek's face looked drawn and tight. "I, um... no kissing. Can that be a rule?"

Stiles felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. "No kissing?" he repeatedly numbly, because surely he hadn't heard Derek correctly.

Derek nodded, and he still looked terrified.

Stiles took a deep breath. All right. This wasn't ideal, no, but Derek was asking him for something. Something that would, from what it sounded like, make him more comfortable with this arrangement. And if that were the case, well, Stiles would bite his own lips off to keep from doing it. "No kissing," he said, more certainly. "Is it just... kissing on the lips, or no kissing at all?"

Derek frowned, those pale yellow-green eyes of his going deep with thought. "Just on the lips," he finally said.

Stiles smiled. "Thank heaven. I would hate to think about all the cock sucking we'd miss out on otherwise."

Derek's face turned a brilliant red, and he choked.

"Unless you don't want to!" Stiles said hurriedly. "We don't—that can go off as well, if you—"

"No." Derek shook his head vehemently. "I... eventually, that might be... good," he said, and his face turned even more red.

Embarrassed Derek was, perhaps, the most adorable thing Stiles had ever seen. Which was awful, because he had just promised not to kiss him. Ever.

Well, who knew? Perhaps if they got through this, if Derek gave him rules and Stiles followed them to the letter, Derek would eventually quit looking like he was terrified at the thought of spending any time alone together.

Stiles held out his hand. "To no kissing."

Derek folded his hand around Stiles's, gently, almost as though he were afraid it would sting him. "Thank you," he murmured.

Everything inside him melted into a puddle of goop at those two soft words of gratitude. Stiles would never kiss him again if it meant he could keep hearing Derek say something like that. "You're welcome. I—" Stiles cut himself off and looked closer at Derek's wrist. "You're wearing
the bracelet," he finished inanely.

Derek pulled his arm back and covered his wrist, looking almost shy about it. "You gave it to me," he said, as if that were reason enough.

He must be smiling like a damned idiot right now. Stiles rocked back on his heels and clasped his hands behind his back so that he wouldn't lurch forward and hug Derek. "Good," he said. "That's... good."

Derek nodded and backed toward the tent's opening, but Stiles thought he saw another smile. "Good night, Stiles."

"Good night, Derek."

Stiles waited until he'd heard Derek's footsteps fade before he danced around his tent.

***

The next morning before they broke camp, a stoically silent Boyd delivered Stiles a note. Before he even got it open, Stiles saw the same precise handwriting as had been on the report Derek had given him.

He opened it so fast he nearly ripped the paper.

*Thank you for the bracelet, husband. And your understanding.*

- D

Stiles felt the dopey grin split his face. "Wait right here," he said to Boyd.

Boyd stared at him. "I have duties."

"Just five minutes!"

***

They had been on the road for nearly an hour when Derek saw Boyd riding up to him, a scowl creasing his face. "Where have you been?" Derek asked.

Boyd's response was to thrust a folded piece of paper in his direction. "For you, sir."

Derek's heart flipped over, and any irritation he'd had at Boyd for vanishing for so long evaporated like fog under the midday sun. He snatched the paper and opened it with shaking hands. Sure enough, Stiles's messy script scrawled across the page.

*You are most welcome, husband. And your wish is my command. After all, I am magic. Anything I can do for you, I would be happy to.*

*(I'm glad you like the bracelet.)*

Derek held the note a little closer to him. He could smell Stiles on it.

Next to him, Boyd gave a longsuffering sigh. "I should like to remind you, sir, that I am a valet, not a courier."

Derek felt heat creep its way up the back of his neck, and he shoved the note into a pocket of his
jacket. "I know, Boyd."

"Though notes are an excellent way to get to know each other." Boyd's face softened, and he touched a hand to his chest, where Derek knew he had a locket with Erica's picture. It reminded him what Boyd had lost since the Argents had attacked. "Don't worry. We'll find her," Derek said.

"I know, sir."

***

He wasn't going to write Stiles another note. He wasn't. Responding so quickly would make him seem overeager, and he didn't want that. Whenever they took breaks, Derek did write, but letters to his mother and sisters. He also drew, and tucked those drawings under the rest of his belongings, next to the two notes Stiles had given him.

That night, he returned to his tent after checking the camp perimeter to find another note folded neatly on top of his pillow.

Derek opened it, and was pleasantly surprised to see another bracelet fall out, this one woven with tiny green stones in a slightly different pattern.

_To match your eyes, husband._

Derek snorted, but he tied the bracelet on next to the one he already wore and tucked the note in with the other two.

***

Stiles was riding beside Scott when Boyd appeared, looking moderately disgruntled and holding a note. Stiles didn't even bother to disguise his excitement when Boyd handed it to him.

Scott raised an eyebrow. "And just what is that?"

Stiles held up the note. "From Derek."

Scott smirked. "Started in with that epic love poetry, have you?"

"Something to that effect." Stiles unfolded it to read what Derek had written.

_If you are to be wooing me with jewelry, husband, you should know my favorite color is black._

Stiles choked on a laugh. "Of course it is."

Scott peered over his shoulder and frowned. "That's remarkably less risqué than I thought it would be. How are you wooing him with jewelry? Do you have a forge hidden in the carriage?"

"No, it's not quite that," Stiles said. "They're charms. I don't know if I've any black stones, though, or what they could be used for..."

Scott's eyebrows shot up his forehead. "Multiple charm bracelets?"

Stiles hesitated. He hadn't told anyone about the message he'd received from Lydia, mostly because he hadn't any idea what it meant. Something in his face must have given him away, however, because Scott leaned forward and whispered, "Stiles, what do you know?"
"Nothing!" Stiles whispered back, and looked around to make sure there were no werewolves within hearing distance. Then again, he wasn't sure what hearing distance was. Damn. He lowered his voice more. "The Sidhe sent me a message the day we were married. 'Protect your wolf.'"

Scott glanced around them, as if looking for Derek as well, and then ducked his head closer to Stiles's again. "Protect him from what?"

"I have no bloody idea. The Sidhe were as loquacious as usual." Stiles tried not to grumble about it too loud. The messages could be helpful, and Lydia herself was an asset for the court, but it was frustrating to receive a message and have to figure out all the hows and wherefores on his own.

Scott nodded sympathetically. "So you're making him charms for protection."

Stiles dragged a hand through his hair. "I have no idea how to protect a wolf, but I'll do my best. And besides... it seems to work. I think he might actually like being wooed, and God knows I like doing it."

"How many bracelets are you going to make?" Scott asked.

Stiles grinned. "As many as he'll wear."

***

Derek was inordinately pleased to find another note and bracelet on his pillow that evening. The next night, he knew, they would be staying in an inn, and he wasn't entirely sure if Stiles would leave him something.

He wondered if it was pathetic of him to be so excited about a scrap of paper and some damn bracelets after just three days. They hadn't really seen each other, hadn't really spoken in person while traveling, but with the notes and the bracelets... it felt like being courted. Since they hadn't had a courtship at all, Derek was delighted they were engaging in something of the sort.

He picked up the bracelet to examine it. The rope was black this time, with tiny white stones, and his heart made the most ridiculous pattering noise at the sight.

He'd told Stiles his favorite color was black. And now his bracelet was black.

Derek read the note.

As I said before, your wish is my command, husband dear. As black as your hair, your brows, and your scowl. And white for your smile and your heart.

The words were absolutely absurd. And yet, Derek found himself pressing his face in his pillow so as not to show just how stupidly happy he was to read them.
Stiles gaped at Scott. "We're going to be doing what now?"

"Sharing a room," Scott repeated. "You're married. It's perfectly appropriate to share a room with your spouse."

"But... Scott." Stiles racked his mind for how to explain this. "We've been doing so well. He doesn't look afraid. He wears the bracelets. I saw him smile yesterday. Actually smile, Scott, with teeth."

It had been beautiful, and Stiles wanted to fold the moment up and put it next to the sparse, neatly written notes he had stashed in his charm box.

"And you think that sharing a room will," Scott raised an eyebrow questioningly, "jeopardize that somehow?"

"Yes."

Scott sighed. "I would get you out of it if I could, but there isn't enough room for all of us. I'm sharing with Mother, for pity's sake."

"But—"

"Stiles," Scott said, with a tone of patient exasperation. "Your only other option is sleeping out in the carriages. Spend the night on the floor, if you must, but there's nothing I can do about getting you two separate rooms."

With that, Scott turned his horse toward the stable and rode away. All Stiles could do was gape after him.

They had been doing well, with the notes and the bracelets. Derek wore them, Derek wrote him back, Derek didn't run the other way when Stiles approached. The space they were giving each other, the courtship before hopping into anything more—it was all, Stiles thought, a very good idea.

Derek's notes were never terribly elaborate, but there was always a bit of sly humor there. And for his own part, Stiles didn't feel like he had to watch what he said as much, didn't feel like he stumbled over his words. He had no desire to mess up a good thing, not when the alternative was Derek looking like he had their wedding night.

That did it. Stiles would sleep on the floor, he would keep his hands to himself, and he would absolutely not make any jokes or innuendos. He would be a gentleman and give Derek all the space he could possibly need.
He could do this.

Of course, that determination lasted until he reached the room—their room—and saw Derek, wearing only shirtsleeves and trousers, sitting on the floor and sketching on a piece of paper with charcoal. It seemed he'd been doing it awhile; paper was scattered over the floor.

Stiles picked one up, mostly to give himself something to look at that wasn't Derek's broad shoulders. "What's this?"

Derek jerked his head up, and his eyes went wide and his face whitened like Stiles hadn't seen since they'd left. He grabbed for the paper Stiles held. "Nothing. It's nothing. Sorry, I didn't hear you—"

Stiles heard him, he did, and he knew he should give it back, but his eyes dropped to what he was holding and he couldn't.

It was a sketch of him and Scott, one of the days on the road that they'd taken their midday break. They were sitting together, laughing, Scott trying to stop Stiles from mussing up his hair. Stiles could hear it, in his head: their easy jokes, Scott's muttered "Stop it!" while fighting a grin. They looked happy, like they were still at home, still kids, like they didn't have any of the responsibilities they both now carried.

Derek pulled it out of his hands.

Stiles let him, some part of his mind still stunned because it was good, the other part reminding him that it was Derek's in the first place. "Did you draw that?"

Derek shoved the sketch back in with the others he'd hidden. "It's nothing."

Nothing? Stiles wanted to shake him. "It's amazing."

Derek froze where he crouched and slowly looked up at Stiles in blatant disbelief. "You... aren't lying."

"Have I ever lied to you?" Stiles knelt beside him. "Can I see more of them?"

Derek looked so surprised it made Stiles's heart ache. "You really want to?"

Stiles nodded, and then said "Yes" aloud so Derek could hear the truth of it.

Derek eased the sketches back out and tentatively sat back, resting his hands on his knees. Stiles could see the way his hands clenched, the tension that ran from his fingers all the way up to his shoulders, like Derek was guarding himself against a perceived attack.

Stiles paged through the sketches. There was one of his father sitting astride his horse, another one of Scott, one of Queen Melissa and Lydia riding together. Boyd, standing with his arms crossed and glowering. Another of Stiles, brow knit in concentration and drawing his thumb across his lip. Lydia again, walking primly next to the carriages. The charm bracelets on Derek's arm, which made Stiles happier than he cared to admit. A sketch of Queen Melissa and Stiles's father, the soft expressions on their faces showing that neither thought anyone was looking.
They were all so detailed, so lifelike, that it made his breath catch. "When did you... how long have you..." For once in his life, Stiles was at a loss for words. "Derek, these are fantastic."

Derek ducked his head, but not before Stiles caught the way his ears pinked.

That was something Stiles needed to see more of. He continued, "The details on these... when did you have time for this?"

"Just whenever we rested. Or in my tent at night."

Stiles couldn't believe it. "How long have you been drawing like this?"

"Since I was little," Derek said, like he was admitting a dark secret.

"Why were you trying to hide it?"

Another shrug, and Derek once again hunched in on himself. "It's not a very good hobby for someone like me to have."

Stiles gaped. "What idiot told you that?"

"Peter. And Jason," Derek mumbled, so quietly Stiles almost didn't hear him. "And Kate."

Kate. The Argent princess. Derek hadn't mentioned her before, at least not by name, but Stiles had surmised she was the one with whom he'd been intimate. He wasn't surprised to hear Peter and
Jason were morons, but Kate had been betrothed to him. How could she possibly have treated him that way?

Stiles wrapped his hand around Derek's and squeezed it reassuringly. "Lying fools, the lot of them. You're amazing. You should never stop."

Derek finally raised his eyes to meet Stiles's, and the sheer vulnerability there rendered Stiles breathless. Derek looked afraid to believe him.

Stiles had to restrain himself from jumping at Derek to kiss him until that look left his face. He wasn't going to break his promise just because Derek was staring at him like Stiles had given him a gift after a lifetime without them and he was afraid it would be yanked away.

Instead, he brought Derek's hand to his lips and brushed a kiss across his knuckles. "I mean it," Stiles said, even though Derek had to know he wasn't lying. "Do you mind if I show Scott the one of him and me?"

Derek's eyes widened a little more and he shook his head vehemently. "No. Not now, please."

Stiles squeezed Derek's hand and hoped his disappointment wasn't obvious. "All right. I won't. But, if you ever change your mind, I would like to show him. I think he'd like to see them."

Derek dropped his gaze to their hands and said nothing.

Well, at least they'd talked for a little bit, and Stiles now knew Derek was a fantastic artist. He would count that as a win for the night.

He reluctantly released Derek's hand and stood. "I've got some other things to bring in, but I'll be right back."

He left Derek sitting on the floor, staring at the sketches for a long moment before picking them up like they were something precious, instead of something to be ashamed of.

***

Derek sat in the room for a long time and reflected on his conversation with Stiles, absently rubbing his thumb over the bracelets on his arm. He liked the texture of them and how they looked against his skin. He liked that Stiles had made them for him, liked that looking at them reminded him of the notes. And, if pressed, he might admit that he liked the way his heart beat faster when he thought of phrases like to match your eyes and for your smile and your heart.

Stiles liked his eyes.

Stiles liked his smile.

Stiles liked his sketches.

Derek was beginning to think there was a chance Stiles might like him.

It felt like far too much to hope for, and the sane part of his mind reminded him that Kate had been nice as well, in the beginning. But he had been the one to give her little gifts and tokens of affection. She'd never bothered in return.

He ought to stop comparing them. Kate may have said human men were brutal, but so far Stiles had been everything but. He'd been gentle, and kind, and funny, and understanding. He made
bracelets whose only purpose seemed to be as gifts for Derek. After Derek had said no kissing, Stiles hadn't tried. Their only kiss since then had been one on the hand, just now, and that wasn't even bending the guideline as Derek had specified only kisses on the mouth.

Maybe he could... maybe they could...

No. A part of Derek balked at the thought. Hadn't he learned the hard way people weren't always what they seemed? Stiles might be sweet now, but then again, Kate had been, too. And Stiles had said this was just an arrangement. He might not want anything more.

No, wait. He did want sex. Of that, Derek could be fairly certain.

Then he heard Stiles's sullen mutter in his head. Why don't you ask me instead of assuming?

Maybe if he asked Stiles what he wanted in bed, then Derek could do it. And he wouldn't mess it up.

*Even if he agrees, he'll stop it if he doesn't think you want to,* a voice in the back of his head reminded him.

That... that was all right. Derek just had to make sure Stiles understood, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he wanted to try.

Of course, his courage failed him completely the moment Stiles walked back in the room, dropped a trunk to the ground, and said, "All right, I'll take the floor."

Derek stared at him, dumbfounded. "There's a bed." *Wow, absolutely brilliant statement, Derek.*

"Yes, a bed which I am ceding to you," Stiles said. "I told Scott we weren't ready for that, but did he listen to me? Of course not. He never listens to me, except on the rare occasions where it's life or death, but you would think he'd extrapolate that to regular occasions as well. I promise, you'll still have—"

"We could sleep together," Derek said.

Stiles cut off his rambling explanation and gaped at Derek as though he were sprouting an extra head. "I—" Stiles began, then appeared to think better of it. "But you... there was space, we agreed on space, and I'm not asking you to give up space because the damned inn doesn't have enough rooms for—"

Derek made himself stand up and ask, "Would you like to share a bed?"

It came out, perhaps, a bit more forcefully than he intended, almost a growl. Stiles took a step back and blinked. "Um... do you want to share a bed? Because my stance on the whole 'doing things you don't want to because you think I want them' thing hasn't changed. And you don't exactly look like you want to."

*Damn it.* Derek rubbed a hand over his face. This wasn't going well. He was messing it up. Again. Words were difficult.

But then, Stiles hadn't actually answered his question. So Derek asked again. "Would you like to share a bed?"

"Well, theoretically, yes, but—"
Yes. That was good enough for him.

Derek crossed the room and picked Stiles up. Stiles squawked indignantly. "What are you—"

Derek carried him to the bed and carefully deposited him there. Then Derek lay back next to him and grabbed Stiles's hand. He was probably squeezing a little tighter than he needed to, but he didn't want Stiles to get up and walk away.

There. They were both in bed. That had been simple enough.

Stiles wiggled his hand. "I, um, hm. Would I be wrong if I guessed that was your way of saying, 'Yes, Stiles, I would like to share a bed with you tonight'?

Derek kept his eyes on the ceiling and shook his head.

"Is that a 'no, I don't want to share a bed with you tonight', or a 'no, you're not wrong'?

Derek rubbed his thumb over Stiles's where their hands were clasped. "No, you're not wrong."

"Oh." Stiles sounded surprised and—pleased, perhaps? "All right. But, um, I do still have my waistcoat and boots on, and the lanterns are still burning, so if you could just—"

Derek nodded and let go of his hand. Stiles scrambled out of bed and shed his boots and clothes with surprising efficiency, stripping down to his drawers. Derek sat up to take off his own shirt and trousers and toss them to the floor, and Stiles doused the lanterns. The room dimmed, but didn't darken, and soon Derek's eyes adjusted to the light of the nearly full moon pouring through the window.

Stiles crawled back into bed and flopped on his back next to Derek, a line of warmth mere inches from his body, rapid heartbeat and slightly shallow breathing filling Derek's ears. Nervous. Of course Stiles was nervous; Derek was nervous. He'd gotten Stiles into bed with him, and now he had no idea how to proceed. Awkwardness settled between them once again.

"So. Um. How have you been?" Stiles asked.

How have you been. Good God, of all the questions for him to hear from the man who was supposed to be his husband. Derek mentally slapped himself in the head. "Good," he said, and hoped his voice didn't betray his nerves. "You?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stiles nod. "Good. Good."

All right, now or never. Derek swallowed. "What do you like?"

Stiles turned his head to look at Derek. "What do I... what? Um... horses, I guess..."

Derek groaned inwardly. He was terrible at this. "No, that's not—I meant in bed." He felt the heat start to creep up his cheeks and had to force the next question out. "What would you like me to do to you in bed?"

Stiles stiffened. "Derek, we don't have to—we've been over this. You shouldn't make yourself do something you don't—"

"It's not that," Derek said as quickly as he could, because if he waited he would lose any courage he'd roused. He closed his eyes and threaded his fingers through Stiles's. Stiles had been honest with him; this admission was the least Derek could do in return. "With Kate... I wasn't very good. I
couldn't please her."

Stiles squeezed his fingers, but, amazingly, didn't say a word.

Derek took what courage he could from it and continued. "I thought if you told me exactly what you wanted, then maybe... I'd be able to please you. I would like that," he finished quietly, so quietly he wasn't sure Stiles would have heard him.

Stiles pulled their linked hands to his mouth and kissed the back of Derek's. "All right. But..." He took a deep breath and turned to face Derek. "I don't have much experience. To know everything I like. Or don't. So," he swallowed hard, "if I don't like something, or ask you to stop—"

"I'll stop," Derek said.

He saw the curve of a smile behind their hands, and Stiles shook his head. "I know you will. But don't run away. We can't figure anything out if you keep running." He tightened his grip on Derek's fingers. "Promise me."

Oh. A tightness that had been twisting in Derek's chest unwound at that. Stiles didn't want to be rid of him. Derek nodded solemnly. "I promise."

The smile grew wider. "Good."

Derek pulled their hands over to him, unlaced their fingers so he could brush a kiss over the pulse point in Stiles's wrist. He felt the heartbeat jump under his lips, galloping like a horse. "Is this all right?" he whispered into Stiles's skin.

He kept his eyes on Stiles, who nodded. "Yes, that's good. I like... that. The kissing. And the licking. And the biting. Those are all good things."

Derek kissed Stiles's wrist again, then gave in to that which he'd been wanting to do since the first night he'd seen Stiles's tattoos: he tentatively licked his way up one of the twisting blue lines, from Stiles's wrist halfway up his forearm.

Stiles gasped, and it melted into a moan. "Good. Very good. You can keep doing that. And touching. In fact, we should be touching a lot more."

The idea of touching Stiles more was almost enough to have Derek leaping onto him to press their bodies together, to feel Stiles warm and solid beneath him, to bury himself in the smell of the forest. He wanted it, more than he could remember wanting anything else.

Derek made himself stop and think, mouthing at the soft skin at the bend of Stiles's arm as he did. Then he turned onto his side and nudged Stiles into doing the same, and tugged Stiles until his back was pressed to Derek's chest, ass against Derek's cock.

He ran his nose up the back of Stiles's neck and over the shell of his ear. "How's this?" Derek whispered.

The shudder that ran through Stiles more than answered his question. "Good. So good. Touching is very good."

Derek kissed the back of Stiles's neck and ran his palm over Stiles's chest, listening to his breathing and his heartbeat, trying to determine what Stiles liked the best. Then he remembered he was supposed to be asking. "Where do you want me to touch you?"
Stiles let out a strangled laugh. "That should be fairly obvious."

Derek sank his teeth into Stiles's shoulder and scratched fingernails down the center of his chest, an act rewarded by Stiles arching into him with a moan and reaching back to dig fingers into Derek's hair. "Oh my God, do that again."

"Scratching or biting?"

"Both."

Derek obliged, and Stiles whined and wiggled against him. Derek buried his face in Stiles's back and breathed in; he smelled so good, like a spring storm, warming slowly with arousal. No scent of nerves now, no anger, just... desire.

He kissed the center of Stiles's back to hide his smile, and peppered more kisses over the dark tattoos there. He pulled back just far enough to look, to trace the patterns weaving over Stiles's back to where they all met in an interlacing knot just above the small of his back. The ink glowed faintly under his touch, and Derek watched in fascination.

"Derek," Stiles murmured, a thread of urgency in his voice.

The sound sent a warm bolt down his spine, and Derek almost involuntarily thrust his hips against Stiles's ass. He stopped himself, though; he didn't know if Stiles would like it; Kate had never—

Stiles ground against him hard enough to drive every thought from his mind, hard enough to have stars bursting behind his eyes, hard enough that Derek groaned helplessly and slipped his arm back around Stiles to keep him close.

"I take it you liked that?" Stiles said.

Derek could hear the self-satisfied smirk in his voice. "Not sure," he said. "You should try it ag—"

Stiles did, rolling his hips, and all the parts of Derek's mind used for words melted and dripped out his ears. He cursed in a whisper against Stiles's back, and Stiles rolled against him again, sending another shot of pleasure up his spine and leaving him shivering.

Derek grabbed Stiles's hip and held it in place, because otherwise he was going to start rutting like a goddamned animal, and he was supposed to be doing what Stiles wanted.

It was very, very difficult to remember that with Stiles's scent in his nose, Stiles writhing against him and making complaining noises like Derek was the worst person in the world for holding him still.

Derek slowly straightened his fingers, moving his hand from Stiles's hip toward his groin, stopping the moment his fingers brushed Stiles's cock, hard under the thin material of his drawers. It took another few seconds for Derek's brain and his mouth to get words out. "What do you want?"

"I want you to touch me, Derek, please, fuck." Stiles whined. "You should be tossing me off right now, not teasing me, just—"

"Show me how you want me to do it."

That was apparently all the invitation Stiles needed, because he immediately shoved down his drawers, grabbed Derek's hand, and wrapped it around his hardened cock. He let out a sound perilously close to a sob. "God, your hand, you feel so good, Derek, please, just, please—"
Derek stroked him slowly, just to relish in the hot slide of skin against skin, to hear the little noises Stiles made, to enjoy the pinpricks of pain from where Stiles's fingernails dug into Derek's forearm. He ran his thumb over the head, around it, across the slit where pre-come leaked out, used it to slick his way as he stroked.

Stiles tightened his grip and cried out. "Fuck, Derek, please, more, I need more, please..."

The words fell off into a rambling begging, and the sound of it was nearly enough to have Derek spilling into his drawers. He did as Stiles asked, stroking him harder, faster, and Stiles let go of his arm to bury his fingers into Derek's hair once again.

"Yes, good, perfect, ohmygod that's perfect, Derekderekderekderekderek..."

Derek had no idea how arousing it could be to hear his name murmured like a litany, a prayer, to hear Stiles at the point where Derek's name was the only one he knew. He wanted more, wanted it all, wanted to hear it again and again...

Stiles groaned and dug his fingers into Derek's scalp. "I can't—Derek, I'm going—"

Derek sank his teeth into Stiles's neck and Stiles came with a shout, sobbing Derek's name as he did.

Derek kept stroking him as Stiles shuddered through the aftereffects of his orgasm, inhaling deeply, emblazoning every nuance of this smell on his memory. This was his new favorite scent, Derek decided: Stiles after he'd come, the way the sharp, hot scent of arousal faded into the warmer smell of satisfaction, the calm of the forest after a summer storm.

He licked the indentations his teeth had left and finally released his grip on Stiles's softening cock. Derek turned slightly, just enough to get his hand—still covered with come—on his own cock, which was practically begging for release. It only took a spare handful of strokes before he spent himself as well.

As soon as he felt halfway steady again, Derek pulled away. Stiles, who'd relaxed his grip on Derek's hair, tightened it again. "What're you doing? Where're you going?"

"I'm getting a towel for us," Derek said.

"Oh." Stiles let go. "That's acceptable, then."

Derek couldn't help but chuckle, and he got out of bed to clean himself off at the basin. Surreptitiously, just before he cleaned off his hand, he smelled it, to memorize the scent of him and Stiles, together. And now that might be his new favorite scent.

Stiles shifted around on the bed and flopped at the mattress. "Derek, I'm cold, come baaaaaack."

Derek ducked his head to hide his smile and returned to the bed with a damp cloth. Stiles hissed the moment it touched his skin. "Cold cold cold cold."

"Would you rather have it dry there?" Derek asked.

Stiles grinned up at him dopily. "I'll quit complaining if you promise to warm me up."

Derek tossed the cloth aside and got back under the covers. Stiles immediately snuggled up next to him. "Mmmm, warm."
Derek felt the smile tick up at the corners of his lips. "Was that good?" He swallowed hard, hated how desperate his voice sounded. *Did you like it? Did I please you?*

Stiles laughed and patted Derek's chest. "Good. Good is an *understatement*. It was *great*. Amazing. Wonderful. You are so much better than my hand."

Derek let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, and rested his hand over the one Stiles had on his chest. Some part of him that had been pacing, tense and whining since before he'd even married, finally curled up and quieted.

He'd pleased his husband. Maybe Derek wouldn't ruin everything after all.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, the art in this chapter is from the amazingly talented [geeky-sova](https://geeky-sova.tumblr.com)! I seriously squealed over her Lydia, you guys. There might have been full-out flailing. :-}
Stiles all but floated down the stairs the next morning. He'd awakened alone, but it was difficult to feel too bereft when last night had been so otherwise amazing. Besides, Derek had likely gone to spar or talk to Boyd or something of the sort. Maybe he preferred rising early in the mornings.

As Stiles did not, that did not bode well for their marriage.

The inn's common room was bustling when Stiles entered, with half their party breaking their fast and the other half streaming in and out with trunks and bags. He found Scott at the table nearest the roaring hearth, which chased away the chill of the spring morning.

Stiles dropped into the seat next to his brother, and Scott slid a plate of bread, cheese, and bacon to him.

The smell was heavenly. Stiles moaned. "I love you. Will you marry me?"

Scott didn't even look up from his plate. "You're already married, I'm betrothed, and we're brothers, anyway."

Stiles shoved a piece of bacon into his mouth. "You're my favorite brother."

"I'm your only brother," Scott said. "And my only request is that, in exchange for saving you this food, you tell me absolutely nothing about how you got that mark on your neck."

Stiles grinned. "I'm not a virgin anymore."

Scott snatched a piece of bacon off the plate. "So I gathered. One more word and I'll take the whole plate back."

"One more word of what?"

Stiles looked up to see his father standing over them and nearly choked. Teasing his brother with tales of his bedroom exploits was one thing; his father was something else entirely. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Uh-huh." Father looked skeptically from him to Scott. "Well, I suggest you tell 'nothing' to shave, because the back of your neck looks like you dragged sandpaper across it."

Heat raced up the side of his cheeks, and Stiles buried his face in his hand. Next to him, Scott laughed, the traitor.

"Regardless," Father took a seat at the bench, "I had some things I wanted to review with you both before we depart."

Stiles recognized that tone. He looked up, embarrassment momentarily forgotten. "What kind of things?"

Father pulled out a map and spread it on the table. "Judging by the road and how fast we've been traveling, we'll be able to make it to the Argents' palace by tomorrow afternoon. However, that means we'll be spending the full moon in the open."
Stiles examined the map and the noted wilderness between them and the Argents' palace. Not only would they be out in the open, they would be about as far from any assistance as they could be.

"Did Prince Derek speak to you about what we could expect?" Father asked.

Stiles nodded. "I still have the list in my pack, if you'd like to read it. But as long as we stay about here," he pointed to a clearing on the map, "that should keep us away from the most territorial creatures. It looks like we'll be far enough north we shouldn't run into pixies."

Scott shuddered. "That's good to know."

"Still, best to keep on our toes on that account," Father said. "You know they tend to travel."

"While pixies are annoying, and I do look forward to setting them on fire, one good shriek from Lydia ought to keep them away," Stiles said.

Father frowned at the map. "True, but if there are any werewolves in the area, they're more likely to be drawn by the shriek than deterred."

"Is it really that likely we'll run into rogue werewolves?" Scott asked.

"It's not likely, but it's a possibility, especially considering where we'll be." Stiles realized he'd quoted Derek's notes almost directly, and his heart pattered a little at the thought. "So I'll put down the ash as soon as we're settled for the night."

Father nodded. "Good. Prince Derek said he and Boyd would run the perimeter tonight, help us out on that front."

Stiles blinked at the news. "Wait, he did? What? When?"

"The first day we were on the road." Father raised an eyebrow. "Will that be a problem?"

Would that be a problem? Lydia's warning came back to him with startling clarity, and Stiles almost jumped out of his seat. "Once I put down the ash barrier, he won't be able to get back into camp." He waved a hand toward the door. "They'll be stuck outside all night!"

"I know that. So does His Highness." Now Father's look had shifted to one of patient explanation. "He's a soldier, Stiles, and not to mention just as dangerous as anything out there. He'll be fine."

He knew that logically. Father was right. But the idea of Derek being trapped outside the camp all night made Stiles feel cold, despite the hearth burning not ten feet away. "But what if he's not? What if they need help? What if—"

"They'll stay close enough to camp that guards can assist them if necessary," Father said.

"And couldn't you break the circle and seal it again?" Scott said.

Stiles opened his mouth and closed it again. He could, yes, but the difference of magic required to form a circle from scratch and to reseal a broken one was significant. But explaining that to Scott and his father would be an exercise in futility.

The point was, he could do it. If it were necessary.

He really hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

"Stiles?" Scott prompted him.
"Yes," Stiles answered. "Yes, I could. Though I'd really prefer not to have to."

He would prefer not to sleep alone tonight. He would really prefer not to spend the hours from dusk till dawn worrying if he would be a widower in the morning. But it appeared he'd have to do a lot of things he didn't prefer to today.

"Well, God willing, we won't have to rely on any backup scenarios." Father stood and bowed politely to Scott. "Your Majesty. Stiles. We depart in three hours."

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For the first time on their trip, Derek nudged his horse toward the front of their caravan so he could ride next to Stiles.

He hadn't wanted to get out of bed this morning, not with Stiles sound asleep and snuggled against him, the smell of peace and contentment and sex settled over his own cold forest scent. It had taken an act of superhuman will to get up to train and check on Boyd. Derek had a feeling Boyd had been looking into any information on Erica's disappearance, but he knew better than to ask too many questions about it.

Now, Derek was just hoping the fragile alliance he and Stiles had formed would remain in the harsh light of day.

He offered Stiles a tentative smile as soon as he got close, and Stiles whirled on him. "Did you really tell Father you would spend tonight outside camp?"

Derek blinked at the unexpected vehemence of the question. "Yes?"

Stiles grunted and glared down at his hands, where he was twisting the reins into knots. "Tonight. On a full moon. In the wilderness. Are you actually mad?"

Derek tried to fathom where Stiles's opposition to this idea had come from, and couldn't begin to. "I've spent many full moons out in the wilderness. And don't you think everyone in camp will feel better knowing that there aren't any werewolves stuck inside the circle with them?"

Stiles flailed his arms toward Derek. "That's not the point! The point is that you're going to be stuck outside camp for nearly twelve hours, sharing the woods with God only knows what."

"I gave you a list," Derek reminded him.

Stiles gave him a flat look. "Yes. I'm aware. I've memorized it and that's part of why I'm worried." A dull pink flush covered his cheeks, and he went back to staring sullenly ahead.

Worried. Derek stared at him. "You're worried."

"Yes."

"About me."

"Yes, you dolt. I'm actually fond of you, in case you hadn't noticed."

None of it was a lie. The irritated confession warmed Derek almost as much as their notes had. "There's nothing out there I can't handle," Derek said, making his voice gentle. "I'm a soldier. This is what I do."

"I know. I know. Stiles sounded frustrated. "But...I just wish you'd stay in camp tonight so I'd
"Know you'd be safe."

"And will you be staying in camp, safe?" Derek asked. "Or will you be patrolling the circle and defending the camp by magic?"

Stiles opened his mouth to argue, then closed it and sent a mutinous glare in the other direction. "That's my duty."

"Just as protecting the camp on the other side is mine," Derek said.

Stiles wound one hand back through his reins, and then grabbed Derek's wrist with the other. "Promise me you'll be safe, all right? Promise you won't do anything foolish."

Derek looked down at his wrist, and then at the plea in Stiles's eyes. "I promise," he said, and then he lifted his wrist to his lips so he could kiss Stiles's knuckles. "Nothing foolish."

Derek relished the way Stiles's heart beat a little faster, the way his amber eyes finally softened. He wanted to stay here for the rest of the journey, perhaps flirt a little more, take the chance to truly talk to Stiles.

Of course, that was when he heard the buzzing noise.

He let go of Stiles and looked to the west, scanning the tree line for the source.

"Derek?" Stiles asked. "What is it? Do you hear something?"

"Lots of somethings." Derek kept searching, but he couldn't see anything. "And they're heading this way fast."

The noise grew louder, and Derek saw the moment Stiles heard it too. "Oh, hell. Pixies."

A dark line rose out of the trees, like a flock of crows. But these weren't birds. They were smaller, faster, and far more vicious.

Derek cursed and drew his sword, and Stiles raised his fingers to his lips and let out an ear-piercing whistle, one long burst and two short ones.

A half second later, Derek heard an answering whistle from both in front and behind them, followed by the sound of soldiers arming themselves. And not a moment too soon, because then the pixies were upon them.

Derek immediately dismounted and swung his sword, bisecting two pixies heading straight for him and Stiles. A jet of flame arced past his head, so close Derek swore he could feel it singeing his ear. It immolated another three pixies swarming their way.

He spun on his heel and saw Stiles, one arm raised and wreathed with fire.

"I thought you only had small magic!" Derek shouted over the buzzing.

Stiles blasted another pair of pixies going for the horse. "I said mostly small magic."

Well, that was unexpected good fortune. Derek went back to hacking away at the attacking pixies.

It wasn't that pixies were difficult to kill. They weren't. Their spindly limbs and bodies were exceedingly fragile, they didn't heal, and they were small enough—the length of a man's hand—that one good shot could take them out.
The problem lay in how damn many there were. They were viciously territorial, attacking anything and anyone who came too close to their lands, and their tiny teeth and claws could strip a horse in under an hour. And when one swarmed, all of them did, and there was no way to tell if a hive was in the hundreds or the thousands.

Because they would just keep coming.

Derek wished bitterly for a spear or a staff, but both of his were back with the other weapons. He was proficient with a sword, but the longer weapons were his greatest strength.

One of the pixies got past his guard and sank its teeth into his neck. Derek snarled, grabbed it, and flung it away as hard as he could. But he'd lost his rhythm, which meant other pixies had spotted the opening and started swarming. The bites and scratches healed as quickly as they formed, but it still hurt.

He swung his sword one-handed with more force than finesse, swatting away the pixies diving at him with his free hand. The buzzing of their wings was driving him mad, and on top of the sounds of fighting and frightened animals, Derek felt his teeth start to lengthen. He did his best to hold the change in check. He did not need to be a wolf right now.

Another jet of flame blasted a hole in the dark cloud of pixies surrounding them, but more just took their place. "Derek, hold your breath!" Stiles shouted.

Derek covered his nose and mouth and ducked his head, just as Stiles flung a small pouch in the air. It burst, and a fine white powder showered over them. Pixies screamed and buzzed and fell to the ground dead. The powder burned where it touched Derek's skin, and he shook it off.

Mistletoe. Somehow he wasn't surprised to know Stiles had mistletoe with him. Derek jumped back and brushed his hair to get the powder off his scalp. Stiles threw another pouch, leaving another ten-foot circle of dead pixies. Around them, Derek saw others throwing pouches of mistletoe into the thick swarm surrounding them, but although it was effective, it wasn't effective enough.

"Stiles, if we don't stop them soon, we're going to lose the animals!" Derek yelled over the noise of the swarm. And I'm going to go deaf.

"I know!" Stiles swore and threw another pouch. "Can you hold them off here a little longer?"

"Yes!"

"Good! I'll be right back!"

Stiles spurred his horse forward and galloped off, leaving Derek with a few hundred angry pixies zooming straight for him.

He took a deep breath and let out a long howl, loud enough to startle the pixies closest to him and give him a chance to beat a few back. In smaller numbers, pixies tended to avoid werewolves. In a swarm this large, he doubted it would have much more of an effect than it already had.

Boyd appeared beside him and swatted a line through the pixies with a staff. "How are you holding up, sir?"

Derek sliced another arc through the air, and some part of him winced at all the flecks of pixie blood and flesh decorating his clothes. "Oh, just wonderful. And you?"

"A bit dicey in the back, but nothing we couldn't handle." A brief pause. "They don't seem to be
thinning at all, sir."

Derek grimaced. "Believe me, we know."

And then the most ear-piercing shriek he'd ever heard in his life rent the air.

Derek dropped his sword and covered his ears, but the sound speared through, overpowering the buzzing of the pixies until there was nothing in his ears but the scream. It drove him to the ground. Boyd crouched next to him, hands clapped over his ears, eyes burning yellow and fangs bared in a snarl.

Another howl clawed its way up his throat, and Derek bit through his lip to keep it back.

Just when he thought he couldn't take one more second without clawing out his ears, the shriek stopped and faded to nothing.

And there was nothing, he realized. All the noise was gone but for the ringing in his ears.

The pixies had disappeared.

Derek rolled onto his back and stared up at the empty sky. Stiles's face appeared above him, brow knit with concern and lips moving, but Derek couldn't hear a word of it.

He shook his head. "I can't hear."

Derek knew he said it, because he felt the vibrations of his throat, but that was the only indication he'd made any noise at all.

Stiles pulled him into a sitting position and put his hands over Derek's ears, rubbing them. Derek had to laugh; it wasn't like that would do any good.

He pressed his hands over Stiles's, flattening the palms against his ears, and closed his eyes. Soon, he could hear another sound over the ringing: the soft rumble of blood flowing through Stiles's veins, moving in time with the steady beat of his pulse. His battered ears healed, and soon the sound of the blood was all he could hear.

It was oddly comforting.

After a moment longer than he actually needed, Derek released Stiles's hands and the world sounded normal again.

"Are you all right?" Stiles asked.

Derek nodded. "Better. What was that?"

Stiles looked grim. "Lydia."

Oh. So that was what a banshee's scream sounded like. Derek tried to imagine that unearthly shriek coming from Lady Lydia, and couldn't. "Well, it got rid of the pixies."

"Yes, but a banshee's shriek is only effective at dispersing some creatures." Stiles sat back and wiped blood and grime from his face. "It's going to be a difficult night tonight."

As if to punctuate his statement, a faint howl echoed off in the distance, followed by others going up in a chorus. Derek froze, and Boyd growled softly. Derek held up a hand to shush him.
All told, Derek counted seven distinct howls. Not terribly close, but they would be by nightfall, sooner if their caravan didn't start moving again.

Stiles let out a slow exhale. "Please tell me those are regular wolves."

Derek wished he could. Instead, he said, "I hope you brought more mistletoe."

Chapter End Notes

By the way, I'm on Tumblr as mad-madam-m. Come say hi!
I can do this, Stiles told himself. I can do this, I can do this, I can do this.

He looked around the expanse of their camp, the long shadows on the ground, the purple clouds smudging the darkening sky. Oh God, I can't do this.

After the pixie attack, his father had grimly gotten them all moving again in record time, and made more regular patrols of the length of the caravan. (However, Stiles had noticed his father had stayed very close to Queen Melissa's carriage whenever he wasn't patrolling. He had brought this to Scott's attention, and they had quietly and intently discussed what it meant, and if they needed to somehow let their parents know it was all right if they wished to proceed with anything. It was a discussion, not gossiping like the old ladies at court, no matter what Lydia said.)

Fortunately, nothing else had attacked while they were traveling, though Stiles could feel the tension in the air like it was a palpable thing. The sheer pressure of waiting had scraped his nerves raw, made him want to run out into the woods and scream at whatever was out there to get on with it already, just so something would happen.

They had made it to the clearing shortly after sundown, and everybody set about settling in for the night with one eye on the fading light in the west and the other on the rising moon in the east.

And now Stiles was responsible for protecting the entire camp with ash. Multiple circles, all requiring his belief in them. This morning, he would have said he could do it perfectly, and he would have been telling the truth. He'd never done anything on this scale before, but he could handle it. Now, however, doubt had wormed in, and it was there for one reason only.

He didn't want to trap Derek outside until dawn.

Stiles nudged the burlap sack beside him, filled to the brim with black ash. He needed to get started, because the moon wasn't going to stop rising just because he wanted Derek inside the camp where Stiles could protect him.

Logically, he knew Derek could take care of himself. He knew that, and also knew that, were their positions reversed, he would be more than mildly irritated at the implication he couldn't.

But that was part of what they had pledged, wasn't it? To honor and protect each other, and even if it was only an arrangement, Stiles had no intention of letting his vows slide. He had even less intention of ignoring a direct message from the Sidhe, but the former had to do with his own personal honor and the latter had to do with the empirical evidence he had about how the Sidhe would react when you didn't listen to them.

Even so, Derek had a point: He and Stiles both had a duty to protect the camp, and if Derek was trapped inside the ash circle, he couldn't do that. And that would be selfish, to prevent someone from carrying out their duty for your own peace of mind.

Derek might be limited by the placement of the ash, but Stiles wasn't. And if Derek wouldn't stay inside with him, Stiles would camp outside it instead.

Decision made, Stiles hefted the bag and started walking the perimeter of the camp, trailing a thin
line of black ash behind him.

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Derek felt wild, caged, closed in. His wolf grew stronger by the moment, more powerful, more restless, clawing at his skin in an effort to break free. The moon pushed his senses beyond acute, to the point where half of Derek's focus had to go to eliminating all the mundane noises and smells so he could concentrate on the ones he actually needed.

He couldn't shift just yet; he had to finish walking the perimeter. With a control borne of years of practice, Derek held the change in check.

The sky was almost completely black but for the very westernmost horizon, where the last light of day stubbornly clung to life. By now, the moon offered far more light, though Derek didn't need it to see. He let his eyes shift to blue and made his way around the camp and the expanse between the ash line and the forest around them.

Stiles had placed a circle around the entire camp, followed by smaller circles around the horses and King Scott's and Queen Melissa's tents. Derek approved of this strategy; even if the ash circle around the camp was breached, the places that most needed protection would still have it.

He prodded the circle at intervals as he walked. It held strong. Any pride Stiles held in his magical ability was well-earned.

Derek rubbed his left wrist, which felt naked without the bracelets on it. It had hurt more than he'd expected to leave them behind with his other things, but they wouldn't stay on his arm once he shifted, and he would be furious with himself if he lost a single one of them. He'd left behind everything except his shirt, trousers, and a pair of boots. Clothes were easier to keep track of, and he was so used to accidentally destroying them that one more ruined shirt or lost pair of trousers wouldn't matter.

He stepped out of the shadows of the trees into a pool of moonlight, and the pull of it was overwhelming, sharp and seductive. His wolf side battered at his mind, howling, snarling, scrabbling to be let out, out out out.

Controlling the shift itself was going to become difficult very, very soon.

Derek walked faster on the last leg around the camp. He saw nothing in the trees, heard and smelled no sign of the other wolves. Maybe they had grown tired and decided to go looking for easier prey.

Really, he knew better than to be that optimistic. But perhaps they had moved fast enough that the wolves were still catching up.

He knew better than to be that optimistic as well.

Regardless, Derek couldn't sense anything, and holding the shift back was about to drive him mad. Stiles had done a good job of shielding the camp magically, and Captain Stilinski and his men could handle anything Derek and Boyd couldn't. It was time to return to his camp for the night.

Derek hurried back to where he and Boyd had pitched their tents, a little ways away from the main camp and the ash circle. He was not surprised to find Boyd there already. He was surprised, however, to see Boyd was still human.

Derek was about to ask why when he saw the answer: Stiles sat cross-legged smack in front of
Derek’s tent.

His wolf froze and Derek followed suit. Why hadn't he been paying attention? Why hadn't he smelled Stiles? "What are you doing here?"

Stiles took a drink from his canteen and shrugged. "You can't stay inside the camp, so I'm staying outside it."

No. No no no no no. Stiles couldn't stay. He couldn't. The cagey restlessness dissolved into panic. He had to get Stiles back to the camp. "You can't stay here."

"And just why not?" Stiles asked.

Derek didn't bother holding back the growl. "It's dangerous."

"But not too dangerous for you."

Derek gestured to himself and Boyd. "We're part of what's dangerous."

Stiles raised an eyebrow. "Going to rip my throat out with your teeth, husband?"

"I might," Boyd said conversationally.

The edges of his vision went bluer, and Derek whirled on Boyd and snarled. Boyd didn't bat an eye, but Stiles sat up straighter. "So I take it you're more likely to kill anything that intends to hurt me?"

Derek buried his face in a hand, even though he knew Stiles couldn't see his embarrassment. Instinct demanded he protect his husband, probably what Boyd had intended to prove, the bastard. And Derek couldn't. The last time he'd tried to protect someone... "It's safer in the camp," Derek said, an edge of desperation creeping into his voice.

"When I told you the same thing, you ignored me." Stiles leaned back on his arms. "The only way you'll get me back into camp is if you carry me there yourself and sit on me. Else, I'll just come right back."

Good enough for him. Derek couldn't sit on Stiles, but he imagined there were more than a few people at camp who would be happy to.

He grabbed Stiles around the waist and threw him over his shoulder. Stiles let out an incensed shout. "What are you doing?"

Derek growled through the fangs lengthening against his lips. "Carrying you back to camp. As requested."

"Put me down!"

"No."

Derek was expecting the flare of heat that raced over his shoulder, back, and arm, like someone had trapped his right side between two giant red-hot pokers. He tightened his grip on Stiles and kept walking. The pain distracted him from the wolf scrambling to break out. He spotted the captain and King Scott near one edge of the camp and headed that way.

Stiles struggled fruitlessly against him. "Derek, you can't do this."
"Yes, I can," Derek said.

Fingers bit into his waist, and Derek grimaced and juggled Stiles so that he lost his grip. Stiles cursed. "Let me go, you great ass. I can't protect you from inside the damned camp!"

Derek dropped him unceremoniously to the ground and hauled him back to his feet, so he could look Stiles in the eye. "And I can't protect you if you're outside it."

*Like I couldn't protect my father.* Derek clamped his mouth shut against the words.

Stiles's amber eyes flashed with fury. "Do I look like I need protection?"

*You're human,* Derek wanted to say, but remembered the captain's warning from days before and bit his lip. "Do I?" he countered instead.

"YES!" Stiles shouted. "Why in the world do you think I've been giving you charms all week?"

"Charms? You haven't given me any..." The realization hit him like a fist and Derek couldn't breathe. "The bracelets."

Stiles stabbed a finger at him. "Exactly."

So they hadn't been gifts. Stiles had given them to him because he thought Derek needed *protection,* not because he was trying to court him. Out of duty, and nothing more.

Stiles started forward. "Now that that's cleared up, we should—"

Derek grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him back toward the camp, hard enough that Stiles stumbled back over the mountain ash line. Stiles glared back at him, but the glare faded to confusion. "Derek?"

Derek cursed whatever emotion was showing on his face and schooled it back into what he hoped was a glower. "Captain!"

Captain Stilinski walked briskly to them. If he'd heard any of their fight, he gave no indication of it. "Your Highness?"

"Make sure *everyone* stays inside the ash circle tonight." Derek sent a pointed look in Stiles's direction. "It's not going to be safe outside of it."

Stiles made a move forward and the captain grabbed his shoulder, yanking him back. "Don't worry," Captain Stilinski said. "*Everyone* will."

Derek turned and stalked back toward his and Boyd's camp, shifting when he was halfway there, not even caring that he shredded his clothes in the process. He thought he heard Stiles call his name, but he ignored it.

He shouldn't have been surprised. He really shouldn't have. And perhaps it shouldn't hurt him so much; Stiles *had* made the bracelets to protect him. But it was another harsh reminder that this was only an arrangement to Stiles.

Derek would do well to remember that.

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Stiles stared after Derek's receding figure, trying to figure out what had gone wrong in the last few
minutes. Because for a moment there, Derek had looked broken and vulnerable, like he'd been stabbed, and Stiles had a horrible feeling he had done something to cause it.

He looked up at his father, who still had a death grip on his shoulder. "How much of that did you hear?"

Father didn't relinquish his grip in the slightest. "None of it, why?"

"I think I may have said something wrong," Stiles said.

"Hmm," was the only reply.

"But I couldn't have," Stiles continued. "All I did was mention the charms, and then... he just..."

"Charms?" Father repeated.

"Yes, charms." Stiles mimed weaving them. "You know, the little bracelets and necklaces I make?"

"Ah, the handmade jewelry you've been giving him every day we're on the road," Father said. "Did Derek know they were charms?"

How could someone not know what they were? "Of course he did!"

Father just regarded him with a patient look. "Did you tell him they were?"

Stiles tried to remember exactly what he'd written on the notes. "I... um... well, no, not as such, but —"

Father maintained the patient look, like he'd figured something out and was waiting for Stiles to catch up. "You just gave him jewelry with silly notes?"

"Well, yes—"

"And didn't tell him what they were really for?"

Stiles made an undignified noise of frustration. "I thought he knew."

"Stiles, how would he know if you didn't tell him?" Father sighed exasperatedly. "I didn't know until you told me."

Stiles ran a hand through his hair. He was missing something, and he hated the feeling that he was missing something. "But... why would it bother him if they're charms? I made them to protect him!"

Father pressed a hand to the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Stiles, look at it from his point of view for five seconds. You spent all week giving your husband flirtatious gifts and then just told him they weren't actually gifts."

"I... but... I..." But his mind was already thinking on what his father had said, putting together the pieces from Derek's point of view. "Oh." He paused. "Oh, I'm an ass."

Father smiled grimly and clapped him on the shoulder. "Welcome to marriage, son. So I imagine that's why he wasn't wearing them?"

Stiles stopped cold. "Wait, what? He wasn't wearing them?"
Father shook his head. "Didn't you notice?"

He'd been too busy looking at Derek's face, not his bloody wrist. "Oh, no. No no no..."

Stiles broke away and ran through the camp, back to the cart where Derek and Boyd had stored their belongings. His heart pounded unsteadily, and his hands shook so hard he almost couldn't climb into the cart.

It didn't take him long to find the three charms he'd made, along with Derek's wedding ring and a few other bits of jewelry, stored in a box next to the weapons. Stiles felt his stomach drop.

"Stiles!" His father leaned against the cart. "What's wrong?"

"He didn't wear them," Stiles said hollowly. "I made them to protect him and he didn't wear them tonight. Why... it can't be out of spite; he didn't even know and he'd already put them away... he hasn't even taken them off since I gave them to him..."

"Maybe he didn't want to lose them," Father suggested. "He's not exactly going to be human tonight."

Stiles wanted to kick himself. His throat closed off. He hadn't told Derek about the importance of the charms, and so here they sat, safely enclosed with other things Derek didn't want to lose, where they would do precisely the least amount of good. "I have to go find him."

"I don't think that would be a good idea right now," Father said.

"He's out there without any protection—"

"Stiles," Father grabbed his arm. "Have a little faith in him. And if not that, then at least recognize he clearly wants to be alone for a while."

"But... the Sidhe..." Stiles shook his head and put away the box. What did it matter? There wasn't any guarantee Derek would even listen to him right now. He was more likely to run away or rip Stiles's throat out. "Oh, God, I've messed this up."

Father tugged on his arm, and Stiles climbed back down from the cart. "It's all right. You can talk to him in the morning."

Stiles didn't say anything. It was true; he could talk to Derek in the morning.

If Derek was still alive to talk to.

Chapter End Notes

(It KILLED me to have to wait a week to do this!)

I have to give kudos to Ev42 for guessing this plot point pretty damn close in a comment on chapter 10. Seriously, I flailed at my friends and it took everything in me not to spill the beans right then, because, you know, SPOILERS. Great guess, and I hope you like the way it actually happened!

P.S. I'm on Tumblr!
Derek wasn't sure what time he heard the first howl.

The moon was high overhead, making shadows sharper and darker, even to his enhanced vision. Most of the fires in camp had been extinguished, but he could still see the silhouettes of the guards on watch. He and Boyd had made their own circuits twice, but having seen and smelled nothing, they'd settled down for the night. Boyd had taken first watch, and Derek had been trying to sleep.

He had just slipped into a doze when he heard it.

Derek sat up immediately, ears alert, hardly daring to breathe so as not to disturb his hearing any more than necessary. Boyd sat stock-still on his haunches, ears twitching and fangs slightly bared.

The howl came again. East of them, about a mile off.

Boyd flicked his yellow gaze to Derek, an inquiry. *Follow the howl?*

Derek shook his head and settled back. That was just one voice, and there had been seven earlier. He didn't want to risk running off to follow one only to find out the others had snuck in another way.

The same howl sounded again, this time a little closer, followed by a second in the same direction. The howls rang off each other, loud and fast, but still from the east. In the camp, Derek could see the silhouettes of the captain's men moving in that direction, away from him and Boyd.

Derek thought fast. It was easy for him to pick out the sounds and know there were only two wolves, but to humans, it would sound like more. And if two wolves were drawing the guards to the opposite side of the camp... where were the others?

Most likely coming around to flank the camp.

Derek prayed Stiles's circle would hold, and jerked his head at Boyd. If his guess was right, they'd find the rest of the wolves on this side of the camp, probably somewhere deeper in the woods.

He and Boyd crept across the open ground into the forest, and Derek closed his eyes and sniffed for other werewolves. It was difficult, since there was an entire bouquet of scents around him and he wasn't sure which one he was looking for. His and Boyd's he discarded completely, as well as the scent of rabbits, squirrels, voles, and other rodents, the smell of decaying leaves and dirt and the fresh new growth peeking out of the forest carpet. He was looking for something bigger. Something—

A light flashed ahead of him and to the left, closer to the camp, and he heard a howl of rage.

Derek growled and launched himself in that direction, Boyd right on his heels. They ran without heed to silence now, kicking up leaves and twigs and more than a few terrified prey animals. They burst out of the woods together, right next to the camp, where three other wolves were pacing beside the pen of panicky horses.

The horses were inside two ash barriers: the main one surrounding the camp and a smaller one just around them. The wolves flung themselves at the main ash barrier, sending up a flash of blue light with every strike. The barrier held. The horses were safe.
But the horses didn't know that.

Derek mentally cursed. If the wolves drove the horses into a blind panic, they could pull up their stakes and run for it. At best, they'd only cross the barriers. At worst, they'd break the circles and the entire camp would be in danger.

He crouched low and snarled, loud enough that the other wolves would hear.

All three stopped their attack on the barriers and turned toward Derek and Boyd. Their eyes were yellow, but with a strange green glint that made the fur on Derek’s neck bristle with the wrongness of it. The wolves may have been smart enough to draw off the guards, but they were otherwise out of control.

The largest, a grey brindled wolf, took a step forward and snapped at Derek. Back off.

Derek held his ground and snarled louder. You'll have to make me.

All three wolves let out a simultaneous howl and sprang.

Derek darted toward the leader and swiped his front paw across his nose. The grey wolf howled in pain and bit, trying to get Derek's leg in his teeth. Derek bounded out of the way and crouched close to the ground, snarling and debating the best time to spring for the throat.

The other wolf made the decision for him and lunged for his neck. Derek twisted and dug his teeth into the wolf’s hide, fighting to get past fur and into skin. The grey wolf yelped and scratched at him, claws raking down his side toward his belly. Derek snarled and slid to the side, trying to get away from it even though he could feel his body knitting itself back together in the wake of each scratch.

Derek flung himself back, taking the other wolf in a roll with him. The grey wolf wrenched his neck from Derek's grasp. Blood leaked out of the wound even as it started to heal.

Derek positioned himself between the other werewolves and the camp. He couldn't spare a glance back at the horses, but from the sound of things, they hadn't calmed much. He prayed somebody at camp would do something before they broke the circles completely. Beside him, Boyd rammed headfirst into one of the other wolves, and they went tumbling.

The grey wolf sprang again. Derek ducked. The wolf flew over his back, scrabbling to get a hold on him. Derek rolled and kicked up with his rear legs, sending the other wolf flying back toward the tree line.

He caught a blur out of the corner of his eye and turned just in time to have another wolf slam into his side. Derek snarled and rolled with it, throwing his full weight onto one of the wolf's legs as he came around to the ground. The leg didn't break, but it gave Derek access to the other wolf's stomach. He sank his teeth deep into the exposed skin and yanked backward. He tasted blood.

The wolf howled in pain, scrambling to get away from Derek, its attack forgotten. He loosened his jaw and let it flee, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

One wolf stunned at the tree line here, one running, and the other locked in combat with Boyd. Two wolves on the east side of the camp, presumably being taken care of by the captain and his men. That left two more somewhere—

Both of the other wolves exploded out of the tree line and bolted toward Derek, jaws dripping and fangs gleaming in the moonlight. He barely had time to get into a defensive position before they
were on him.

Fighting as a shifted wolf was not his favorite way to fight. He missed weapons, missed the
dexterity of hands and opposable thumbs. But this also spoke to some deep, primal part of him,
something that thrilled in having everything stripped away, relying only on his body and his mind
to survive.

The other wolves snarled and snapped at him, dragging claws and fangs over his fur, opening
enough wounds that they didn't heal quickly. Derek whipped his body around to keep the wolves
from digging too deep, bit and scratched every time an ear or nose or paw came in reach. He
managed to get his fangs into one wolf's throat and shook it violently as long as he could.

Out of nowhere, he heard the sound of a bowstring snapping. A split second later, the wolf on top
of him fell over, an arrow sticking out of its side.

The wolf scrambled to its feet and ran back into the woods, its friend following right behind.

Derek shook himself off and got to his feet, looking back to see who'd loosed the arrow.

Queen Melissa stood near the horses, another arrow ready and aimed at him.

He froze.

The queen frowned and lowered the arrow ever so slightly. "Prince Derek?"

He yipped, and hoped she realized that meant Yes, it's me; now please don't shoot me.

She lowered the bow entirely, sticking the arrow back in the quiver. "Have they gone?"

Derek looked around. Boyd was behind him, licking a paw, one of his ears half-hanging off but
already healing. The other wolves were nowhere to be seen. He could hear the sound of crashing in
the forest as they ran, slowly growing more distant.

He turned back to the queen and nodded.

She set the bow aside. "Good. I believe they've subdued the wolves on the other side of camp."

"They have," Stiles's voice said, and he appeared a moment later, looking wild and worn at the
same time. "Father and his guards are patrolling the woods on that side, making sure there aren't
any others. We had a couple of bites, but nothing fatal. No Alphas. Scott's with Father."

Derek's stupid heart flipped to see him, followed immediately by a sharp pang as he remembered
the truth behind the bracelets. He sat on the ground, pointedly facing the woods. Just watching for
any new threats, he told himself.

Behind him, he heard the queen sigh in relief. "That's good. Help me calm the horses before they
trample the circle."

Just then, something roared in the woods. Derek's ears flipped toward it, and he felt the fur on the
back of his neck stand on end.

That wasn't a wolf. That was a sound he'd never heard before.

"What was that?" Queen Melissa whispered.

"Something very bad," Stiles whispered back.
Derek thought his husband most definitely had the right of it.

Whatever it was roared again, and a moment later, Derek heard the yip of a wolf in pain, followed by a gurgling howl.

At least one of their attackers was no more.

Derek backed toward the camp, keeping his senses on alert, scanning the edges of the woods. He could hear rustling, branches breaking, something crashing around beyond the trees, but he couldn't see anything. Worse, he couldn't smell anything.

Whatever it was, it was coming their way.

Next to him, Boyd growled low. Derek moved closer to him, still keeping his eyes on the trees. He flicked an ear back, listening to Queen Melissa and Stiles as they calmed the horses. They appeared to be fine.

Beyond the tree line, Derek could see a shadow flicking between branches. It leapt fast enough he couldn't track it; one moment he would see it, then it would take him a heart-stopping few seconds to find it again.

Then the trees closest to the camp swayed and something huge burst out from the branches, landing mere feet away from Derek and Boyd.

Standing on its back legs, it was at least seven feet tall and reptilian, with scaly skin that glistened eerily in the moonlight. Its face was flat, with two slits for a nose and a mouth full of pointed teeth. Something clear dripped from its clawed hands, and its long tail snapped back and forth. It smelled like dead frogs and dried snakeskin.

A kanima.

Derek had heard legends about them, but he'd never seen one, hadn't really believed they existed. They were the rarest of shifters because their creation required such special circumstances. His mother had called them abominations.

Faced with one, Derek was hard-pressed to disagree with her.

Boyd snarled, and the kanima fixed its yellow eyes on them. It hissed, long tongue snaking out from between its sharp teeth, and dropped to all fours.

Derek spared one glance at Stiles and the queen. They were frozen, twin looks of horror on their faces, and the horses seemed momentarily paralyzed as well.

Good. If he and Boyd could just get this thing away from camp...

The kanima jumped straight for them.

Derek skidded to one side, Boyd to the other, and the kanima crashed into the line of mountain ash, sending bright ripples around the shield. Horses screamed, Stiles cursed and yelled for help, but the kanima paid no attention to that. It whirled around and ran straight for Derek.

It wants us, he thought, and scrambled out of the way before the kanima could get its claws into his hide.

He yipped at Boyd and ran toward the forest as fast as he could. The kanima let out another roar,
this one almost a shriek, and raced after them.

Derek plunged into the trees, feet barely touching the ground, not even thinking of Boyd or the kanima, just thinking about leading that abomination away from the camp as fast as he could. He ducked his head and pushed himself faster.

_Catch me if you can._

***

It was _outstanding_ how quickly all hell could break loose. One minute, Stiles was gentling the horses, the rogue werewolves were fleeing, and Derek and Boyd were pacing the boundary of the camp.

The next minute, a seven-foot-tall _snake monster_ was bursting out of the trees, the horses had trampled the circle he'd set around them, and Derek and Boyd were running _back into the damn forest_, the snake monster right behind them.

"Der—" Stiles yelled.

A horse bucked and one back hoof glanced off his chest. Stiles staggered backward, trying to breathe, and prayed he didn't have any broken ribs.

Queen Melissa was beside him in an instant, pulling him away from the panicked animals. "Stiles! Are you all right?"

He tried to speak, but he was still trying to get his damn breath back, and every moment he stayed here was a moment Derek got further from the camp, alone in the woods with nothing but Boyd and the snake.

"Sit." Queen Melissa pushed him onto a nearby crate and put her hand on his side, prodding gently with her fingers. "Tell me what hurts."

Stiles winced; he would have a bruise there soon. "Broken?" he finally managed to gasp.

The queen pursed her lips and shook her head. "I don't think so."

Stiles tried to get to his feet; Queen Melissa pushed him back down. He tried again. "Derek's out there. I have to—"

"You're _hurt_, Stiles." The queen straightened and called out to a guard nearby. "Get some men and subdue those horses. And get Captain Stilinski and His Majesty here immediately."

The guard scrambled to obey, and Stiles groaned. "Your Majesty—"

Queen Melissa put a hand on his shoulder, holding him firmly in place. "You're not moving."

Stiles rolled up his sleeves and lifted his shirt. His tattoos didn't descend past his elbows, and the ones on his stomach had faded to blue outlines. He still had enough energy. He hoped.

He took a deep breath and pressed one hand over his ribs. He closed his eyes and focused, turning all his thoughts and energy inward. Here, inside his mind, he could feel the faint buzzing of the mountain ash, the main circle still strong and protecting the camp, and more importantly, the pool of his own energy.

He drew on it, mouthing words he knew by heart, putting the energy toward healing himself. His
side burned, chipping at his concentration, but he pushed it away and kept going.

"Stiles, what are you—" the queen asked.

He opened his eyes and breathed deep. His side still pained him, but he could breathe once more. He stood, and shrugged off her hand when she tried to make him sit again. "I'm fine," he said.

Queen Melissa looked both skeptical and worried. "How much magic do you really have right now?"

Stiles took a step toward the edge of the camp. "Enough." I think. "Tell Father that Boyd and Derek led that thing off to the woods. I'm going after them. I don't know what it is but I don't think they can handle it alone." He paused, concern making him stay long enough to ask, "Will you be all right?"

The queen hefted her bow and notched another arrow. "I will be fine."

Stiles grinned. "Good."

He bolted out of the camp and into the woods.

***

Stiles knew he wasn't as fast as a werewolf, or as a... well, whatever the hell that thing was, but once he had recovered more from his healing, he made good time through the forest. He paused only occasionally to listen and gauge where he needed to go next, but he hated stopping, hated not moving, hated the idea that Derek was in trouble and Stiles couldn't help him.

He heard a hissing roar and a howl off to his right. Stiles ran toward the sound, jumping over fallen branches and trying not to break his neck tripping over something. He'd hoped the full moon would provide at least some light, but there wasn't much filtering down through the thick trees. He could make his own light, but between the pixie attack earlier, the ash circles, the werewolves, and his healing, he needed to conserve what magic he had.

He imagined that snake monster would require a great deal of it.

He heard the snake monster's roar again, this time close enough that it made him stop cold for a full few seconds. To his left, now.

Stiles spun and ran faster.

He burst into a clearing just in time to see the snake monster swing its tail and slam Derek into a tree.

"No!" Stiles flung out his arm, sending a wreath of fire twisting out over his hand and through the air. It hit the monster in its side, and it let off an ear-piercing shriek.

The good news was that the monster wasn't looking at Derek anymore.

The bad news was that the fire seemed to do little more than infuriate it, and now all its attention was fixed on Stiles.

He swallowed hard and took a step back. A large stick or a sword or something would be fantastic right about now.

The snake monster hissed and barreled after him. Stiles jumped to one side, rolling and coming up
in a crouch to shoot another jet of fire at the creature's backside. A screech filled the clearing, and even Stiles could smell the odor of burning scales.

The snake lunged at him again. A mass of black fur flew in from the right, landing on the snake's face, biting and clawing at it.

The monster hissed and whipped its head to dislodge the attacking wolf, and Derek landed hard against another tree. Stiles scrambled toward him, and caught the snake monster's tail in his injured side.

He tumbled across the ground and grunted, trying to get his breath back for the second time. All right, fire wasn't working. Time to try something else.

He dug a packet of mistletoe out of his pocket and threw it, yelling a warning to Boyd and Derek as soon as the packet left his hand.

Derek and Boyd bounded toward him just as the mistletoe exploded against the snake monster's skin. The resulting screech was loud enough Stiles swore his teeth hurt. But God, he hoped that would take the bastard down.

The monster flailed in front of them, slamming into trees and rolling on the ground, trying to get the mistletoe off its skin, no doubt.

Derek put himself between Stiles and the snake monster and growled, a sound so feral and vicious Stiles was glad it wasn't aimed at him. Derek was huge as a wolf, he and Boyd both were, with their backs almost level with Stiles's hips, but the snake monster was bigger, stronger, faster, and seemed bound and determined to rip both wolves to pieces. A quick glance showed Stiles that both Derek and Boyd were hurt, and even their healing wouldn't be enough to keep up with this assault.

Did they have enough time to get away? Probably, but chances were just as good the thing would come after them as soon as it could. Stiles had a handful of mountain ash with him—enough to make one circle—but could he distract the creature long enough to contain it?

He fidgeted, his fingers around the top of the packet of mountain ash. He might not be able to do the distraction and handle the circle, but Derek and Boyd probably could. The snake monster would be bound, then, and Stiles was reasonably certain he could get out of the circle before getting ripped to pieces.

Reasonably.

He rested a hand on Derek's back. "I need you two to keep it distracted," he said as quietly as he could. "I have a plan."

Derek's head snapped around to him, and though Stiles was not adept at reading a wolf's face, he was pretty sure Derek was giving him a look of complete incredulity.

He didn't have time to explain this. Stiles groaned. "Just trust me for five minutes, all right? I'm good at plans!"

In front of them, the snake monster scrambled back to its feet, no longer flailing wildly. Damn it, he'd hoped the mistletoe would buy them more time than that.

To Stiles's surprise, Boyd pounced, landing on the snake's back with fangs and claws bared. Derek looked torn for a sparse moment—between helping Boyd or staying near Stiles—and then snarled and went for the snake's leg.
Stiles could barely make out what was going on in front of him—it was a dark blur of thrashing limbs and fangs and fur—but he edged closer, hoping to keep out of the creature's way. He could start the circle, get Derek and Boyd to herd the snake over here, and then—

He caught something moving out of the corner of his eye, far too close, and Stiles instinctively jerked back, bringing his arm up to protect him.

The snake's claws raked over his forearm, and Stiles stumbled back, cursing at the burn. And realized half a breath later he was in much worse trouble, because he couldn't move his arm.

Stiles staggered, the paralysis seeping into the rest of his body. Shit. Shit. His other hand seized, the ash sifting through his fingers. He dropped to the ground, flat on his back. Almost helpless. Would be helpless in a few sparse seconds.

He had no time.

"Derek! Boyd! Get over here now!" He tried to put as much command in his voice as he could, but it still came out weaker than usual. He couldn't move anything now, barely even his finger over the pile of ash now under his hand. Stiles closed his eyes and drew on his magic to counteract the paralysis, but it wouldn't last long.

Both wolves howled, sending chills down his spine, and then two massive, furry bodies landed next to him. Stiles grunted and pressed his finger down into the ash.

He could do this.

The ash spiraled out around them, forming a solid circle right before the snake monster crashed into it. A furious roar echoed through the clearing.

Relief made him giddy. Stiles bit his lips against a hysterical giggle that threatened to come out. The snake monster stalked around them, screeching, slamming at the barrier of the mountain ash.

They couldn't get out, but it couldn't get them, either.

Right now, Stiles would take it. He focused on the happy fact that his circle was holding against the monster's onslaught, and not on the fact that he couldn't move any part of his body except his mouth.

Next to him, Derek shuddered.

As Stiles watched, Derek changed. The fur shrank away to smooth skin, his body pushed and changed with what looked like great effort. A moment later, a mostly human Derek crouched over him. He still had pointed ears and a heavy brow and fangs—definitely fangs—but other than that, he was human.

And naked. Very naked.

"What. Are you. Doing," Derek ground out, his whole body shaking with each word.

Stiles resolutely kept his eyes above Derek's neck. "Nothing much. Just taking a walk in the woods, enjoying the moonlit night, saving my husband's furry ass from a seven-foot-tall snake monster, you know, as you do."

As if to punctuate his sentence, said monster threw itself bodily at the ring of ash. The resulting
flash of light was so bright it hurt Stiles's eyes.

"It's dangerous." Derek's voice sounded more animal than human.

Now? They were going to have this conversation now? Stiles would have kicked his husband if he'd been able to move his legs. "Yes, and you decided to lead that thing on a merry chase through the woods, just the two of you. Because that speaks of loads of self-preservation."

A full shudder wracked Derek's body, and his teeth lengthened a little more. "We were getting it away from the camp."

"And going to get shredded in the process," Stiles snapped.

Derek groaned and dropped his head to the ground, covering it with his hands. Stiles could see just out of the corner of his eye as Derek's skin rippled, and he swore he could hear bones cracking.

His irritation melted and concern poked its way in. What was it costing Derek to stay human right now? "Derek?"

Derek let out another groan, and then he shifted so fast it was like a blur. One minute he was still human; the next, a huge black wolf curled up beside Stiles again.

Well, at least that had effectively ended the conversation. Derek couldn't complain about things being "too dangerous" when he didn't have the ability to speak.

Stiles tried moving his fingers, and then his toes. No luck. He was still paralyzed.

"You may as well give up," he said to the snake monster, which was creeping around the perimeter of their circle. Entirely too close for comfort. "You're never getting through that barrier."

The monster stopped where it was and stared at him, yellow eyes boring into his. Stiles got the uncomfortable feeling that it had understood him, and was now doing its best to figure out how to prove him wrong.

Two arrows struck the creature.

It screeched and jerked around, and another arrow hit it in the chest. Apparently that was enough for it, because the creature scrambled off into the woods, moving so fast Stiles soon lost the sound of it.

Thank God, they were saved.

Horse hooves thundered against the ground, and half a dozen mounted men rode into view, all bearing bows and a multitude of other weapons. And that was just what Stiles could see from his supine position. It took him the space of a breath to ascertain that these were not his father's men, and then two of them were looking over at him and pulling more arrows out of their quivers and—

"No!" Stiles shouted. "No, don't shoot!"

One of the men held up his hand in a closed fist, and the others lowered their weapons. He rode forward and peered down at Stiles, Derek, and Boyd from his horse. "Now, this is an interesting picture. Two werewolves and a human, inside a ring of mountain ash?"

Stiles felt both Derek and Boyd tense on either side of him, and Derek growled low.

The man didn't seem worried, and turned his attention to Stiles. "Who are you?"
Stiles had never been more grateful for his title than he was at that moment. "Prince Stiles Stilinski of the McCall court."

One of the men cursed. "King Scott's bastard brother."

Stiles grinned, though he wasn't sure how well they could see it. "In every sense of the word. And who might you gentlemen be?"

"What are you doing in a circle of mountain ash with two werewolves?" the leader asked.

"Being mauled to death, what does it look like?" If they weren't going to answer, Stiles saw no reason he should. "Now who are you?"

"Watch your tongue!" one of the other men said.

"Quiet," the leader ordered.

"But, Highness—"

"I said quiet."

Highness. That gave Stiles the information he needed. Only one "Highness" likely to be out with a hunting party this time of night. "Prince Chris Argent, I presume?"

The leader—Prince Chris—looked frustrated, and then smiled again. "You are a smart one, aren't you?"

"It's the only reason Scott keeps me around."

"That still doesn't explain why you've sealed yourself in with two werewolves."

Stiles didn't much care for the look on the prince's face, or for the way his men continued to hold loaded crossbows.

"I didn't know King Scott had werewolves in his court," Prince Chris said, his voice changing subtly.

Trying to pry more information out of Stiles, undoubtedly. He wished he could shrug. "It's a relatively new development. But they are with us, so I suggest you tell your men to point their weapons elsewhere before anything happens that we might regret."

"Yes, I agree," a new voice said, and Stiles had never been so happy to hear his father's voice in his life.

Another eight horses rode into the clearing, and to his great relief, Stiles spotted Scott among them as well.

Prince Chris and his men straightened and, thank God, turned their full attention to Father and Scott. Prince Chris bowed, somewhat stiffly, and Stiles didn't think it had too much to do with how the saddle hampered him. "Your Majesty," the prince said.

"Your Highness." Scott gave a perfunctory nod and turned to Stiles. "Stiles, are you all right?"

"A little paralyzed, but otherwise unhurt," Stiles said.

Scott gaped in horror. "A little paralyzed?"
On second thought, that probably hadn't been the best way to break it to him. "I am fine," Stiles said. "I just can't move. There was something on the snake monster's claws."

"Snake monster?" Scott sounded even more horrified, were that possible.

"A kanima, Your Majesty," Prince Chris spoke up. "It's a shifter, much like the werewolves, except it's a reptile instead of a wolf. My men and I have been hunting it these past few nights."

Father motioned to his men, and they fanned out around the clearing.

"Given that there is no body around here," Scott said slowly, "I'm guessing this...kanima...is still alive?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Prince Chris said.

"In that case, Your Majesty, I think it might be best to continue this conversation inside the camp," Father suggested, in a tone that said it wasn't a suggestion at all.

"Agreed," Prince Chris said. "There are still far too many hours before dawn."

Scott frowned in a way that said he had many more questions, but he nodded. "Very well. Your Highness, you are more than welcome to accompany us."

Prince Chris hesitated.

Interesting, Stiles thought. He wondered if Prince Chris wished to continue the hunt. "Come now, Your Highness. The kanima is long gone, and our camp must be safer than these woods."

The prince gave Stiles a flat look before directing an answer at Scott. "Of course we will, Your Majesty."

Scott beamed and hopped off his horse. "Excellent. Captain, if you would help me?"

Stiles's father dismounted as well, and Scott knelt next to Stiles and broke the circle. "Can you ride?" Scott asked.

Stiles made to shake his head, but he couldn't even do that. "Scott, I can't move."

"All right." Scott rubbed a hand over his face. "Captain, get him onto my horse. I'll lash him to me if I have to." He looked to Derek and Boyd, who still hadn't moved. "Can you follow us back?"

Derek nodded his shaggy head, and finally stood and moved away, keeping a good distance from the horses. Boyd followed him. Stiles tried not to feel bereft at how cold it suddenly was.

Father grabbed him under the arms and hauled Stiles to his feet. "You all right?"

Stiles heard the concern under the soft question and wished he could do more to reassure his father. "Fine. Really. Looking forward to moving on my own again."

Father shook his head and chuckled softly, and helped Stiles get on the horse.

When they reached the camp, Stiles realized they had a problem. "Scott, you have to break the circle," he said into his brother's back.

He felt Scott stiffen. "Stiles—"
"Derek and Boyd can't get in otherwise," Stiles said. "That kanima was after them, and it may still come back."

"No," Father said.

Stiles felt like he'd been slapped. He wanted to look at his father, but he couldn't do much more than wiggle his toes right now. "But Father—"

"We break the circle, the whole camp is in danger," Father said. "You're the only person who can reform it, and you can't reform anything right now."

"We can't just leave them—"

"We won't," Father said. "I'll have extra men stay out with them. If that is acceptable to His Majesty."

"Yes," Scott said. "He's right, Stiles. We can't leave the camp unprotected. I'm sorry."

Scott sounded genuinely sorry. And Stiles knew that; he understood how important it was to keep the camp safe. And yet, the thought of leaving Derek out there, knowing that thing was still around...

It made him sick.

He watched Derek out of the corner of his eye as long as he could, until Scott's mount carried them too far into camp and out of sight.
To his absolute relief and boundless gratitude, Stiles could move when he woke the next morning. He was stiff and sore, like he always was the mornings after he'd used a lot of magic, but he could move. Thank God, the paralysis hadn't been permanent.

He pushed himself onto his elbows, his muscles protesting every step of the way, and got all the way to sitting up before he realized he wasn't alone in his tent.

Derek looked worn and tired, as though he hadn't slept at all the previous night. His sleeves were rolled up past his elbows, and on his left arm, he wore the charms once again.

Stiles's heart did something unfamiliar and achy at the sight. "You're all right," he said inanely.

"So are you," Derek said softly.

Stiles fisted his hands in his blanket and reminded himself that it probably wouldn't be the best idea to clamber across the bedroll to give Derek a hug, no matter how much he wanted to. "How long have you been here?"

Derek looked away from him. "Since dawn. His Majesty said it would be all right."

Thank you, Scott. "Yes. He's right. It is. I, um..." And Stiles's words failed him completely. He had things to say, he knew it, but he couldn't figure out how to say them. Not now, in the early morning sunlight, with Derek sitting before him exhausted.

Derek got to his feet. "His Majesty and His Highness Prince Chris have requested a briefing of last night as we break our fast. We've been waiting on you to wake."

Oh God, Derek was going to leave and Stiles wouldn't get a chance to explain. He scrambled to his feet. "They were gifts!"

Scrambling to his feet while tangled in a blanket was not a good idea for him at the best of times, let alone immediately after waking and after he'd spent part of the night paralyzed. Stiles lost his balance and pitched forward.

Derek was by his side in an instant, catching him before he planted his face on the ground. "Stiles, be careful."

Stiles grabbed Derek's arms, latching on half to get his balance and half to keep Derek from walking away. "They were gifts," he repeated. "The charms. I didn't just make them to protect you. I mean, I did make them to protect you, but I also meant them as gifts." Stiles clamped his mouth shut to stop his babbling and pretended he wasn't flushing in embarrassment from head to toe.

"And I am sorry if I made you think otherwise, for even a minute." He paused, another uncomfortable thought sliding into his head. "Unless, that wasn't why I upset you yesterday? Was it? I—"
"Stiles," Derek cut him off. The look in his pale green-yellow eyes softened a fraction. "It's all right."

"Oh." Damn, he needed to quit looking into Derek's eyes because it made it very difficult to think. "I'd like to court you," he blurted, because apparently he was flinging everything he hadn't said last night at Derek in some hope of salvaging what he'd broken, since they were both still alive to fix it. "I mean, if you want. Whatever you want, just tell me, and I'll—"

"It's fine," Derek said, again silencing the stream of speech that popped out every time Stiles got nervous. "If you want to, it's fine."

Stiles let out a relieved, shaky breath. All right. They could fix things. And if he was going to do this, he'd do it right. "There's something I need to discuss with you. Part of why I started giving you these." He squeezed his hand over the charms on Derek's arm. "But it can wait until after we talk to everyone. Is that all right? Would you mind riding with me today?"

Derek rubbed his thumbs over Stiles's arms, and then let him go. "That's fine. But we should go. They're waiting."

Stiles stumbled after Derek, resisting the urge to grab his hand, and followed him out of the tent. It was all right. He would make things all right. And in the meantime, he could turn his attention to the briefing and, more importantly, to Prince Chris's reaction to this marriage.

***

Derek shrank in his seat in King Scott's tent, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. He hadn't missed the way Prince Chris's face had darkened when he'd entered the tent with Stiles, and the look hadn't lifted for the entirety of the breakfast.

Derek had met the glare with one of his own. The last time he'd seen the prince's uniform had been during the ambush, and it took everything in him not to lash out in the midst of the meal. It would only make things worse for all of them if he did.

The others present—Stiles, Captain Stilinski, King Scott, Queen Melissa, and (surprisingly) Lady Lydia—didn't seem to notice the tension around the table. Or if they did, they said nothing about it.

"How long have you been hunting this kanima, Your Highness?" Captain Stilinski asked.

Prince Chris finally tore his eyes away from Derek. "We found its first victim four days ago, and we've been tracking it ever since. They're difficult bastards to find, especially since the person has no notion of what they've become."

"How can that be?" Queen Melissa asked, with a quick glance in Derek's direction. He decided not to read anything into it.

"And what other knowledge do you have of them?" Captain Stilinski asked. "Do they hunt werewolves?"

Derek stiffened. The kanima from the night before had come directly for him and Boyd and ignored everyone else, at least until Stiles interfered.
Prince Chris smiled thinly. "A kanima doesn't exactly... hunt. It's a killer. Goes after anything it can get its claws on. And as you saw last night, it has paralytic venom that it uses to keep its victims from moving." His gaze flicked to Stiles. "Normally it strikes them on the back of the neck, drops them immediately."

Next to him, Stiles tensed, and Derek saw him rub his fingers over his injured arm. Likely the only reason Stiles had been able to move for even a few seconds was because the kanima had struck his arm, not his neck.

"Are there more kanimas?" King Scott asked. "Or is it just the one?"

Prince Chris shrugged. "They don't build packs like wolves do. Usually there's only one. We're not even really sure how it's created."

"The bite goes wrong," Derek said softly.

He didn't expect anyone to actually hear him, but the silence that followed was deafening. All eyes at the table turned to him, and Derek wished he hadn't said a word.

"Prince Derek," the queen asked, "what do you know?"

"Yes," Prince Chris said, and Derek did not like the smile that played on his face. "What do you know, Your Highness?"

Derek wanted to either disappear into his seat or launch across the table and bury his claws in the prince's neck. The vehemence of both reactions surprised him.

Warm fingers curled around his hand, and he looked over to see Stiles giving him a small, encouraging smile. It made him feel less alone, and Derek took heart from it. "Our lore says a kanima is created when a werewolf bites a person with an empty soul."

Captain Stilinski crossed his arms and frowned. "An empty soul? What exactly does that mean?"

Derek shrugged helplessly. "I can't explain it much better than that. They look... outside, for someone else to give them an identity. A kanima seeks a master as soon as it's created. As His Highness said," he spared a glance at Prince Chris, "a kanima doesn't hunt. It just follows orders."

"Wait," Stiles said. "If it's following orders, then did someone order it to kill you and Boyd?"

Derek shook his head. The kanima had attacked the other wolves first. "More likely any werewolf it came across."

"Hm." Prince Chris tapped his chin. "So, Prince Derek, has your mother bitten anyone lately?"

It took all of Derek's willpower to keep his claws and fangs in. "Not that it's any of your business, but no."

Unsurprisingly, Prince Chris didn't appear to believe him. "But an Alpha's the only one who can give the bite, correct?"

Violence would get him nowhere, but Derek dearly wished he could do something to wipe that smug expression off the prince's face. "Yes."

"I apologize. I must ask," Prince Chris said, though he didn't sound apologetic at all. "There are only a handful of Alphas, after all."
"Actually, at last count, there were forty-two packs in the Hale lands, including the royal family," Stiles spoke up. "Queen Talia is the pack authority over all of them, but the individual packs each have their own Alphas. It's a fascinating, if complicated, hierarchy. Then you have the packs living outside the Hale lands, who aren't as well-documented."

Derek blinked in surprise. How in the hell had he known all that?

Stiles glanced sideways at Derek and shrugged sheepishly. "I did some reading."

Derek felt his eyebrows crawl nearly to his hairline. "Some?"

"It seemed like a good idea to be informed," Stiles said defensively.

"Ah yes," Prince Chris said, and Derek swore he could feel the tension coalesce around the table. "My belated congratulations to you both, by the way."

Derek's mouth felt so dry he couldn't speak.

Fortunately, Stiles didn't seem to suffer from the same problem. "Why, thank you, Your Highness. Couldn't be happier about it."

"It seems an awfully short betrothal, if you don't mind me saying so," Prince Chris said. "And the timing is... suspect. In fact, a suspicious person might wonder if you had married solely in the hopes of stopping a war."

Out of the corner of his eye, Derek saw King Scott go very still. For his own part, Derek was having difficulty breathing.

"And I feel I should let you know," Prince Chris continued, "my father is a very suspicious person."

The warning couldn't have been clearer, and Derek fought to keep his fear from showing on his face. If their arrangement angered King Gerard, the war wouldn't end. It would only have just begun.

"Well," Stiles drew out the word, "I do hate to expound upon my personal activities in front of family—"

King Scott covered his eyes with one hand and groaned softly enough that it was audible only to Derek's ears.

"—but if it will assuage your worries, Your Highness, there was a perfectly good reason for our hasty marriage." Stiles rested his elbow on the table and propped his chin in his hand. "We were compromised."

What? Derek stared at Stiles as though he'd lost his mind.

Prince Chris blinked, as if he hadn't been expecting that. "Compromised?"

"Oh yes." Stiles smiled beatifically. "Thoroughly. It was well after midnight, and Scott had gone to meet the rest of the court at the port, and, well, I neglected to realize just how good werewolf hearing is, which is a problem when you're not exactly quiet—"

Now Captain Stilinski buried his face in his hand. "Please stop talking."

Derek wanted to melt into the floor. His face had to be the color of a tomato, because it certainly
felt hot enough to cook bacon on.

"But Father, His Highness wanted an explanation," Stiles said, all wide amber eyes and innocence.

"And your explanation is that you were compromised?" Prince Chris still sounded skeptical.

"We were compromised," Stiles corrected. "It takes two, after all. It takes two many, many times. In many different positions."

King Scott looked like he was debating sticking his fork into his ears. Captain Stilinski rolled his eyes to the heavens, as though in silent prayer. Queen Melissa looked like she was trying not to laugh.

Derek was discovering new levels of discomfort and embarrassment. He elbowed Stiles sharply. Stiles looked at him askance. "What?"

"You've explained," Derek muttered. "Thoroughly."

He hoped Stiles correctly interpreted that as "please quit talking about our imaginary sex life before I die of embarrassment and take you with me."

"But, my lovely sugar plum—"

King Scott choked.

"—I'm simply trying to reassure His Highness," Stiles finished.

The Highness in question looked... amused. Derek didn't know if it was because Prince Chris believed them, or because the explanation was plausible enough that he wanted to. "Well, that certainly explains why you were so insistent on getting him inside the camp last night."

"Naturally," Stiles said, and his fingers tightened around Derek's. Derek gave in to his own desires and squeezed them back.

Prince Chris stood and bowed. "With your permission, Your Majesty, my men and I will take our leave. We appreciate your hospitality, but we've much to do."

King Scott nodded, and made a dismissal with his hand. "Of course, Your Highness."

The prince made to leave, but stopped at the door and turned back to them. The faint amusement had vanished from his face entirely. "I'll deliver word of your marriage to my father." He hesitated, and then continued. "I believe that he will understand the... urgency that comes with your situation, at any rate."

Before any of them could say another word, Prince Chris ducked out of the tent.

After the space of a few moments, King Scott turned to Stiles. "Was that really necessary?"

Stiles crossed his arms and huffed in offense. "I didn't see anyone else coming up with an idea. And it was half-true, anyway."

Derek covered his face with his hand in a vain attempt to save himself from any more embarrassment.

"Well, he certainly seemed to be looking for a credible reason you two would be married so quickly," Lady Lydia said in crisp tones.
Stiles smacked the table with his palm. "Exactly. That's all I gave him. I don't think His Highness wants all-out war any more than we do. Or else why would he warn us about King Gerard's potential reaction?"

Queen Melissa let out a long sigh that ended on a chuckle. "It does seem likely."

"He still didn't seem to like Derek much," King Scott said, and Derek swore he could hear the wince in his voice. "No offense meant, Your Highness."

Derek waved it off. After all, the feeling was mutual. "It's true. He didn't."

"You can dislike somebody and still not want war with them," Stiles pointed out emphatically. "A concept it appears King Gerard has yet to grasp."

King Scott rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You're not wrong. But now His Majesty is going to be watching to see if you two really couldn't keep your hands off each other."

Oh. Derek felt the blood drain from his face. If they didn't play the part, and play it well, then all of this could well be for naught.

Stiles, however, looked resolute. "Scott, I assure you, you have nothing to worry about."

***

After the morning's disastrous breakfast, Derek was so wrapped up in worrying how they were going to survive King Gerard's scrutiny that he forgot Stiles had wanted to talk to him. That was, until Stiles rode up next to him and gave Boyd a look that said, very clearly, Be somewhere else.

Which was how Derek ended up alone with Stiles, gaping rather unceremoniously at him and without anyone else around to confirm that Stiles had actually said what Derek thought he had.

"You were warned," Derek repeated, because maybe repeating it would help it make sense in his head.

"Yes."

"By the Sidhe."

"Also yes."

"That I needed protection."

Stiles smiled at him, but there was an uncharacteristic sharpness to it. "Three in a row."

Derek held up his wrist to show the bracelets. "And that's why...?"

Stiles nodded and bit his lip, eyes darting away from Derek. "That's why I started making them for you, yes."

Derek stared, still not comprehending this. "Why?" he finally asked, because it was the only word that encompassed everything in his head.

"Why what?" Stiles looked back to him, but his amber eyes held none of their typical humor.

"Why did they warn me? Why do they think you need protection? Why didn't they say anything to you? Why did they decide to interfere at all?"
From the exasperated litany of questions, it sounded like Stiles was in much the same state of mind as Derek was. "Yes. All of it."

Stiles scoffed. "Well, that's easy enough. I don't know. To all of them."

"So you're just... protecting me?" Derek swallowed, wondered why there was a lump in his throat. "Because they asked you to?"

Stiles's eyes hardened. "If the Sidhe saw fit to warn me, it means you're worth protecting. I don't know why or how it will play out in the end, but I'm not going to ignore them. Especially not when..." He glared down at his reins. "Not when I agree with them on that account."

Derek tore his gaze from Stiles and focused his eyes ahead. The Sidhe must be blind, then. He wasn't worth protecting, not when he couldn't protect anyone else in return.

"Do you want to know what they're for?" Stiles asked.

Derek turned to him in confusion. "What?"

"The bracelets." Stiles nodded his head toward Derek's wrist. "Do you want to know what each one does?"

Derek followed Stiles's eyes to the woven bands. "Oh. Yes?"

He didn't suppose it mattered much, but if Stiles wanted to tell him, so be it.

Stiles reached over and brushed a finger over the red stone bracelet. "This one is for enhancing strength. This one," he touched the green stones, "is to help make you faster, more agile. And also to bring out the green in your eyes," he added with a suggestive wink.

Derek felt his face burn in response.

"And the white accelerates your healing," Stiles continued. "I know werewolves already have amazing healing abilities, so it feels a little overdone, perhaps, but—"

"Thank you," Derek said. "They're good. Thank you."

Beautiful, Derek. You're so articulate.

But Stiles grinned, and the force of it made Derek feel a little breathless. "I wish they'd given me more information," Stiles said. "If so, I could make, for example, protection against arrows, or bladed weapons, or poisoning—wait, can you be poisoned outside of wolfsbane? Or mistletoe?"

Stiles had a look on his face like he was mentally reviewing every poison he knew of and some, perhaps, that he didn't. "Just wolfsbane and mistletoe, to my knowledge," Derek said. "Protection against arrows would be good. If we're struck, we can't heal until they're removed."

"Good! Well, not good, but that's helpful." Stiles fidgeted in his saddle. "I can make those. And maybe I can find a way to protect against the kanima's paralysis. If that thing's set on coming after wolves it can't hurt to have a charm for that, particularly for you and Boyd. It won't be easy, but I know how it feels, now, so—"

Derek got the feeling Stiles was talking more to himself than to Derek now. "You'll find a way."

Stiles blinked, and he focused on Derek once again. "Yeah?"
He sounded so bright and hopeful that it hurt to look at him. Derek wanted to shake him. Everybody knew how clever Stiles was; of course he'd find a way to work his magic on anything. Even a kanima's venom.

"All right. I need to get back to the carriage and start working on the charms," Stiles said. "I don't know how much time I'll have once we reach the Argents' palace."

The reminder hit Derek almost like a physical blow, and he felt his body go cold. Even the scent of the air seemed to change.

Kate would be there.

"Derek?" Stiles touched his arm, just above the bracelets. "Are you all right?"

Derek had an overwhelming urge to throw himself at Stiles, bury himself in that cool forest scent until he couldn't smell anything else, until his heartbeat calmed and Stiles was all he could think about. He made himself rein in the urge even as he reined in his horse. "I'm fine," Derek said, and hoped Stiles didn't hear how hollow his voice was. "You go on. I don't wish to keep you from your work."

He rode off to find Boyd before his composure could break.
Dusk had fallen by the time they reached the Argents' palace, and Stiles was exhausted. He'd been staring at charms for hours, slowly weaving the one for protection against wolfsbane poisoning (black with purple stones), and it still wasn't ready. He wasn't surprised; this particular kind of poisoning wasn't one he was familiar with, so of course it would take him longer to weave, but he'd still hoped to have it finished in time to give to Derek this evening. Preferably with a note.

Instead of resting, though, he'd left his carriage when they'd entered the city to ride beside Scott, who was unusually fidgety and looked moments away from passing out and falling off his horse.

"I'm going to meet her," Scott said for the fifth time, staring vacantly in front of him. "I'm going to meet her. What if she doesn't like me?"

Stiles rubbed the bridge of his nose and, for the fifth time, reassured his brother. "She'll like you. She'll love you."

"If she doesn't, her taste is terrible," Lydia added from Scott's other side. "Besides, you two have been writing to each other since you were old enough to put quill to paper, haven't you?"

Scott kept fidgeting, running his fingers over the jewelry box he had propped before him on his saddle. "We have, but what if she likes the me who wrote the letters better than the real me? I had time to think with the letters. I could be witty. Stiles helped me be witty."

"That was just once!" Stiles said. "All the other eight thousand letters you wrote were all you."

Scott made a noise Stiles had never heard before, but it didn't sound healthy. "But... but... this is Allison. I mean, Her Highness, Princess Allison."

Lydia scoffed. "Scott, it's still just us. We're not going to hang you for not using her title. And from the tone of her letters, I find it difficult to believe Her Highness would be offended if you called her Allison."

"It will be less than forty-eight hours before they're calling each other ridiculous things like 'my lovely treacle tart' or 'sweet honey pumpkin,'" Stiles said gravely.

"Oooh, I'll place ten shillings on that," Lydia said. "I think it will only take them twenty-four."

"You both are horrible," Scott said, but a blush had risen in his cheeks and he no longer looked like he was a too-short breath from passing out atop his ride.

Lydia tossed her hair. "We are awful."
Stiles clapped Scott on the shoulder. "Keeps us awake every night."

Scott smiled at him weakly. "Do you think she'll like the necklace?"

"Yes," Stiles said, and was pleased to hear Lydia echo it in the same semi-exasperated tone.

They reached the bridge that led from the city to the palace itself, and caught their first glimpse of the Argent palace. It sprawled before them, larger than their castle back home, larger than the Hales' castle as well. There must have been a candle in every window of the palace and then some, because everything shimmered like a thousand golden stars floating in the fading light of day.

Scott grabbed Stiles's wrist.

Stiles sighed. "Scott, breathe, everything will be fine. Allison will—"

"It's not about her," Scott said, his voice low and urgent. "I'll need your eyes. The entire time we're here. I don't know what we're walking into but I have a bad feeling about it and you see more than me."

Oh yes. Because though Allison waited at the starlit palace, so did King Gerard. And, Stiles reminded himself, Princess Kate. He nodded solemnly to Scott. "I understand. Constant vigilance."

Scott returned the nod. "Good."

With that, he sat back in his saddle and adjusted his posture and Stiles saw the exact moment Scott transformed from his brother—sweet and slightly insecure and anxious—to his king.

It awed him every time he saw it, made him more proud than he could name. And if some vicious part of him hoped that King Gerard would make the mistake of underestimating Scott, well, Stiles could hardly be blamed.

As they neared the palace, Scott turned to Stiles again. "I need Mother beside me. You, Derek, Lydia, and your father next. Lydia?"

"I'll fetch them," Lydia said, and rode back from the head of the line.

Stiles raised an eyebrow at Scott. "Are you sure?"

"Best I can think of," Scott said. "We don't want insults but I also don't want misunderstandings. Unless you have another procession in mind?"

Stiles considered it. There was no way Stiles could ride next to Scott, not as an equal in front of a foreign king, but their alliance with the Hales and their own family hierarchy needed to be clear. "No. That's probably the best."

Lydia returned quickly with Father, Queen Melissa, and Derek, with the latter frowning at Stiles. "I shouldn't—" Derek began.

Stiles pulled up on the reins of his horse so that he could ride beside Derek again. "Yes, you should," he said, with a little more force than was perhaps necessary. "You're my husband, you're a prince, and you're one of our allies. Yes, you should."

Derek turned back from him, but Stiles didn't miss the way a bit of tension seemed to drain from his body.

The Argent welcoming committee was arrayed along the wide front steps of the palace. As they
rode closer, Stiles spotted the only form he recognized among the impressive line of royal guards: Prince Chris, standing tall, flanked by two women. He did not see King Gerard, thank God; at least they'd have a bit of a reprieve before dealing with him.

The prince descended the steps, the women right behind him, and all three bowed or curtsied in unison. "Your Majesties," Prince Chris said. "I am glad to see you made it safely."

Stiles was just at the right angle that he could see Scott's crooked smile in return. "I am as well, Your Highness."

"May I present my wife, Her Royal Highness Princess Victoria," Prince Chris gestured to his right, and the woman with a frankly terrifying stare curtsied again, "and my daughter, Her Royal Highness Princess Allison."

Allison was beautiful: dark hair and dark eyes and pale skin and a genuinely lovely, if hesitant, smile. Stiles wouldn't have been surprised to see birds flying around her head and singing.

Scott looked like he'd been hit over the head with a staff, which faded into the happiest, most ridiculous grin Stiles had ever seen on his brother's face. He dismounted swiftly and bowed, taking Allison's hand in his and presenting her with the jewelry box. "Princess Allison. It's lovely to finally meet you."

Stiles would swear on his grave that she was blushing. "It's lovely to meet you as well, Your Majesty," she said.

He looked sideways at Lydia. She smirked at him and mouthed, "Ten shillings."

Ah well. It was a bet he would be happy to lose.

***

They learned that His Majesty King Gerard was absent that evening, but he would return the next day in time for a welcoming banquet to commence the celebration of Scott and Allison's upcoming nuptials. Tonight, Prince Chris said, they would get settled to rest and recover from their journey.

Scott had, bless his soul, asked Prince Chris for adjoining chambers for Stiles and Derek, suggesting that it would be best if no one were forced to share a room with Stiles, and that letting Derek have some space would go a long way to preventing a lover's spat in the midst of the festivities.

"Stiles is my brother, and I love him," Scott had said, "but I've known him all my life and there are times I wish I could lock his jaw shut. I would not inflict him upon someone who has scarcely known him two weeks."

Stiles overheard this and fell over laughing. Regardless, the excuse worked, so he and Derek were allowed separate chambers in the interest of peace and happiness and nobody ending up with a gag over their mouth.

He had mostly finished getting settled and was working on his charm for Derek when there was a knock at the door. Stiles cursed the break in his concentration—he'd just gotten into the headspace needed for the weaving—but called out "Who is it?" anyway. Because he was polite like that.

"Derek."

Stiles was on his feet so fast he knocked his chair to the ground. He straightened it, looked at his
disaster of a room, and decided there wasn't much he could do that wouldn't require leaving Derek standing outside for twenty minutes. He ran a hand through his hair in what was likely a vain effort to tame it and answered the door.

Derek stood there, in trousers and a shirt and a wrapper knotted at his throat, shifting his weight from side to side. Was it bad that Stiles wanted to undo the knot with his teeth? Would Derek let him?

Belatedly Stiles remembered his manners, and stood aside to wave Derek in. "Sorry! Sorry. I was... weaving. Your bracelet. It's almost finished."

Derek nodded. "Thank you."

Stiles snorted. "Don't thank me yet. I have no idea how this thing is going to work, or even if it's going to work. And I haven't even given it to you."

"I know. But," Derek rubbed his left wrist, "it's thoughtful."

Stiles searched for something to do with his hands instead of waving them uselessly. Or undressing Derek. "So what brings you to my lovely quarters?"

Derek looked around and gave the barest hint of a smile. "Lovely?"

Oh, how much he wanted to make Derek smile more. Stiles flicked the comment away. "Work in progress. I'll get there eventually."

Derek twisted his hands in the sleeves of his wrapper. "Perhaps by the time we leave."

He continued to shift his weight, eyes not quite meeting Stiles's. Light banter covering up for something else, something making him nervous. Well, that was something they couldn't have. Stiles crossed the space between them and took Derek's hands in his. "Derek?"

"Did you like the night we spent in the inn?"

The initial blush of surprise was drowned very quickly by the memory of Derek wrapped around him, biting at the back of his neck and dragging Stiles to the best climax of his life. "Ah. Yes. Yes, that was a good night."

Derek flushed a little, and for a split second, Stiles thought he looked rather pleased with himself. "I was thinking. Since you told Prince Chris we were compromised. We ought to try again. If that's... if you'd like."

He did. He wanted to a lot. Stiles rubbed his thumbs over Derek's hands. "I'd like that," he said, as honestly and kindly as he could manage, because he worried responding with his actual amount of enthusiasm would scare Derek off. "Would you?"

Derek nodded, a little hesitantly, still blushing vividly. "I like pleasing you."

At some point in the future, he would tell Derek how adorable he was when he blushed. Today was not that day. Stiles's heart pounded harder, and he was certain Derek could hear it. He endeavored to keep his movements as slow as possible as he pulled Derek's hands up to kiss the knuckles. "Remember what I said the last time?"

"If you do anything I don't like, tell you and you'll stop. If I do anything you don't like, I'll stop. And," Derek hesitated just a fraction of a second, "I won't run away, so we can figure things out."
Stiles couldn't stop the smile spreading across his face. Maybe he couldn't get Derek to tell him what he wanted, but Derek would tell him what he didn't. He could work with that. "Perfect. Still no kissing on the mouth?" he asked.

Derek nodded jerkily.

All right. Stiles knew where he stood with that, then. "Is there anything else you don't want to do?"

Derek paused and then shook his head. His blush had faded in color, but his face was far from the pale he'd been on their wedding night. He just looked nervous, now, not actually scared.

Which was fine, because Stiles was nervous, too.

Stiles lowered their hands and let out a shaky breath. He didn't have the slightest clue what he was doing; he just wanted, and was trying to figure out the best way to translate that want into words that wouldn't scare Derek away. "I... I'd like to see you. Touch you. If that's all right."

Derek nodded and reached up to untie his wrapper, but Stiles shook his head and got his fingers there first. "No. Let me?"

Derek hesitated for just a second, his fingers hovering over Stiles's, but then he lowered his hands. Stiles swallowed in a vain attempt to wet his suddenly dry throat, and then turned his focus to unknotted the tie at Derek's neck.

He'd tied and untied thousands of knots in his life, but the mundane task took on an astounding importance when the knot was located a mere inch from Derek's neck, when Stiles could hear each soft breath, could see the way Derek's throat worked as he swallowed. Stiles stifled the sudden and nigh-overwhelming urge to lunge forward and bite, see if he could mark Derek the way Derek had marked him. He kept his gaze studiously on his fingers.

Derek dipped his head and ran his tongue along the top of Stiles's finger. Heat raced over Stiles's arm and shuddered down his back, as quickly as if it had been an actual flame.

Stiles looked up, couldn't not look at Derek after that. Derek licked his lips and broke their eye contact. "You said you liked licking."

From another person it might have come out coy. From Derek, it just sounded like he was stating a fact. "Yes," Stiles said, and damn, his voice had gotten hoarse at some point in the last few minutes.

He needed to get his hands on Derek as soon as possible.

Stiles shoved the wrapper down Derek's arms, let it pool to the floor, but restrained himself from actually ripping the shirt off. Instead, Stiles took a deep breath and pulled at the hem.

"Wait," Derek said.

Stiles stopped where he was and immediately released Derek's shirt. He almost took a step back as well, but then—

"Are you going to take your shirt off?" Derek asked, almost shyly.

The worry that he'd done something wrong evaporated, and Stiles felt himself grinning. "Do you want me to?"
"I like your tattoos," Derek mumbled.

Stiles yanked off his shirt so fast he almost tangled himself in it. "Ask and ye shall receive."

Derek's eyes raked over Stiles's chest, and then he started to take off his own shirt. For the second time, Stiles stopped him. "Let me. Please. I want to undress you."

Derek paused again, eyes wide and surprised and slightly vulnerable, and it made Stiles's heart ache. Then Derek held his arms up over his head and, well, Stiles wasn't one to turn down an obvious invitation.

He pulled Derek's shirt off and took a moment to look at him—actually look at him—up close for the first time since their wedding night. And really, Stiles couldn't count that since he'd been paying far more attention to Derek's face than any other part of his body.

Derek was gorgeous, all tanned skin and hard muscle, the ridges casting shadows on his skin in the candlelight. Dark hair dusted his chest, and a faint dark line arrowed from his navel to beneath the band of his trousers. Stiles wanted to follow the path with his fingers or his mouth or perhaps both at the same time.

He reached out and touched Derek's stomach, felt the muscles ripple under his fingers. Derek huffed a soft laugh. "That tickles."

"Sorry." Stiles spread his fingers, rested his whole hand against Derek's side. "Better?"

When he got a nod in return, Stiles continued his exploration, letting his hands slowly rove over Derek's skin, stomach and chest and arms and shoulders, trying to memorize everything with his fingers. He may not have been a werewolf, but he found himself completely attuned to Derek's reactions regardless: the way his breath caught when Stiles skinned over a certain spot or his faint moan when Stiles rubbed a thumb over his nipples, so quiet Stiles wasn't entirely certain he was hearing it. Each noise was more arousing than the last, and Stiles wanted to hear all of them, feel it as Derek came apart with him.

He traced his finger over Derek's chest, following the path with his tongue, finding his way back to the spots where Derek had gasped the first time. When Stiles flicked his tongue over one nipple, Derek cursed and squeezed his hips harder, pulling him forward. Stiles wasn't quite prepared for the jerk, and stumbled into Derek, who took the opportunity to press their hips together and thrust.

The delicious friction turned his knees to water, and Stiles dug his fingers into Derek's arms and moaned. Involuntarily, he rocked forward, earning another soft curse from Derek, who dropped his head to Stiles's neck and shuddered.

Stiles wanted to keep rocking, but more than that, he wanted to strip their pants, to line their cocks together, to feel the slide of skin against skin, wrap his hand around them both and stroke until he
could watch Derek come. He wanted that almost more than he wanted his next breath.

Before his body could make the decision for him, Stiles pushed back. "Trousers," he said, because his mind wasn't functioning well enough for him to form a complete sentence. "No trousers."

"No trousers," Derek echoed, staring at Stiles with pupils so wide his eyes were nearly black.

Stiles fumbled at Derek's trousers, trying to get them off so he could get his hands and mouth everywhere. He pulled the waistband forward and stuck his hand inside, running his fingers up the hard length of Derek's cock. Derek whined, and Stiles pressed his hand flat against Derek as the other one desperately finished divesting him of trousers. Derek rocked forward, making small needy noises that were doing more for Stiles's arousal than his own hand ever had.

He wrapped his hand all the way around Derek and stroked him, slowly, relishing the bitten-off groan Derek made. Stiles kissed his neck, nosed his way up to Derek's jaw and sucked on his earlobe. "I want to taste you," Stiles whispered. "Can I taste you?"

"Yeah." Derek nodded, his cheek scratching Stiles's. "Yes."

Yes. Stiles had to stop and rest his forehead in the crook of Derek's neck. He took a few deep breaths to steady his heartbeat and keep himself from doing something completely mad, like knocking them both to the floor and trying to lick Derek's entire body at once.

He ran his thumb over the tip of Derek's cock and swiped away a drop of pre-come. Stiles sucked it off, and did not miss the way Derek's eyes fixated on his mouth.

Stiles grinned and crouched, tracing Derek's chest and stomach as he did, following the path his fingers made with his mouth. He might not be able to lick everywhere at once, but he could touch and taste the slightly salty skin, savoring every inch of it. Stiles licked up the edge of the V-shaped muscle that arrowed down to Derek's cock.

And then Derek was suddenly not there anymore.

Stiles blinked in surprise and fell forward, but grabbed hold of the bed before he hit the floor. Derek was on the other side of the bed, face pale and drawn, his whole body tensed as though prepared for an attack.

The sight was like being doused with ice water. For the second time, Stiles had put that look on Derek's face and he wasn't sure how or why, and it made him sick. "Derek—"

"I'm not running," Derek said tersely.

Thank God for small favors. Stiles stood and kept one hand on the mattress for balance. His legs wouldn't hold him otherwise. "I know. Thank you. What happened?"

Derek sat on the edge of the bed and rested his fists on his thighs. He shook his head. Stiles wasn't sure if that meant "nothing" (ha) or if it meant Derek didn't want to tell him. He cautiously edged closer to the bed. "May I sit?"

"Please," came the soft answer.

Stiles sat, close enough to Derek that he could offer comfort if need be and far enough away that Derek wouldn't feel pressed or trapped. He hoped. "I did something. What did I do to hurt you?"
Derek shook his head again and exhaled a shaky breath. "You didn't hurt me. It was... bad memories. I don't want to talk about them. I don't want to bring them here."

He raised his eyes, and the combination of anger and hollowness and vulnerability there hit Stiles like a closed fist. He was overwhelmed with the urge to find the person who'd given Derek those bad memories and show them just how creative his charms could get.

Or perhaps he'd just set them on fire. That seemed like a viable option at the moment as well.

"Was it the licking?" Stiles asked, to get his mind off vengeance.

"Not all of it. Just," Derek drew a hand up his side, over the last place Stiles had licked, "here."

Stiles nodded, reached out toward Derek to offer comfort, but fortunately came to his senses before he did something foolish. Derek might not want comfort right now.

Ask, Stiles reminded himself. "Is there anything I can do?"

For the longest moment, he thought Derek wouldn't answer, or that he would leave, which... all right, Stiles would completely understand if Derek wanted to leave, but he didn't want him to.

"Scent helps," Derek whispered.

"Scent?" Stiles repeated, and scooted closer. "Do you need to smell me? Would that help?"

Derek nodded, the move so slight Stiles half-thought he'd imagined it. "I like the way you smell."

Stiles tentatively reached over and placed his hand over Derek's fist. "Smell me all you like, then."

Derek unclenched his fist, turning his hand so their palms rested together. Then he laid his head on Stiles's shoulder. The intimacy of the simple gesture sent a stutter through Stiles's heartbeat, and he could only pray Derek wasn't paying attention to it.

He's just smelling you, Stiles scolded himself. Calm down. You don't want to scare him away.

But it was difficult to listen to the smarter part of his mind when Derek was nuzzling into his neck, scraping stubble against Stiles's bare skin and making soft happy noises as he did. Stiles tried to summon the image of Derek's face just a few moments ago, but then Derek sucked at the corner of his jaw, just over the pulse point, and all chivalrous thoughts flew out the window.

"Do you feel better?" Stiles asked, failing miserably at keeping the desperation out of his voice.

Derek kissed his way down Stiles's neck, humming contentedly. "Yes. Much better." His hand tightened on Stiles's. "You smell so good."

"Oh?" It was the most coherent response he could manage. "How do I smell?"

"Like the forest after a thunderstorm." Derek traced his fingers up Stiles's arm, following the lines of his tattoos. "Fresh and cold and wild. Green. And a dozen other things I haven't figured out yet."

Yet. Like he wanted to sit here forever and pick apart Stiles's scent. That was an unexpectedly arousing thought.

"And it changes," Derek said, making his way down Stiles's chest and gently kissing the eye of each dragon there. "Gets stronger some places. Like here," he released Stiles's hand to trace a finger down his neck, "and here."
Derek ran his other hand lightly over the front of Stiles's trousers, and it took every single bit of self-control he possessed for Stiles to keep from bucking up into the touch. He couldn't stop himself from making an embarrassingly needy whimper, though. He was hard again, so hard it was hurting, because his body responded to Derek like nothing else. Every touch was like the strike of a match, flaring sharp against him.

Derek squeeled him gently. "May I?"

Yes, God, yes, whatever you want, please, Stiles thought, but he could scarcely form a word with Derek touching him. "Unh. Yes," he finally croaked.

Derek undid his trousers one-handed and wrapped his hand fully around Stiles's cock, the warm, solid pressure a relief and a tease simultaneously. This time, Stiles did buck up, because his self-control had a limit and that was when Derek had a hand on him. "God, Derek."

The response was a nuzzle into his chest as Derek scraped stubble across one nipple, and holy God that felt more amazing than it had any right to. They should explore that more—much more—later. Then Derek was pushing him down to the bed, and really, Stiles wasn't going to argue about anything at this point.

He flopped backward, then levered himself up to his elbows just in time to see Derek lick him all the way from his balls to the head of his cock. Stiles's whole body jerked upward at that, and he swore loudly.

Derek raised his eyes just enough to meet Stiles's. "Is that... good?"

Stiles had the presence of mind to capture this moment: Derek bent over him, eyes soft and face flushed, looking like he wanted this, maybe as much as Stiles did. "Good. Very good."

Before Derek bent back down, Stiles caught the smile teasing at the corners of his lips, and he was seized by the urge to drag Derek up so he could kiss it. He fisted his hands in the covers to keep himself from doing so.

Then Derek licked him again and Stiles fisted his hands in the covers for an entirely different reason. "Fuck, Derek."

The soft exhale might have been a laugh, but then Derek put his entire mouth over the head of Stiles's cock and Stiles stopped thinking about everything.

Derek hummed a little, his head moving achingly slowly up and down, one hand still fisted at the base of Stiles's cock to hold him steady. Stiles watched through a haze of desire, because he couldn't decide which was better: the heat and suction of Derek's mouth, the slide of his tongue, or actually seeing the way his cock disappeared between Derek's lips.

Stiles shifted his weight to one arm so he could thread his fingers through Derek's silky soft hair, not to push him down but just to feel, just to be touching Derek while he carefully took Stiles apart with only his mouth.

"Good, good, that's so good," Stiles whispered, aware on some level that his mouth was operating independently of his mind. "God, Derek, you feel so good, that's so good..."

Derek hummed again, the vibrations making Stiles's toes curl, and he moved a little faster, taking Stiles's cock deeper into his mouth and twisting his hand at the same time. Sparks flashed at the edge of Stiles's vision and he moaned, arching up involuntarily, every part of his body begging for more. He could already feel his climax building, coiling in him like a spring while Derek sucked
him.

God, he wasn't going to last much longer.

"Derek, I'm going to come, I'm going to—"

Stiles made to pull away, but Derek tightened his grip and sucked.

Stiles came hard enough that his vision greyed at the edges, hard enough that his body felt completely weightless but for where Derek touched him. Derek kept sucking him, each drag of his lips pulling whimpers from Stiles, until he was so over-sensitive he had to tug at Derek's hair to get his attention. "'S'too much, stop, Derek."

Derek stopped, pulling slowly off Stiles's cock, but he didn't move. Instead, he nuzzled against Stiles's thigh, kissing him there over and over.

Stiles petted him absentmindedly, just letting his fingers trail through Derek's hair, back and forth. "Just give me a minute," he said. "Just a minute, and then I want to suck your cock."

Derek chuckled softly, then kissed his thigh again and stood. "It's all right. I don't want to be a bother."

A... What the hell? "Bother?" Stiles repeated, pushing himself up so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed instead of laying on it. "What are you talking about?"

Derek was already mostly dressed once more, pulling his wrapper on. "It's all right," he said again, this time with a small smile. "I'll see you in the morning, Stiles."

With that, he was gone, leaving Stiles both sated and very, very confused.

Chapter End Notes

Derek freaks out a little when Stiles touches him in a way that reminds him of Kate. It's not a full-blown panic attack and it's viewed entirely from an outside POV.

As always, if you guys see something I should tag for, let me know here or on Tumblr. Thank you muchly. :-)
Derek perched on the edge of his bed, staring at the sketch in his hands. He'd been up with the sun, as usual, but after sparring with Boyd and getting dressed, he'd spent the last half-hour sitting on his bed, paralyzed with indecision.

The sketch was the one of Stiles and King Scott, the one Stiles had asked to share just a few short days ago. For the past half-hour, Derek had been debating letting him.

He didn't have much to offer, but Stiles had liked his sketches, and Derek wanted to give him something in thanks for the bracelets. Even if they were part of the arrangement, even if Stiles made them for protection, it was still a kind gesture. Derek wanted to make a gesture in return, do something that would make Stiles's eyes soften and bring out that little secret smile.

But every time he thought about letting go of the sketch, a part of him seized up in terror. What if King Scott laughed? And what if Stiles laughed with him?

Naturally, Boyd's suggestion had been a flat look and "Just give it to him, sir." Which was why Derek rarely asked him for advice; he didn't understand the particulars. Or maybe just didn't care.

He set aside the sketch, and then picked it up again for the millionth time. Stiles hadn't laughed at him the first time. And last night...

Well, Derek had come twice afterward, just from the memory of the smell and the taste and the sound and *Good, good, that's so good*.

Before he could make a decision one way or the other, someone knocked at the door joining his and Stiles's chambers. Which meant it had to be Stiles.

Derek set the sketch aside and had to push away a sudden attack of nerves before he could get up and open the door.

Stiles stood on the other side, shirt half-tucked into his breeches and waistcoat unbuttoned. His hair stood on end, as though he'd been running his hands through it, and his amber eyes looked a little wild. Derek had scarcely inhaled before he smelt the anxiety.

He tensed immediately, a thousand horrible scenarios running through his mind. "What's wrong?"

Stiles grinned brightly, but it looked false and did nothing to dispel the scent of anxiety. "Why, good morning to you too, husband."

Derek knew he ought to be courteous, but he couldn't. Had he done something to offend? Was
Stiles regretting last night? "Stiles, what's wrong?" he repeated.

Stiles groaned and shoved his way into the chamber. "Nothing's wrong, why would anything be wrong? We've just been summoned to a perfectly ordinary family luncheon with the Argents."

Derek had the span of a heartbeat to be grateful it wasn't anything he'd done before he recalled what a luncheon with the Argents would include. He rested a hand on the wall to steady himself and swallowed hard.

Stiles paced the room, gesticulating wildly. "Of course, when King Gerard said a 'family luncheon,' his invitation only implied Scott and Her Majesty. And he didn't even send an invitation to Her Majesty, just asked Scott to do it. Because he's a condescending bastard even in note form."

Derek frowned. "So... we've not been summoned?"

"Scott has decided to take him at his word," Stiles said. "It's a family luncheon, and as far as Scott's concerned, you and I are family. Besides, we need to tell King Gerard about our arrangement, preferably before the betrothal banquet this evening. I'm not thrilled about it happening now, but better sooner than later, I suppose."

Derek felt light-headed. He wasn't sure which would be worse: facing King Gerard, or facing Kate.

"On the bright side, King Gerard is supposed to think we were compromised, so Scott has requested that we spend the luncheon ogling each other," Stiles said.

Derek was pretty sure his eyebrows touched his hairline. He was rather skeptical King Scott had said that.

Stiles stopped pacing in front of him and smiled sheepishly. "Well, perhaps not in so many words. But it's what he meant, I assure you."

Though Derek was fairly sure Stiles intended that to be a reassurance, it only made him more nervous. "What time are we expected?"

"Half past noon." Stiles glanced at the clock and cursed. "And I have to finish dressing."

Derek looked down at himself. He was dressed, but certainly not well enough for a family luncheon. "I should, too, in that case."

Stiles half-smiled and headed back to his chamber. He paused at the threshold, one hand on the doorknob, myriad emotions flicking across his face before settling on harsh determination. "Derek, I swear, I won't let them hurt you. I'll take care of you. I promise."

His feelings spun through their own whirlwind at that, a mix of softness that Stiles wanted to protect him and frustration that he felt he had to, that Derek couldn't truly protect him in return.

He wanted to say something, anything, but his voice seemed to have gotten stuck. Stiles just half-bowed and backed out of the room.

Derek cursed at himself and then called for Boyd. He apparently had a luncheon to survive.

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The hour he had between Stiles informing him of the luncheon and him needing to be there was enough time for Derek to lose his appetite. No matter what King Scott and Stiles thought, this
wasn't going to go well. He could feel it in the pit of his stomach, cold and tight, making him nauseous. He could barely feel Stiles's gloved hand wrapped around his. Once again, he had the overwhelming urge to run, but he didn't even want to think about what that would do to his family, to his country.

"Breathe, Derek," Stiles whispered, breath warm against Derek's ear. "All you have to do is smile politely and occasionally look like you're picturing me naked."

Derek choked and glowered at Stiles, but it was difficult when the words painted a picture in his mind of the night before, of Stiles arching beneath him and moaning with every movement Derek made.

"King Gerard will not be pleased about this," Derek whispered back, in an effort to get his mind away from Stiles naked.

"You're probably right," Stiles said, "but there's little we can do about his reaction except support Scott and hope for the best. Besides, there's always the chance he'll decide to welcome it with open arms."

"Do you really believe that?" Derek asked incredulously.

Stiles snorted. "Not in the slightest."

"Then why did you say it?"

"I'm trying to get you to smile, sourwolf."

Derek scowled. "This isn't a laughing matter. He could destroy my family."

Stiles returned his glare. "And what do you think he'll do to us? Do you really think we'll walk away unscathed?"

Derek had only half a second to register Stiles's words—to see he was worried, under the jokes—before they had to enter the banquet hall.

For the first brief moment, all Derek could think was Please don't let Kate be there.

He took in the room quickly—Prince Chris he recognized immediately, and King Gerard, tall and white-haired and smiling warmly. His heartbeat stuttered when he saw two women, but they were Victoria, the princess consort, and Princess Allison.

Not Kate. Kate wasn't here.

Derek let out a slow breath of relief and bowed with Stiles just as King Scott presented them to King Gerard. He kept his eyes up, though, and caught the way King Gerard's smile slipped for but the blink of an eye.

Definitely not happy.

"Additional guests?" King Gerard said. "But this is a family luncheon."

"Exactly." King Scott nodded in earnest agreement. "And this is my family: my mother, my brother and his husband."

King Gerard looked from King Scott to Prince Chris. "Husband? There must be some story there. Last I recall, Prince Derek wasn't available for marriage."
King Gerard sharp eyes landed right on Derek, and it was all he could do to keep himself breathing evenly. Stiles's hand twitched in his, and Derek squeezed back instinctively, seeking some faint measure of reassurance.

He wished Laura were here.

Prince Chris leaned over and whispered something, low enough that Derek couldn't catch it with his werewolf hearing, but he could make a guess as to what it was.

His suspicions were proven right a moment later. King Gerard swept a knowing gaze over Derek and Stiles. "Oh. Well, that's not terribly surprising. Though I would have expected you to know better, Prince Derek."

Derek felt the heat climb in his cheeks. He didn't know which was worse: the statement that he should've known better or the implication that Stiles didn't.

"Regardless of how it happened, he is family," King Scott said, his heartbeat and voice both steady.

King Gerard raised both snow-white eyebrows, and then the warm smile was back. "Of course, of course. Please, sit and let's eat."

The luncheon proceeded almost exactly like the one where Derek had first met Stiles: servants delivered the courses at intervals, and Derek focused on his food and couldn't taste a damn thing, eating more by rote than anything else. The conversation moved around him, with King Gerard speaking almost exclusively to King Scott and Prince Chris.

The biggest difference was that Stiles sat next to him this time, and was uncharacteristically quiet. He didn't even attempt to join the conversation, which Derek found strange.

He started to ask what had Stiles so silent, when Princess Allison turned to them, smiling brightly from across the table. "It's good to finally meet you, Prince Stiles. Sco—His Majesty writes of you often."

Stiles grinned in response. "Only half of what he says is true, Your Highness."

She took a delicate sip of the soup. "Then did you really make a miniature army out of clay and mud and reenact a battle in the queen's chambers?"

Derek gaped at Stiles. "You what?"

Stiles shrugged one shoulder and chuckled. "Scott didn't have enough wooden figures for a proper battle, and we were only six so we couldn't make more."

"But," Derek lowered his voice, "the queen's chamber?"

"Best terrain in the castle," Stiles said solemnly.

Princess Allison set her chin in her hand. "And did you really perform a poem for Lady Lydia in front of the whole court?"

Stiles choked on the bite he'd just taken and red blossomed over his face. "He told you about that?"

Derek tried to bring the image of Stiles standing before the assembled court, reciting poetry to Lady Lydia. It was easier than he'd expected. "Did you write the poetry?" he asked.
The darkening crimson on Stiles's cheeks gave him the answer. "Poetry is not my forte."

Princess Allison giggled. "I think it's sweet. Have you not heard any of their childhood stories, Prince Derek?"

Derek shook his head. It was only now occurring to him how little he knew about Stiles, about how all his knowledge of his husband could fit into two small boxes labeled "sex" and "politics." He knew nothing about how Stiles had grown up, how he and King Scott had become so close, what kind of foods he liked or what scared him or what he liked to do on rainy days. Stiles should have had courting and silly stories and more notes and tokens, not this forced arrangement with someone who was practically a stranger.

"Well," Princess Allison took a sip from her goblet, "I'll have to share some of my letters with you, then. That way you'll get all the stories, even the ones His Highness conveniently forgets to share."

Stiles scowled at her. "You and Scott are disgustingly perfect for each other."

Princess Allison beamed, but this time it was deliriously happy and unguarded. "You really think so?"

Stiles smiled and nodded, but Derek could see it didn't quite reach his eyes. He felt the faint sadness there like a knife to the stomach. Stiles didn't get to marry someone disgustingly perfect for him, because he was stuck with Derek.

*I'm sorry,* Derek wanted to say. *I know you didn't want this. I wish you didn't have to give up your life because of my mistakes. You deserve so much better than me, so much more than having to take care of me.*

But he couldn't say it here.

"You will have to tell me your story sometime," Princess Allison was saying, looking between Derek and Stiles with a gleam in her eye. "I imagine it's unbearably romantic. I would love to hear it."

"As would I," a sickeningly familiar voice said.

Derek jerked his eyes up from his plate and froze. Kate swayed into the banquet hall, blond hair perfectly coiffed, self-assured as ever, eyes fixed on Derek and a smile as sweet as poison dancing on her lips.

He was going to be ill.

 Somehow, Derek stood with the other men at the table, as was polite, sitting again when Stiles did. He knew King Gerard made introductions, but could not have said what they were. All he could hear was the sound of his own heart, impossibly loud, the whoosh of blood in his ears.

How had he missed her smell? The sound of her footstep outside the banquet hall? How could he have been so casually foolish as to imagine for even a moment she wouldn't actually show up here?

Whatever appetite he'd had before was gone now, and Derek couldn't even pretend to eat. He was cold all over, like a thin sheet of ice had settled on his skin. Every instinct was screaming at him to run, but he couldn't. He was trapped. With Kate. Again.

Something warm covered his fist. A hand. Stiles's hand. "Derek," he said under his breath, somehow making it a question and a reassurance all at once.
Derek made himself raise his eyes to Stiles's golden ones, fraught with concern. Once again, Derek felt words he couldn't make himself say battering at his tongue. *I'm all right. It's fine. Please let me bury myself in your neck until she goes away.*

"Good luck with that," Kate scoffed delicately from across the table. "If you can get more than three consecutive grunts out of him, I'll be impressed."

His throat tightened, and Derek made himself turn back to his food. That didn't stop him from clinging to Stiles's hand like it was the only thing keeping him from plummeting off a cliff.

"So," Kate continued, "you must be Prince Stiles."

"Must I?" Stiles said lightly, too lightly.

Derek chanced a look up from his plate. Kate was assessing Stiles with a gaze just short of leering, and Stiles was... angry. He covered it with a banal smile, but Derek could see how his eyes had hardened.

"Process of elimination," Kate said serenely. "After all, you're the only person at this table I'm not at least somewhat familiar with." She slid her eyes back to Derek with a knowing grin.

Bile stung the back of his throat, and Derek wanted to crawl into a hole.

"Now, I believe you were going to tell Allison a story?" Kate bit into a piece of fruit and chewed it with relish. "I must say, I look forward to hearing this one."

"Aunt Kate," Princess Allison said, voice tinged with uncertainty, "it's really not appropriate."

Kate waved the objection away. "Oh, please. They're not paying any attention," she inclined her head toward the head of the table, where another conversation was going, "and really, it won't be anything I'm unfamiliar with. Besides, it would be good for you. You'll be a married woman soon!"

Princess Allison looked both embarrassed and horrified. "Aunt Kate!"

"Besides, I simply must hear how this came about."

"Interesting." Stiles drew the word out. "I was always under the impression these topics weren't fit for dinner table discussion. I must have a word with my etiquette instructor. He's been lying to me for ten years."

Kate rested her hand in her chin and wrinkled her nose. Once, Derek had found the expression unbearably cute. Now... "Oh, come now, Your Highness. We are practically family. You and I perhaps a little more so than others." She winked. "Isn't that right?"

He couldn't miss the implication in her words, the reminder, and Derek clenched his fist under the table, trying to keep himself from reacting outwardly in any way. Stupid. He'd been so stupid.

Stiles reached for something and knocked over a glass of wine. The red liquid splattered over Derek, and he jumped in surprise.

"Sorry, sorry!" Stiles said, standing up and dabbing at the front of Derek's shirt with his napkin. "Oh, your shirt, I'm so sorry. You should change."

Derek stared at a blotch of red wine spreading over Stiles's shirt as well. He nodded at it, and
looked up at Stiles significantly.

"What?" Stiles looked down. "Oh, da—well, I am a clumsy one." He turned to the rest of the table and bowed. "If you all will excuse us?"

Stiles didn't even wait for an official dismissal; he just grabbed Derek's arm and hauled him out of the banquet hall. Derek followed him, still breathless and unsure exactly what was happening, until they finally reached his chamber and Stiles pushed him inside.

"Sorry," Stiles said again as soon as the door was closed. "I shouldn't have, with the wine, but it was all I could think of to get you out of there."

"Why?" Derek asked, his voice far harsher than he meant it to be.

Stiles didn't even flinch at the tone, but took Derek's fist and held it up.

His claws were buried in his palm, blood running in rivulets down his wrist to stain the edges of his sleeve. Derek stared at it, not quite able to believe his eyes, and then he felt the dull throb of pain beating in his hand. How long had he had his claws out and hadn't even noticed?

He tried to unclench his fist, tried to retract his claws, but no, some part of him still felt trapped, like this entire palace was a cage. Derek knew he was gasping, recognized it at the edges of his perception, but he couldn't stop. Everything was closing in on him. He was dimly aware of Stiles letting go of him, moving around the room, and then—

Then Stiles gently took hold of his wrist again, brushing it with a cool cloth, wiping away the blood. He was murmuring something under his breath, a chant or a song in a language Derek didn't recognize.

The rhythm soothed him, pushing away the trapped feeling until he no longer felt so caged. Finally, Derek's claws retracted and his fingers unfolded. Stiles just continued to clean off the blood, singing his soft song the entire time.

They were standing so close that it was all Derek could smell, the clean water of the cloth and the faint tang of blood and his own scent mixing with the wild-forest smell of Stiles. Now he could finally hear something other than his own heartbeat, could hear the sound of Stiles's as well, the way they didn't quite match up but made a rhythm that worked all on their own. Stiles held him gently but firmly, warm fingers pressing into Derek's wrist, rubbing the cloth over Derek's skin.

"Is that magic?" Derek asked, and even though he spoke softly, his voice seemed to ring in the silence between them.

Though Stiles's eyes stayed down, Derek saw the slight smile tilting up the corner of his lips. "Hardly. It was..." He took a soft, shaky breath. "My father used to sing it to my mother whenever she had nightmares. Or, later, when she was sick."

Derek had no idea what to say. Instead, like a dolt, he repeated "Sick?" because there was something in the way Stiles said it, like it had more weight than just a word.

"She died when I was ten."

He said it calmly, six words stating a simple fact, but Derek now understood the pain under the words. He twisted his hand and caught Stiles's, squeezing it reassuringly. "I..." He trailed off, because there weren't words.
Stiles smiled sadly. "I know."

He hated that Stiles was sad, hated more that Kate had unnerved him so much he'd very nearly lost control. He hated that he'd been so obviously undone, hated that he'd needed a rescue, hated that he couldn't be a stronger husband like Stiles deserved.

Even so, he couldn't bring himself to push Stiles away. He squeezed Stiles's hand again, loath to let it go. "Thank you."

Some of the sadness lifted from his smile, and Stiles rubbed his thumb over Derek's. "Anytime, husband."

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After the luncheon, things were surprisingly uneventful. The engagement banquet for King Scott and Princess Allison went very smoothly, and afterward King Gerard had apologized to Derek for attacking after the failed negotiations. Talking to Scott had shown him the error of his ways.

Derek didn't believe it for a second.

King Gerard had also insisted they meet regarding a new treaty, with King Scott acting as mediator. Before Derek could react in any way, however, Prince Chris suggested they wait until after the marriage to start negotiations.

That was more than fine with Derek. His mother and Laura would be here by then, and no one would be depending on him to present a coherent statement of his family and country's needs.

The next morning after sparring with Boyd, Derek ensconced himself in the library with his sketches. It was quiet, and he felt slightly less trapped here than in his chambers.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to return to Stiles last night. He had wanted to, desperately, but seeing Kate had made it impossible for him to get her voice out of his head. And he didn't want to put Stiles through that again. Stiles deserved so much better.

Derek pushed the thoughts away and drew his charcoal across the paper, sketching Cora and Laura in an effort to ease the homesickness in his heart. It wasn't the same, but seeing their faces take shape under his fingers eased the pang of loneliness.

However, he was not so engrossed in his sketches that he didn't hear the swish of a skirt on carpet.

Calmly, Derek tucked away his paper and charcoal and pulled out a book. He wasn't certain who the skirt belonged to, but he was certain he didn't want them seeing anything he drew.

The next sniff brought an uncomfortably familiar perfume to his nose, and Derek had only the span of a few seconds to steel himself before Kate sashayed around a shelf to lean against his table.

Her smile was positively predatory. "Good morning, Derek."

Derek turned his gaze back to his book. "Your Highness," he said as evenly as he could.

Kate drew one perfectly manicured fingernail across the top of the table. "So what are you doing, cooping yourself up inside on a lovely day like this?"

Derek flipped a page, even though he'd scarcely read a word. "Just enjoying the solitude of the library."
"Odd. I'd have thought solitude would be the last thing you want right now." Kate tapped a finger on top of the table. "Considering how quickly your husband spirited you from the table yesterday, I assumed you two couldn't keep your hands off each other."

He didn't miss the slight emphasis she put on "husband." Derek took a deep breath and clamped down on his bone-deep urge to run as fast as he could. "We do have to come up for air occasionally."

Kate flicked his comment away. "Oh, please, no one expects to ever see those who are newly wed. How do you find married life, anyway? Was your wedding night everything you hoped it would be?"

Derek could keep his eyes resolutely on the book, but he couldn't control the heat racing up the sides of his cheeks. "What happens in my marriage bed is none of your concern."

"Oh, come now." Kate leaned farther over the table, closer to him. "Once we had no secrets between us."

Derek shut his book firmly and stood. "And once we were betrothed. Now we are not, and this conversation is extremely inappropriate."

He spun on his heel and walked toward the door, knowing better than to hope it would keep Kate from following him, but hoping it anyway.

Sure enough, he hadn't even made it out of the library before she fell into step beside him. "Oh, Derek, don't be like that. Are you gentlemen already having trouble? I find that difficult to believe. Then again, I also find it difficult to believe your husband even let you out of his sight, after that luncheon yesterday."

He walked faster and turned down the corridor that led back to his room. "I don't wish to discuss my private life or my husband." He clamped down on his tongue before he added with you. God, he wished for a way to shake her off.

"Derek!"

Well, that was the fastest he'd ever had a prayer answered. Derek turned to see Stiles striding up behind them. "I've been looking all over for you!"

"Looks like I was right," Kate murmured, low enough for only Derek's ears.

He ignored her and gave Stiles his full attention. "What do you need? Husband," he added belatedly.

Stiles slid an arm around Derek's waist, a wide smile on his face. "I woke this morning and you weren't there."

Oh. Stiles had not truly been looking for him, then. This was all to be for Kate's benefit. Derek stiffened under Stiles's arm, had to make himself relax. "My apologies," he said, with a mouth that felt like ash.

Stiles tugged at him. "Come. We're to speak with Prince Chris." He flashed another smile at Kate. "Please excuse us, Your Highness."

Derek caught the way Kate's mouth tightened just a fraction before she returned the smile. "You certainly like to play the dashing knight, don't you, Prince Stiles? Riding up to rescue Derek from
awkward conversations."

Her insinuation burned, and Derek fought to keep his expression neutral. It chafed, that he needed Stiles to save him.

Stiles met her gaze with a mild look of his own, and then pulled Derek more insistently. "We don't wish to keep His Highness waiting."

Why do you need me? Derek wanted to ask, but kept his mouth shut. Besides, the alternative was continued conversation with Kate, and Derek wanted that even less. He bowed curtly to Kate and let Stiles lead him away.

As soon as they turned the corner, Derek asked, "Is there actually a meeting with Prince Chris?"

Stiles's false smile fell, dissolving into a look of grim determination. "There is, as a matter of fact. Scott and I have been intending to speak with him since we arrived."

Derek made to leave. "Then I would just be in the way."

Stiles shook his head and tightened his grip on Derek. "No, you ought to come. It concerns you as well, and you'll be able to tell if he's lying to us."

"Concerns me?" A thousand bad scenarios ran through Derek's mind. "What do you mean to discuss?"

"Well, not you, precisely, but your family." Stiles ushered him down the stairs to the second floor and finally released his hold on Derek's waist. "And it will likely affect the treaty we will inevitably try to renegotiate."

Derek nearly had to run to keep up with him. "You didn't answer my question."

Stiles gnawed on his lower lip and his eyes darted to the side, as if he was having a furious internal debate with himself. "We want to know why the treaty negotiations really failed," he finally said, voice low.

"Why do you need to know that?" Derek couldn't keep the harshness out of his voice. "The negotiations failed and my father is dead. And it's my fault. What does it even matter?"

Stiles looked taken aback. "The why always matters. The negotiations failed after the betrothal between you and Princess Kate was removed from the treaty. I want to know why it was removed and why King Gerard got so angry over it he started a bloody war."

"And you really believe Prince Chris will tell you?"

"Of course not," Stiles said with an undignified snort. "But you would be surprised what you can learn from a person even if they tell you nothing. And besides, there's always the chance he'll tell us everything. Granted, it's a minor chance, but still." He threaded his gloved fingers through Derek's. "Come on. We shouldn't keep them waiting."

Derek wanted to pull back, to say no, because he wasn't sure he could stand for Stiles to find out the real reason behind the broken negotiations, but a door in the corridor swung open just then and King Scott stepped into the hallway. "There you are!"

Before Derek could say a word, Stiles dragged him into the study right behind King Scott. Prince Chris was already there, sitting at the opposite end of the large oval table dominating the room.
Even though he knew to expect it, Derek still started at the rush of anger that went through him.

The prince's lips thinned ever so slightly. "I was unaware Prince Derek would be joining us," he said.

"My apologies." King Scott took his seat and blinked guilelessly. "I thought I had mentioned it to you. Will that be a problem?"

Rather well done, Derek thought, to have King Scott insist for his presence, rather than Stiles.

Prince Chris smoothed his hands over the maps on top of the table, his face a perfect mask once more. "Of course not. Please, sit."

Awkwardly, Derek slid into a chair across from King Scott, and Stiles immediately sat next to him, flashing what was probably supposed to be an encouraging smile. Derek folded his hands under the table and focused on keeping his breathing even and his face impassive. He could get through this. It wasn't as though he needed to say anything.

"So, Your Majesty," Prince Chris said, voice pleasant, "why did you want to meet today?"

King Scott smiled so wide he looked like a child. No wonder people were always underestimating him. "Well, we were hoping you could help us, Your Highness."

Prince Chris raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"As I'm certain you're aware, we were hoping to be able to reopen negotiations between your family and the Hales." King Scott nodded toward Derek. "As both your families will soon be joined to ours by marriage, it seems the best course of action to ensure our alliances are strong on all sides."

"I couldn't agree more," Prince Chris said, "but we wouldn't open those negotiations until after your marriage to Allison."

"Oh, of course!" King Scott rested his linked hands on the table and leaned forward a bit. "I wasn't hoping to open them early, no. But last time, the negotiations failed."

"Rather spectacularly," Stiles said under his breath.

King Scott glared at him, but thankfully, Prince Chris didn't seem to hear. "We wanted to know if you had any idea why, so we can avoid any trouble with the next treaty."

Prince Chris sighed. "The negotiations had been going on for seven years. So much was added, removed, and altered that each new version barely resembled the one before it. I assume you discussed it with Queen Talia?"

Derek didn't hear a lie in his heartbeat, but then again, Prince Chris hadn't said anything specific enough for it to make any difference.

"We did," King Scott said. "She didn't seem happy about treating with His Majesty, but mentioned she would be inclined to treat with you."

The line on Prince Chris's forehead deepened with his frown. "If she didn't explain why, I'm not sure what more I can tell you."

"Well, based on the treaties I saw, it appeared removing the marriage between Derek and your
sister is what sunk negotiations," Stiles said.

Derek barely kept himself from jerking his head in shock. Stiles knew? How did Stiles know?

A muscle in Prince Chris's jaw twitched. "And how did you get a copy of those?"

Stiles flapped his hand, as though it were unimportant. "Her Majesty Queen Talia let me see them. Regardless, the fact remains that the final treaty was quite favorable to your family, even more so than it had been with the betrothal included. And yet, negotiations failed and King Gerard went to war. Was the marriage between Derek and Princess Kate that important?"

Prince Chris fixed a poisonous glare on Stiles. "To His Majesty, it certainly was. Frankly, I think he'll be much less likely to treat without that being available. But I'm sure you'll find some way to make it work."

Stiles met the glare inch for inch, without blinking. "Interesting. That betrothal clause had been in the treaty since the very beginning. Why would the Hales have removed it so suddenly?"

Derek dropped his gaze to the table, but not before he saw Prince Chris's eyes flick to him. His stomach twisted, guilt pushing out the anger. *My fault, my fault, my fault.*

"Why would you want me to speculate on their reasons for any alterations they made?" Prince Chris said. "I was not privy to their private meetings. I barely had time for the negotiating table itself."

"Queen Talia said she'd be willing to treat with you, specifically," King Scott said for a second time. "That's a great deal of trust she places in you to deal fairly."

Derek didn't trust any of the Argents as far as he could throw them, but he didn't utter a word. Claws pricked his palm where he clenched his fists; he forced them back.

Prince Chris grunted and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "It's no secret my father and I don't agree on many things, and he has been much harsher in his dealings with werewolves in the past."

"And you haven't been?" Stiles pressed.

"Believe it or not, I would prefer to solve our problems through diplomacy rather than battle." Prince Chris shoved back his chair and stood. "Now, if there's nothing else—"

Derek didn't intend to say anything, but the words came out anyway. "Then why did you order the ambush?"

The prince froze, disbelief evident on his face. "What?"

Derek took a deep breath. "You just said you aren't as harsh as your father. That you prefer diplomacy to battle. And yet it was your men who ambushed my father and me as we went to visit soldiers who'd been wounded. Do you really expect—"

"I did not order that ambush," Prince Chris cut in, his voice hard. "I had nothing to do with that."

"Then who did?" Stiles asked.

Prince Chris glowered at them, his fingers gripping the edge of the table. "I don't know, and I intend to find out."
It wasn't a lie, and it was the most direct answer they'd been given in this whole damned meeting. Derek supposed he ought to be relieved, but he just wanted to howl.

"I think we're finished here," Prince Chris continued.

King Scott was the first one to his feet. "Of course. Thank you for your time."

Stiles wasn't far behind, biting his lower lip like he was holding back from saying something. Derek followed them back into the hall, keeping his eyes focused at the ground. That had been nothing but a spectacular waste of time.

They'd barely walked halfway down the hall when Stiles burst out, "He met with Queen Talia. Whatever reason they had for taking the betrothal out of the treaty, Prince Chris gave it to them. I'd bet my magic on it. Did you hear how he avoided every question? He didn't want Derek to hear him lying. God, I'm almost impressed. No, I am impressed."

"We still don't know what that reason was," King Scott said. "And we did learn King Gerard is going to be much harder to please this time around."

"As if that's a surprise." Stiles rolled his eyes. "As long as we deal with it after you and Allison marry, they can't start another bloody war."

Derek suddenly felt a hand around his wrist, and he raised his eyes to see Stiles giving him a concerned frown. "Are you all right?" Stiles asked.

What could he say? He gritted his teeth and forced out his apology. "I'm sorry. I spoke out of turn."

"No," Stiles said firmly. "Don't apologize. That was important. Prince Chris's men ambushed you?"

He didn't sound angry. Cautiously, Derek nodded. "I recognized the uniforms." He didn't allow himself to think of the rest of that day.

Next to them, King Scott rubbed a hand over his face and cursed. "So that attack was ordered by someone who had authority over the crown prince's soldiers, and could give orders without him knowing."

"Fantastic." Stiles pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "So we know Prince Chris met with Queen Talia and told her something which had them remove the betrothal from the treaty. We know King Gerard wanted that marriage, badly enough to attack when it was removed. And now we know that Prince Chris wasn't behind the ambush that ki—" He took one look at Derek and cleared his throat. "Which means it was most likely Princess Kate or King Gerard who gave that order. Please tell me I'm not the only one thinking there's far more going on here than any of us see."

"You aren't." King Scott sounded grim.

Derek twisted his hand to grab Stiles's, gave it a squeeze before dropping his away. He felt the strangest sense of relief and dread, making him queasy. If what King Scott and Stiles were saying was true, then it couldn't be his fault that the treaty had failed. There had to be something more going on.

And yet, knowing Prince Chris hadn't been behind the ambush brought up a plethora of other questions, ones Derek knew he wouldn't like the answers to. Like who had really ordered the ambush, and just as importantly, who would have known where Derek and his father would be. It
wouldn't surprise him in the least to know King Gerard or Kate had given the actual order, but they couldn't have known where to send the soldiers. Not without someone else telling them.

And the only people who'd known where Derek and his father would be were family.

Chapter End Notes

Derek has a brief, minor panic attack after an encounter with Kate, and it is from his POV.

In other news, the lovely and talented xkxdx drew fanart for this story! :-D Go check it out!
The Accusation

After everything he'd learned, Derek wanted nothing more than to be left alone to sort himself out. However, that appeared to be impossible, because every time he was alone for even half an hour, Kate seemed to find him. And every time Kate came near, it was like Stiles appeared out of thin air, smiling without his eyes and being almost aggressively pleasant. Being on the receiving end of that would have unnerved Derek, but at most it seemed to annoy Kate. However, it was usually effective, leaving Kate to saunter away, but not before making snide remarks about Derek's inability to take care of himself.

Derek couldn't decide how he felt about it. On the one hand, he was grateful not to have to deal with Kate on his own, but at the same time, he hated how grateful he was. He ought to be stronger, ought to be the kind of man Stiles could depend on, or at least be someone who didn't need to be saved all the time. It grated on him like a constant itch, a bit of sand stuck in his boot until it rubbed his foot raw.

It made him wish Laura were here, or Cora, someone he could talk to whose teasing would be tempered with love and some irritated advice. Boyd would have provided the irritated advice, at least, but he spent most of his time in the city outside the palace, looking for more information on Erica's whereabouts and the whereabouts of the other missing wolves.

Derek had offered to help, but as Boyd had pointed out, a prince seeking information of that sort—particularly a prince who had just married King Scott's illegitimate brother—would attract far more attention than a servant doing the same.

Which only served to make him feel utterly useless, in addition to the incessant feeling of being trapped he'd had since they'd arrived. Everyone else seemed to have something they were doing in preparation for the wedding, while Derek sat around twiddling his thumbs in the midst of a hunter's palace.

Surprisingly, it was Queen Melissa who gave him something to do. She'd swept down the hallway and slipped her arm into Derek's, neatly pulling him away from Kate before she had a chance to say a word.

"Your Highness, are you good with scents?" Queen Melissa had asked.

Derek hadn't been sure what to make of the question. "Um, yes?"

Queen Melissa had beamed at him and squeezed his arm. "Excellent. Please come with me. I could use your help."

It turned out Queen Melissa wanted him to smell the flowers for King Scott and Princess Allison's wedding, and help her determine which ones were best matched by both sight and scent. Her Majesty seemed perfectly content to let him take as long as he needed to debate the merits of which flowers went best together and why. All in all, it was the most peaceful afternoon he'd spent in a long time, and it reminded him of the time he'd spent with his own mother in their gardens.

She had said absolutely nothing about Stiles or Kate until Derek took her back to her chambers so they could all prepare for supper.

"I hope things are going well with you and Stiles," Queen Melissa said. "I realize he can be a little intense if you aren't accustomed to him."
Derek felt a bit like a deer who'd been surprised while eating. "I—that is, Your Majesty—"

Queen Melissa smiled wide and patted his arm. "Oh, no, you needn't tell me anything, Your Highness. I've known Stiles since he was a boy, and if there's one thing I can tell you, it's that Stiles cares about very few people."

Derek's stomach bottomed out. He knew that, of course he knew that; Stiles wasn't—

"But those he does," Queen Melissa continued, as though she hadn't noticed Derek's reaction at all, "he cares about wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. It can be... overwhelming, to put it kindly. If ever you need him to back down, don't be afraid to tell him. God knows Lydia has had to do it enough."

All Derek could do was blink at her. "I, uh—"

Queen Melissa merely smiled again and went into her chambers. "Just consider it, Your Highness," she said, and then left Derek standing in the hallway, gaping at her door.

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Though the afternoon with Queen Melissa was a reprieve, it was still a reprieve of but a single afternoon. By the time they were all invited to go riding in the royal forest four days after their arrival, Derek jumped at the chance to get out.

They reached the forest by midmorning, and at King Scott's suggestion, they all split up: King Scott, Princess Allison, Lady Lydia, Stiles, and Derek all rode together, while King Gerard, Prince Chris, Queen Melissa, and Captain Stilinski made up the other party. Derek wasn't sure what it meant that Kate hadn't joined them; she loved riding. But he decided not to question it.

They let the horses amble through the well-worn paths under the trees. Derek wanted to shift and run, stretch out the parts of him that had been held under wraps for far too long, but now wasn't the best time. He settled for tilting his head up, breathing in the wet scent of the leaves and the spring air, clean and crisp, but with warmth under it that reminded him summer was coming.

He drifted a little apart from the others. Scott and Allison rode close together, heads bent toward each other, while Lady Lydia and Stiles rode just far enough back that they could have a furiously whispered conversation about who owed whom ten shillings.

Derek's lips twitched at the sight. Allison and Lydia had become fast friends, and the princess and King Scott were shyly and completely mad about each other.

He brushed his fingers along his left arm, feeling the ridges of the charm bracelets underneath his coat sleeve. A new one had appeared on his pillow the day before, this one with small purple stones and another scrawled note.

To protect you from poisonings, husband. Though I wish I could protect you from words, as well.

Derek had sat there a long time, rereading the note, thinking of his own wishes. Three days, and he hadn't been able to bring himself to return to Stiles's bed, not when he couldn't push Kate's mocking voice out of his head. Things would just end the way they had on their wedding night, and Derek had no wish to repeat that ever again. This constant anxiety made it worse, his desire to be with Stiles fighting against the bone-deep knowledge that he wasn't good enough, could never be what Stiles really needed, really wanted.

He could feel his claws poking out of his fingers; with great effort, Derek forced them back. He
couldn't run off on his own right now, so riding with the group was all right, so long as they let him be. He was too twisted up from holding himself together these past few days, from dealing with Kate, from being grateful Stiles wanted to protect him and shamed that he couldn't do so in return, from being trapped in a palace that may as well have been a prison, surrounded by people who would kill him as soon as look at him.

So he rode and resolutely told himself that everything would be fine.

Of course, that was when Stiles pulled away from Lydia and rode to Derek. "A shilling for your thoughts, husband."

The wolf howled to be let out. Derek set his jaw against it. "Only a shilling?"

Stiles grinned, and it lit up his face like a sunbeam. "If your thoughts are lustful, I'd be willing to pay far more for the details."

An image of Stiles sprawled out before him, naked, body bowed, sprang to the forefront of Derek's mind. It didn't help his control in the slightest. "Hardly," Derek croaked.

"Pity." Stiles pouted, his lower lip sticking out. Derek wanted to bite it. "Won't you ride with us?"

He was already on the edge, every part of him wild to run free. Being closer to people would only make it worse. Derek shook his head and gripped his reins tighter. "I'm fine. It's fine."

Stiles blinked wide golden eyes at him and gestured back toward their group. "Come on. You can join in on our bets. Lydia thinks—"

"Stiles," Derek said, trying his best to impart his desperation into his words. "It's fine. Please, just... I'm fine."

Stiles stiffened, and the open look on his face faded. "Have I done something to offend?" he asked cautiously. "Derek—"

For some reason Derek could neither understand nor articulate, that was what did it. Not Stiles's scent or smile or anything else, but the slight wariness in his voice as he uttered Derek's name. That he couldn't bear, not after hearing it whispered over and over again like an endless prayer.

It was just another reminder of how little they knew about each other, how unsteady they were in their interactions. His husband was cautious around him, like Derek needed to be coddled.

"I'm going running," Derek said, and was off his horse before Stiles could say another word. He didn't wait, didn't listen for any objections. He just ran until he could stop and shed his clothes, shake off his skin and let the wolf take over.

Then he ran again, this time letting the wolf just go, as far and as fast as he could.

***

Stiles stared at the patch of forest where Derek had disappeared, not quite understanding what had happened. Derek had been quiet and standoffish for the past few days. He'd said nothing about the other charm, though Stiles knew he was wearing it. He also hadn't made any other attempt to... well, to do anything. Stiles had spent the past few nights waiting for Derek to come and then he hadn't. Neither of them had, in any sense of the word.

It had nearly reached the point that Stiles was going to give up understanding his husband in the
slightest. And now, that Derek had just run away...

Lydia rode up next to him. "Trouble with your wolf?"

Stiles made a face at her. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

That earned him a ladylike scoff.

He looked back to the area of the forest. "What am I doing wrong, Lydia?" He tried to make it a simple question, but it came out plaintive. Damn it.

She patted him on the shoulder. "Nothing."

"But—"

"Stiles." The admonition in her voice stopped him from saying any more. "The man's been trapped in a palace for days surrounded by people who want to turn him into a pelt. Is it any wonder he wants a little time to run around?"

"It's not just that." Stiles struggled to find the words to explain. "We made progress. We were courting. We spent husbandly time together."

Lydia rolled her eyes. "That's a phrase for it."

Stiles ignored the interruption. "And now it's all just fallen apart and we're back to being strangers and I don't know what I did or why. If I could just figure it out, I could fix it, I could—"

"Has it ever occurred to you it might not be something you can fix?" Lydia said pointedly.

Stiles scoffed. Of course it was something he could fix; it was probably something he'd messed up in the first place. He opened his mouth to tell Lydia just that.

Her eyes went black and she let out a blood-curdling scream.

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Stiles knew Princess Allison was asking him a question, but he couldn't hear it over the ringing in his ears. He'd never been this close to Lydia when she screamed; he wished he'd had more warning.

Then he remembered there was only one reason Lydia screamed without warning.

His blood ran cold. Derek was out there alone in a forest full of people who hunted werewolves.

Stiles grabbed Lydia's arm. "Which way?"

Lydia blinked, the black of her eyes fading, and pointed in the direction Derek had run. Stiles dug his heels into his horse's flank and bounded that way, heedless of Scott's voice calling after him.

No, no no no no...

He bent low over his horse and whipped through the trees, riding more recklessly than he had in years. The logical part of his mind reminded him that Lydia only screamed after death, not before, and no matter how fast he rode, he would only find a body at the end of it. He knew that, and yet some part of him still held hope, still thought he might get there in time. And that would only make the actual discovery worse.
Stiles caught a glimpse of something and yanked the reins, pulling his horse to a stop in a clearing. His mind first registered the body, bloody and shredded, before he realized it wasn't Derek.

*Thank God.*

Relief lasted only so long as it took him to see it was a man's body, with great gashes up the chest, viscera torn out of his stomach, and eyes staring sightlessly at the leaves above.

Black spots danced at the edges of his vision, and Stiles twisted his hands in the reins and buried his face in his horse's mane. He would not pass out. He wouldn't.

He might well be sick, though.

He heard horses crashing behind him, and Stiles straightened to see Scott, Allison, and Lydia gallop into the clearing. Allison clapped her hand over her mouth and turned her face away, but not before Stiles heard a small whimper. Lydia closed her eyes, lips whispering something Stiles couldn't hear.

"Do..." Scott cleared his throat and spoke again. "Do you know who it is?"

It sounded as though the question was directed at the three of them in general. Stiles shook his head. "Haven't seen him before."

"Nor have I." Princess Allison took a deep breath and dismounted. To Stiles's surprise, she approached the body. "I believe he is from the city, though. Often people will come through the forest to gather herbs, though not usually this far." She turned back to them, face resolute. "It appears he was attacked by some wild animal."

Yes, Stiles had gathered that. He had to swallow a few times to keep his stomach steady. "It must have taken him by surprise. We didn't hear him scream, and we were close enough to." He looked to Lydia, hating that he had to ask the question. "Did you—"

"No." Lydia shook her head in a short jerk. "Nothing this time."

"This time?" Allison repeated.

"Sometimes I'll get glimpses if a person dies nearby, see how they died," Lydia said. "I saw nothing for him."

That was unexpected. Stiles hadn't heard Lydia voluntarily explain anything about her Sidhe heritage since they were children.

More hoof beats thudded against the ground, and moments later, the other party broke into the clearing. Stiles had rarely been so relieved to see his father.

Father grabbed Stiles's arm. "Are you all right?" he asked, his gaze tracking to Lydia and Scott as well.

Stiles heard the slight pause after "you," knew Father had nearly added "children" onto it after so many years of calling him, Scott, and Lydia exactly that. It was familiar, oddly comforting in the face of a dead body, and it took everything in him to keep Stiles from throwing his arms around his father's neck.

Instead, he cleared his throat and rested his hand over Father's. "We're fine. I promise."
"And you, Lydia?" Queen Melissa asked.

Lydia bowed perfectly on top of her horse. "Fine, Your Majesty."

She was so composed that if Stiles hadn't seen how white her knuckles were on the reins, he might have believed it himself.

Prince Chris had dismounted and gone immediately to Allison, and now held her close. "What happened?" he demanded. "Did you see anything?"

Stiles shook his head. "No. We arrived just before you did. Do you know what could have done this?"

Prince Chris glared down at the body, and Stiles knew what he would say before the words left his mouth. "A werewolf."

"Where is Prince Derek?" King Gerard asked.

Stiles stared, his blood roaring unnaturally loudly in his ears. He knew what the king was insinuating, but...

"Your Majesty, are you implying Derek did this?" Scott asked incredulously.

King Gerard pointed at the mauled body. "There are no other werewolves in the royal forest. Who else?"

Stiles couldn't believe what he was hearing. "That's ridiculous. Derek wouldn't—"

"With all due respect," King Gerard cut him off, "how would you know?"

Stiles heard the dismissive tone and almost bit his tongue off to keep himself civil. Derek was taciturn and standoffish, certainly, but Stiles couldn't reconcile what little he knew of his husband with someone who would murder an innocent person.

What little you know. His mind mocked him, throwing his own words back in his face. Because you don't know him all that well, do you? Except for a handful of things he's let you glimpse. You truly don't know what he's capable of under the wrong circumstances.

"When did Prince Derek leave?" Prince Chris asked, sounding a little more level-headed.

All eyes in the clearing turned to Stiles. He wished they hadn't, not right now; he was still thinking things through. "It couldn't have been more than a few minutes before Lydia screamed; there isn't a way he could've had time to get out here and do this."

"And you know so much about how quickly werewolves can move? How quickly they can kill?" King Gerard snapped. "A few minutes is more than enough time."

Prince Chris spoke up again. "Was he acting strangely at all?"

"No," Stiles said firmly.

"He rode a little apart from us," Princess Allison said. "He kept mostly to himself, but he didn't seem angry or anything."

Stiles realized how that could be construed and added, "Keeping to himself is normal behavior."
"So he just... left?" King Gerard sounded supremely skeptical.

Stiles met the king's steely gaze without flinching. "He said he wanted to run."

He didn't mention their fight, or how agitated Derek had been when he'd left. People got angry all the time and didn't kill someone; Derek wouldn't be any different just because he was a werewolf. *He wouldn't do this.*

Something else crashed through the underbrush, but it didn't sound big enough to be a horse. Somehow Stiles knew, before he even turned around, that it would be Derek, looking disheveled and a little dirty. His heart stumbled and lodged itself in his throat, and he wanted to shout, to warn Derek away, but he couldn't find the words.

"I heard the scream," Derek said, without any other preamble.

The clearing went quiet, and Stiles could feel the unasked questions weighing so thick in the air he could probably touch them if he tried.

Derek took another step into the clearing and his eyes fell on the body. A look of horror crossed his face. "What happened?"

"And where have you been, Prince Derek?" King Gerard asked.

"I was running," Derek said, eyes still on the body.

"All alone? No one with you to corroborate your story?"

Stiles saw the moment Derek understood, in the way his body tensed under the king's scrutiny. "I didn't do this."

The assurance didn't make a dent in King Gerard's skeptical look. "But you ran off and left the rest of your party behind?"

Prince Chris frowned. "Where is your jacket?"

Stiles wanted to hit himself for not noticing first. Derek wasn't just disheveled; he was only in his shirtsleeves.

Derek set his jaw and met the prince's scrutiny. "It was missing. I had it with the rest of my clothes, but it was gone when I returned."

"Missing?" King Gerard scoffed. "Or did you dispose of the evidence linking you to this horrific crime?"

Derek didn't waver. Indeed, he might have been a statue at that moment. "I didn't kill him."

"I believe you," Stiles said.

Derek stared at Stiles as though he'd been slapped. Stiles didn't have time to discern it right now, though; his mind was racing to find other possibilities before King Gerard ordered Derek arrested.

"Prince Chris, did your men ever find the kanima?"

The prince's lips thinned and he shook his head. "Unfortunately, no."

"Is it possible the kanima could have done this?" Stiles waved his hand at the body. "The kanima doesn't know it's a shifter; isn't it possible whoever it is came back this way?"
Prince Chris still didn't look happy, but he at least looked like he was considering it. Thank God, Stiles could work with that.

"That's preposterous," King Gerard said. "That kanima was last spotted a day's ride away from here."

"But they move much faster than werewolves," Prince Chris said.

Stiles dismounted and walked toward the body, willing himself to stay composed in the face of so much gore. That was a lot of blood. "Is there any way to tell if he was attacked by a kanima?" he asked. "Perhaps if he was paralyzed?"

Prince Chris knelt and gently moved the man's head to check the back of his neck. "There's a mark."

Stiles swallowed, reminded himself not to be sick, and crouched beside the prince. There was a scratch on the back of the man's neck, such a tiny thing considering what else had been done to him. "From the kanima's claw?"

Prince Chris nodded, face grim. "Most likely. Paralyzed and mauled him, and then vanished before we could get here." He straightened. "I'll double the watch at the palace and in the town. Captain, if you have any men to spare, I would appreciate it. We have to find this thing."

Father bowed. "I agree, Your Highness. Just let me know what you need."

Stiles gratefully stood and stepped away from the body as fast as he could without making it seem like he was actually scared of it. Relief made him dizzy. Derek hadn't killed anyone, and King Gerard wasn't going to get to arrest him for a murder he hadn't committed.

"We shouldn't leave him here. We should give him a proper burial," Scott said.

Prince Chris bowed and mounted his horse once again. "We will, Your Majesty. I'll have some men sent out immediately to tend to it."

"I'll stay until your men arrive," Father said. "If that pleases Your Majesties?"

No. Stiles opened his mouth to object and barely remembered that now wasn't the time or the place. But he didn't want his father staying out in the middle of the damn forest by himself, not when the kanima had already killed one person and likely hadn't gone far.

Stiles attempted to communicate this line of thought to Scott with facial expressions. It wasn't quite as effective as he'd hoped.

Scott nodded his approval. "That will be fine, Captain."

Queen Melissa, on the other hand, did not look pleased. "That thing could still be out here. It's dangerous for you to stay alone."

Stiles could have kissed her, but that also would have been inappropriate.

Father smiled. "I'll be fine, my lady. It won't be for long."

"I can stay," Derek said.

Stiles gaped.
"Thank you, Prince Derek," Scott said. "That will be perfect."

No. Not perfect, not perfect! Had it been just them, Stiles would have shouted it, but he was painfully aware of King Gerard’s presence. As it was, he managed to cut himself off with a noise that made it sound like he was being strangled.

Scott looked askance at him. "Stiles, are you all right?"

"Fine. I'll stay as well," he said quickly. "Strength in numbers, right?"

Father sighed. "Stiles—"

"Of the two of us, I have actually fought the kanima before," Stiles protested. "My expertise could be helpful if it comes back."

I don't want to leave you two alone to fight it, he didn't say.

"I know I will feel better knowing there are three of you out here," Queen Melissa said.

Father sighed again, but it was the one he gave when he knew he'd been beaten. He bowed. "As Your Majesty wishes, as always."

Queen Melissa smiled. "Thank you."

Prince Chris and Princess Allison both remounted their horses and led the others back out of the clearing, Prince Chris with the reassurance that he would return soon. Stiles kept one eye on King Gerard, but couldn't discern anything from the king's facial expressions.

He had been awfully fast to blame Derek for the murder.

Stiles mulled it over as he tied his and Derek's horses to a tree. He could blame it on the king's innate dislike for and prejudice against werewolves. But if that were the case, why in the world would he have been willing to let his daughter marry one? And not only marry, but require Derek to come and live with them, and require at least two children from the union? It didn't make any sense.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and Stiles looked up to see his father standing behind him. "I'm surprised you wanted to stay."

Considering Stiles's background with freshly dead bodies, human or otherwise, that wasn't an unexpected reaction. Stiles tried for a light tone. "What, and leave you two here alone? You'd be lost without me."

Father rolled his eyes. Derek said nothing, simply walked over to a tree and sat at the base of it, glowering at nothing.

Stiles followed him. "Derek, what's wrong?"

Derek stared resolutely at the ground. "Nothing. I enjoy getting accused of murder. It makes my day so much better."

"That's not what I meant. Well, not only what I meant," Stiles said, failing to keep the frustration out of his voice. "You've been irritable all day. What's wrong?"

Derek shook his head. "Just leave me alone, Stiles, please."
Stiles opened his mouth to ask the question—had he done something to offend Derek?—when his father's voice cut in. "Stiles, come here."

Stiles hovered for a moment, every part of him pushing to get Derek to talk to him, but he finally let it drop and walked over to his father. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Father said. "I just wanted you over here."

"What?" Stiles burst out, then dropped his voice because Derek could actually hear them. "Why?"

Father looked at him mildly. "What did he say?"

Stiles flailed in frustration. "Something's wrong, and I'm trying to figure out what it is so I can help, but he won't—"


His first instinct, as always, was to argue, but that tone of voice meant there was only one answer his father would accept. It made Stiles feel twelve years old all over again. "You told me to ask," he said mulishly.

"I also told you to listen." Father put a hand on his shoulder and led him a little way out of the clearing. "He asked to be left alone, leave him alone. Badgering him for answers won't help anything."

Stiles groaned. "But how am I supposed to fix things if he won't talk to me?"

His father swatted him upside the head. "There may not be anything you can fix. All you can do is let him know that you're willing to listen, whenever he's ready to talk. And he may not be ready to talk for a long time. Just be patient."

Patient. Good Lord, there was an unnatural trait Stiles had become intimately familiar with over the past few weeks. "I've been patient!"

Father rocked back on his heels and gestured to the forest. "Look around and see if you can find any evidence of which way the kanima went."

Stiles gaped and tried to explain through frustrated hand gestures just how unfair that was—he damn well knew Father was doing it to keep him away from Derek—but it was as effective as it had been when he was a child. Which was to say, not at all.

Father nodded at the forest again and gave Stiles the look that said "well, get to it."

Without another protest, Stiles stalked off. At least looking for clues might give him time to think, a chance to figure out where he'd gone wrong with Derek and what in the world King Gerard was up to.

It was depressing to think the latter of the two might be easier.

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To Derek's great relief, Captain Stilinski seemed perfectly happy to leave him alone and keep his attention on the horses, though Derek was fairly sure they didn't need that much coddling. He kept one ear on the forest and looked for the kanima's scent in each breath, but all he heard was Stiles stumbling around and muttering curses.
Derek did his best to push it away. He wanted to wall himself off and he very emphatically did not want to think about Stiles. Not when half his mind was taken up with the refrain of Stiles's voice, saying "I believe you."

And the other half of his mind was hearing Stiles's heartbeat skip on the lie.
The Confrontation

Derek surveyed the ballroom and let out a long, slow breath. It smelled of a thousand things—sweat and people, wine and sugar, smoke and perfumes—all twisting together to make his nose itch. He had no idea why King Gerard was throwing so many damn balls. This was their second one this week, and from what Lady Lydia had said, there would be at least two more before Princess Allison and King Scott wed.

Derek grabbed a flute of champagne, downed the entire thing, and set the empty glass back on another tray. If he had his way, he'd still be up in his room, as he had been since they'd returned from the forest earlier that day.

He'd seen the consternation on Stiles's face as they'd ridden, like he was physically holding himself back from asking Derek more questions, but not a one of them had left his mouth. Derek was grateful. That wasn't a conversation he wanted to have. At all, if he could avoid it.

He kept hearing the lie in the back of his mind, no matter how hard he tried to push it out. Stiles hadn't believed him, had, on some level, thought Derek was capable of murdering an innocent person in cold blood. Stiles didn't trust him.

It hurt far more than Derek had expected. Damn it, he knew this was only an arrangement to Stiles, and it wasn't as though Derek needed more reminders about how he didn't measure up to his husband. Certainly didn't need reminders that they were practically strangers still, that he needed Stiles so much more than Stiles needed him.

Derek realized he was clasping his left wrist, rubbing his thumb over the charms hidden beneath his sleeve. If he were stronger, he'd have taken them off. But he hadn't, and now he had five tied there, the final one delivered courtesy of Boyd earlier this afternoon.

"His Highness asked after you," Boyd had said, brandishing the bracelet.

There wasn't a note. Derek wasn't disappointed. He wasn't. "And what did you say?"

"That you were perfectly fine, sir, but that the events on the ride had tired you and you would rather not be disturbed."

Derek found that difficult to believe. "You said all that?"

"I implied it, sir. I am certain he understood."

Derek swallowed and pulled the new charm between his fingers. "Was that all he said?"

"Yes." Boyd didn't even bat an eye as he spoke. "Was there anything else you wished to convey?"

He wished to convey too many things, none of which he could do through Boyd. Or even himself, for that matter. Derek shook his head. "Have you found anything on Erica and the others?"

If Boyd thought it was a strange shift in topic, he said nothing of it. His normally placid gaze hardened. "The trail ends here, sir. For all of them. I'm close; I can feel it."

Derek pushed his own thoughts away and gave Boyd his full attention. "If you need anything at all from me... or from King Scott, he did promise to help with this—"
Boyd cut him off with a brief shake of his head. "Nothing now, sir. Oddly, by keeping everyone so fixed on you and Prince Stiles, no one pays any attention to me or my questions."

Derek had scowled. "You sound awfully amused about this."

Boyd's face had gone perfectly blank again. "Sir. I would never."

Derek knew better than to believe that tone.

"You look as though you're having a fine time," a new voice said right at his elbow, shaking Derek from his reverie.

His blood went cold when he saw it was Kate.

She lifted a glass of wine to her blood-red lips and smiled. "It is customary to respond when someone says something to you, you know."

Derek suppressed the shudder that threatened to run through him. The trapped feeling surfaced again, clawing at his throat, making his wolf howl. Only iron control kept him outwardly calm. "Lovely banquet," he finally said, at a loss for anything else.

"Indeed it is." Kate smiled over the rim of her glass, and Derek wasn't sure whether it was the wine or the paint on her lips making them that red. "I just love these balls. So festive."

Derek wondered if it would be possible for him to slip away without causing any offense. He couldn't afford any missteps, not after King Gerard had nearly had him arrested for murder this afternoon. "Mm."

"And it is so lovely to see Scott—I mean, His Majesty," Kate said, in a way that indicated she wasn't sorry at all about the slip, "and Allison getting along so well, don't you think?"

Another servant walked by with a tray of drinks, and Derek gratefully took one and finished half of it. "It is," he agreed, and looked for an exit.

Kate tapped one fingernail against her chin. "I haven't seen Prince Stiles around tonight. You wouldn't happen to know where he is, would you?"

Derek knew precisely where Stiles was, had known the moment he'd entered the ballroom. He was also well aware Kate meant that she hadn't seen them together. "He's around."

Kate laughed. "I'm surprised he let you out of his sight. He's been so attentive."

Attentive here meaning that Stiles had spent the past few days making sure Derek was never alone with Kate. He inhaled slowly, suddenly grateful for the all the other scents in the room, so that he could easily push Kate's away and focus on the drink he held. "What do you want, Kate?"

She waved her glass. "I just wanted to catch up with my favorite wolf. Dance with me."

Just the thought of it had his skin crawling. Derek bit back the urge to snarl, but he did growl a little. "No."

"Come now." Kate pouted. "It'll be just like old times. You know you want to."

Derek set down his glass before it shattered in his hands. "No. I don't."

Kate rested a hand on his arm. Revulsion curled in him, and it took everything in him to override
his instinct to yank away. He could only hold himself still as a stone and hope it would be enough. "Don't touch me," he said.

In response, her fingers dug in a little harder. "Just one dance, Derek. I should hate to tell my father how rude you're being. In fact, it would make me wonder about your breeding, that you would cause such grave offense to your host by turning down a dance." She leaned closer to him and lowered her voice, smooth and sultry and sickening. "It's enough to make one think you might have something to hide."

She wasn't a wolf, Derek reminded himself. She couldn't hear the uptick in his heartbeat, couldn't smell his stress. The only thing she might feel would be the tension in his arm. He desperately didn't want to dance with her, but if he didn't, it could very well ruin everything for his family and King Scott's. Derek was all too familiar with how vindictive Kate could be.

One of the many traits she'd inherited from her father.

Derek exhaled slowly and smiled—at least, he hoped it was a smile, rather than a grimace. "Very well. One dance."

He'd survived three years of Kate. He could survive one more dance.

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Stiles had been patient. He had been patient as Prince Chris's men arrived to properly wrap and transport the body back to the village. He'd been patient as they'd ridden back to the castle, patient when Derek went into his chamber and closed the door for the rest of the afternoon. Stiles had been supremely patient when he'd given Boyd another charm for Derek; he hadn't said anything except to ask how Derek was getting on after the excitement on the hunt, and Boyd's response had been a neutral expression and the word "fine."

He had very patiently gone downstairs to the banquet and ballroom alone, patiently continued to give Derek his space, had nearly swallowed his tongue to keep himself from badgering Derek with questions, thank you, Father, for that lovely description of it.

But now Derek was dancing with Princess Kate, looking for all the world like he might have been enjoying himself, except Stiles knew he couldn't be, not when he'd been so terrified of her at lunch the other day, not when he'd seen the flash of fear in Derek's eyes when she'd gone up to him. That was the last straw. Stiles was done. He'd been trying for weeks now to get Derek to trust him, to build some kind of foundation for a relationship, but he may as well have been beating his head against a brick wall for all the headway he was making. It was like walking across a roomful of eggs—Stiles never knew when he'd step wrong, break one, and have to start all over again. And worse, Derek didn't seem inclined to give him any warning.

Now he was dancing with the woman who, from everything Stiles had seen, was responsible for the "bad memories," for scaring Derek away from any kind of intimacy.

Stiles waited until the music changed and he saw Derek step away from Princess Kate. He strode up to them and rested his hand on Derek's arm. It might have been a bit possessive, but Stiles's thinking wasn't entirely clear at the moment.

He smiled at Kate, but could feel the brittleness of it. "Mind if I cut in?"

She smirked at him. "Of course not. Wouldn't want to let this one get away, would you?"
Stiles felt the muscles in Derek's arm twitch. For his own part, Stiles regarded her mildly, determined not to give anything away.

Kate moved away from them, and then paused. "I do suppose it was quite the coup for you, marrying an actual prince."

Wow. It had been years since he'd heard that particular flavor of insult, enough so that it took him off-guard and struck him like a quick jab. Stiles was grudgingly impressed.

He turned and swept Derek into the next dance before he could give Kate's words another thought.

"What are you doing?" Derek practically hissed.

He ought to be excited to be this close to Derek, but Stiles was so angry he almost couldn't see straight. "Dancing with my husband, what does it look like?" Stiles said, as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Why, what were you doing with her?"

Derek's jaw twitched. "Making an effort not to offend our host."

Stiles scoffed. "Oh, is that what that was? Could have fooled me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Derek's grip on Stiles's hand tightened. "Do you think I wanted to dance with her?"

"I'm trying to think of other explanations for why you're dancing with a woman who, by all appearances, scares the hell out of you."

"Again," Derek was glaring now, actually glaring, "making an effort not to offend our host. I realize I'm no good at politics, but I can attempt civility when the occasion calls for it."

Stiles met Derek's glare inch for inch. "And this is an occasion that calls for it? For God's sake, Derek, you don't have to talk to her, just—"

"Just what?" Derek cut in. "Just let you swoop in and save me yet again, because obviously I can't take care of myself?"

Stiles felt as though he'd been slapped. He was still dancing, but it sure as hell wasn't because he was paying any attention to what his feet were doing. "Swoop in and... what the hell makes you think I think you can't take care of yourself? Have I done anything to give you that impression?"

"Yes."

The word, coupled with the anger in Derek's eyes, struck Stiles as solidly as a punch, and all he could do was gape. He... but... how...?

Derek let go of him, took two full steps away. "I'm not feeling well. I think I'll retire for the evening." He bowed curtly. "Please enjoy the rest of the ball."

Stiles watched him go for approximately forty-five seconds before he got his feet to move in Derek's direction. Oh, no. He wasn't done with his husband just yet.

***

Derek had been in his chamber all of two minutes and was halfway through unbuttoning his waistcoat when the door slammed open and Stiles stalked in, amber eyes narrowed and his fingers twitching like he was holding himself back from latching them around Derek's neck.
Derek was depressingly unsurprised. "What are you doing here?" he said flatly, though he already knew the answer.

Stiles kicked the door shut. "I'm here because we're having a fight, and we're sure as hell not finished with it."

He was close enough that Derek could smell the hot spark of anger, could hear the furious beat of Stiles's heart. He should be scared, should be worried, because Stiles was angry with him, but sometime in the last two hours something inside him had snapped, and he wanted to snap and claw and fight. "Maybe I am finished with it. It's not like you'd know."

Stiles made a noise that would have been a growl had he been a wolf. "It's not for lack of trying. What more do I have to do, write it on the bloody sky?"

Derek finished unbuttoning his waistcoat and threw it across the room before he lacerated the damn thing. "You've made it perfectly clear this is just an arrangement, just as you've made it perfectly clear you don't trust me."

Stiles looked taken aback. "I'm sorry, what? I don't trust you? Where did you—"

"I heard the lie!" Derek shouted. "When you said you believed me, that I hadn't killed that man, it was a lie. You didn't believe me. You don't trust me."

Stiles started as though Derek had struck him, his mouth hanging open. Something crept into the back of Derek's mind, a reminder that he was dangerously close to saying things he couldn't take back, but right now he couldn't begin to give a damn.

"I didn't want to," Stiles finally said. "I didn't want to believe you could do that, but like you said, it's not like I'd know. Not when you shut down and push me away every time I get close, when the slightest misstep puts us back to being strangers. You're one to talk about trust, because you sure as hell don't trust me."

Derek snarled, but it had the opposite effect, because Stiles stepped closer and jabbed a finger at him.

"It's bloody exhausting, all the time I spend tiptoeing around you," Stiles said. "I never know what's going to trip you up, because God forbid you actually fucking tell me."

Derek trembled with anger. He could feel the vibrations of it deep in his stomach, making him shudder. "You want me to tell you things?"

"That would be a nice change of pace, yes!"

"All right, then, I have no use for a husband who could think, even for a moment, that I could possibly kill someone in cold blood."

"Is that so?" Stiles's eyes went flint-hard. "Well, I have no use for a husband who can't unstick his mouth and bloody tell me what he wants from me."

Derek curled and uncurled his fists. "Well, you know where the door is. You're welcome to use it any time."

Stiles's mouth opened and closed a few times, like he was trying to find words but couldn't. "Fine!" he finally yelled, and spun away from Derek.
"Fine!" Derek yelled after him.

Stiles stalked out and slammed the door, and after thirty seconds of furious breathing, anger faded to dread as Derek realized he really couldn't take back anything he'd said. If Stiles took him at his word, their families' alliance was forfeit, and there was nothing to keep King Gerard from attacking again.

He truly had ruined everything.
Stiles wasn't sure where he was going, only that he was going there very quickly. The halls passed in a blur. He wanted to find Scott, but no, he would be with Allison, and talking to him right now would be an exercise in futility. He could go find Lydia, but she had already been in her chambers when he'd gotten back from the forest, and he highly doubted she would want company of any kind for at least another hour.

He wanted to rant and rail at someone. Preferably Derek, but it was abundantly obvious Derek didn't want him around. At all.

"Run into a spot of trouble, Your Highness?"

Stiles whirled on whoever had interrupted him.

That it was Princess Kate did not help his mood.

She was sitting primly in a chair in the hallway, as if she hadn't a care in the world. She stood and carefully smoothed out her skirt. "I couldn't help but notice how quickly you and Derek vanished from the ball after you started dancing. I do hope everything is all right."

_Of course you do_, Stiles thought bitterly, and sealed his lips against his first response. "That is kind of you, Your Highness, but we're fine. I assure you."

He made to move past her, but Kate was fast enough to fall into step beside him. "That's good to hear. I understand how... difficult Derek can be."

The false sympathy in her words rankled him. Stiles knew she was trying to get him to open up, painting herself as a confidante. He ground his teeth at the thought. "Strange. I don't find him difficult at all," Stiles lied through his teeth. "Perhaps he just needed someone with a gentler touch?"

Kate's mouth twisted just slightly before sliding into a smile. "Perhaps. But then, you would have more experience with that than me. I've never needed to worry about my mere presence causing offense."

Stiles stopped and turned to her. "And just what is that supposed to mean?"

Kate smiled and waved the comment away. "Nothing, nothing! Just... thinking about how taxing it must be for you, constantly reminded that you're only barely a prince in a world where such things are quite important."

Stiles laughed. He couldn't help it. "That's it? That's the best you can come up with? Good lord, woman, I'm the illegitimate son of a king raised at court. Do you really think you can learn enough about me in a mere span of days, mere minutes, to even come close to the abuse I've endured for nineteen years? This is child's play to me."

He probably should've stopped there, but he was furious, furious at how this woman had treated Derek, how she'd pushed and manipulated him. His mouth ran on its own at the best of times, and now was far from the best of times.
Stiles met her eyes unflinchingly. "How weak you are, that this is what you do to feel strong, to feel whole. You must hate yourself so much to get any joy out of grinding someone else down. Or, no... it's because it's the only way to get your father's attention, isn't it?" The quick flash of fear in her eyes told him he'd hit the nail on the head. "Ah, so that's the one, isn't it? Your father's a cold-hearted bastard, and he only respects strength, particularly strength he agrees with. Your brother has the guts to stand up to him but you don't, because you need his validation almost more than your next breath. So you've twisted yourself into a mockery of a person to get his attention, to make him love you, to make him value you. He's manipulated you as neatly as you've manipulated any number of people, making you into his very own golem: an empty living statue bound wholly to his bidding. Do you even remember who you are anymore? Or are you tied so tightly to him that if he goes, you'll vanish, like a wisp of smoke?"

He leaned forward, just a fraction. "I have never met anyone so desperate, so pathetic, as—"

Her fist struck him square in the mouth, as solid a punch as any he'd received during training. Blood filled his mouth. Stiles blocked her second strike, but her knee snapped up and jabbed him in the side. She grabbed his head, twisting her fingers into his hair, and spun him around, slamming him face-first into the wall.

Stiles forced out a laugh. "I take it I struck a nerve?"

Kate seethed behind him. "You know nothing. The only reason I haven't killed you right now is that my father thinks you're more useful alive."

Stiles shoved off the wall and spat out blood, grimacing at the metallic taste. "Ah yes." He rubbed his jaw. Damn, that would hurt in the morning. "Wouldn't want to antagonize His Majesty King Scott, would we?"

Kate smirked. "He's also more useful alive, as is the rest of your household...at least, for now. You've no idea how quickly His Majesty's whims can change."

Stiles went utterly still. "If you harm any of them—my brother, my father, my husband—I will skin you alive and grind your bones to powder to feed the fish in the river."

Kate's eyes widened, all fake sweetness and innocence. "Oh, but surely you wouldn't strike a woman? You're far too chivalrous for that."

He swiped the blood off his lip and made his voice as cold as he could. "Who said I needed fists?"

Stiles pushed away from Kate and headed back down the corridor, still angry enough that he wasn't seeing straight. When the first shudder racked him, he dismissed it entirely. The next one was hard enough to have him leaning against the wall. He was freezing, and it knifed straight down to his bones.

Damn it, damn it, how could he have been so bloody stupid?

He held up his hands and saw it, the sigil of cold marked on the back of his right hand. He didn't know how Kate had gotten it on him—if it was something she'd built herself or if someone had given it to her—but he needed to break it before he froze to death in the middle of the damn hallway.

Stiles stumbled back toward his chambers. He needed a knife.
Derek had to fix this. He wasn't sure how, but he had to fix this. If Stiles requested an annulment, Derek's family would have no protection. And it would all be his fault. Again.

He told himself that was the only thing causing the sickening knot in his stomach.

He should go find Stiles and apologize. No, he should wait until Stiles returned to his chambers. Perhaps he would be less angry then.

*Not likely, considering you told him you had no use for him. You'll be lucky if he'll speak to you at all.*

Derek buried his face in his hands. If only he'd walked away from Kate. If only he'd kept his mouth shut. He should've bitten his lip bloody before he dared express any dissatisfaction. So what if Stiles didn't trust him? He'd still prevented Derek from being arrested for a crime he didn't commit. That was enough, wasn't it?

A door opened in Stiles's room, and Derek jumped to his feet and was at the door adjoining their chambers in two steps. He made himself take two deep breaths before he knocked. "Stiles? May we talk?"

He waited, but he heard nothing in response, nothing except for a rapid heartbeat and equally rapid breathing. Stiles was still upset. Derek supposed he shouldn't be that surprised, but still...

No, he should just leave it alone. Perhaps he could try again a little later, or perhaps in the morning —

Something crashed in Stiles's room.

Derek cast caution to the wind and burst through the door.

Stiles was on the ground, curled into a ball, shaking so hard Derek feared he'd dash his brains out against the overturned chair next to him.

Derek jumped over the chair and into a crouch. He'd seen a seizure only twice; most of what he knew came from Boyd and how he dealt with Erica's. It shouldn't last long, only a couple of minutes at most; he would just have to ensure Stiles didn't bang into anything and hurt himself further.

As soon as he got a good look, though, Derek realized his assessment was wrong. Stiles's lips were nearly blue, and his skin was like ice.

He wasn't seizing; he was *shivering*.

Stiles blinked up at him, and his breath came out in a white mist. "D-d-d—"

Derek gathered Stiles up, hissing at the cold from where their skin made contact, and carried him to the bed. He managed to wrap them both in the top blankets, curling his body around Stiles's as much as he could to warm him. Stiles shuddered hard enough to crack his head against Derek's jaw. Derek winced, more from the inevitable bruise Stiles would have than from any damage done to his own body.

"Tell me what's wrong." He pulled Stiles closer. "Tell me what to do."

Stiles held up his hand, and Derek saw the bright blue mark on the back of it. "B-break it," Stiles said through chattering teeth. "Knife. Or—"
Derek extended his fingernails into claws. "This?"

Stiles nodded and another shudder racked his body.

Derek sat them both up, covers and all, so he could have a better angle. He slid the tip of his thumb claw across the mark, separating it quick and clean, making sure the pressure was just enough to break the skin without going deeper.

It had the same effect as if he'd cut a puppet's strings. Stiles slumped against him, tension dissolving from his body, still shivering but not nearly as violently. His skin warmed, and he practically burrowed into Derek's chest.

Derek was more than happy to let him. He tightened his arms around Stiles and held him close, waiting for the shivering to stop, waiting for Stiles's breathing and heartbeat to return to normal.

"You need a bandage," Derek said. "Let me—"

"It's fine." Stiles twisted his fingers into Derek's shirt. "It's fine, just... Thank you."

Derek pushed his nose into Stiles's hair—to warm him, absolutely not to get his scent. "What was that?"

"Cold sigil," Stiles said. "It's supposed to freeze you immediately, or nearly so; I think that one wasn't crafted as well because it took a couple of minutes to take effect. Still made it damn difficult to get my knife."

Derek looked back to the chair on the ground; he could see now that half the mess on Stiles's desk had followed it to the floor. Presumably the knife was among said mess. And then he realized what Stiles was actually saying. "Wait. Someone put that on you? To make you freeze to death?"

Stiles shrugged and wound his fingers in and out of Derek's shirt. "Your former betrothed was not too pleased with me."

"Kate," Derek said dumbly. "Kate did this to you?"

"She approached me. I was in a poor mood." Stiles pressed his face against Derek's neck. "It only went downhill from there."

Derek clutched him tighter. He wanted to kill Kate for hurting Stiles, but then, it was his fault Stiles had stormed off in the first place. God, if only he had...

Stiles sighed, his breath refreshingly warm against Derek's skin, and gripped Derek's shirt once again. "Don't listen to her," he said, his voice forceful. "Everything she's ever told you is a lie. She's selfish and vile and I hate that she's touched you at all, ever; I don't know what she said or what she did but I know it wasn't good and I wish I could set her on fire for that—"

"Stiles," Derek said, hoping to stop the onslaught of words, but Stiles either didn't hear him or didn't care or couldn't stop, because the shaky tirade continued.

"You deserve better than that, you deserve so much better than that, and I'm sorry I didn't believe you in the forest and I hate that; I hate that I let King Gerard, of all people, influence me for even a second; I don't care what problems we've had; you didn't deserve that—"

The words twisted his heart, and Derek shoved the covers away and hauled them both to their feet. But even that didn't stop Stiles; the change of position just allowed him to pace, dragging his
fingers through his dark hair as he roamed a six-foot-square area. His amber eyes were wide and wild, words tumbling out of his mouth so fast Derek almost couldn't keep up with them, a deluge flooding the room.

"And I don't know what I did, why you think I think you can't take care of yourself, but you have to tell me these things, Derek, tell me what I do so I don't do it again, because I don't want to hurt you, I don't want you to run away from me; I hate it when you look at me like you're scared of me—"

Derek lunged forward, with no idea what he was going to do other than he needed Stiles to stop, just for a moment. He cupped Stiles's head and brushed his thumb along that beautiful lower lip, saw for the first time where it was split and bleeding.

To his surprise, Stiles stammered to a stop. Derek's ears rang with the silence until he heard Stiles's heartbeat, strong and rapid, filling the space between them.

Derek couldn't think for a moment, just had to look, at Stiles's lips and his nose and his huge amber eyes and his flushed cheeks—one with a mark that would be a bruise in the morning—and the moles dotting his pale skin. Derek wanted to kiss each one.

Stiles whimpered, a soft, wounded noise that echoed in the quiet, and Derek remembered that his lip was actually injured. He should have taken his hand away, but Derek desperately didn't want to stop touching. "You're bleeding," he said inanely, his voice rougher than normal.

"Huh?" Stiles blinked, and then his tongue darted out, touching the cut on his lip and skimming the edge of Derek's thumb. "Oh. That. It's nothing."

"We should clean it," Derek said hoarsely.

Stiles shook his head imperceptibly, such a slight motion that the only reason Derek felt it was because he was still cupping Stiles's head. "It's fine. Watch."

Watch Stiles's lips. Well, that certainly wasn't a hardship.

Stiles closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath. The cut on his lip glowed blue, like the tattoos on his body. When the light faded, there was no sign he'd ever been injured.

Derek slowly swept his thumb over the skin where the cut had been. "You can heal yourself."

"A little," Stiles said. "Derek—"

"I want to kiss you."

The words came unbidden out of his mouth, so soft that for a minute Derek was certain he'd only said it in his head.

Then he saw the way Stiles's eyes widened, as if in shock, and Derek realized he had said it aloud.

Panic immediately flooded him, every instinct pushing at him to shut down and run away before Stiles started laughing. "But I'm not any good," Derek added hurriedly. "I'm not—"

"I don't care," Stiles cut him off. "We'll practice. We'll practice a lot." He reached up, rested his hand over Derek's. "Do you have any idea how much I've been thinking about kissing you? It's distracting. I thought you didn't want to."

Derek finally moved his thumb off Stiles's lip, but only to trace over the mole near the corner of
his mouth. "I did. I do," he said. "I just... I don't want you to be disappointed in me."

I don't want you to send me away was perhaps truer, but Derek couldn't bring himself to say it. Already it felt like he was too open, like he had unlocked a box of the most fragile glass and was handing it to Stiles, with no idea of whether it would end up cherished or smashed.

Stiles's eyes softened at the words, almost as if he'd heard what Derek hadn't said. "I don't think I could be," he whispered, his breath ghosting against Derek's skin.

Derek dropped his hands to Stiles's waist, rubbed his thumbs over the hip bones he could feel through the thin breeches Stiles wore. They were flush against each other, noses brushing, and all Derek could hear was the rapid, erratic beating of their hearts.

And then Stiles leaned forward, closed that last half-inch gap, and kissed him for the first time since their wedding.

Derek froze, a knee-jerk reaction, every muscle tightening, but Stiles's lips were warm, gentle. His fingers curled in Derek's hair, scratched lightly against his head. Slowly, the tension eased out of Derek's shoulders and his focus turned back to the kiss, back to the soft press of lips that was scarcely more than a caress.

Then Stiles pulled back a fraction of an inch, just far enough to speak. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

No, it was... it was something Derek didn't have a word for, something he couldn't identify. "Stiles," he murmured, and closed the scant distance between them to brush their lips together again.
Stiles hummed appreciatively, and the faint vibration made Derek shudder. His heart still thundered with nerves as much as desire, but the fingers in his hair acted like an anchor, telling him with faint pressure things that couldn't be said with their mouths occupied.

_Don't leave. Don't run. Stay here. Kiss me more._

On a shuddering exhale, Derek finally screwed up the courage to run his tongue along Stiles's lower lip, nip it gently. That earned him a surprised grunt, and then Stiles immediately mimicked him. It didn't jolt him so much as warm him, like pleasure was a slow simmer and every movement and noise Stiles made increased the warmth imperceptibly.
Then Stiles ran his tongue along Derek's lips again, almost as if asking permission, and after only the briefest hesitation, Derek parted his lips to let Stiles into his mouth.

It was achingly gentle, almost cautious, the way Stiles explored him, as if he weren't sure of himself or weren't sure of what kind of welcome he would receive. Then their tongues brushed, and everything slowed. Time slowed, Derek's heartbeat slowed, and the world faded away to nothing but Stiles, his hands and his lips and his soft hums and his scent. With each tender caress, fear and worry and tension melted away, leaving Derek loose and wanting.

He tightened his grip on Stiles's hips and pulled him closer, opening his mouth more. Stiles took the hint and deepened the kiss, fingers tangling a little harder in Derek's hair, and oh, God, it was new and strange and so, so good. Why had he waited so long for this?

Stiles trailed one hand through Derek's hair, down his neck to his chest, and pushed lightly but insistently. Derek might have worried, but Stiles was still kissing him and his other hand was still tight on Derek's head, and it was very, very hard to think about anything else, to feel anything other than this soft, warm desire.

Derek allowed himself to be nudged back until his legs bumped against the bed, and he sank slowly to sit on the edge. Stiles broke the kiss then, but it was to grab the bottom of Derek's shirt and tug on it. Derek raised his arms, still dazed and floating in this special timeless world, and Stiles pulled the shirt off and tossed it away.

Derek pushed Stiles's coat down his shoulders, then went to work unbuttoning his waistcoat as Stiles shrugged out of his coat and dropped it to the floor. The waistcoat followed, and then Stiles undid his neckcloth and pulled off his shirt, finally revealing his tattooed chest.

He straddled Derek, spreading his legs so that his knees bracketed Derek's hips and their cocks rested a hairsbreadth from each other.

It was like a dream, everything slow and rich and beautiful, and Derek was loath to wake from it.

He ran his hands over Stiles's sides, drinking in the sight of his tattoos, and leaned forward to trace one blue curve with his tongue. Stiles shivered and arched against him, "Yes" falling from his mouth as a bare whisper, and Derek followed the path of the tattoo until his mouth reached a nipple. He flicked his tongue across it, and Stiles whimpered.

Derek started to make his way to the other one, nosing and kissing his way across Stiles's chest, and then Stiles stopped him, tipping his chin up and capturing Derek's mouth in another kiss. Stiles rocked forward, just enough that their cocks brushed. Derek moaned at the desire pooling at the base of his spine, slightly sharper than it had been a moment before, then relaxing once again into a warm tingle suffusing his entire body. Some small part of him wanted more, wanted to rut harder, faster, rub his cock on Stiles until they came shouting, but it was so far away, a faint prickle buried under a blanket of hazy pleasure that came from the perfection of this, just this. Kissing slowly, like they had nothing else to do, nowhere else to be, like they had all the time in the world just to touch, to explore, to treasure.

Derek slid his hands back down to Stiles's hips, then up his back, relishing in the quiet moans that followed his palms, swallowing the soft sharp gasps when he scratched lightly with his nails. Stiles arched into him, pressing into Derek's chest, and it was so easy to fall backward, to take them both onto the bed with the mattress against his back and Stiles against his chest, a warm weight Derek never wanted to push away. His hands found Stiles's ass again, and Derek thrust lazily upward, just enough for him to feel the pressure of it, enough to feel Stiles whine against his mouth.
His hips moved almost of their own accord, but still slowly, because everything felt so wonderful, so perfect, that Derek didn't want it to end. Stiles shifted slightly on top of him, hips rolling to meet Derek's, arms braced on either side of his head and still kissing him, leaving Derek breathless with that clever tongue.

It was like being on a boat, half-asleep and rocking gently with the waves. Derek felt thick and slow and heady with the scent of Stiles and arousal, of sex and them, drifting into his body with every breath. He wanted to stay here forever.

"Derek," Stiles whispered. "Derek, please."

Derek pressed one hand harder to Stiles's ass, trailed the other up to the back of his neck to pull him into another kiss, and then rolled his hips just a little harder, just a little faster. Stiles cried out into his mouth, fists clenching at the sheets, hips jerking against Derek as he came. Derek savored it, the sound of the helpless little cries Stiles let out and the vibrations of them in the kiss, and then with the next inhale he smelled it: the scent of come and sated pleasure and that was all it took to push Derek to his own climax.

He didn't fly, he didn't shatter, just let it roll over him like a wave, safe and warm and beautiful, let Stiles kiss him through it, let his body thrust of its own volition until the aftershocks faded.

Stiles dropped his head next to Derek's and nuzzled his neck. "Wow."

Derek ran his hands up Stiles's back and nodded, not trusting himself to speak just yet. A lump was forming in his throat at this intimacy, this new thing between them that was precious and fragile and perfect and absolutely overwhelming.

Stiles raised his head and brushed his thumb across Derek's cheek. Concern creased his face. "Derek? Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

Derek reached up, felt the wetness on his cheeks. Ah. So he was crying. And Stiles was worried about him.

"Derek—"

Derek took Stiles's hand and kissed the palm. "I'm fine," he said, his voice rough and raspy. "You didn't hurt me. You're perfect. That was perfect."

It was the right thing to say, because the concern melted away into a soft, unsteady smile, and Stiles buried his face back in Derek's neck. "Yes, it was," he whispered, and something about that, knowing Stiles felt the same, made Derek want to just curl up in this moment and never leave it.

"You should stay," Stiles said. "With me. If you want."

Stay. Derek closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes. I want." And then he made himself say it all, so Stiles could hear it. "I want to stay with you."

He felt the curve of a smile against his neck. "Good."

***

They both woke hours later to the sound of a banshee's scream.

Chapter End Notes
Oh hey, I'm on Twitter now! (And I'm still on Tumblr.)

**ETA:** Art by the absolutely wonderful and amazing geeky-sova! I do not have words, I just have all-capslocked keysmashing because it's SO PERFECT.
The Scream

Stiles jerked upright and fell halfway out of bed, his legs tangled in Derek's and the sheets. He wiggled his way free and flopped onto the floor, grabbing blindly for clothes. Lydia's shriek rang in his ears, long and loud enough that the whole palace would be awake now, and all he could think about was Kate's warning, and his father and Scott and Queen Melissa and please, God, not them, let it not be them...

Derek grabbed his arm and dragged Stiles to his feet, and the next thing Stiles knew, Derek was shoving a shirt on his head and a pair of pants into his hands.

Stiles dressed faster than he ever had in his life, was still pulling his shirt over his head even as he ran into the hallway, straight to Scott's room because it was closest.

The door swung open before Stiles could knock, and Scott was standing there, dark hair mussed from sleep and only slightly more put together than Stiles was, alive, alive, it wasn't him; Lydia wasn't screaming for him.

Stiles lunged forward and hugged his brother, felt Scott return the hug just as hard, could practically hear the selfish relief of Thank God, it's not you in his grip.

"Have you seen Mother?" Scott asked.

Stiles shook his head. "We came straight here."

"We?"

"Derek and me." Stiles looked back at the hallway, saw Derek rest a hand on Boyd's shoulder, and then saw his father and Queen Melissa running their way. The look of sheer relief on Father's face echoed exactly what Stiles felt, and he refused to feel ashamed for either the lump in his throat or the way he practically tackled his father.

"Thank God," Father said, so quietly Stiles was pretty sure no one was supposed to hear it, and then, louder, "Where's Lydia?"

Derek pointed down the hallway toward the main part of the palace. "The scream came from this way."

Scott's face drained of color. "Allison."

He was halfway down the hall before Stiles could blink. Father cursed and followed, ordering "Stay with the queen!" over his shoulder as he did, even though Queen Melissa was already running after them both. Derek and Boyd took up positions on either side of her, and Stiles ran up and threaded his fingers through Derek's, holding his hand as they raced through the halls.

They found Lydia further down the hallway, curled up against the wall, holding herself and rocking. She wasn't screaming anymore, but murmuring to herself, soft enough Stiles couldn't tell what she was saying. Scott knelt beside her, squeezing one of her hands, and Father was...

Father was staring at a body at the top of the staircase.

Even from several paces back, even without werewolf senses, Stiles could smell the blood. He pressed his free hand over his mouth to keep from retching.
"Stiles," Derek said softly, a note of concern in his voice.

"I'll be fine." He let go of Derek's hand. "Stay with Lydia and the queen."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Derek nod, and Stiles walked woodenly to stand beside his father. Distantly, he could hear shouts and footfalls from the other wing of the palace, those who weren't familiar with a banshee's scream, didn't know what it signified. Stiles didn't know if he envied them or not. Less distantly, he could hear his father's men coming down the hallway behind them. This area would be chaos in mere moments.

Then he actually saw the body, even more savaged than the one in the forest, and had to turn away. "Good God."

Father rested a hand on his shoulder. "It's Her Highness, Princess Victoria."

What?! Stiles snapped his head back around, sheer shock helping to keep his stomach steady. Now that he was looking—now that he could look—he saw that the princess consort's face hadn't been harmed at all, a pale, perfect doll's head on top of a mutilated body. The kanima hadn't been nearly so careful with the peasant from this afternoon.

Whoever had done this hadn't wanted to risk any chance of mistaken identity.

The implications chilled him. "This is going to get bad, isn't it?"

"Very," Father said. "Take Lydia back to her room. I imagine—"

Someone shrieked, and Stiles tore his eyes from the body just in time to see Princess Allison come racing down the hall. He moved, but Scott was faster, appearing almost out of nowhere to catch Allison before she could get too close.

Prince Chris moved around them and just stood there, staring at the body before them. Myriad emotions crossed his face, before settling into a chillingly blank expression.

Before Stiles could say anything, before Father could say anything, Prince Chris stalked over to where Lydia still sat against the wall, leaning against Queen Melissa. Stiles broke his inaction and ran over, but Derek and Boyd were already straightening, forming a wall between the prince and Lydia. Stiles got there just in time to insinuate himself in front of them.

Prince Chris snapped his unsettling gaze to Stiles. "Stand aside. I'm taking them for questioning."

Derek growled. "The hell you are."

Stiles wanted to elbow him to be quiet. "They didn't do it," Stiles said, before Prince Chris could take issue with Derek's statement. "They couldn't have."

"They're werewolves. I assure you, they are perfectly capable of savagery like that. And that," Prince Chris flung his arm behind him, "was not a kanima."

Stiles swore he could feel both Derek and Boyd bristling behind him. "I mean they couldn't have in that they didn't have time," he said hurriedly. "Lydia screams precisely at the moment of death. Derek was with me when we heard the scream, and we all saw Boyd just after. There isn't a way either of them could have done this, returned to our wing, and cleaned up before Lydia screamed. Even werewolves aren't that fast."

Prince Chris's glare deepened, and Stiles knew he'd said nothing to save the situation. Prince Chris
was going to take Boyd and Derek and—

"Red eyes."

Stiles jerked around at Lydia's voice, saw her clinging to Queen Melissa. Tears streaked her cheeks, but her eyes were clear and her voice was her own.

Immediately, he knelt beside Lydia. "Did you see?"

She nodded, and a flash of horror echoed in her eyes before she spoke resolutely. "I saw red eyes and claws and--" She shuddered and then, to Stiles's surprise, looked up at Prince Chris. "I have seen werewolves, Your Highness, and whatever attacked your wife was no wolf. It was a monster."

"An Alpha gone wrong," Derek said softly.

"Are you trying to tell me there's an Alpha werewolf on the loose in this palace?" Prince Chris didn't quite snarl, but he got rather close. "That's preposterous."

Stiles stood back up, toe-to-toe with Prince Chris. "I realize you know nothing about banshees, Your Highness, but I assure you, if Lydia says a monster with red eyes attacked your wife, then that is indeed what happened. And you ignore that knowledge at your own bloody peril."

Queen Melissa stood as well. "Your Highness, I have known Lydia for more than ten years, and never have I known her vision to be wrong."

Prince Chris's eyes flicked back and forth, from Stiles to Derek down to Lydia, and then back up to Queen Melissa. A muscle in his jaw twitched, as though he wanted to say something, but was holding himself back from it.

With a curse, he whirled back to the Argent guards, spitting out orders with a speed and focus that was impressive. The landing exploded into ordered chaos, half the men making preparations with the body and the other half spreading out to search the palace. Stiles wasn't terribly surprised to see his father giving similar orders before coming over to them.

"Take Lydia and Her Majesty back to their chambers," he said. "If you can put any sort of protection there, Stiles, do it."

Before Stiles could even answer the affirmative, his father was already turning to Boyd and Derek. "Can either of you smell anything? Would you have any idea of how to find the Alpha?"

They shared a look, and then Derek slowly shook his head. "There's too much blood. We can't get a scent."

"I have been around most of this palace and its town, Captain, and have not smelled another wolf, let alone an Alpha," Boyd said. "Although hunters are capable of hiding scents from werewolves."

"And an Alpha's smell is different in their human form," Derek added. "Even if we could get a scent, it would only be them as a wolf."

Father cursed under his breath. "All right. I would request that you two stay in our wing, as I'll have the rest of our men searching the palace. And," he lowered his voice, "I would really prefer that Argent's men not have an excuse to come after the two known werewolves."

"Of course, Captain," Derek said without hesitation. Boyd just bowed.
A lump choked Stiles's throat, and he grabbed his father's hand before he could turn away. Shakily, Stiles traced a protection glyph on the back. It wasn't as strong as a charm, wasn't as strong as it would've been if he'd had a chance to build it beforehand, but it was the best he could do right now.

Father smiled at it and nodded, as if he'd heard words Stiles hadn't said. "Good. Now go, get back to the chambers."

Stiles turned back to Lydia, but she was already standing, one arm on Queen Melissa's. Lydia met his gaze with a look that dared him to try and coddle her. Stiles knew better by now.

Scott came up to them, one arm still around Allison, who had her face half-hidden in his shoulder. "Lydia, can Allison stay with you?"

Lydia nodded. "Of course."

They made their way back to the chambers in silence, Boyd and Derek at the front and the rear of the group, respectively. Stiles fidgeted as he walked, his mind racing down a half-dozen different paths. The implications of the princess's death, the implications of an Alpha werewolf and a kanima killing with impunity around the palace, the fact that his father was out there looking for both of them...

Derek and Boyd checked the chambers, and Stiles sealed each one with mountain ash, painting it over the frame and the threshold. It stayed strong against both Boyd and Derek, so Stiles could only hope it would be as effective against a stronger wolf.

The only door he didn't paint was his own.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked Lydia.

She ushered Allison into the room and shook her head. "Nothing."

Stiles wanted to say something else, wanted to say he was sorry, but Lydia's face was hard and Allison looked as though she might break at any moment. There wasn't anything he could say.

He walked Scott back to his chambers, let Derek escort Queen Melissa while Boyd scouted further down the hall. "This is bad," Scott said.

Stiles wanted to laugh at the sheer magnitude of the understatement. "Bad. Yes, I suppose that's one word for it."

"Are you—"

"Fine," Stiles said, before Scott could finish the question. "I'm fine, Scott. I promise. And you?"

Scott gave half a smile. "I don't know that I'll sleep much more tonight."

"Me neither." Stiles wished he had something to do with his hands. They felt far shakier than normal. "Scott, I don't think it's coincidence that we've found two bodies on the same day."

The smile dropped away completely, and Scott looked as serious as Stiles had ever seen him. "I don't either."

"At least King Gerard wasn't around to blame this one on Derek," Stiles muttered.

"No. No, he wasn't." Scott paused. "Wait, he wasn't."
Stiles felt the realization dawn on him at the same time he saw Scott's eyes widen. He grabbed Scott's shoulder and pushed them both into the chamber.

"Do you think this death was supposed to be blamed on Derek as well?" Scott whispered.

Stiles gnawed on the edge of his thumb. "Probably. Killing the princess consort... it wouldn't matter that he's a visiting prince, they'd have imprisoned Derek on the spot. The only reason he wasn't arrested in the forest was because we proved it was a kanima."

"And this was definitely a werewolf," Scott said. "And it's the middle of the night; he'd have been alone. No alibi."

Stiles started to shake his head, but then he realized Scott was right. "Oh. Oh, damn. He was supposed to be alone. But he was with me." He mentally reviewed the people he'd seen on the landing. "Did you see Princess Kate? Was she there?"

Scott shook his head. "No, did you?"

"No." Something was tickling the back of his mind, insistently, an answer that was right there but flitted away every time Stiles tried to grab it. "Someone's framing Derek for murder, and if it's not King Gerard or Princess Kate, then it's almost definitely someone who answers to them. I just don't know why. What in the world could they hope to accomplish?"

Scott scrubbed a hand through his dark, shaggy hair. "Can you prove it's them?"

"Of course I can't. It's a hunch, Scott, and it feels right. I just..." Stiles trailed off and cast his eyes around the dark room, as if the answers might be hiding in the shadows. "I don't trust them."

"I don't either." Scott sighed. "Look, we should both sleep. First thing in the morning, we'll meet with Prince Chris and your father, see what they've found and plan our next steps. If you're right, and the goal was to frame Derek, it's doubtful they'll hurt someone else if he's going to be with you."

After this, Stiles wasn't letting Derek out of his sight. "I'll tie him to the bed if I have to."

Scott snorted. "Good to know," he said, and wrapped Stiles in a hug. "Stay safe."

Stiles hugged his brother back. "You too."

***

Stiles half-expected Derek to have gone back to his own chambers, but he was standing next to Stiles's desk, replacing everything that had been knocked off earlier that night. Papers, books, stones, twine, a box of magical accoutrements... Derek put them back on the desk and arranged them gently, like he knew how important they were. The sight was oddly domestic, and it twisted something in Stiles, broke it to pieces.

Before he knew what he was doing, he was across the room, fisting one hand in Derek's hair and the other in his shirt, dragging him into a kiss, harder and hotter than the ones they'd shared before. Stiles didn't realize how much he needed it until their lips touched, until he had his mouth on Derek's and the heat of desire skimmed over his skin. Stiles let out a wounded noise, one he barely recognized as coming from his own mouth.

He pulled back from Derek, trembling, even though every fiber of his body wanted to keep touching, to keep kissing, to keep— "Sorry," he whispered. "Sorry, if you don't want—we don't—I
need, Derek, I need—"

He didn't know how to say it, didn't know how to ask, how to explain the feeling scrabbling under his skin.

Derek cupped his face, brushed his thumb over Stiles's cheek, eyes softer and more open than Stiles had ever seen them. "I know," he murmured. "Stiles, I know. Whatever you want. Whatever you need. Let me, just let me."

Stiles searched Derek's face, looking for the slightest hint of fear or hesitation, but there was nothing, just earnestness. "Derek," he said again, and that was all because there needed to be more kissing, nothing but kissing and touching and...

He attacked Derek's mouth again, digging fingers into Derek's hair to give him more leverage. Derek moaned and grabbed his hips, fingers clutching so hard Stiles would have bruises. God, he prayed he would have bruises, prayed he would see Derek's marks on his body for days to come.

He bit Derek's lower lip, sucked at it until Derek growled, and it rumbled through their joined mouths and straight to Stiles's cock. He wanted more of it, wanted all of it, wanted the reminder that Derek was alive, alive; Lydia hadn't screamed for him, hadn't screamed for any of them...

Stiles grabbed at Derek's shirt, rucking it up so he could touch, run his hands along every inch of Derek's skin, warm and thrumming with life. This was what he needed, needed this touch, needed the feel of Derek's pulse under his fingertips and the noises he made, needed all of it, needed more of it.

Derek seemed to understand, though, because he let out a muffled curse and ripped off his shirt, and wasted no time in shredding Stiles's as well.

Sweet Lord, that was the most arousing thing he'd ever seen.

Derek hesitated and looked back to Stiles, his pupils so wide his irises were mere rims around them. "Was that... I..."

"Trousers," Stiles gasped out, and hooked his fingers through Derek's to illustrate his point. "We need to not have trousers."

Those irises flashed brilliantly blue, and Derek raked his claws down the sides of Stiles's trousers. Stiles exhaled sharply. "Fuck."

He shoved Derek back toward the bed, pushing him onto the mattress, stopping only long enough to drag Derek's trousers off and flinging them across the room. And then he had Derek naked and spread before him. Stiles wished they had more light, more than the pale panes of moonlight shining through the window, because he loved seeing Derek, but he didn't want to pause long enough to light any candles. Need prickled at him everywhere, so much that he was vibrating with it, and he was already hard and leaking.

Stiles crawled over Derek to kiss him again, to press their bodies together. It calmed some part of him, lying fully on top of Derek like this, skin to skin, and Stiles slid one hand out to grasp Derek's, to link their fingers together.

Derek let out a sound that was half-sigh, half-growl, and nipped at Stiles's lower lip. "What do you want?"
Stiles smiled, hid his face against Derek's neck. "Sit up."

He started to move so Derek could do so, but Derek wrapped an arm around Stiles's back and sat them up together. Their cocks slid against each other, the sweetest friction, and Stiles moaned and scrambled to get a hand around them both. He didn't bother with slow, not now, not when he was barely holding himself together, not when he needed to feel Derek come apart underneath him like he needed his next breath.

Derek cursed and buried his face in Stiles's neck, breath coming in hot gasps. Stiles dug his free hand into Derek's hair and bent his head to watch their cocks pressed together. They were both leaking, slicking the way for his hand, and each stroke had Stiles making noises he didn't recognize and couldn't begin to be embarrassed about.

Derek whined on each exhale, hips jerking his cock in Stiles's grip. Stiles wrapped his hand solely around Derek's cock and stroked him, fast and hard. Derek shuddered and sank his teeth into the juncture of Stiles's neck and shoulder, and blunt human nails into his back.

Stiles arched into the sensation, not sure if he was trying to get closer or further away or maybe both at the same time. It wasn't pain or pleasure, it was just fire and desire, the need to mark Derek and be marked in return, the need to touch Derek everywhere he could be touched.

He tugged Derek's head up so they could kiss, so he could taste every desperate noise Derek made, each panting breath. "You feel so good," Stiles whispered between kisses. "Please, Derek, come. Come for me."

Derek clutched him tighter and did, coming with a helpless-sounding whimper against Stiles's mouth, cock pulsing hot over Stiles's fist. Stiles kept stroking him, slowing his movements as Derek trembled against him. He trailed his hand down Derek's neck, brushed his thumb over the pulse there, relishing in the connection. Derek shuddered again, and then took Stiles's cock into his own grip.

Stiles jerked at the touch and covered Derek's hand with his, but even so, it was an embarrassingly few strokes before he came over both of them. He sagged against Derek, sweaty and shaking, but the need that had been buzzing under his skin had finally calmed.

He stayed there, plastered to Derek with sweat and come, until his knees began to protest from holding him crouched for so long. He still didn't want to move. "Ow."

Derek's response was to lie back, taking Stiles with him, until they were both stretched out on the bed. "Better?"

"Mm." Stiles nosed his way over Derek's shoulder and stretched his legs. He shivered, and told himself it was because of the cooling sweat on his back, not because of the...feeling swelling inside his chest, pressing at his skin and constricting his throat. "Thank you." His voice croaked on the second word.

If Derek noticed it, he didn't comment. He merely traced a hand over Stiles's back, some indistinct pattern over and over, and gently nuzzled at Stiles's cheek. "We should clean up."

Stiles shook his head, exhaustion and satiation making his movements slow. "Don't want to move. Just want to keep touching you. Touching is good."

Derek kissed the side of his head. "Touching is good."

Stiles tightened his grip on Derek. "Stay with me. Don't leave. Don't go anywhere." Stiles heard
the thread of desperation in his own voice, even under the thickness of bliss.

That earned him another kiss on the temple, and Derek squeezed him gently. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere."
Derek didn't sleep. Well, that wasn't quite true; he did doze, floating in a space between sleep and waking, where he was only vaguely aware of anything. Except Stiles, who was draped across him, burrowed into Derek's chest as though it were his favorite pillow. Derek had made him move—to copious noisy protests—just long enough to clean them both up, and then Stiles had clamped onto him like a vise the moment he was back in the bed. Derek didn't mind. He'd simply carded his hand through Stiles's hair and relaxed into the embrace.

It made him feel... complete, in a way he'd never expected. He certainly hadn't anticipated any of this after their conversation in the garden, hadn't thought Stiles would ever want this. Derek was just glad he could give it.

He drifted closer to waking and, as he had numerous times already, listened for the sounds of Captain Stilinski and his men returning to the guest wing. As before, Derek heard only the most muffled sounds of the rest of the palace. The search had faded, but more importantly, he hadn't heard the sound of any fights.

He sighed and turned his ears back to Stiles's heartbeat, slow and steady with sleep.

Derek wanted to stay in this bubble as long as he could, pretend the world outside the chamber didn't exist. He just wanted a few more minutes with Stiles in his arms, before they had to wake to deal with what had happened the night before.

He had almost dozed off again when he heard the sound of a door closing, footsteps on the carpet in the hallway, and then a knock at their chamber door.

_Damn._

"Stiles." Derek shook him gently. "Wake up."

Stiles mashed his face into Derek's chest. "No. I refuse."

"Stiles, are you awake?" Scott's voice whispered from the other side of the door. Likely not loud enough for Stiles to even hear.

"It's Scott," Derek said.

Stiles sat up, golden eyes blinking blearily and dark hair impossibly mussed from sleep and sex. His neck and shoulders practically glowed red from where Derek's stubble had scraped them the night before, and the bite marks and bruises were sharply reddish-purple against his fair skin.

Derek reached out and rubbed a thumb over the bite he'd left on Stiles's neck, in the same spot as the one he'd made the day they married.

Stiles covered Derek's hand with his and squeezed, a soft smile playing at his pink lips. He opened his mouth, but then Scott knocked again. Stiles groaned and leaned into Derek's hand. "We should dress."

Derek rubbed the mark again and reluctantly drew his hand away, then got up and pulled on his
trousers, which were the only article of clothing between him and Stiles that hadn't been ripped to shreds. Stiles stayed in the bed, scrubbing his hands through his hair and yawning.

Scott knocked again. "Stiles—"

"Oh, for God's sake, I'm awake, come in," Stiles snapped.

The door opened and Scott slipped inside, followed immediately by both Lady Lydia and Princess Allison, who both took one look at Derek and Stiles and stared. Well, Lady Lydia stared, an eyebrow arched judgmentally; Princess Allison flushed and clapped her hand over her eyes.

Derek felt his entire body heat and wished desperately for a shirt. He crossed his arms over his chest in some effort to feel less vulnerable.

Stiles squawked and yanked the bedclothes back over him. "Scott!"

Scott blinked. "You said come in! Why did you say 'come in' if you were naked?"

"You've seen me naked," Stiles hissed.

"Not with your husband!"

Stiles flailed a hand at Derek. "He's not naked!"

Princess Allison squeaked. "Oh my God."

"Oh, for pity's sake, just get a damn pair of trousers, Stiles," Lydia snapped. "No one here cares about your cock. Well," she tossed her head toward Derek, "except maybe him."

Stiles was blushing so red Derek thought he might set the bedclothes aflame. He cast his eyes around the room, spotted a chest with clothes in it, and grabbed out a pair of trousers and a shirt to throw to Stiles on the bed. Stiles muttered thanks and flopped about under the covers, dressing.

"So, what happened?" Derek asked, desperate to get everyone's attention off the fact that he and Stiles were half-clothed. "Has there been news from the captain? Your Majesty," he added belatedly.

"Really, Scott's fine. Especially now." Scott shook his head. "And... well, not exactly."

"Where?" Stiles asked from half-under the sheets.

"The north wing." Princess Allison gestured in that direction. "He said they searched it, but it's the oldest part of the palace and there are dozens of nooks and crannies and hidden passageways. I used to explore there as a child before Mother caught me and forbade me from setting foot in it ever again."

Derek caught the way her voice trembled on the word "Mother," but Princess Allison held herself straight and utterly composed. "So you think the Alpha's hiding there?" he said.

Princess Allison nodded firmly. "Considering the attack, I believe he—or she—would have to have somewhere in the palace to hide, and the north wing is disused. No one goes there, and half the
staff believes it to be haunted. It would be perfect."

Stiles scrambled out of the bed, finally clothed, and gaped at the princess. "Haunted? Why would they think it's haunted?"

"They claim to have heard noises there, screams and howls and the like." Allison waved the question away. "What does it matter? The point is it hasn't been searched, and right now there isn't anyone in the palace to search it but us."

"Us, Your Highness?" Derek repeated. "You intend to go?"

She snapped her head around to him, dark eyes flashing. "I am an archer, I am an Argent, and that thing killed my mother." Her voice shook with barely contained emotion. "I do not know your intention, but I am searching that wing until I find that beast and put an arrow through its black heart."

Her heartbeat remained strong and steady as she spoke, and Derek regretted the implication of his previous statement. Stiles looked impressed, and Scott looked smitten.

The princess shared a look with Lydia, and then smiled sweetly. "I am here because I promised Scott I would at least ask for your assistance. If you do not wish to give it..."

Stiles shook his head. "Wait, wait. We didn't say that. But... our assistance? Scott, you're not going?"

Scott's mouth thinned. "I can't. King Gerard sent a messenger requesting a meeting this morning. In light of the... recent events, he wants to review the betrothal agreement." He sighed. "I know it wasn't actually a request. I can't refuse."

"What?" Stiles said. "No, what? Scott, you can't be alone with him. You can't."

Allison looked confused. "Why not?"

Stiles threw up his hands. "Because he's behind all this, somehow, I just know it! I don't trust him half as far as I can throw him, and if you must go, you aren't going alone."

"And just who do you propose to go with me?" Scott said. "No offense, Stiles, but it can't be you."

Stiles scoffed. "Of course not me. Derek."

Derek felt suddenly cold. "Me?"

Stiles nodded and paced the floor. "Yes. King Gerard's been pestering you for days about a new treaty. Surely he'd be thrilled to get the chance to discuss it with you. Two treaties with one meeting. He can't object to that. Or, well, he could, but it's doubtful."

Unease prickled at the back of his throat, and before long, Derek knew, it would transform into panic. "Stiles, I can't. I'm not good at that sort of thing; I wouldn't know what to say, what—"

Stiles flipped his hand, as though it was of no concern. "I have the previous treaties memorized; I can give you a list. Just stick to those points and glare, you'll be fine. Besides, there's no way this is merely review." Stiles spat the word. "He's waited until everyone's out of the palace and it absolutely must happen now? No. He's planning something."

"That's quite an accusation, Your Highness," Princess Allison said.
"Do you think I'm wrong, Princess?" Stiles asked.

She crossed her arms and looked away, saying nothing in response.

Derek breathed, trying to steady himself and failing miserably. Stiles was asking him to go to protect Scott, and Derek hadn't been able to protect anyone.

Stiles grabbed his hand, linking fingers through Derek's, and met his gaze with a solemn, pleading expression. "Derek, please."

"I..." Derek faltered, because when Stiles was looking at him like that, it was difficult to say no. "What about you? Who's going to protect you?"

"Princess Allison," Stiles said, without hesitation.

The princess in question turned to Scott. "I like your brother."

Derek didn't roll his eyes, but it was a near thing. "You're going after an Alpha. You thought the kanima was bad? An Alpha will be harder, and none of you have the strength and speed of a wolf."

Stiles's eyes narrowed, like he was about to argue that they were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, but Derek put a hand over his mouth before he could say a word. "Don't. You're worrying for Scott, I'm allowed to worry for you." And then, a little louder, he said, "Boyd."

Within seconds, his valet was in Stiles's room with the rest of them, arms folded behind him and standing a few paces behind Lydia and Allison. "Yes, sir?"

"Have you been eavesdropping?" Derek asked.

Boyd scarcely moved his face and still managed to convey offense. "Sir, I would never."

That time Derek did roll his eyes. "Fine. Have you been listening, then?"

"Naturally, sir. I'm always listening."

Stiles dragged a hand through his hair and looked sideways at Boyd. "God, I hope not."

Derek ignored the comment. "Good. I don't want to explain again. Can you go with them?"

Boyd bowed. "As you wish, sir."

"Then it's settled," Scott said. "Derek and I will meet with King Gerard, and you four will search the north wing. Be ready in one hour."

Stiles nodded grimly. "One hour."

***

Having everything settled didn't make Derek feel any better. Rather, it made him feel worse, panicky, like his skin was too tight and fit wrong. He hated the idea of Stiles, Allison, and Lydia exploring the palace, even if Boyd would be with them. He hated the idea of being in the same room with King Gerard. He couldn't shake the awful, nauseating feeling that something was going to go horribly wrong.

_Breathe_, Derek told himself. _In. Out. Just breathe._
He didn't bother to shave; he'd probably slice his neck to ribbons. He just washed his face and dressed, the formal clothes stiff and confining. He splashed more water on his face, in the vain hope that it would do something to the sickness in his stomach.

Derek heard the door open, knew it was Stiles before the door closed once more. He patted his face dry and met Stiles's eyes in the mirror. "Do you have your knife?"

Stiles snorted. "Naturally. Are you wearing your charms?"

Derek rested his hip against the basin, undid the cuffs on his jacket and shirt, and rolled the sleeve up to reveal the five charms stretching up his forearm. "Naturally."

"Don't 'naturally' me," Stiles groused. "You've left them behind before."

"I was a wolf," Derek said. "I didn't want to lose them."

The tense lines at the corners of Stiles's eyes and mouth softened, and he smiled. "So I gathered. I made another one." He fidgeted a little. "May I?"

The quiet question made Derek's heart beat a little faster, and wordlessly, he held out his arm. Stiles took the invitation and stepped forward, pulling out another charm, this one black with blue stones. He tied it to Derek's arm, just above the others. His fingers were nimble and warm, and made quick work of the knot. "There," Stiles said.

"What does this one do?" Derek asked.

Stiles smiled a little wider and rubbed his thumb over the stones. "Blue is just pretty."

Derek's heart thudded hard, and then jumped into a new galloping rhythm. Stiles had made this for him, not for protection or for magic or for anything, just for him.

He cupped his hand behind Stiles's head and kissed him with everything he didn't know how to say.

"Mm," Stiles said, tracing his fingers over Derek's face. "We'll have to do more of that later."

_Later_. God, Derek hoped there would be a later. He rested his forehead against Stiles's. "Do you have everything you need to search?"

Stiles scoffed. "Of course I do. And here." He pulled out a piece of paper and tucked it in between two of the buttons of Derek's waistcoat. "The treaty points I promised you."

He patted it, and Derek covered Stiles's hand, pressing it flat to his chest. There were a thousand things he wanted to say, but they didn't have time. "Be careful, husband." _Come back to me._

Stiles brushed another kiss across his lips. "You too."

***

Of all the wings in the Argent palace, Stiles was unsurprised to find the north wing was the one rumored to be haunted. It was clearly the oldest area and just _looked_ foreboding. It was midmorning and the entire place sent chills up his spine; he didn't want to think about searching this area in the middle of the night after a murder.

"I would not be surprised if your father's men lied about searching this wing," he said to Allison.
She strung her bow with barely a glance at him. "Nor would I. Which is why we're here."

Stiles traced protection spells on Lydia's and Boyd's hands, and then Allison's as soon as she was finished with her bow. These were stronger than the one he'd given to his father, and hopefully they'd be enough to give them an edge against whatever they found in this forbidden wing.

He also hoped they wouldn't drain his magic too much. With the charms for Derek and Scott and protection spells on Lydia, Allison, Boyd, and his father, Stiles was already taking care of far more people than he usually did. At least the barrier on Queen Melissa's door didn't require anything else of him.

The wing itself was dim, thanks to the heavy curtains and shutters over the windows, blocking out all but a thin edge of sunlight. Stiles blew a ball of light into his palm, enough to let them see a little better. The sparse furniture and framed paintings were covered in sheets and cobwebs, moth-eaten tapestries lined the walls, and some particularly vicious-looking suits of armor stood guard at intervals down the hall. The whole place smelled musty and forgotten, and it certainly didn't look as though anyone had been here in awhile.

"Can you smell anything?" he asked Boyd.

Boyd shook his head. "If something came through this wing, it came through another way. Everything smells old."

"It feels like a tomb," Lydia said, and Stiles caught the faintest tremor in her voice.

"There's a locked door back here somewhere," Allison said. "The day I found it was the day my mother forbade me from coming here ever again."

"You think an Alpha got through a locked door?" Stiles asked.

Allison shot him a haughty look. "I think there are a thousand hidden places in this wing, and that beast could have gotten through any of them."

She pointed them to a few—hidden passageways between rooms, narrow servants' stairwells—but none showed any signs of recent use, and Boyd shook his head every time Stiles asked him about a scent.

It took them the better part of an hour to meticulously search the bulk of the wing, but they found nothing. The only thing Stiles noted was that, as they drew farther in, Lydia grew more and more agitated.

He fell into step beside her. "What is it?"

She tensed. "I don't know."

"Lydia..."

"I don't know, Stiles." She whipped her head around to glare at him. "I told you it feels like a tomb. It feels like I'm descending into the depths of a mausoleum, like I'll pull down one of those tapestries and find nothing but skulls and corpses staring back at me, like there are spirits flitting just out of the corner of my eye. I feel like they're watching me, waiting, but I don't know who they are and I don't know why." Her gaze went suddenly sharp and vacant, all at once. "It feels like I'm going to scream."

Stiles took a few prudent steps backward and ordered, "Cover your ears!"
He did so himself just before Lydia shrieked. The sound reverberated off the forgotten walls, echoing down the corridors and shaking dust from its perches. Boyd's eyes flashed a brilliant yellow and he bared his fangs, but other than that, he didn't move.

Stiles kept his hands over his ears until Lydia closed her mouth and the sound faded.

"What was that for?" Allison asked breathlessly. "Did someone else die?"

Lydia shook her head and wiped her fingers under one eye. "No. That was for those who've already died here."

Faint howls filled the air, not as loud as Lydia's scream, but loud enough to send shivers down Stiles's spine. "What in the hell is that?"

Boyd growled around his fangs and crouched. "Wolves."

With that, he sprang down the hall, running off in the direction of the howls.

"Shit!" Stiles started after him, even though he wasn't nearly as fast as a wolf. "Boyd, wait!"

He checked behind him to make sure Lydia and Allison were coming before turning back so that he didn't lose sight of Boyd. Of course, by now the bloody werewolf was barely a silhouette in the shadows in front of him.

Stiles heard a dull thud from that end of the hallway. He ran faster, could now see Boyd throwing himself bodily against a door there. His first instinct was to yell at Boyd to be quiet, but anyone here would have heard Lydia's scream. They didn't have the element of surprise any longer.

He skidded to a stop just before he slammed into the wall next to Boyd. "What the hell are you—"

The door splintered under Boyd's weight and strength. Behind it was a stairwell. A lit stairwell, Stiles realized. The torches mounted on the wall were ablaze.

"Someone's been this way," Allison said behind them.

Boyd's nostrils flared, and his placid expression darkened. "I smell blood."

Stiles pulled his knife out and said a quick prayer. "Let's take it slow. Boyd, keep an ear out."

"Yes, Your Highness."

They moved into the stairwell, which spiraled upward. Boyd took the lead, eyes gleaming an even brighter yellow in the torchlight, with Allison right behind him, bow and arrow at the ready. Stiles took up the rear. Though he was reasonably sure nothing was going to come from behind them, one could never be too careful.

Lydia grabbed his hand, and Stiles instinctively squeezed it. "All right?" he asked.

She shook her head, her lips pressed so tightly together they were white. "Remember that feeling I told you about?"

"Yes."

"It's getting worse." She looked up the stairwell, her whole body tensed. "It's getting so much worse."
Stiles held her hand tighter. Lydia was like a sister to him, the only person almost as close to him as Scott was. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She let out a shaky breath and met his eyes for the first time since they'd stepped into the stairwell. "It's not me I'm worried about."

"There's another door, Your Highness," Boyd said from above them. "Locked, but newer than the others in this wing."

Stiles and Lydia rounded the corner, just in time to see Allison elbow Boyd out of the way and set at the lock with... "Are you picking the lock with hairpins?" Stiles asked.

Allison didn't even spare him a glance. "How did you think I got into this wing in the first place?"

Stiles shook his head. "You and Scott were made for each other."

"Does he pick locks?" Allison asked.

"No," Stiles said. "He needs someone who will."

He couldn't be certain, but it sounded like she laughed. Then the door latch clicked, and Allison straightened. "We're in."

Boyd eased the door open, and Lydia clutched Stiles's hand so hard he felt her nails dig into his skin. "Lydia," he whispered, but she didn't react to her name.

Stiles followed Boyd and Allison into the room above, keeping himself in front of Lydia and flexing his fingers to make sure he could still feel them. Her grip was like bloody iron.

The stench of it was the first thing to hit him, so strong Stiles had to fight down a surge of bile. He couldn't begin to describe it, herbs and smoke and rot and other things he couldn't identify, and above it all a metallic scent so heavy he could taste it on his tongue.

God, if the stench was unbearable to him, Stiles couldn't imagine what it was doing for a werewolf's senses.

Boyd coughed and covered his mouth and nose. "Breathe through your mouths, Your Highnesses," he instructed. "You'll get used to it momentarily."

Allison choked. "Oh God."

Stiles did as Boyd had suggested, and would have covered his mouth if he had a free hand. Now that the first punch of the smell was fading, he scanned the room to see where they were.

It was larger than Stiles had expected—much larger—lit by green magelight rather than torches and filled with rough wooden tables. A few were covered with glass instruments, filled with colored liquids Stiles couldn't recognize, and other scientific paraphernalia. Others had metal surgical instruments and weapons lying across them. And two tables, Stiles saw, had restraints bolted to the sides and ugly dark stains across the tops. Chains dangled from the ceiling with open manacles, like a grotesque mockery of a chandelier.

And farther back in the shadows, lining the edges of the walls, Stiles could just make out the metal bars of cages.

Oh God. Oh God.
"What the hell is this place?" Allison said, her voice breaking for the first time that day.

Lydia finally let go of Stiles's hand. "It's a graveyard," she whispered.

"It's a torture chamber." Stiles couldn't keep the horror and revulsion out of his voice.

Boyd snarled, low and vicious.

"Actually, it's a research laboratory," a cold, haughty voice said from the depths of the hellish room. "Not that any of you would appreciate the work we've been doing."

Oh hell. Stiles knew that voice, and God above, he hoped he was wrong.

Allison stumbled back to them, dark eyes wide in shock and horror, and steadied herself on Lydia. "Oh my God, no."

Princess Kate stepped out from behind the chains and into the green magelight, a smirk on her face.

Stiles hated being right.

Chapter End Notes

I will have this entire thing posted by the end of October, so help me God.
The Alpha

Now that Derek stood right outside King Gerard's study, his nerves were returning. Only years of training prevented him from fidgeting even the slightest. He did, however, surreptitiously tug on his collar, trying to make it a little easier for him to breathe.

"It's going to be fine," Scott said grimly, as if he somehow read Derek's nerves anyway.

Derek could only stare at him. "Do you truly believe that?"

Scott gave him a crooked smile. "One can always hope, yes?"

"It's more likely a trap," Derek pointed out.

Scott nodded, but didn't seem terribly fazed about it.

"And you aren't worried?" Derek asked incredulously.

"Of course I'm worried," Scott said under his breath. "But there's very little I can do right now aside from smile and hope we see His Majesty's trap before he springs it. So," he grinned at Derek again, "hope."

Before Derek could respond (other than a continued incredulous stare), a shriek rang through the air. Instinctively, Derek spun around and sought the source, though he knew it had to be Lydia.

His stomach turned and his heart raced.

"It's all right." Scott grabbed his arm. "It wasn't a scream for a new death." His eyes flicked toward the north wing. "It was a scream for an old one."

"How can you tell the difference?" Derek asked.

"I've known her for more than ten years," Scott said. "Believe me, you learn the difference."

A servant opened the study door, bowed, and said, "His Majesty will see you now."

Scott smiled amiably, and Derek tried not to glare as much. Stepping into the spacious, well-decorated study lit with morning sunlight, he couldn't help but feel that he'd just stepped inside a cage. The weapons interspersed between the bookshelves did not help the feeling.

King Gerard stood beside a large desk, looking out the wide windows. The servant announced Scott and Derek, and then vanished out the door, closing it firmly behind them.

Derek suppressed the part of his mind screaming that he'd been trapped.

The king turned to them, clearly with a greeting ready, but Derek caught the surprise on his face. "Prince Derek. I wasn't expecting you."

Obviously. Derek cleared his throat, bowed, and did his best to keep his face and voice neutral. "King Scott mentioned that you were discussing your treaty this morning. I thought it might be best if we could discuss ours as well."

The statement only served to make King Gerard's eyebrows climb higher. He chuckled and walked around the desk. "I was under the impression you wished to wait until after my granddaughter and
King Scott married. Or have you changed your mind?"

Derek met his eyes steadily. He would not be cowed by this man. "And I thought you wanted to discuss a treaty as soon as possible. But I might be mistaken."

King Gerard raised a hand. "Yes, of course I did. Please, sit down. We might as well get it all worked out at one time, don't you think?"

Scott smiled easily and took a seat. "Agreed."

Derek moved to the chair next to Scott, but didn't sit quite as quickly. He didn't trust an amenable King Gerard. He wasn't sure if it was his own feelings or Stiles's mistrustfulness coloring them, but he was not going to be comfortable until he and Scott were safely out of the room.

"Shouldn't Prince Chris be here?" Scott asked.

A disarming smile crinkled the skin of King Gerard's face, and he shook his head. He made no move to sit on the other side of the desk. "No, he has enough to worry about at the moment. Besides, his input isn't necessary for this."

It sounded true enough, but something about the way the king said it sounded... odd. Derek couldn't quite put his finger on it. He rested his hand on his left wrist, pressing the charms into his skin. It made him feel less alone.

Scott peered at the desk and frowned. "Your Majesty, I don't suppose you have a copy of the betrothal agreement? I know it well, but I'm afraid I don't have it memorized."

King Gerard waved off the statement. "Oh, we don't need that yet. There were a few other items I wanted to discuss first."

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled, and a new scent hit Derek's nose. It was subtle, just the barest hint of a difference in the regular smells of the king's study. What was that?

"I'm certain you have heard my son and I don't always agree when it comes to what's best for our kingdom," King Gerard said, but he was saying it to Scott, not to Derek. "And to be perfectly honest, I have concerns for his leadership, after I'm gone."

"Really?" Scott sounded surprised. "Prince Chris seems a good leader to me."

"Perhaps with his men," King Gerard allowed. "But for the kingdom itself, I worry that his vision is too... narrow."

Derek inhaled furtively. Where was that scent coming from? He quickly dismissed the musty scent of books, the metal and oil from the weapons, the inkwell and parchment on the desk.

Scott tilted his head, brow creasing. "What are you saying, Your Majesty?"

It wasn't Scott; his scent remained the same, if a little more anxious than usual. And Derek didn't hear any other heartbeats; there were only the three of them in the room. He took another breath, filtering through the medley of smells and trying to identify what was strange about the new one.

"Surely you understand the importance of duty to your kingdom," King Gerard said. "One of the most important decisions a king can make is a choice of heir, to ensure your kingdom continues down the proper road."
Scott continued to frown. "Yes..."

The smell grew stronger and sharper, mostly unfamiliar, but there was a tang Derek recognized. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, though. And there was something about the way King Gerard was moving his mouth...

Derek shot out of his chair, slamming into Scott and knocking them both to the side. Claws raked across his back, slashing through his coat and into his skin. Derek rolled to his feet and shoved Scott behind him, baring his fangs at Gerard.

King Gerard grinned around his own mouthful of fangs, vicious and amused all at once. "You're faster than I expected."

The scent of an Alpha was obvious now. Derek had no idea how Gerard had managed to hide it so long—magic, most likely—but it didn't matter. Right now, Derek needed to keep himself between Gerard and Scott.

He crouched and growled, let the low warning rumble through his throat. "You were going to bite him."

"You're the Alpha?" Scott said. "You killed Princess Victoria? Wait, you were going to bite me?"

Gerard stepped toward them, bones jerking and cracking as he started to shift. "As I said... I need an heir." His face started to lengthen into a muzzle, garbling his voice. "And don't think your new pet can protect you."

Derek snarled at the words. He wouldn't be able to hold an Alpha off for long, but he could at least give Scott time to escape. "Go. Get out of here."

Scott's fingers dug into his shoulder. "What about you?"

Derek shrugged his hand off and shoved Scott toward the door. Gerard was mid-shift, but that would only give them a few more seconds. "I'll hold him off. Just go!"

He turned back and froze. Gerard was fully shifted now and unlike any Alpha Derek had ever seen —too human to be wolf and too wolf to be human. He was huge, at least twice Derek's size, with a massive chest and long arms and thick clawed feet. Clothes hung from his grey fur in tatters, and unbidden, Derek remembered one of the first lessons in shifting his mother had given him: Never do so clothed, unless you didn't want to have those clothes any longer.

He fought the absurd urge to laugh.

Gerard dropped to all fours and sprang.

***

Stiles pushed himself in front of Lydia and Allison, next to Boyd. He knew Kate could use a little magic, at least, and there was no telling what else she was capable of.

She stepped up to the table separating them from the rest of the room, but made no move to come any closer. "You know, none of you are supposed to be up here." Kate drummed her fingers across the table's scarred surface. "Don't you know this wing is haunted?"
Allison moved out from behind Stiles to stand beside him. "What is this place?"

"I told you," Kate said patiently. "It's a research laboratory."

"You said that already." Allison's voice was thick, and her hand trembled on her bow. "What are you researching?"

Kate's eyes flicked to Boyd and hardened just a fraction. "This is what our family does, Allison. We hunt those who hunt us. And we research to find any advantage that we can, anything that will keep us from falling to the monsters."

She could couch it in all the pretty terms she liked, but her words still turned Stiles's stomach. "You experiment on werewolves."

Kate's smile was sharp. "It's for science."

Stiles's mind raced, because he almost had all the pieces and they were finally, finally sliding into place, showing him the larger picture. "You've been kidnapping the wolves from the Hale lands."

Kate didn't seem particularly offended by the accusation. "Research requires subjects, and we don't have that many wolves in our kingdom. And," she smirked, "we still haven't been able to acquire a born wolf."

Stiles felt like someone had punched him in the gut. For one horrible moment, the room narrowed to nothing but Kate and the smirk on her face, the look that said she was waiting for him to figure it out. With cold dread, he recalled the one bit of the Argent-Hale treaty he hadn't understood: the mandate for where Derek would live and the number of heirs he and Kate would have.

"You were going to do this to Derek," Stiles said, and his voice had never sounded so cold to his own ears. "You were going to do this to your own bloody children. That's the only reason you wanted the marriage in the first place."

Kate's smirk faded to a glare. "Honestly, I worried we'd never get a born wolf, not after you ruined our chances."

Stiles considered pointing out Prince Chris and Queen Talia had ruined those chances, but Kate didn't seem to be in a listening mood.

She picked up a glass vial and twirled it around. "But then, you brought him here, like a gift from above. Getting him arrested would have been so much easier. So many accidents in the dungeons. You'd never have known he wasn't really dead."

Stiles was going to kill her. With his knife, with fire, with whatever he could, he was going to—

Allison grabbed his arm, preventing him from advancing. "Who else knows?" she asked, voice shaking. She cleared her throat. "Does Father know about this? Did Mother?"

"Everybody knows," Kate said. "Father's been experimenting for decades. You have no idea how much we learned about them. We wouldn't be half as stable as we are without it." She rolled her eyes. "Chris never wanted any part of it, but Victoria..." Kate's voice broke, and she wiped a hand across her eyes. "Victoria understood. She understood. We had planned on telling you when you turned eighteen, but Chris forbade it." She laughed mirthlessly. "He forbade a lot of things, when it came to you and your involvement in our heritage, your birthright."

Allison was shaking her head, her face sickly pale. "Not like this. They're people; how could you
"They aren't people!" Kate slammed her hand against the table. "They're monsters, every last one of them, and given half a chance they'd rip us all to pieces. Look!"

She pointed at Boyd. He growled, the low sound filling the room, teeth bared and eyes gleaming yellow in the dim light. Kate wrinkled her nose in revulsion. "Does that look like a human to you?"

His anger had always run hot, but right now Stiles was cold and shaking, everything in his mind crystalline sharp. "More human than you."

Kate whipped her head to him and sneered. "Somehow I find it unsurprising that you would be sympathetic toward them."

Before Stiles could respond, Boyd jumped across the table separating them, sending alembics and beakers crashing to the ground. He wrapped one hand around Kate's throat and lifted her from the floor. "Where's Erica?"

"Put her down!" Allison shouted, but it sounded like a reflex more than anything.

Boyd's eyes flashed and he growled again, though it was difficult to tell whether it was directed at Kate or Allison. Possibly both. "Erica," he repeated. "Where is she?"

Kate chuckled; she didn't even seem fazed that a furious werewolf had her by the throat. "Is that all you wanted? Why didn't you ask sooner?"

She snapped her fingers, and from the darkness stretching toward the back of the room, Stiles heard a snarl. Shit. He'd forgotten the answering howls when Lydia had screamed. Those had to have come from somewhere.

Two half-shifted werewolves—one male, one female—jumped through the chains dangling from the ceiling and landed on the table. By reflex, Stiles threw an arm out in front of Lydia and Allison, but the wolves appeared to be focused on Boyd and Kate, not on them. Stiles didn't miss the look of horrified recognition on Boyd's face.

Kate laughed. "You might want to let go of me. Otherwise they may get... angry."

It looked as though it was costing him everything, but Boyd lowered Kate to the ground. His eyes stayed fixed on one of the wolves, the female. If she recognized Boyd in return, though, she didn't show it.

Mind control, Stiles thought. He'd seen it only once, though Deaton had told him about it. If Kate could create a cold sigil, then there was a damn good chance she could create a control sigil that worked on werewolves.

Boyd bared his teeth at the two wolves—a gesture even Stiles recognized as meaning back down—but neither of the wolves reacted. If anything, it seemed to make them angrier, and the only reason they hadn't attacked yet was probably because Kate hadn't slunk out of the way.

If she was controlling the werewolves, the sigil had to be somewhere on their bodies. Probably their heads. Stiles thought fast. "Allison, have you got a knife?"

"I have arrows," Allison whispered back.

Good enough. "Get to the wolves and look for a sigil like that." Stiles pointed to the one he'd
drawn on her hand. "Slice across it and break it. It'll break her hold on them."

Allison gripped an arrow and nodded. "How can we get close enough?"

Stiles looked over his shoulder. "Lydia?"

Lydia narrowed her eyes and took a breath.

Stiles clapped his hands over his ears and hoped Boyd had overheard their plan.

Lydia's shriek rent the air, so loud Stiles swore his vision vibrated. All three werewolves covered their ears and howled.

As soon as the scream faded, Stiles ignored the ringing in his ears and jumped for the female wolf. She'd fallen back off the table and rolled on the ground, holding her head. He readied his knife and hoped the element of surprise was enough.

As he'd suspected, the girl had a black control sigil tattooed on her forehead—a large one, stretching from temple to temple. Stiles wondered fleetingly if this was part of the experiments, finding ways to make werewolves slaves, but he could—would—ask Kate about that later.

He touched his knife to the sigil to break it. Something slammed into Stiles from the side, knocking the wind out of him and sending his knife skittering across the floor. He slid across the cold stone floor, crashing into a shelf with his hip. Sharp pain lanced up his side, followed immediately by the heart-stopping reminder that he was unarmed in a room with two hostile werewolves.

Before Stiles could scramble back to his feet, a snarling Boyd landed in front of him, trapping Stiles against the shelf. "Boyd!" Stiles shouted, instinctively throwing his hands up. "Whoa, I wasn't going to hurt her, I was just trying to—"

Boyd grabbed his arm, and Stiles saw the smaller control sigil on his cheek. Fuck. When had Kate gotten it on him?

Stiles sent a blast of heat down his arms, always his first line of defense, but Boyd didn't even flinch. As if Stiles hadn't burned him at all.

Damn it, protection sigil! Of all the stupid—

Boyd raised one clawed hand, and Stiles punched him in the nose. It was an awful strike, not even with his good hand, but he was knife-less and magic-less and he needed more than a few seconds to dispel the sigil of protection so he could break the control sigil.

Boyd's head snapped back, but his hand remained fastened around Stiles's wrist. He let out a roar and threw Stiles into the opposite wall. His head snapped against the stone, hard enough that stars sparkled at the edges of his vision. Stiles shook his head to clear it, but that was a bad move. His stomach churned and his head swam, and he was still half-deaf from Lydia's scream.

"Boyd," he tried to say, tried to talk sense, but the control sigil wouldn't break unless someone severed it or Boyd himself fought it. And Boyd didn't know Stiles well enough to fight it for him.

He saw Boyd's dark bulk advancing, and Stiles scrambled to grab hold of something, anything, whether to pull himself to his feet or to throw it, he didn't care. Blood dripped down the side of his face. That would be something to worry about later.
Suddenly, the female werewolf landed on Boyd with a snarl, tackling him away from Stiles. Someone else grabbed his shoulder, dragging him up. Stiles swung his arm again, but dizziness didn't help either his aim or his strength. Whoever was holding him battèd his arm away and cursed.

Stiles was manhandled to the table, where Lydia swept the broken glass off and pointed at the clear surface. "Here, put him here," she said, though her voice was still muffled to Stiles's ears.

He tried to protest, but just managed to make a garbled sound. Lydia and whoever held him set him up on the table, and Lydia examined the side of his head while Stiles got the first look at the person who'd hauled him out of harm's way: an angelic-looking young man with curly blond hair and the highest cheekbones Stiles had ever seen on a person. "Who're you?"

The man steadied him. "Isaac. Hold still."

Stiles squinted, made his eyes focus on the smudged remains of a control sigil across Isaac's forehead. "You're a werewolf."

"You're astute."

"Stiles." Lydia's voice was sharp. "Quit talking and try to heal yourself."

Right. Right, his head. He needed to... Another wave of pain hit him, and Stiles slumped.

Lydia and Isaac righted him, Lydia digging her nails into the meat of his shoulder. "Stiles Stilinski, don't you dare faint on me. Now heal."

He closed his eyes and focused on those five little pinpricks of pain. Stiles drew on his magic, found the warmth and sent it to his head, remembering belatedly to remove Boyd's protection sigil as well. He kept going until his head stopped pounding, until he no longer felt blood oozing down his cheek.

Lydia wiped at his face with a handkerchief. Or a bit of her dress, who knew at this point. "Are you better?"

"I wasn't going to faint," Stiles said.

She scoffed. "Yes, you were." She shoved up his sleeves and frowned. "Stiles..."

He followed her gaze. His arms were bare, the familiar tattoos completely gone. Stiles yanked up his shirt, only to see his stomach bare as well, the dragons on his chest mere outlines, and they were already fading. That was not good.

"You haven't used that much," Lydia said. "You should have more."

"More what?" Isaac asked.

"I sealed the rooms last night," Stiles said. "And then four protection sigils. Plus..." He trailed off, suddenly cold. "Derek's charms."

If his magic was draining this quickly, it meant Derek was using his charms and using them a lot. His first instinct was to panic, but Stiles tamped it down. Derek would be fine. He had to be fine. They had their own problems to worry about.

"Where's Allison?" Stiles asked.
Lydia jerked her head toward the back of the room. "She went after Kate."

Damn it. Stiles shoved off the table with every intention of running after them, but his legs gave out as soon as he put weight on them. Isaac grabbed him by his collar and hauled him upright again. "I don't think you're going anywhere."

Before Stiles could correct him, Boyd walked out of the shadows, the female wolf tucked under his arm. The control sigils on their faces were broken, and both had shifted back to human. Boyd walked right up to Stiles and dropped to his knees. "Your Highness, forgive me."

Isaac spluttered and jerked his head back to Stiles. "Highness?"

Stiles shook his head and waved off Boyd's apology. "It's fine. We have to find Allison."

The blonde—Stiles guessed she was Erica—gestured to the back of the room. "There's another staircase back there. That's how they normally entered."

Lydia hefted Stiles's arm over her shoulder, and he gratefully let her support him. "We should hurry," she said.

Erica squeezed Boyd's hand and swept in front of them. "Follow me."

Lydia walked briskly, Stiles hobbling to keep up with her. His legs were still shaky from the head wound and healing. Boyd and Isaac followed behind them, talking in low tones Stiles could nevertheless hear perfectly.

"Highness?" Isaac repeated, sounding dazed.

"Prince Stiles of the McCall court, King Scott's brother," Boyd explained.

"The McCalls? What are they doing here?"

"They've come for King Scott's marriage to Princess Allison, and Prince Stiles and Prince Derek were married less than a month ago."

Isaac choked. "Derek is married? To a human mage?"

"Human, not deaf!" Stiles snapped over his shoulder.

"Apologies, Your Highness," Boyd said, though he didn't sound sorry at all.

The rear door was half-open, letting torchlight into the dim rear of the laboratory. Stiles studiously ignored everything around him—he had the impression of cages and chains and human-like shapes that were not moving—and focused instead on his now-steady legs. He and Lydia followed Erica down the stairs, Isaac and Boyd still in the rear, once again talking, this time softly enough Stiles couldn't overhear.

Erica burst through the door at the base of the tower, letting them out into the warm morning sunshine. Stiles took two steps after her and saw Princess Allison lying prone on the grass beyond. His heart stopped for a full two seconds, before he reminded himself Lydia hadn't shrieked, not for this, not—

"Allison!" Lydia screamed, and Stiles broke into a run.

He skidded to a stop next to her, falling to the ground to turn her over, even as he could hear Allison saying "I'm fine, I'm not hurt, I'm fine."
"What happened?" Stiles asked.

Allison swallowed hard, her luminous brown eyes red with tears. "Aunt Kate... she's the kanima. I tried to stop her, I thought we could talk, I thought—"

Stiles gaped. "She's what?"

Lydia crouched next to him, pulling Allison's head into her lap and smoothing her hair. "Slow down. It's all right."

Allison took a shuddering breath. "Aunt Kate is the kanima," she repeated. "She was half-shifted when I got to the bottom of the stairs, caught me on the back of the neck. You have to stop her, you have to—"

"We will," Stiles said fiercely. "Which way did she go?"

Allison blinked furiously. "Toward the city."

A chill ran down his spine. The city, where his father was. Where her father was, come to that.

From the small sob Allison let out, she knew that too. "You have to stop her, you have to promise me—she's not herself, I don't know who she'll hurt—"

Stiles squeezed her hand. "I promise. I promise, Allison, we'll stop her." He looked up to the three werewolves crowding around them now. "I need one of you to take Allison and Lydia to Queen Melissa's room. It should still have a barrier. The other two will come with me to find Kate."

"You should accompany Princess Allison and Lady Lydia back as well, Your Highness," Boyd said. "We three can handle Kate."

Stiles shook his head. "No. One, Lydia and I alone can't carry Allison. You three have the werewolf strength. Two, can any of you use mistletoe? Mountain ash?"

Isaac shifted uncomfortably, Boyd looked unmoved, and Erica scowled.

Scowl all they liked, it didn't change the facts. Stiles barreled on. "Yes, that's what I thought. Those are the only two things I've seen work against a kanima, and I'm the only one who can use them."

"Stiles," Lydia hissed. "Your tattoos—"

He glared at her, but though Lydia closed her mouth, she met the glare inch for inch. "I just need enough time to throw an ash circle around her," Stiles said. "That's all. It'll restrict her movements, and we can either wait for her to change back or let someone else take care of it."

"I'll go with you," Isaac said. "I don't have experience with a kanima, but I am a soldier."

Erica and Boyd had what appeared to be an entire conversation through angry facial gestures, and then Erica flipped her hair over her shoulder and smiled. "I'll go with you as well. I too am a soldier, with six campaigns under my belt, and I do wish my betrothed would remember that."

Boyd grimaced, but crouched to pick up Allison without further argument. "Be careful."

Erica kissed his cheek. "Always."

Stiles straightened. He felt naked without his knife, equally so with the knowledge that the tattoos on his chest had nearly disappeared, if they hadn't vanished already. This was far from the best
idea he'd ever had, but he didn't see any other way. He grabbed Lydia's hand and squeezed it. "Stay with the queen. Take care of Allison. Find Scott, if you can, and get him there as well."

Lydia nodded once and hugged him swiftly. "You had better come back."

Stiles hugged her back. "I'm planning on it."

***

Derek took the brunt of Gerard's weight, rolling with it, and slammed his feet into Gerard's stomach. The Alpha crashed into the nearest bookshelf, splintering the wood and sending books toppling onto the floor. He was upright once more before Derek could blink.

He set his feet. It was the only chance Derek had to ready himself before Gerard hit him again, digging massive claws into the meat of his shoulders.

He grunted at the pain and jammed his knee into Gerard's ribs, once, twice, three times, hard enough to feel the bones crack. Gerard snapped at him, jaws dripping, and Derek pushed back, jamming his own claws into Gerard's neck and squeezing.

Gerard reared back with a gargling howl. Derek kicked with the extra room, driving his boot into the ribs he'd already broken. It was enough to get Gerard off him.

Derek scrambled to his feet and ran for the nearest weapons display, grabbing the first staff his fingers closed on. He spun it, testing the weight of the staff and the mobility of his shoulders. They were already healing, much faster than usual from wounds inflicted by an Alpha.

Stiles's charms. It had to be. He just hoped the rest of them worked as well as the healing one did. It might well be the only way he survived this fight.

Gerard snarled and raised himself to his full height, towering over Derek.

_I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this_, some traitorous part of his mind whimpered over and over.

Derek adjusted his grip on the staff. It didn't matter if he couldn't do this; if he didn't even try, Scott would have nothing standing between him and an angry Alpha. And that was unacceptable.

Gerard dropped to all fours and prowled, eyes flashing red. Derek moved with him, not taking his eyes away, keeping his body between Gerard and the exit. He had no idea how long Gerard had been an Alpha, how well he could fight as a wolf, or any number of things that could give Derek an advantage.

He really hoped Scott had gotten out of the study by now.

With a bone-rattling howl, Gerard barreled toward him and swiped a massive paw at Derek. He slid to the side and spun the staff, knocking Gerard's arm away. Derek continued the spin, bringing the staff up to Gerard's jaw, but the Alpha jerked away so fast Derek scarcely saw it.

He _didn't_ see the other arm coming toward his head, but he felt it, the faintest movement of the air. Only years of training and preternatural speed had his staff in position to block it before Gerard could take his head off.

It was fast and furious, Gerard advancing on him, forcing him back, Derek keeping those vicious claws and teeth at bay with his staff alone. He strained every sense he had to keep up with Gerard,
his own body moving faster than it ever had before. It was barely enough for Derek to stay alive, certainly not enough for him to gain the upper hand.

That was all right. He didn't need the upper hand. He just needed to keep Gerard distracted.

He ducked another swing and slammed his staff into Gerard's knee, a blow that would have broken a human's leg. Gerard stumbled, but didn't fall, and seized the end of the staff.

*Oh shit.*

Derek went flying across the room, crashing shoulder-first into a damaged shelf. He coughed and rolled over the debris, moving by sheer panic rather than any conscious thought, just before Gerard landed right where he'd been lying.

He grabbed a broken shelf and smashed it across Gerard's face. It didn't seem to do much more than infuriate him, but Derek felt a little better. And he was close to another weapons display. If he could just grab a sword—

The movement out of the corner of his eye was all the warning Derek had. He brought his arms up, blocked the first few strikes, onetwothreefour—

The next one caught him on the side of the head, left his ears ringing, and then Gerard grabbed him around the neck and slammed him back-first into the wall. The stone cracked, and Derek grunted.

Gerard slammed him against the wall again and held him there, claws piercing into Derek's neck as hesqueeze. His face shifted subtly, muzzle shrinking, until Derek wasn't looking at an Alpha or King Gerard but some horrible cross between the two.

"You have been more of a problem than I could have imagined." His voice was guttural and garbled, coming out of a throat that wasn't meant to speak. "If I didn't need you alive, I would rip your head off right where you stand."

Derek bared his fangs and snarled, though it probably came across as an empty threat. "Just try it and see how far you get."

Gerard grinned a *horrific* grin, and his fingers tightened. "Oh, don't push me. You're convenient, but not indispensable."

Derek dug his claw into the muscle at the base of Gerard's thumb, trying to get free, but his grip barely twitched.

"Did you really think you could fight me and *win*?" Gerard taunted. "You're a second son, a Beta, and your mother had to run crying for help with her tail between her legs. You never had a *hope* of defeating me. *I am the Al*—"

He broke off in a choked gurgle, mouth agape. His grip spasmed around Derek's neck, and then fell away, and Gerard fell with it. Derek dropped to the ground and leaned on the wall to keep himself upright, because his legs didn't seem to be cooperating at the moment.

Scott stood over Gerard, bloody sword in hand, blinking in shock. "Did that do it? Is he dead?"

Derek coughed. "Head off. *Head off.*"

Scott whacked the sword against Gerard's neck twice more, until his head went tumbling across the broken shelves and fallen books. Blood spurted after it, and the hot metallic scent turned Derek's
stomach. He felt as though he'd been fighting for hours, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes, at most.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, voice raspy. "You're supposed to be somewhere safe!"

"The door's barred from the outside." Scott held his sword out at Gerard, as though he expected the headless body to jump up at any moment. His tan face had turned pale green. "Oh my God, did I just decapitate my betrothed's grandfather?"

Derek nodded and wheezed a little.

"And," Scott poked the body with the tip of the sword, "he was the Alpha? The leader of the damn werewolf hunters was a secret werewolf?"

He was starting to sound hysterical. Derek lurched forward and clapped a bloody hand to Scott's shoulder. "It's all right. It's all right. We need to get out of here, find the others. Tell Captain Stilinski and Prince Chris to call off the search."

Scott nodded, but he still looked vaguely ill, staring at Gerard's body. Derek wasn't even sure he'd heard a word. "Scott!"

That seemed to snap him out of it. "Yes. We should," he swallowed, "we should let them know. But the door's still barred."

Derek pulled Scott away, back toward the front of the study. "A wooden door I can handle."

Derek wasn't entirely sure who led who to the study door; he and Scott both leaned heavily on each other. Not from actual wounds—Derek was healed, and he was fairly certain Scott hadn't been injured—but relief and shock that they were alive made Derek's legs wobbly.

It took him three tries to kick out the door, but it broke, and he and Scott were finally out of the study. Derek gasped, dragging in air like a half-drowned man, and the trapped feeling he'd had since waking up finally subsided. His clothes were ruined, scored with claw marks and blood, but Derek didn't care.

"Sir?"

Derek snapped his head up to see Boyd and Lydia halfway down the hall. They both looked fine, but Boyd was cradling—

"Allison!" Scott shouted, anguished, and he ran to them.

"Scott, she's fine, it's all right," Lydia said.

Scott brushed his hand over Allison's face, but his own was even paler than before. "What happened?"

"The kanima, Your Majesty," Boyd explained.

"The kanima?" Scott repeated. "It's in the palace?"

Derek's stomach dropped. "Boyd, where's Stiles?"

"With Erica and Isaac," Boyd said. "They went after Princess Kate. She's the kanima. And she's not in the palace. She's heading for the city."
Scott gaped at Boyd. "What?"

Derek felt like he'd been punched twice for each sentence Boyd had uttered. None of it made any sense, but he latched on to the single most salient piece of information: Stiles was going after the kanima. Stiles was in danger.

He spun and pounded down the hallway, running blindly for the nearest door. He thought he heard Boyd yelling after him, but Derek couldn’t hear the words. It didn't matter.

He had to find Stiles.
The Kanima

Stiles ran alongside the castle walls, searching for some sign of the kanima—of Kate—but finding none. The walls were smooth and tall enough that Stiles felt reasonably sure she hadn't climbed them. And there was nothing between the castle wall and the outer wall, the one surrounding the entire city, except for an expanse of grass that yielded no clues whatsoever.

"Can you smell anything?" Stiles called out to Isaac and Erica, who were both running in front of him.

They pointed in tandem toward the city, the buildings just on the other side of the narrow river separating the palace from the city proper. Stiles cringed to think of the havoc Kate would wreak in areas full of people.

Erica stopped and held up her hand. "I hear screams."

Stiles cursed and ran faster, trying to think up some sort of reasonable plan over the din in his mind, over the voice reminding him that his father was out there. He didn't think Isaac or Erica would be strong enough to fight Kate for long, not after having been captive for as long as they had been. And Stiles knew damn well he wasn't up to it. A warning, a trap, perhaps a distraction for Prince Chris and his hunters—that would be the most they could hope to do.

They crossed the bridge over the river and ran straight for one of the wide stone roads that led to the main market. Now Stiles could hear the screams as well. If his father and Prince Chris were anywhere within earshot, they and their men would be heading toward the pandemonium.

Stiles grabbed Erica and Isaac before they charged any further into the city. "Find Kate and keep her occupied. Don't let her hurt anyone and don't let her hurt you. I'm going to find my father and Prince Chris."

"And then what?" Erica asked.

Stiles thought. "Howl. We'll follow you to wherever you've corralled her. Maybe with you two and the soldiers, you can distract her long enough for me to set a trap of mountain ash."

"Do you even have enough?" Isaac asked.

Stiles threw a careless smile at them. "I always have enough."

Granted, "enough" was usually contingent on how much magic he had left, but he was fairly certain the tattoos on his back hadn't faded yet. That was all he needed for this.

The kanima roared then, and that sent up another more terrified wave of screaming in its wake.

Stiles shoved Erica and Isaac down the road. "Go, go!"

They ran until they hit a market square, which looked as though it had been hit by a whirlwind. Animals ran loose, carts and booths had been overturned and broken, and goods lay scattered across the cobblestones. So did people. For one heart-stopping moment, Stiles was convinced they were all dead, but there was a distinct lack of blood, and most of them were still screaming. Paralyzed.

Isaac and Erica split off from him, racing after Kate, and Stiles ran to the nearest guards, both in
Argent colors, who were helping those on the ground.

"Have you seen Prince Chris or Captain Stilinski?" he asked.

One guard looked him over like he'd lost his mind, but the other man pointed further into the city. "That way."

Stiles nodded and ran. He hoped that with all the guards and soldiers, there would be more than enough to keep Kate from killing anyone else. Given the state of the market square, though, he knew it may well be a vain hope.

He jumped over a pile of broken wood and stumbled, catching himself before he went sprawling over the cobblestones. His lungs burned with each breath, but he didn't stop running, not now that he could hear how bad the fighting was getting.

He heard Prince Chris first, shouting orders over the screams of others and the roar of the kanima. Stiles spun right at the next alley and ducked under two low-hanging clotheslines, following the sound. He found the prince at the edge of another square, motioning his men off to surround it. Across the square, Stiles spotted men in the McCall colors cutting off the roads leading that way.

In the center of the square, the kanima crouched on top of an overturned cart. Erica and Isaac circled it slowly, growling, just out of reach of the kanima's claws. The square, like the one before, was littered with bodies, but far more of these would not be getting up. Stiles didn't see his father anywhere.

*Doesn't mean anything*, he told himself. It didn't mean anything at all.

Prince Chris spotted him then, and took two furious steps in Stiles's direction. "What are you doing here? Get back to the palace!"

Stiles clenched a fist. He didn't have time for this. "Oh, you don't want to know just who it is you've got surrounded out there?" He didn't wait for Prince Chris's response. "That's Princess Kate."

Myriad emotions crossed Prince Chris's face, but fear was definitely one of them before it settled on disbelief. "Kate? The kanima? Are you actually mad?"

"I may jest, Your Highness, but not on this particular account."

Stiles took a step forward, but the prince blocked him from moving any closer to the square. "Did you see?" Prince Chris demanded, keeping his voice low. "Did you actually see her change?"

"I didn't," Stiles admitted. "But Allison did."

The words had the desired effect, as all the color drained from Prince Chris's face. "That's not possible."

"It's very possible, I assure you." Stiles tried to move forward again, but the prince continued to block his path. "Might I at least attempt to seal her in place with ash?"

The challenge brought a bit of color back to Prince Chris's face, along with anger. "Do you really think you can? That didn't work quite so well last time."

Stiles took the rush of anger and channeled it into his voice. "Well, this time I have two werewolves, daylight, and a whole *host* of soldiers to act as a distraction. So, unless you want to
pepper your sister with arrows, will you get out of my way?"

Prince Chris glowered, but he finally stepped aside, and Stiles darted out of the alley and into the square.

Thankfully, the kanima appeared to be too preoccupied keeping an eye on Erica and Isaac to worry about Stiles. *That's me, just the human, nothing to see here*, he thought, trying to make himself as unobtrusive as possible as he dug the mountain ash out of his pocket. He had only a handful. But that was all he needed; just enough to keep her contained until they could decide what to do with her.

The kanima snarled and sprang off the cart, straight for Erica. She ducked under the outstretched claws and shoved her own into the kanima's chest. They both fell to the ground, momentum carrying them back. Erica drove her feet into the kanima's gut and sent the snake monster somersaulting into the side of the nearest building.

Stiles scanned the square. Should he draw most of an ash ring inside one of the buildings and then have Erica and Isaac lead Kate to it? No, he'd tried that last time and ended up paralyzed on the ground. Throwing an ash circle around the kanima would have the element of surprise, but he would have to be fast to avoid getting hit. And he would have to ensure Isaac and Erica were out of the way before he threw it.

He took another glance at the edges of the square; the Argent men were standing down, bows ready but not raised. As he'd suspected, Prince Chris had no desire to kill his sister, at least, not at the moment.

The kanima caught Isaac with her tail and sent him flying halfway across the square. He crashed upside down into a booth near Stiles and scrabbled back to his feet, snarling. Across the square, Erica darted around Kate, striking fast and nimbly avoiding the venomous claws.

Stiles grabbed his shoulder. "Can you and Erica pin her and then get out of the way? I've got a plan."

Isaac grinned, his fangs distorting his smile into something reckless. "Watch us."

He sprang across the square in two bounds, sweeping up a board as he did and swinging it on his third jump. The board shattered across the kanima's head, and with a roar, she turned from Erica to swipe one massive arm at Isaac. He skipped back and snapped his teeth in a taunt. Erica picked up a block of stone, hefting it above her head, while Isaac kept Kate distracted.

So that's what they're planning, Stiles thought, and scrambled as close as he dared, pulling the pouch of mountain ash from the leather thong around his neck. He would have to move faster than he ever had in his life; he just hoped Erica and Isaac could give him enough time.

Erica smashed the stone on the kanima's head. The stone crumbled, the kanima roared and swayed, and Isaac and Erica both leapt backward.

Stiles bolted straight for the kanima, ash tight in hand, stretching his legs as far and fast as he could. The kanima was shaking her head, as if to clear it, and still hadn't seen Stiles.

In between one step and another, when he was right behind her, Stiles threw the handful of ash in the air. It spiraled out, settled in a circle around the kanima just as Stiles hit the cobblestones. The pull of magic from him was a physical thing, unexpected, and he stumbled. He tried to get his feet under him without compromising the ash circle, but that effort just tripped him up further.
Erica grabbed him. Stiles landed hard against her, but she kept him upright. "Thanks," he said.

She smiled with fangs. "You're heavier than you look."

Stiles looked back. The kanima spun in a circle, slashing at the barrier of mountain ash, but it held firm. Stiles sagged in relief, and was once again grateful to have Erica holding him up.

It had worked. Thank God.

Prince Chris and his men closed in on the market square, and then the prince and two of his guards advanced on the kanima. Stiles straightened from Erica and scanned the faces of the guards in the crowd. Now that the kanima was confined, he was less concerned with her and more concerned with finding his—

"Stiles!"

He jerked at the bark of his name, at the command and worry woven into it, and he pushed away from Erica to see his father break through the ranks of men on the east side of the square.

Stiles crossed the square, meeting his father halfway, and it wasn't until they embraced that Stiles allowed himself to feel the absolute bone-deep relief that came with knowing they were both alive and unharmed.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Father's voice was rough. "You're supposed to be at the palace with Meli—with Their Majesties."

Stiles grinned at the slip, where his father couldn't see him, and then clapped him on the back and pulled away. "Derek's still with them. I was," he waved toward the kanima, "busy."

Father frowned as if he wanted to say something, then sighed and shook his head. "Come on. Let's see what she has to say."

They walked back to Prince Chris and his guards. Erica and Isaac sat on the other side of the ash circle, faces normal once again, both wiping blood from nearly healed wounds.

In the center of the circle, Kate had shifted back to human, completely naked. She sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, though she didn't appear to be embarrassed by her nudity in the slightest. "Perhaps you could throw me a cloak, brother?"

Prince Chris's jaw worked, though Stiles couldn't begin to guess what he was thinking. "Kate, how could you?"

"How could I what?" Her voice was cold and brittle as ice. "I'm afraid you'll have to narrow it down for me."

"You killed people. Innocent people," Prince Chris said.

If she felt remorse at the idea, Kate didn't show it. "It was for the greater good."

"The man in the woods? My wife?" Prince Chris clenched his fists. "Tell me how that was for the greater good."

Kate's gaze went hot. "I didn't kill Victoria."

"But you know who did," Prince Chris shot back.
She looked away and didn't deny it.

Stiles was nineteen years old. He was grown, married now, had been acting as an advisor to his king for the past two years. But right now, all he could do was lean against his father and accept that wordless support, take comfort in the knowledge of their tiny family's unshakable bonds.

"Who bit you?" Prince Chris demanded.

Kate smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"We have an unchecked Alpha running around and killing people. Who bit you, Kate?" he repeated.

She pursed her lips and didn't answer.

Stiles stared at her, his mind replaying their conversation from the night before—God, had it really only been the night before? It was a leap, but his own words echoed in his mind, followed by Derek's explanation of how a kanima was created in the first place.

"It was King Gerard, wasn't it?" Stiles said.

Both Kate and Prince Chris snapped their heads to him. Prince Chris looked horrified, but Kate looked furious.

Which told Stiles he'd guessed right. He wished the knowledge didn't feel like a blow to the stomach. "You're a hunter. There's no way you would've been bitten by a random Alpha, and if you had, you wouldn't be flaunting it," he said. "The king's the only one you'd have allowed, and even if he didn't, I know he's your master."

Kate threw her blond head back and laughed. "Oh, you are the clever one. I don't need to tell you anything, do I? You can just guess it all."

Father squeezed Stiles's shoulder, a clear warning not to rise to it.

"Of course," she continued, "if that were the case, then you've surely already guessed what Father wanted with your brother, haven't you?"

Time seemed to slow around him, and his body went numb. He'd been so focused on Kate that he'd forgotten. Derek and Scott were alone with King Gerard—no, they were alone with a bloody Alpha werewolf. "He's going to bite him."

Kate beamed. "Very good!"

"Good God, are you mad?" Prince Chris said. "You'd attack a visiting king?"

Father turned to his men and pointed back toward the palace. "Get back there and find His Majesty, now."

Kate shrugged a careless shoulder. "Go if you must, but it's far too late."

Pain pricked at his palms, and Stiles looked down to see he was clenching his fists hard enough to draw blood. He didn't care how much magic he had left; he was going to step over that line and burn—

"Depends on which 'majesty' you think you're too late for."
Stiles whirled, and for the first moment he couldn't believe his eyes. Derek shouldered his way through the Argent guards, clothes ripped and stained with blood. He stalked toward them, his body oriented toward Stiles, but his eyes fixed on Kate. The look on his face was one Stiles had never seen before. It was pure hatred, and it was terrifying.

Stiles took a step toward him. "Derek," he started, but didn't know how to finish.

Derek's eyes flicked to him and softened. "Scott's fine," he said. "He wasn't bitten. He's safe."

"And King Gerard?" Prince Chris asked, voice tense.

Not "Father," Stiles noted.

Derek hesitated just a fraction of a second before answering. "Dead."

Kate snarled and lunged, but the mountain ash barrier threw her back with a flash of blue light. "You lie."

That look of hatred was back. "I could show you his head, if you like," Derek said.

Stiles would later wonder what it said about him, that his first reaction was Oh, thank God, he's really dead. For the moment, though, he was only grateful he knew better than to say it aloud.

Kate's face twisted in rage, and the noise she let out wasn't anything close to human. She shifted, scales springing up over her body, hair melting back into her skin, and threw herself at the barrier again and again.

"Kate, stop!" Prince Chris yelled, but she didn't. Stiles wasn't even sure she could hear him, now.

Father's grip tightened on Stiles's shoulder. "Is that barrier going to hold?"

Stiles opened his mouth to say of course it would, when Kate threw herself at the ash circle hard enough that he felt it at the small of his back, a force that drove him to his knees.

He fell into himself almost without thinking, a reflex to get a better grip on his magic, on the now-shaky barrier. Hold it, Stiles ordered himself, but each blow resonated through his entire body. He didn't have enough magic left to hold it, not with a furious, vengeful kanima attacking the barrier nonstop.

Dimly, Stiles heard his father and Prince Chris both shouting orders, the shuffling of men moving into positions to contain, to capture, not to kill. Killing was still a last resort.

Two hands grabbed him, pulling him tight into a blessedly warm, familiar chest. "Stiles." Derek pressed his nose behind Stiles's ear. "What's wrong?"

He didn't know how to explain. Stiles felt as though he was clinging to the barrier by the very edge of his fingernails, holding it together in a desperate attempt to outlast Kate's anger. He wasn't going to last. He couldn't last.

Stiles gritted his teeth and dug his fingers into the cobblestones, as if that would help ground him. Gerard was dead. That meant there was no way to stop Kate, unless they did kill her or... "She needs another master."

"What?" Derek said.

"Kate. She needs another master."
Kate roared and slammed into the barrier again, and the flash of blue light was the last thing Stiles saw before everything faded away.
Derek stared at Stiles, slumped and silent in his arms. Cold dread tightened his chest. "Stiles."

Stiles didn't respond. He was pale, so much paler than normal, his face devoid of any color but for the circles under his eyes, dark purple like bruises.

Derek brushed his fingers over Stiles's cheek, over his lip that had been split the night before. His skin was cool to the touch. "Stiles," he said again, shaking him gently.

Stiles still didn't wake.

The tightness in his chest was growing, churning, but removed from Derek, as though a pane of glass separated him from everything he felt. Because Stiles was going to be fine, perfectly fine, he was going to open his eyes any moment...

Derek heard the shouts around him, Prince Chris yelling at Kate to stop, the roars and the crackle of magic every time she struck the barrier, but he pushed it all away and focused. Listening for the only sound he wanted to hear, the only sound that mattered.

Behind him, Kate roared again, and something inside Derek just snapped.

He cautiously rested Stiles on the cobblestones, then leapt to his feet and shouted, "Enough!"

To his surprise, it worked. Everyone quieted, staring at him with mouths agape. Even Kate, who was fully shifted to a kanima now.

She clawed at the shield and hissed at him. Derek stepped forward and snarled, letting his eyes bleed blue. "Sit. Down," he growled.

Kate sat. Derek couldn't quite read expressions on her scaly face, but he thought she looked astonished. He might have been as well, but right then he was too angry or frightened to care.

"Shift back," he ordered.

She did, her astonishment even more obvious once she was human again. She looked small, vulnerable, the way she curled into herself. Once upon a time, Derek might have felt sympathy for her, but not now. She'd chosen this.

Derek glared at Prince Chris and jerked his chin, and then returned to his more pressing problem. Stiles still hadn't moved, was barely breathing, and now that Derek could hear, his heartbeat was softer and slow, so much slower than it ought to have been.

Fingers trembling, Derek searched for an injury, but he couldn't find anything; at least, nothing that was still bleeding, nothing that would explain why Stiles was just lying there, so much quieter than he should've been.

Captain Stilinski crouched next to him and grabbed the edge of Stiles's shirt, tugging it up. "Check his tattoos."

For the briefest moment, Derek was confused as to what Stiles's tattoos had to do with this, but then he remembered. They faded as he used magic.

Derek shoved Stiles's shirt up. His chest was completely bare. The tattoos were gone.
Before Derek could ask what that meant, Captain Stilinski was turning Stiles over. "His back. Check his..."

Derek didn't argue, just did as he was told. Stiles's back was as bare as his front, save for the tattooed knot over his spine near the small of his back, which looked lighter and less vivid than Derek recalled.

His breath caught in his chest, and Derek rested his fingers on the loops of the knot. What did it mean when Stiles's tattoos were gone?

Judging by Stiles's shallow breathing, it wasn't good.

The captain cursed and rubbed his hand over his face. "Something's still draining him," he said, voice quiet and tense, and that sent a chill down Derek's spine.

Derek pressed his fingers harder into Stiles's skin, as though he could hold the fading knot there by sheer force of will. "How do we stop it?"

Captain Stilinski looked conflicted, and his eyes flicked back over Derek's shoulder, toward Kate. "Any magic he cast..."

Not Kate, then. The ash circle. Derek pulled Stiles into his lap, hunching over his husband as if that would keep him warmer, keep the magic from seeping out of him. "Break it."

"I understand your concern," Prince Chris said from behind him, "but Your Highness, we can't break the circle, not with—"

Derek lifted his head only to glower at Kate. "She won't be a problem. Will she?"

Kate met his glower with one of equal ferocity, but gave an aborted shake of her head.

"Good enough for me," Captain Stilinski said. "Break it."

Derek turned his attention to his own wrist, where the charms now weighed heavier than he ever thought possible. He extended a claw and sliced through them without even a thought. All but the one Stiles had given him today.

*Blue is just pretty*, Derek heard in his mind, saw Stiles's soft smile playing at his lips. A howl scratched at the back of his throat, trying to escape, but Derek clenched his jaw so hard his teeth ached. He wouldn't let it out, he wouldn't.

"Derek," Captain Stilinski said gently. "Let me see his back."

Derek nodded mutely and shifted his weight, tilting Stiles toward him so the captain could see if it had worked. Derek felt he ought to look as well, but couldn't bring himself to do so. Instead, he closed his eyes and focused on the faint beat of Stiles's heart and each soft, shallow breath.

After a long, long moment, the captain let out a sigh of relief. "It's steady. It's not fading anymore."

"Does that mean," Derek had to swallow over a sudden lump in his throat, "he should wake up?"

Captain Stilinski brushed his hand over Stiles's forehead and hesitated. "I don't know. He's never used this much before."

Derek looked up at the raw sound in the captain's voice, all of the fear and uncertainty Derek felt down to his bones.
"We should get him back to the palace," Captain Stilinski said. "Mel—Her Majesty will know more."

Derek shakily stood, cradling Stiles close. "I can carry him, sir."

Captain Stilinski smiled, but there was sadness in his eyes. "I know."

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The trip back to the palace was uneventful, much to Derek's relief. Prince Chris and his men had Kate bound well, and true to her word (for once), Kate caused no trouble. Captain Stilinski walked close to him, keeping an eye on Stiles. Erica and Isaac walked on his other side, looking no worse for wear after a fight with a kanima.

"It's good to see you both," Derek said softly.

They both smiled at him, and Isaac saluted. "Good to see you, too, Your Highness."

Derek wanted to ask what had happened, where they'd been, but that conversation would be better left for another time, when they weren't surrounded by Argent men. When Stiles was better, because Derek imagined he'd want to know everything as well.

Until then, Derek would just be grateful they were alive; he'd thought Isaac had died in that ambush, and it had been nearly three months since they'd seen Erica.

They entered the palace, and Prince Chris ordered his men to take Kate to the dungeon, while Derek carried Stiles up to their wing. As soon as they arrived, general mayhem broke out: Boyd, Queen Melissa, and Scott came running; Erica threw herself at Boyd; the queen and Scott both demanded to know what happened to Stiles, which Captain Stilinski and Isaac both tried to explain. Derek stood, quietly, until Queen Melissa told him to take Stiles to his room.

Derek did, depositing Stiles into the bed they'd shared the night before, the second bed they'd ever shared. He was still pale, and none of his tattoos had returned save for the knot on his back. Derek had hoped that being back in the palace and hearing everyone around him would rouse him, but clearly that hadn't worked.

He heard the door open, the footsteps, and smelled Scott before he cleared his throat and spoke. "He should be fine in a couple of days."

Derek spared only a glance at Scott, standing near the foot of the bed. "What makes you say that?"

Scott smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "The one on his back, that's the core. It binds the magic, I think. That's how Deaton described it, anyway. As long as he doesn't lose that, he'll be fine in a couple of days."

Derek stared at the bed, at Stiles, his vision blurring. "And what if he had lost it?"

Silence stretched between them for a few too many heartbeats. Derek listened to all three of them, his and Scott's and Stiles's, the strange rhythm they made together.

"I don't know," Scott finally said, quiet enough that Derek may not have heard it, had he been human.

Regardless, it wasn't a lie. Derek decided not to think about it, because the what ifs were not helping his composure one bit. He rested his hand over Stiles's, thinking to take pain away, but
there wasn't anything to take. He couldn't do anything but stand here, willing Stiles to wake.

"What would have happened if I'd turned?" Scott asked.

Derek looked up, momentarily confused at the question. "If Gerard had bitten you?"

Scott nodded, frowning deeply. "I know, if an Alpha bites you, you either turn or you die. And given everything His Majesty was saying about an heir, I don't think he intended for me to die. So... why would he want me?"

Derek wasn't certain what Gerard had been thinking, but he could make an educated guess. "As a Beta, he'd have a certain amount of control over you. He could... encourage you to do what he wanted."

"Encourage," Scott repeated, face darkening. "You mean force."

The thought of someone like Gerard abusing an Alpha's power turned Derek's stomach. He closed his eyes, trying not to think about it too much. "If you couldn't fight it, yes."

"That means he wouldn't just have control of me." Scott clenched a fist, and looked very much like he wanted to hurt something. "He would have had control of my kingdom."

"But he didn't," Derek said, because he had to remind himself that the worst hadn't happened. "You stopped him."

"You did first," Scott said forcefully, and then some of the steel faded from his voice. "If you hadn't pushed me out of the way, he'd have bitten me." He smiled, a little sadly. "'Thank you' doesn't seem to be enough, under the circumstances."

"And if you hadn't stayed, he would've ripped me to shreds and still been able to bite you," Derek said. "I should be thanking you."

"I suppose we can call it even, then," Scott sighed. "I probably ought to tell Prince Chris the full story. See what he wants to do about a foreign king committing regicide."

Derek couldn't fathom Prince Chris actually holding Scott accountable for it. "You were defending yourself against an attacking Alpha werewolf. I think a hunter will understand." He paused and cleared his throat. "For what it's worth, I do think you'd make a good wolf. If you ever did want the bite, I'm sure my mother would welcome you."

Some of the uncertainty faded from Scott's face, and he smiled. "That's a high compliment."

Derek just nodded. He still marveled at the way Scott treated him as an equal, but he was trying to get accustomed to it.

Other footsteps sounded in the hallway, and then Captain Stilinski entered the room and bowed. "Your Majesty, Your Highness. I'm sorry to interrupt, but Prince Chris has requested to see Your Majesty as soon as possible. There are... things to discuss."

Things to discuss. That had to be the largest understatement Derek had ever heard.

Scott rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "I imagine there are. I'll go take care of it."

With another small smile, Scott left, and Derek was alone with Captain Stilinski once again.

He looked down and saw he was still holding Stiles's hand, absentmindedly tracing his thumb over the
skin. Derek couldn't bring himself to let go. From the small, pained smile the captain sent him, Derek guessed he understood.

Captain Stilinski stepped up to the other side of the bed. "Princess Kate has been secured in the dungeon."

Derek felt a little like a weight had slid off his chest, knowing she was finally somewhere she couldn't hurt anyone. "Good. That's good."

"What did you do to her out there?" Captain Stilinski asked.

Derek's confusion must have shown on his face, because Captain Stilinski continued, "So far she hasn't been a problem, but I want to ensure it stays that way. And in the city, she was listening to you. Not to her brother, not to anyone else. To you."

Derek shook his head. In the city, his only thought had been for Stiles, and it had barely occurred to him that Kate was doing as he said. Or what that meant. "I don't know. She'd need a new master, but..." He tried to remember what all he'd read about how a kanima chose a master. "It's based on a desire for revenge, or on the strength of a person's will, whether they can provide the kanima with..."

It hit him like a stone to the head, and he couldn't even finish the thought.

"Identity?" Captain Stilinski said.

For a moment, Derek couldn't speak. "I... suppose so," he finally croaked.

Captain Stilinski just nodded, as though that made perfect sense. "All right. I'll let Prince Chris know we don't need to worry."

Derek just stared at him, unable to believe his ears. How could the captain accept it so readily? It barely made sense to Derek.

A bitter smile twitched up the corner of Captain Stilinski's mouth. "You've been married to Stiles for more than a week and you haven't let him run all over you. That tells me you have more than enough strength of will to handle her."

A hysterical laugh bubbled at the back of his throat, and Derek clamped his teeth shut to keep it from coming out. He didn't think he could explain it.

Captain Stilinski looked from him to Stiles and back again. "There are some other things I must tend to." His brow creased in consternation, as if showing how little he wanted to tend to those other things. "You'll be all right here? You'll stay with him?"

Derek threaded his fingers through Stiles's limp ones, squeezing them as if he could simply will Stiles back to wakefulness. "Of course, sir. I'm not going anywhere."

The captain nodded, and backed out of the room with a final bow before Derek could tell him there was no need to stand on ceremony, all things considered.

He turned his attention back to Stiles, who hadn't stirred once, who gave no indication that he was still living but for his slow, shallow breathing and steady heartbeat.

Derek sat on the edge of the bed and pulled their joined hands into his lap. "I'm not going anywhere," he whispered again, and hoped Stiles could hear him.
The next two days at the Argent’s palace were the most boring whirlwind Scott had ever been privy to. With King Gerard and Princess Victoria both dead, Princess Kate in the dungeon, and the revelation of a secret laboratory filled with torture devices and dead werewolves, the entire palace had been thrown into upheaval. Prince Chris and Allison both had numerous things to do, and Scott had been informed in the kindest terms that the best thing he could do was stay out of the way.

He might have been more amenable to taking the suggestion if it weren't for the devastation he glimpsed on Allison whenever she thought no one was watching. Scott saw it only twice, just a flash before she composed herself once more, but it was enough to leave him aching. She was his betrothed and he had loved her for years. She shouldn't have to grieve alone.

But he was also a foreign king, and not yet family, and the one responsible for her grandfather's death.

Scott still wasn't sure how he felt about that. He certainly didn't regret it—if he hadn't done anything, he would have been bitten and Derek would most likely be dead. But he wished there had been another way, wished he could've done anything else. He wanted Allison to look at him and still see him, not the man who'd stuck a knife into her grandfather's neck and chopped off his head.

Scott found himself up on the roof of the palace late the second night, because if he stayed inside one minute longer, he was going to scream. He couldn't do anything to help Allison. He couldn't do anything to help Stiles, who still hadn't woken up. He couldn't do anything to help Erica and Isaac, who spent most of their time with Boyd and avoiding the Argents as much as possible. He was a king, for God's sake, but he'd never felt so useless in his life.

The night was cooler than he'd anticipated, a light breeze skipping over the roof and around the parapets. The sky above was clear and black and speckled with stars, the waning moon shining like a beacon.

Scott leaned against one of the parapets, gazing out over the palace grounds and the surrounding city. There were a few lantern lights, but most everything was dark and quiet, except for the rustle of the breeze.

"What are you doing up here?"

Scott startled at the sharp voice and spun to see Allison standing behind him. He froze, one hand on a parapet, suddenly feeling like an interloper. "I didn't know anyone else was up here," he said stupidly, and he could practically feel Stiles's hand upside the back of his head.

Allison nodded, hands clasped in front of her, face pale and resolute in the moonlight. She looked like a bowstring drawn too taut, like she might snap at the slightest pressure. The previous weeks of their relationship, the ease of it, seemed to have vanished like smoke in a soft breeze, leaving them standing awkwardly apart.

He was intruding. He should leave, let her be. Scott stepped away from the parapet and bowed. "I'm sorry. Truly. I didn't mean to intrude. I'll just—" He laughed bitterly. "I'm sure I'm the last person you want to see right now."

Allison frowned. "Why would you think that?"

He felt pinned to the spot by her question, as though they had just finally acknowledged a massive gulf between them they had previously agreed to ignore. Scott scrambled for something to say.
"Your grandfather—"

"My grandfather?" Allison's dark eyes flashed in fury. "My grandfather kidnapped people, had them taken from their homes and their families so he could," she waved her hand at the dark hulk of the north wing, "experiment on them. He lied to our allies so he could do that to their son. He turned my aunt into a monster. He murdered my mother."

Her voice choked out, and Allison turned from him to glare out at the city below. "If you hadn't cut off his head, I would have done it myself."

Scott almost stepped back at the unexpected tirade, but forced himself to stay right where he was. He might be completely misreading, but it didn't sound like Allison was angry with him. And more than anything, he didn't want to leave her alone.

So he tentatively moved to stand beside her, close enough for support, but far enough that she would have space, if she wanted it.

"I don't understand," Allison whispered, eyes still fixed on the city, hands curled against the stone of the parapet. "I have no idea why you aren't disgusted by all of us. By me."

The last words were so soft, Scott almost didn't hear them. And he was absolutely certain he'd heard them wrong. "Disgusted? By you? Now I'm the one who doesn't understand."

Allison shivered, but Scott couldn't tell if it was because of the chill of the night or something else. "You saw that place. You saw what they did."

"Them, Allison. Not you." Cautiously, Scott rested his hand on the parapet, next to Allison's but still not touching. "You had nothing to do with that."

Her gaze dropped to their hands, but she neither moved closer nor told Scott to leave. He would take it.

"I love my mother," Allison said finally, her voice wavering with unshed tears. "I love my aunt. But they did horrible, horrible things. And I hate that, I hate—" She let out a shuddering breath. "I hate that I don't know if Gerard made them do it or if they chose it. I hate that they did it at all. And I'm afraid that... I could become them."

That was a fear Scott understood all too well.

Allison uncurled the hand closest to his, spreading her fingers, but stopped short of actually touching him. "I would understand if you wanted to break our betrothal."

Scott felt as though she'd struck him in the stomach, and all he could do was gape at her. "What?"

She lifted her hands to her face, wiping under her eyes. "It's all right. I know none of this is what you expected, and I... if you hate me—"

_The hell with this._ Scott grabbed her hands and turned her to look at him. "I don't hate you. I could never hate you." He swallowed hard and took the plunge. "Allison, I've been in love with you since I was twelve years old, and now that I've met you, I've only fallen more in love. You're smart and beautiful and strong and kind and amazing, and every time I look at you, I'm struck with how much I feel for you." He squeezed her hands, running his thumbs over her fingers. "Just because you share their blood doesn't mean you have to share their choices."

Allison stared at him, eyes wide and shining with tears. Her lips parted, as if to speak, but she didn't
say anything. Her hands trembled in his.

Scott was trembling himself. "I know what it feels like, to be afraid you'll look in the mirror one day and realize you've become the worst parts of them. To feel it over your shoulder like a specter you'll never be rid of. But... you're not them. You're you, and nothing can change that."

Allison smiled a little, lips quivering. "I thought you were avoiding me because of what Gerard."

Scott shook his head emphatically. "No. No! I was trying to give you space. I thought you wouldn't want to see me."

She laughed, though it sounded a little choked. "Of course I wanted—to see you." She dropped her gaze to their joined hands. "I always want to see you."

The tension that had been hovering between them seemed to have dissipated, and Scott tugged her forward. Allison looped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder, and he held her close, overwhelmed by the feeling that this was right, and that he never wanted to be parted from her again.

"I may cry on your shoulder," she whispered.

Scott smiled into her hair. "That's what it's for."

"And," her hands tightened around the back of his neck, "you still want to be married to me?"

He didn't even have to think about his answer. "Always."

She exhaled, long and slow and shaky. "I do love you."

Warmth bloomed in his heart, steadying him, and Scott kissed her head. "I love you, too."
Stiles woke because he was *hot*. Outstandingly hot, as though someone had wrapped him in a thousand fur blankets. He shifted, trying to move himself out from under said blankets, but his left side wouldn't budge.

He blinked bleary eyes to see a dark hulk curled half on top of him. No, it wasn't a hulk. It was a huge black wolf, sound asleep, muzzle pressed into Stiles's neck.

Stiles frowned. "Derek?"

"He's been like that for the past two days."

Stiles turned his head to see Scott sitting in a chair near the bed, paging through missives. Scott raised his head from the papers and smiled wearily. "Good to have you back, brother."

He looked bloody exhausted, but Stiles decided against mentioning that, as he probably didn't look much better. "How long have I been asleep?" he asked, voice rasping.

Scott set the papers aside and stretched in his chair. "Three days."

*Three days.* Good Lord, he'd never used that much magic before. No wonder he felt as though he'd been run over by a dozen horses. Stiles closed his eyes and groaned.

Then he remembered what had happened before he'd lost consciousness previously, and it woke him as effectively as being thrown in a lake. Stiles's eyes snapped open and he struggled to sit up, but Derek snored softly and draped one massive foreleg over Stiles's chest, pinning him to the bed.

Well, that wasn't helpful. Stiles lifted his head. "Scott, Kate's the kanima, she was—"

"We know," Scott cut in, his voice soothing. "Stiles, it's all right, we know. Prince Chris took her into custody just after you passed out, and she's been in the dungeon ever since."

The relief he felt at that was almost enough to make him pass out again. Stiles dropped his head back to the pillow and stared at the ceiling. "Is everyone all right? Did she hurt anyone?"

"Several were paralyzed, several more were wounded, but thankfully, no one died," Scott said. "You got the mountain ash circle around her, and then Derek managed to step in as her master before she could break it."

"*What?*" Stiles tried once again to sit up, but Derek still weighed him down. "Derek...*what?*"

One of Derek's ears twiched, but that was his only reaction.

Stiles scowled at him. "You ought to wake up and explain yourself."

Scott waved a hand. "He only just fell asleep an hour or so ago. Let him be for a little longer."

"Oh." Stiles turned his head to get a better look at Derek, and it hit him just how much he'd missed in the past three days. "Scott, tell me everything. Is everyone all right? Is Father—"

"He's fine," Scott said easily. "Everyone is fine, Stiles. Well... everyone is uninjured."

At that tone, Stiles looked back to Scott, who seemed to have aged years in the span of a few
moments.

Scott gave another tired smile. "Lydia's fine, if shaken. She hasn't gone near the north wing again, but she also hasn't screamed. She and Mother have spent most of today with Allison. She's..." He trailed off, and his gaze drifted to the corner of the room.

Stiles considered. Her mother dead, her grandfather a monster and dead, her aunt equally a monster and imprisoned. He would have been stunned if Allison was perfectly fine after all that. "It's all right. I can imagine."

Scott nodded and continued, "We talked, she and I. We thought it was best to push the wedding back a month, give her and her father time for mourning and time for an official coronation. It will also give our messenger time to reach the Hales and extend the invitation for them to come."

Even though he was lying down, Stiles felt his stomach plummet. "You're inviting them all here? After everything? You don't see the numerous ways that could go wrong?"

"I do," Scott said mildly, "but this is all supposed to be about unifying our countries, remember? With King Gerard dead and Princess Kate in prison, it seems the best time to commence peaceful overtures."

"Now?" Stiles still couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Just how do you think Queen Talia's going to react?"

"I know it will not be well," Scott said. "However, everyone actually involved with that horrific place is either dead or imprisoned, and Prince Chris has had his men emptying the room for the past three days."

Glimpses of the room in the north wing flashed through Stiles's mind, and he shuddered with the same creeping sense of horror he'd felt there. "Tell me they intend to set that room on fire."

"My understanding is that there is to be a bonfire at some point, at least with the items that won't explode. Including the destruction of any and all research notes."

"Good." Stiles hesitated on his next question, but he had to ask. "Did they find anyone else?"

Scott shook his head. "None alive. It seems Erica and Isaac were the only two to make it out. They said a few others escaped about two weeks ago, but apparently Kate got to them first."

Bile rose in his throat, and Stiles swallowed determinedly. He lifted his free hand and buried it in the thick fur on Derek's neck, scratching him, feeling the steady rise and fall of his body with each breath. Kate and Gerard had planned to put Derek in that room. If the Hales hadn't removed that clause, Derek would have been...

"You were right about Prince Chris, by the way," Scott said, as though he'd heard the turn Stiles's thoughts had taken. "He confessed he met with the Hales and told them what Kate and Gerard intended to do with Derek. He said he would have wanted someone to do the same for him if it had been Allison. I don't think he anticipated all," he waved a hand around, as if to encompass everything that had happened in the past few months, "this."

Stiles laughed bitterly and tightened his grip on Derek's neck. "No one could have anticipated all this."

"That's true." Scott rubbed a hand over his face and stood. "I'll go tell your father you're awake. And Mother and Lydia."
Stiles tried to laugh again, but that time it didn't come out properly. "All this fuss over me?"

For the first time, Scott's face dropped, and Stiles saw just how deeply the worry had etched itself on his brother's face.

Stiles couldn't find it in him to be flippant. "How bad was it?"

Scott's jaw worked. "Your tattoos were nearly gone, Stiles. You and Deaton never said what would happen if they vanished completely, but..."

Stiles's memory supplied the words where Scott couldn't: *It will not bode well for you*. Deaton had been very clear that once Stiles bound himself to his magic, it would be an inextricable part of his life. And pushing himself too far would have a result that Stiles had consciously kept from his brother and father.

Still, guilt ate at him, because he hadn't intended to use enough magic to put him in danger, hadn't meant to put that anxiety on Scott's face. "I couldn't let her get away," Stiles said, though the explanation sounded thin. "Mountain ash was the only thing that could keep her contained."

"I know." Scott sighed. "I know. But... you're my brother."

Stiles heard everything in those three words, things he and Scott both knew down to their bones. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

Scott nodded, and the corner of his mouth turned up. "I know," he said again. "I'll be back soon. Try to get some more rest."

Stiles stared back at the ceiling, listening to Scott's footsteps echo across the polished wood floor, and the creak of the door opening and closing firmly.

Rest. God, he didn't need rest; he'd apparently been resting for *days*. He wanted to stand, to stretch, to go outside, to—

His shoulder was suddenly cold, and Stiles turned his head to see Derek wide awake and looking straight at him. Blue eyes flashed, and Stiles realized his hand was still buried in the ink-black pelt on Derek's neck. The muscles under his hand had tensed, like Derek was ready to spring, but he didn't move. He just regarded Stiles warily—or at least, Stiles would have called it "warily" if Derek had been human.

"Good morning," Stiles said, for lack of anything better. "Or, afternoon. I'm not actually sure what time it is."

Derek snorted, but his body relaxed minutely, and he nosed Stiles's ear.

"Ah, cold, cold, cold and ticklish!" Stiles squirmed his head away, and when he was reasonably sure Derek wouldn't try it again, he cautiously petted Derek's neck. "Thank you for staying with me. I don't know whether you were keeping me company or keeping me warm, but... thank you."

Derek whined softly and nudged Stiles's shoulder.

"Did I scare you, too?" Stiles asked.

Derek nodded, and then twisted his head to get at Stiles's sleeve. He nipped at it, as if he was trying to yank it down.
Stiles wiggled his other hand out from under Derek and pushed the sleeve back, revealing the blue weave of his tattoos. Derek let out another whimper and licked over them, dragging his tongue over Stiles's skin.

"I... should not find that quite as arousing as I do," Stiles said.

Derek stopped his licking and gave Stiles a baleful look. He could almost hear the "Not now, you idiot."

"I didn't mean—well, I did, but you heard Scott! He's bringing my father here, and I'm absolutely certain that's not something either of them would ever want to walk in on." Stiles tentatively scratched behind Derek's ear, and suppressed a yawn. "Besides, as much as I'd like to, I have a feeling I'm not quite up to activity that vigorous yet."

Derek's response was to press his whole shaggy head against Stiles's neck and whine again.

Well, one did not require words to translate that. Stiles looped his arms around Derek and hugged him as best he could. "I'm sorry," he whispered for the second time. He had a feeling he would be saying that a lot over the next few days.

Derek's ears twitched, and he lifted his head toward the door, suddenly alert. Not long after, Stiles heard footsteps and voices.

Well, sounded like it was time to start on a few more of those apologies.

***

After three days of unconsciousness and another three days of being unable to leave his room on pain of his father's glare, Stiles was ready to crawl over the walls out of boredom. So he'd been a bit dizzy the first time he'd sat up after waking; he'd been lying down for three days. It was to be expected. And perhaps he'd stumbled—not fainted—when he'd gotten out of bed, yes, but that was no reason to place him under what was essentially house arrest.

At least he wasn't left entirely alone. Scott came by usually twice a day and kept him apprised of everything happening, as did Lydia. She, at least, did not seem to consider him an invalid, and after her first sharp rebuke about taking proper care of himself, she and Stiles fell back into their normal bickering.

Allison came by once and apologized stiffly; Stiles responded by congratulating her on her upcoming marriage with Scott and added that he couldn't wait to have her as a sister. It wasn't perfect, and God knew they still had a long way to go, but the words took away some of the awkwardness and Allison was smiling shyly by the time she left.

To his surprise, Boyd, Erica, and Isaac all came to see him as well. Erica and Isaac were doing well, considering how long they'd spent in captivity as Kate's test subjects, though Erica seemed practically glued to Boyd's side.

In fact, the only person he hadn't seen since the first day he'd woken up was Derek.

Stiles didn't think he'd said anything wrong, didn't think Derek had been angry with him—or at least, not any more angry than everyone else had been. But that still left him at a loss for why
Derek had abandoned him for the past few days.

Well, "abandoned" may have been a bit strong, but regardless. He was bored and lonely and, to be perfectly honest, hurt that his husband hadn't come back to see him. Stiles had even subtly tried to get information from Boyd, but the only response had been the flatly unimpressed look that Boyd had perfected.

Rather than brood over it any longer, Stiles decided it would be best to ask. Which was how he found himself curled up in Derek's sizable bed, blinking sleepily up at Derek, standing next to him with arms crossed and a frown on his unfairly beautiful face.

"Stiles." Derek sounded almost pained. "You ought to be resting."

Stiles sat up and rubbed his eyes. "I was. I wanted to speak with you, and I thought it might be best if I were to wait here. I didn't anticipate you being away long enough that I could take an actual nap." He craned his head to see out the window. It was dark outside. "Hm, perhaps a bit longer than a nap."

Derek sighed the sigh of the longsuffering. "You ought to be resting in your bed."

Stiles pouted. "But yours is more comfortable. Also, you are here, and as I said, I wanted to speak with you. Is there some reason you don't want to be around me?"

Well, he hadn't meant to blurt it out quite like that, but as usual, Stiles's mouth got ahead of him.

Derek stiffened as though he'd been struck, but his frown didn't abate at all. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you've been avoiding me," Stiles pointed out. "I haven't seen you once since I woke up; at least, not as a human. This is our first actual conversation in nearly a week. Did I say something to upset you? Do something?"

Derek dragged his hands through his hair. "You drove yourself to the point of unconsciousness. That was upsetting."

Stiles's heart sank. Of course it was that. Why wouldn't Derek be upset about that? "I'm sorry—"

"You aren't sorry," Derek said, but he sounded more resigned than angry. "You know as well as I do that you would do it again in a heartbeat."

His reaction was to protest, but it would have been a lie. "I couldn't let her hurt anyone else."

Derek shook his head. "Stiles, I just meant I understand. You protect the people you care about, and sometimes that means putting yourself in danger. You needn't apologize to me for it. Just... don't do it needlessly."

Stiles felt his eyebrows climb. "I'm surprised you don't believe this was needlessly."

"I've had six days to think it over." Derek's frown smoothed, enough so that he appeared more contemplative than angry. "Even with two werewolves and a host of soldiers and guards, there's no telling how many people she could've hurt or kill before they stopped her. At least this way, she was contained before she could do too much damage. And your charms saved my life, and by extension, Scott's."

He exhaled hard, something that could have been either a sigh or a laugh, and reached for Stiles,
then stopped abruptly and clenched his fists at his sides. "You should be getting rest."

A hole opened in his chest where his heart was supposed to be, and Stiles swallowed against the pang and resisted the urge to rub it. Derek didn't want to touch him. Perhaps he'd been wrong about this, shouldn't have forced it right now.

Stiles swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, only for his cursed traitorous knees to wobble. In an instant, Derek had hands under his elbows, holding him up.

Stiles's equally traitorous heart immediately sped up at the touch, and he'd wrapped his fingers around Derek's arms before he had time to think about what he was doing. "Sorry," Stiles whispered.

This close, he could watch Derek's throat work as he swallowed. "Don't be," Derek said roughly.

"I didn't think you wanted to touch me," Stiles said. "Was I wrong?"

Derek closed his eyes and let out a faint whine. "I haven't been to see you—I didn't want to touch you because I didn't think I could stop. And you need to rest, you said you weren't up for... strenuous activity."

_Oh._ Stiles remembered the buzzing under his skin the night Lydia had screamed, how much he'd _needed_ Derek then, and wondered if Derek was feeling the same way now. His stomach swooped at the thought. "That was three days ago. I'm feeling much better," he said, and tilted his head to the side, exposing the days-old bruise on his neck that was fading more than he would like. "And I really, really want you to touch me."

Derek groaned and pulled him forward into a kiss.

It wasn't soft and hesitant, but neither was it wild; rather, it felt as though Derek were trying to reach his very soul. It was all focused intent: the press of lips, the scrape of Derek's stubble, the taste of his tongue in Stiles's mouth. Stiles's head spun and his knees buckled again, but Derek just secured him with an arm around his waist and changed the angle of the kiss. All Stiles could do was wrap his arms around Derek's neck and hold on for dear life.

Blood pounded in his veins and his cock, roared in his ears, lit a fire under his skin everywhere Derek touched him. Stiles dug his fingers into Derek's hair and scratched at his scalp, and Derek moaned, the vibrations traveling through the kiss and sending Stiles into a full-body shudder.

The arm at his back stroked down to his ass, and then back up under his shirt, Derek's palm burning against the small of his back like a brand. Stiles whined and arched into it, like he hadn't realized how damn much he needed that touch until he had Derek's skin on his.

Stiles felt the curve of Derek's smile against his lips, and then got one final peck before Derek pulled away and tugged his shirt up. Stiles raised his arms obediently, let Derek divest him of both shirt and trousers and push him, naked, onto the bed.

He wanted to give a token protest, tell Derek to take off his clothes as well, but Derek was kneeling over him, gazing at him with a look Stiles couldn't even begin to decipher, one that made him feel full and flayed open at the same time. He couldn't begin to get his mouth to form a word other than "Derek."

Derek smiled then, just a hint of it, and rested a hand against Stiles's stomach, stroking his fingers up and over the blue lines of the tattoos. "I like these," he murmured. "You should never be without them."
Stiles tried to laugh, or perhaps even retort, but Derek bent closer and licked over the tattoos, tracing them with his tongue, his fingers, his nose. The bands glowed with each touch, warming Stiles twice over, and all he could do was watch, gasping and trembling, as Derek touched him.

"I've wanted to do this since that first night." Derek pressed a kiss to the eye of each dragon, his hands hot against Stiles's chest. "Lick these until I had them memorized."

His fingers skated over a nipple just then, sending a spark of pleasure straight to Stiles's cock, and Stiles couldn't stop the needy whine that slipped out of his mouth.

Derek paused, scrutinizing him, and then slowly dragged his thumb across Stiles's nipple again. Stiles writhed under the touch, his cock fully hard and throbbing now. He'd known he was sensitive there, but with each brush of Derek's fingers, Stiles was beginning to think "sensitive" was the understatement of the century.

Perhaps Derek realized it as well, because he bent his head and flattened his tongue over one nipple at the same time he pinched the other.

Stiles shouted at the sensation, bucking off the bed. Derek chuckled and pressed his hip back down into the bed, then rubbed his thumb over the head of Stiles's cock once before moving away.

"Bastard," Stiles said weakly.

Derek responded by flicking his tongue across the tip of Stiles's nipple repeatedly, and then dragging his stubble over the sensitized skin.

It slowly liquefied every piece of Stiles's brain, until all he could do was clench his fists uselessly against the bedclothes and thrust his hips up, seeking friction and finding nothing. He was making noises, small high-pitched things he would never admit to in a million years, but he couldn't stop, couldn't do anything but let Derek take him apart with nothing but his tongue and the rough pads of his fingers.

Derek gently worried one nipple between his teeth, and Stiles felt his eyes roll back because dear God, it was nigh overwhelming. No, it was overwhelming; it was far too much and he never wanted it to stop, pinpricks of pain and pleasure that drew his entire body up until he was taut as a bowstring, hovering on a knife's edge. Just one little push, and...

And then Derek pinched his nipple again, rolling the small peak between his fingers, at the same time he took Stiles's cock in hand. Lightning struck through his veins and Stiles came with a shout, cock pulsing all over him and Derek. Derek kissed him soundly, stroking him through it until Stiles had nothing left.

His body throbbed and burned in turn, and some part of Stiles thought it would be distinctly uncomfortable to wear a shirt in the morning, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Not when he was limp and sated in Derek's bed.

Derek nuzzled at the corner of his jaw and kissed his neck, then fit his mouth over the bruise there and sucked. Warily, Stiles petted his head, was tired enough that he didn't question the warm feeling bubbling in his chest as Derek renewed the mark.

Derek's breathing went uneven and his arm jerked a few times, and then Stiles felt the hot splash of come on his chest.

Derek collapsed slightly to the side of him, and dragged his nose over Stiles's chest and his fingers through the mess on his stomach. Even to Stiles's human nose, they stank of sex, but Derek just
kept inhaling, like he couldn't get enough.

Stiles had no desire to object. "Do I still smell good?"

Derek nodded, his stubble scratching Stiles's skin with the movement. "Better after sex."

Stiles grinned. "Because I smell like you?"

Derek gave an aborted shake of his head and pulled away.

Panicking, Stiles grabbed at him. "Wait, don't go, I wasn't—"

"I'm just getting something to clean us up," Derek said, his voice touched with amusement.

Well, that was a worthy endeavor, Stiles supposed, and he very magnanimously said nothing when Derek grabbed his discarded shirt from the ground to clean them up. Stiles wasn't going to be wearing it any more tonight anyway.

"So why do I smell better after sex?" Stiles asked.

Derek balled up the shirt and tossed it away, and then divested himself of his own clothes and lay back down on the bed.

When no answer appeared forthcoming, Stiles poked him. "Come now, tell me. Derek. Derek. Dere—"

Derek grabbed Stiles's finger and nipped it reproachfully. "It's because you smell like us both."

His ears turned adorable pink at the admission, and Stiles couldn't stop the grin from spreading over his face. "Why, Prince Derek, are you blushing?"

"No," Derek said, and immediately buried his red face in Stiles's neck.

Stiles wanted to dance with joy. Slowly but surely, they were getting there, to a place with playful teasing and blushing and trust. At least a little trust. He scratched his fingers through Derek's soft hair. "You're adorable when you blush."

Derek shook his head, or maybe he was just nuzzling Stiles some more; it was difficult to tell.

Regardless, he wouldn't let the moment pass. "You are. And you'll just have to deal with it. It'll be a hardship, I can tell, but you'll have to learn to live with the knowledge. Fortunately, I'm here to help you in any way that I can."

Derek clung to Stiles a little tighter. "My father would have liked you."

He spoke softly, but the words still hit Stiles like a physical blow. Derek hadn't mentioned his father once, even though Stiles knew it had to be something he thought about all the time. He ran his hand over Derek's head. "Oh really?" Stiles said, trying to keep his voice light. "He wouldn't glower at me for all the things he knows I'm doing with his son?"

Derek huffed against his neck, the barest hint of a laugh. "Of course he would. But after he got over it... he'd have liked you. Same ridiculous sense of humor."

Stiles heard the break on the last word, felt the shudder, and wrapped both of his arms around Derek, holding him close. And not a moment too soon, because Derek choked out a sob and pressed his face tighter to Stiles. "It's my fault. I couldn't—I didn't—I was supposed to protect him,
I wasn't fast enough, I wasn't strong enough, I wasn't—it's my fault *it's my fault.*

Stiles rubbed his hand over Derek's back, saying nothing, for once, because he knew all too well there wasn't anything *to say.* This sort of grief, this blame, was one with which Stiles was intimately acquainted.

Derek was shaking harder now, fingers clutching Stiles's shoulders, lips whispering a litany against Stiles's skin. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

_Oh God._ He brushed his lips over Derek's head and held him close. "It's all right," Stiles murmured. "I've got you. You can let it go, now."

Derek let out a raw, wretched sound that was half-howl, half-sob, clinging to Stiles so hard it was nearly impossible to breathe. Stiles hugged and rocked him, pressing his face into Derek's hair and just letting him grieve.

"I've got you," Stiles whispered again. "It's all right to let it go. I've still got you."
The Family Reunion

After another five days, the messenger returned from the Hales, bringing the news that Derek's family would be joining them at the Argent palace for Scott and Allison's wedding. She also came with a less official missive for Derek alone, which had letters from his mother, Laura, and Cora.

Cora expressed wishes that he and Stiles were getting along well, Laura expressed cruder wishes along a similar line (and Derek felt his face flame as he read her words), and Mother had asked for more details on Erica's and Isaac's well-being (while also subtly hinting that she hoped he and Stiles were getting along well).

They were, or at least, Derek thought they were. Stiles had pretty much moved into his chambers, and Derek woke each morning curled up around Stiles or with Stiles half-draped across his chest and drooling. Their scents mingled together in the early morning air, warm and heavy with sleep and sex, an intoxicating smell Derek couldn't get enough of. Sometimes they woke slowly, with sleepy kisses and lazy thrusts against each other. Other mornings, Derek was up first, leaving Stiles to make complaining noises before he fell back asleep, and Derek woke him later with breakfast. Stiles looked beautiful in the mornings, sleep-rumpled and yawning, his amber eyes bright in the sunlight.

Of course, he was no less beautiful at night: his pale skin almost silver in the moonlight, the faint glow of his tattoos when Derek touched them. Every time they came together, Derek felt he learned something new—something about himself, something about Stiles, all sorts of tiny things—and he thought he would never get enough of it.

They talked, too, cocooned under the blankets, in their own dark little world. Stiles talked a bit about his mother and far more often about his father and Scott. Derek couldn't bring himself to talk about his father again, not after that first night, but he talked about Laura and Cora some. Other times they said nothing, or Stiles teased him gently about silly things until Derek blushed, and brushed feather-light touches over Derek's skin.

It was quiet, intimate, and Derek could almost believe that they hadn't been thrown together because of an arrangement. Could almost let himself believe that Stiles had chosen him, that they'd chosen each other.

But in the harsh light of day, when Stiles was off with Scott or ensconced in the library with his books, and Derek was training with Isaac, Erica, and Boyd or immersing himself in sketches, that was when the doubt crept back in. Certainly, Stiles liked him, but this had not been his choice of marriage. He'd been dragged into it, and Derek feared that, given the choice, Stiles wouldn't want to be married to him at all.

And considering Prince Chris would soon be on the throne, the largest obstacle that had required their marriage had been cleared. Their arrangement was no longer necessary.

Sometimes, when Derek woke up first, even when he had Stiles mashed against his side or his nose buried in the back of Stiles's neck, a tiny voice in the back of his head whispered *He didn't want this. He didn't want you. And there's nothing to stop him from leaving.*

Derek tried his best to silence the voice, usually by sliding down to mouth at Stiles's cock, licking it until Stiles was hard and making needy gasps, hips bucking up toward Derek every time he took his mouth away.
He loved making Stiles come with just his mouth, loved the way he tasted, loved the way Stiles would thread fingers through Derek's hair, loved all the noises Stiles made. He loved the way Stiles looked at him after, dazed and sleepy and with a smile like the sunrise.

*I'm falling in love with you,* Derek wanted to say. *I want to make you happy. I want you to stay with me.*

But he couldn't make any of the words come out, so he told Stiles with his hands and mouth and body, and prayed it would be enough.

***

Nearly two weeks after the messenger, Derek's family arrived. He told himself repeatedly not to go running the moment he saw his sisters, but that lasted until Cora stepped out of the carriage and her eyes landed on him. In a flash of black gown and dark hair, she was across the courtyard and leaping into his arms, and well, he had no choice but to catch her.

"Missed you," she said into his neck.

Derek hid his smile in her hair and breathed in the scent of sister-family-pack. "Missed you, too."

Cora loosened her grip on him, and Derek let her slide to the ground. She wrinkled her nose. "You smell different."

"That's because he's married, little sister." Laura sauntered up with a wicked grin and pecked Derek's cheek. "Rather happily, by the smell of it."

Somehow, Derek had managed to forget Laura's innate ability to embarrass him in fifteen words or less. His ears felt as though they might incinerate his hair at any moment. "Laura."

She beamed, pale eyes sparkling, and winked at him. "Oh, I've not seen you in weeks. Allow me some fun at my brother's expense. Besides, I'm happy you're happy." She tilted her head toward Stiles, who was greeting Mother. "That means I needn't deliver a fanged talking-to to anyone."

Derek wished for a wall to beat his head against. "Laura," he said again, with half a groan.

That just made her smile wider. "I've seen you all of two minutes and your only word has been my name, said exasperatedly. I'm so glad I haven't lost my touch."

Derek scowled, more because he knew she expected it of him than because of any irritation. Well, there was a little irritation. "I've missed you as well."

The slight smugness in her smile melted into something more genuine, and Laura hugged him. "You are happy, aren't you?"

Involuntarily, his gaze slid back over to Stiles, who was looking right back at him with an impossibly fond expression. Derek felt his own face do something stupid and soft in return.

Laura chuckled. "Well, that answers that question."

"He didn't say anything," Cora pointed out.

"He didn't need to."

Derek jerked his attention back to his sisters. "Perhaps we should get you two settled, and then we can find a topic of conversation that isn't my marriage."
Laura linked her arm with his. "Oh, but it's such a fun one."

He ignored the comment and led his sisters out of the warm afternoon sun and into the slightly cooler air of the palace. Derek supposed a servant ought to be showing them to the room, but he knew where it was. Besides, it gave him the opportunity to spend a little more time with Laura and Cora. "So how was the journey? Uneventful, I hope."

Cora jerked her head back to him, away from where she'd been craning it to look at the chandeliers and the tapestries. "Boring. And long. We weren't accosted by anyone."

He'd been grateful enough to see them all in the courtyard, but Derek felt an inner knot loosen at the knowledge nothing had tried to hurt them on the way. "And as your older brother, I'll be grateful for that."

"Jason was nigh insufferable." Laura rolled her eyes. "Complaining about every little thing, honestly. I half-devised a plan to hamstring him and leave him in the middle of the woods."

Derek stumbled. "He came?"

"Jason didn't send a letter," Derek said. "I assumed he'd decided to just send Mother to act as diplomat." Because she's much better at it than he is.

"Peter and Jason both insisted on coming," Cora said. "Jason said he wished to meet with His Majesty King Chris in person to discuss 'the absolute travesty' and Mother agreed that it was a good idea, and Peter just said he wanted to give the couple his warmest felicitations. His heartbeat was steady but I think he was lying, anyway."

Recalling Peter's definition of "warm" felicitations made Derek want to put his fist through a wall. "I don't recall you being present for that conversation, Cora," Laura said. "In fact, I seem to recall Mother specifically requesting that you not be anywhere within earshot."

Cora blinked her giant brown eyes innocently. "How strange. I recall nothing of the sort."

They reached the wing where their family would be staying, on the floor right beneath the McCalls. Derek ushered them both into the room and did not think about how close his sisters were to the room he shared with Stiles. "How did Jason react when he learned about the 'absolute travesty'?" he asked instead.

"What is the absolute travesty?" Cora asked.

"You're too young," Laura said dismissively.

Cora made a face completely unbecoming of a princess and a hand gesture Derek was certain she hadn't known when he left.

"We'll talk about it later," he said hurriedly, and turned his attention back to Laura. "Well?"

Laura shrugged and tugged off her gloves, tossing them onto a desk next to an armoire. "About as well as you'd expect. Disbelief, and then anger, followed by how he can use it to wring an outstandingly beneficial agreement out of King Chris."

Unbidden, Derek remembered Jason's insults from that first lunch where he and Stiles had met. He
still wanted to punch his brother in the face for it. "Well, that will please him. All he's wanted is a new treaty with the Argents."

"From what I hear, they're meeting this afternoon, though Mother is insisting King Scott and Queen Melissa be present as well." Laura snorted. "As if that might make Jason behave."

Derek nodded. That wasn't a meeting he'd be allowed to attend, but he would most definitely be speaking with Jason after it.

There were at least two questions he needed answered.

***

Later that afternoon, Derek waited in the hallway outside the king's study, the very same one he'd been trapped in with Scott just a few weeks before. The doors had been repaired remarkably quickly, and now Prince Chris—no, King Chris, now—was meeting with Mother, Jason, Scott, and Queen Melissa.

Derek had tried to listen in at first, but King Gerard had apparently done something to mute the room to werewolf hearing. Derek told himself he shouldn't be surprised.

He wasn't entirely sure how long he'd been waiting when the door finally opened and Jason strode out. He gave a cursory glance at Derek and walked faster.

_Oh, no, you don't._ Derek stalked down the hall, not willing to let Jason get away, not now, when he had the chance to ask the question biting at the tip of his tongue.

"Did you know?" he demanded.

Jason stopped with the barest flinch of his shoulders. Derek might have missed it, had he not been looking.

"Did I know what?" Jason asked.

Rage burned under his skin, and it was all Derek could do not to strike out at his brother then and there. He clenched his fists to keep his claws from emerging. "Don't," he growled. "Don't you dare pretend you don't know what I mean." He took a step forward. "Did you know what Kate and Gerard intended to do to me? What they did do to our people?"

_Did you wish to renegotiate with them, knowing full well what would happen to me if you did?_

"No," Jason said harshly. "God, Derek, of course I had no idea. Do you really think I could do that?"

A month ago, Derek would have said no. Now, he couldn't stop thinking about how vehemently Jason had objected to the treaty with the McCalls in the first place, how Derek really wasn't sure what his brother was capable of, given proper motivation. "Then why were you so opposed to our arrangement with the McCalls?"

"For God's sake, this again?" Jason rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "I told you, I felt it had a far higher risk of making things worse rather than better. I didn't believe it was a good idea."

Now Derek felt the pinpricks of his claws against his palms. "You were insulting King Scott's brother. That was a bit much for something you simply didn't believe to be 'a good idea.'"
Jason scoffed. "Forgive me for thinking my brother could do better than a bastard second son."

Derek's vision bled blue, and then next thing he knew, he was standing only inches away from Jason and snarling. Only sheer force of will kept him from putting his claws to his brother's throat. "You want to rethink that statement."

"Hm." Jason only raised his eyebrows, an action so reminiscent of Peter that it made Derek sick. "Perhaps I was mistaken on that account."

Derek forced himself to breathe evenly, to keep his hands at his sides. "The arrangement was good enough for Mother. Why wasn't it good enough for you? Did you just have to make your decision because it was your reign, when Father was hardly cold in the ground?"

A muscle in Jason's jaw twitched. "I don't owe you an explanation."

"The hell you don't," Derek snapped. "After the way you treated my husband, after everything that happened here, I think an explanation of what the hell you were thinking is the least you owe me."

"Fine. Mother was making an emotional decision." Jason drew out the word, as though he didn't think Derek would understand him otherwise. "Peter thought we would be better off with another treaty with the Argents, and I happened to agree."

Peter. Of course it was Peter's idea. Yet another surprise that shouldn't have been one.

"If I had had any idea what they actually wanted, I would never have pursued it," Jason continued. "Now, are we finished with this conversation?"

"Did Peter know?" Derek asked.

"No, he didn't. I don't see how he could have. Mother and Father were the only two who had any idea, and they certainly didn't see fit to share it with any of us." Jason snapped his angry gaze back to Derek. "Was there anything else you'd like to demand, brother?"

There was only one more thing. "Did you tell them where we were?"

Jason actually looked confused. "Tell who what?"

"The Argents." Derek didn't hiss the word, but it was close. "Did you tell them where Father and I were going to be?"

Jason's confusion dropped into a furious glower, and he bared his fangs. "How dare you. First you accuse me of sending you into torture, now this? Is that what you truly think of me?"

I don't want to, Derek wanted to say. "Did you?" he repeated.

"No," Jason growled. "No, I didn't, and no, I would never. He was my father too, you know."

For just a fraction of a second, Derek saw the grief in Jason's face, before anger sealed it off once again. "Now, are we finished?" Jason said.

Derek wanted to say no. He wanted to ask Jason where they had gone wrong, what had happened to make them barely more than hostile allies, and then only because of the bond of family and pack.

Instead, he stepped back and shook his head, and Jason stalked away without looking back.

***
"You don't look happy," Stiles said as he and Derek were getting ready for dinner.

Derek just grunted and fumbled with the buttons of his waistcoat, his expression still stormy, though now it likely had something to with his clothing.

Stiles slid up next to him and replaced Derek's fingers with his own, buttoning up the waistcoat swiftly. "I must say, I'm not all that keen to be putting clothes on you."

Derek just shook his head and clasped Stiles's hands. "I'm fine."

_That_ was a lie, and Stiles didn't need to be a wolf to hear it. The last time he'd seen Derek, he'd been smiling, talking with his sisters, content. Now... Stiles wasn't sure what had happened, but it had left Derek with a deep crease between his brows and a bitter frown. Stiles resisted the urge to extract his fingers and try to rub it away. "Is there anything I can do?"

Another head shake, and a deeper frown. "How did you and Scott become friends?"

An odd change of subject, but Stiles went with it. "We grew up together. By the time His Late Majesty realized how close we'd become and tried to squash it, we were already twelve years old and nigh inseparable. It was the first time I ever saw Scott stand up to him."

"Did you ever resent it?" Derek asked quietly. "That he was heir and not you?"

Stiles felt his eyebrows climb to his hairline, and he snorted a laugh before he could keep a louder one from escaping. "No. No. God no. I'd be terrible in Scott's position. We work far better where we are." He took a bit of a shot in the dark. "Did Jason say something to you?"

Derek's face darkened a fraction, and then he kissed Stiles's forehead. "Nothing of importance."

Stiles shivered at the kiss and the warm feelings curling in his chest. "It's not 'nothing' if it's making you sad."

"I'm fine, Stiles," Derek said again, this time with fond exasperation in his voice, and tugged him in for a kiss.

Stiles returned it for everything he was worth, and wished he could believe what Derek was saying. He pulled back to leave, but Derek squeezed his hands, keeping him close. "Stiles."

"What?"

Derek hesitated, still frowning like he was thinking something over. Finally, his face smoothed. "I think I need your help."
For the second time that day, Derek waited for a family member, but this time it was in a room, rather than a hallway. And he had a sinking feeling this conversation would not go nearly as well as the one with Jason.

Derek hoped he was wrong, prayed for it with every fiber of his being, but the nausea burning in his stomach told him it was unlikely.

The opening door cast a beam of light from the hallway into the dim room, and Peter walked in. He ignored where Derek sat at the desk and walked straight to a small table with a decanter of whiskey, and poured a glass.

Derek knew better than to hope Peter hadn't seen him. He'd probably known Derek was there before he'd even opened the door.

Peter took a sip of his whiskey and hummed. "Care for a drink, nephew?"

No, Derek wanted to say. I want to know why you betrayed us. But his throat tightened, and he couldn't make the words come out.

"I'll take your silence as a 'no,' then." Peter sauntered over to the fireplace and rested his hand on the mantle. "What are you doing here, brooding in the dark?"

Derek's throat finally unstuck itself. "I could ask you the same thing."

"What I'm doing here?" Peter held up his glass. "Why, I'm having a drink."

"At this palace," Derek clarified, though he was positive Peter had known what he meant. "Why did you come?"

Peter smirked. "To give my best wishes to the happy couple, of course. And I did miss our scintillating conversations."

Derek didn't believe that for a moment. He glared across the room, wishing he had the ability to set things on fire the way Stiles did.

"See?" Peter gestured with his glass. "I provide the commentary, you provide the dark looks. Scintillating."

His fingers itched with the desire to shift, to bury claws as deep as they would go in Peter's throat. Instead, Derek took a deep breath and traced a small circle on top of the desk with his human nail. "I've spent weeks trying to understand how the Argents' men knew where to find us. It wasn't something I thought of much at first, but I keep coming back around to it. I assumed Prince Chris had to know something, but he insisted he wasn't involved, and funnily enough, he wasn't lying. And he couldn't have known where we were. In fact, no one knew where we were supposed to be; no one even knew we were leaving the castle... except for Mother, Jason, and you."

"Fascinating," Peter said dryly. "I assume you have a point somewhere in there?"

"Jason said you were the one encouraging him to seek a new treaty with the Argents, rather than our arrangement with the Mc Calls."
Peter tapped his free hand along the mantelpiece. "It's what I do, nephew. I'm an advisor. I advise."

"You also apparently go on a number of trips," Derek said, "or at least you did in the months after negotiations broke down. I didn't think much of it; after all, I was away just as much. But in talking with Allison, it seems your trips coincided with several Kate took at the same time."

Peter's smirk turned nasty. "You think I was conspiring with Her Highness against my own family? That's quite an accusation. What possible motive could I have for treason?"

This was the part he hadn't figured out well yet, but Derek took a deep breath and forged ahead anyway. "I've been thinking about that."

"A dangerous pastime," Peter said mildly. "Could get you hurt."

Derek growled and gave into the urge to dig his claws into the desk. "They offered to help you become Alpha, didn't they?"

Peter met Derek's gaze without flinching, and took another drink. "Interesting theory. How did you come up with that one?"

"No need for you to be king, you've had Jason practically eating out of the palm of your hand for years," Derek said. "All you would have to do is ensure he was on the throne and it would be the same thing. But Alpha... you'd have to take on Mother for that, and that would be impossible unless you had some kind of help. And even an Alpha werewolf would have trouble against a kanima."

Peter scoffed. "And even a kanima would hesitate to attack an established Alpha. I'm beginning to think you've spent too much time around that husband of yours. What could I possibly offer to Princess Kate to make her willing to go after an Alpha werewolf?"

Derek swallowed and pushed himself up from the desk. "I never said Kate was the kanima."

If he had been a slightly more vindictive person, the split-second flash of disbelief on Peter's face might have felt like a triumph. As it was, it just added to the twisting pain in his gut.

Peter waved away the comment with his glass and took another drink. "Of course you did. It was in your letter."

For the first time in the conversation, Peter didn't have a response. He just met Derek's gaze with an acidic glare of his own.

"Was it you?" Derek demanded. "Did you tell the Argents where we were going to be? Did you set up that ambush?" Did your plotting kill my father?

The silence hung in the air, heavy with the accusations and heavier with Peter's lack of denial.

"Well." Peter finished off his drink in one smooth swallow. "What do you intend to do now? Or, like always, did you neglect to think that far ahead?"

Derek stiffened. He wasn't entirely certain how he'd pictured this going... after. He'd had the vague hope that Peter would just confess and ask for forgiveness.

Peter's oily smirk was back. "I feel I should point out, dear nephew, that you have not one shred of..."
proof for anything you've just said. It would be your word against mine."

Of course, that was when the realization dawned on Derek. "That's why you're here. Kate has the proof, doesn't she? You came to ensure it was either destroyed or buried."

Peter shrugged. "And I've already handled it. As for you..."

Derek was painfully aware that it was just the two of them in the room. Peter might not have been a soldier and usually preferred manipulation to physical tactics, but that didn't mean he couldn't fight. Derek had seen it firsthand.

"I suppose you could kill me, if you wanted to," Peter said thoughtfully. "Though considering how close you've come to being accused of murder in the past few weeks, that's probably not the best idea. And killing you would just be messy. So," he clapped one hand on Derek's shoulder, uncomfortably hard, "what do you say we just forget we had this entire conversation?"

Derek's skin crawled, and he resisted the urge to jerk away. "So you get away with treason."

"Well, naturally, that is the point," Peter said. "But look on the bright side. I didn't get away with the entire plan, being as that your dear mother is, in fact, still Alpha."

Derek did jerk away then, but Peter dug his fingers in deeper. "And what if I don't agree to just forget all of this?"

"Leaving aside the aforementioned problem of your lack of proof," Peter bared his fangs, "then I feel I should remind you that your newly extended family contains a veritable plethora of very... delicate humans."

Blue shot into the edges of Derek's vision, and absolute rage clogged his lungs. He didn't care what happened to him next; he was going to kill Peter.

Wood splintered with a crack that echoed through the room. A red-orange flame licked the length of Peter's face, close enough Derek felt the heat of it. Peter roared in pain, and Derek pushed him away and stumbled back from the fire.

Across the room, a door hung off its hinges, and Stiles stood there, one hand raised with tiny orange sparks hopping around his fingers.

Next to him, Mother stepped into the room, her face half-shifted and eyes blazing as red as Derek had ever seen them. By the time he'd blinked twice, she was standing next to Peter, one clawed hand around his throat.

Stiles spun the sparks around his fingers and took another step into the room. "I believe you were saying something about delicate humans?"

"Prince Stiles," Mother said in a mild voice that actually meant be quiet. "Would you kindly open the door and call for the guards?"

Stiles extinguished the sparks around his hand and strode to the main door. Light spilled into the room and within moments, five guards were waiting with a pair of manacles that must have been treated with wolfsbane, given the sickeningly sweet smell of them.

Peter chuckled. "Turning me over to the hunters, sister dear?"

"You just admitted to treason in front of three witnesses," Mother said. "At the moment, turning
The guards bound Peter's hands and feet, and Mother finally stepped away. "Now, you'll stay in the dungeon until such time as you can be tried for your crime."

"Oh, I imagine that trial will be entirely unnecessary," Peter said.

Mother merely flicked her hand toward the guards. "Take him away."

The guards left, Peter in tow, and Derek found himself blinking at the empty doorway. His legs started to shake. Derek groped behind him and found something solid, and promptly sank onto it.

Mother touched his cheek, making him look up at her. "I assume I don't have to tell you how foolish it was for you to confront him yourself?"

Derek shook his head.

"Good," she said, and kissed his forehead, like he was a child instead of one-and-twenty. "I have no wish to lose you as well," she whispered, low enough that only Derek could hear it.

He looked up at her, the realization hitting him like a mule's kick. Derek had lost his father, but his mother had lost her husband, had been holding herself together for her family and her country, and now knew that her own brother had betrayed them.

She swept out of the room before Derek could say a word. He just stared down at his quivering hands, hanging between his knees. Too many unfamiliar, overwhelming feelings warred in his chest, tightening his throat so that he couldn't utter a word.

"Derek," Stiles said softly.

Derek heard him come closer, smelled the cold forest scent of him, and then long fingers tentatively brushed the back of his neck, scratching up into his hair. It was nothing to lean forward, to press his face into Stiles's stomach and inhale. Derek clenched his fists in Stiles's shirt, holding him as close as possible, and Stiles continued to pet him.

"Thank you," Derek finally managed when his throat loosened enough to speak.

Stiles trailed a hand down the back of Derek's neck and squeezed, just enough that Derek felt anchored. "Let's go to bed, husband."

***

"Going to bed" turned out to be actually going to bed. Derek had expected Stiles to kiss him and touch him until they were both hard and aching. Instead, Stiles had a bath drawn and undressed them both. His eyes didn't linger, but his touches did, in a way that made Derek feel cared-for and precious rather than desired. Stiles did kiss him, but it was soft and chaste, the barest press of their lips together.

He pushed Derek into the tub and wriggled in behind him, arranging their bodies and limbs until Derek was curled up against his chest and Stiles had one leg hanging over the edge.

Derek had his arms wrapped around his own legs, doing his best to make himself into the smallest ball possible, as if he could somehow protect himself, pull himself back together by doing so.

Stiles said nothing, seemed to understand Derek was too deep in his own thoughts, and just
hummed a vaguely familiar tune and rubbed absent circles over Derek's back.

It wasn't until they were drying off—or rather, that Stiles was drying them off—that Derek recognized the tune as the one Stiles had sung to him after that disastrous first encounter with Kate.

Once they were in bed, Stiles gave him another chaste kiss before lying down and letting Derek nuzzle into his chest.

Derek lay there half-awake long after Stiles's heartbeat had slowed and his breathing had evened out. He felt scraped raw, like he'd been beaten and dragged for miles, and his mind spun uselessly as he tried to understand how Peter could have betrayed their family. Yes, he was a prat and he and Derek had never really gotten along, but Derek had never thought he'd be capable of something like this.

And some secret part of Derek wished he'd never asked, wished he'd just pushed the niggling questions away.

No. He wouldn't think about that. That way laid madness. What was done was done, and Derek couldn't take back any of it.

He just wished he could make himself stop thinking long enough to rest, but his mind seemed determined to run in circles and dead ends until his head ached and his body itched with restlessness.

A hand carded through his hair. "Derek?" Stiles mumbled, voice thick with sleep. "You awake?"

Derek leaned into the touch, whimpered at how good it felt. Everything else was complicated, but this... this was simple, this was good, this was—

Before he could think any more about it, Derek pushed himself up to kiss Stiles, sealing his mouth over those soft, sleepy lips. Stiles grunted and opened his mouth easily, and Derek just... took. He slid his tongue against Stiles's, tasting sleep and the faint sweetness of wine, an intoxicating combination. He sought more, wanted more, wanted everything Stiles would give him.

Stiles moaned and tugged on Derek's hair, sending a prickling cascade of pleasure down the back of his neck, all the way down his spine. He dropped one hand to Stiles's hip, pulled up so he could rock them together. Stiles gasped and Derek swallowed it down, taking every little noise Stiles made between them.

"Wait." Stiles pulled back, eyes searching Derek's. "We don't have to—if you're not—"

"I want you to fuck me," Derek said.

Stiles's eyes widened, his pretty mouth parting, and his hips bucked up against Derek's.

Derek leaned over and kissed Stiles's neck, biting gently over the mark there. "Please," he whispered, and dragged his lips down to nip at Stiles's collarbone. "Please," he said again, pressing the word into Stiles's sleep-warm skin.

He couldn't explain more than that. He wanted this, where it was just the two of them, where the rest of the world didn't matter, where he didn't have to think of anything but Stiles and how they fit.

Derek traced his fingers over Stiles's chest, following the interweaving tattoos. He brushed his thumb over a nipple and hid his smile at Stiles's sharp inhale.
"God, Derek," Stiles said, and then he was pushing up, pushing Derek over to kiss him, hard and hot. "You're sure?"

"Yes. Stiles, please."

Stiles pressed his face into Derek's neck and groaned. "All right. Yes. God, I'm going to come just thinking about it. What do we need? What do you need?"

You, Derek thought, but didn't say it aloud. He made himself roll away from Stiles and off the bed. "I have oil, hold on."

He found the bottle, tucked within the confines of one of his trunks, and crawled back onto the bed. Tiny shivers ran through his whole body, nerves and anticipation making his fingers tremble.

He uncapped the oil and slicked up his fingers, then knelt on the bed, knees spread, and closed his eyes. He'd only done this a few times, never with more than two fingers, and the idea of fitting Stiles's glorious cock inside his body was alternately terrifying and exciting. But he wanted this, wanted to give this to Stiles, wanted Stiles inside him and over him and everywhere he could be.

Derek reached back, rubbed one slick finger around his hole, and his cock jumped at the sensation. He took a deep breath, relaxed, and let his finger slide inside. The shock of the breach made his ass clutch, as it always did, and the faint stretch and burn made him grunt.

Stiles let out a harsh breath. "Fuck."

Derek opened his eyes and saw Stiles stroking his own cock lazily, heavy-lidded eyes fixed on the point where Derek's finger disappeared into his body.

"You're gorgeous," Stiles said, his voice only a fraction less intense than his gaze.

It sent another shiver through Derek, and saw Stiles stroking his own cock lazily, heavy-lidded eyes fixed on the point where Derek's finger disappeared into his body.

"You're gorgeous," Stiles said, his voice only a fraction less intense than his gaze.

It sent another shiver through Derek, and his finger slid in deeper. Now the burn started to fade from pain into something more pleasurable, and he pushed his finger in and out, stretching himself for Stiles. The knowledge that Stiles was watching him, that Stiles was as aroused as Derek was, made him even harder.

Stiles bit his lip and pushed down on the base of his cock, which was dark with blood against his pale skin. "Can you do two?"

Derek couldn't begin to speak, so he just nodded and pushed a second finger in. It was sooner than he should have, the stretch of it painful. He dropped his head forward and breathed through it, fucking himself on his fingers. The spicy scent of arousal, his and Stiles's both, filled his nose, and Derek drew it into him with each breath. His cock was hard and heavy, practically screaming for friction, but if he touched himself, Derek was positive he wouldn't last.

He twisted his fingers deeper and they brushed against the spot that made sparks jump across his body, nearly made him fall over, and Derek whimpered.

Stiles cursed and sat up, sliding one hand up Derek's arm and the other around to his ass, squeezing it gently before dipping his fingers into the crease, rubbing against Derek's fingers and his stretched hole. That someone else was touching him—that Stiles was touching him there—was almost more than Derek could bear, and he let his head fall forward to rest on Stiles's shoulder.

Stiles pressed down, and the jolt of pleasure had Derek pushing back against it, all nerves forgotten.
"You ready for me?" Stiles asked, lips brushing the top of Derek's ear even as his fingers continued their sweet, slow pressure.

He didn't think he'd ever been so ready for something in his life. He nodded.

"All right." Stiles squeezed his ass again and kissed his ear. "On your back, then. I want to see you. God, I want to see you."

Derek nodded again and lay down, extricating his fingers as he did. Stiles scrambled in between Derek's legs, then grabbed the oil and spread it over his cock until it glistened. Derek's mouth practically watered, and he spread his legs, hips arching in an effort to get closer, to get Stiles inside him now.

Stiles must have noticed his impatience, because he laughed and smoothed his slick hands down Derek's sides. "Give me a moment. I'm savoring."

"Savor faster," Derek growled.

"That goes against the point of savoring," Stiles said, but he pushed the head of his cock against Derek's entrance.

It was larger than his fingers, definitely larger than his fingers, but God, Derek didn't care; he just wanted it inside him. "Stiles," he gasped out.

Stiles pressed harder, stretching him, and then let out a choked noise. "God, Derek, you feel so—fuck, tell me if it hurts, tell me—"

"It doesn't." Derek had no idea how he even managed those words. "Please, I want you—I need you—"

Stiles cursed and drew out of him, and Derek nearly cried, but then Stiles pushed back inside him, slowly, inch by glorious inch. Derek pulled his knees up, digging his heels into the bed, anything to spread himself more, anything that would help Stiles get inside him. It burned, it hurt, but he didn't care.

"Fuck," Stiles said, and put one hand on Derek's knee, pushing it up, and that was apparently all he needed to slide all the way in, the base of his cock flush against Derek's ass, enough so Derek could feel the scratching of the coarse hairs there.

He'd never felt so full in his life, or so perfectly grounded.

Then Stiles started thrusting, just little movements of his hips, and Derek's eyes rolled back at the skittering pleasure.

"Fuck," Stiles said again. "How's—"

"Good. Perfect. God, Stiles, fuck me, please."

That was apparently all the encouragement Stiles needed, because he drove himself inside Derek harder, and that, that was what Derek needed. Needed this sensation of being filled, being fucked, of Stiles plunging into him over and over again. There was more desperation to it than rhythm, but that was all right. Derek was desperate, too.

Then Stiles lunged up to grab Derek in a hungry kiss, and the movement hit him just right, hit him perfectly, so that Derek saw stars. His vision flickered blue and back again, and he made an
absolutely incoherent noise.

Stiles grinned against his mouth. "Felt good for you too, did it?"

And then he did it again. And again.

Derek grabbed at the sheets, twisting them in his hands, distantly heard them rip. It didn't matter. Nothing else mattered, except for Stiles's mouth and hands and hips and cock, his body hot and sweaty and slick against Derek's as they panted into each other's mouths, the scent of sex so strong Derek thought he'd never get enough of it. His cock ached where it was trapped between their bodies, beautiful friction there, but not enough, not—

He reached down to take himself in hand, but Stiles got there first, wrapped his lovely fingers around Derek's cock and stroked him so slowly Derek was fairly sure his mind melted.

"That's right," Stiles murmured. "Let me watch you come, Derek."

He wanted his release, but he didn't want this to end, but Stiles was still fucking him, watching him with eyes so dark with desire, mouth half-open and swollen from their kisses.

"Let me see you," Stiles said again.

That pushed him over the edge, and Derek came, his vision going fuzzy and blue, his whole body clenching around Stiles. The whole time, Stiles stroked him encouragingly, whispering soothing nonsense, until Derek was spent and sensitive.

Then Stiles pulled out and came all over Derek's chest, adding to the mess already there. The scent was overwhelming, and Derek dragged Stiles down to him into a punishing kiss, spreading their shared come over both their bodies.

When Derek finally let him go, Stiles chuckled breathlessly and kissed his chin. "That was... we should do that more. A lot more."

Derek nodded, because he agreed, but words wouldn't come. He wasn't even sure he could form a word that wasn't "Stiles." He wasn't sure he wanted to.

Stiles kissed him again, and then he stumbled out of bed just long enough to grab something off the floor before stumbling back to clean them both off. "I know you like how we smell," Stiles said, "but if we sleep like this, we'll be stuck together tomorrow morning and it'll hurt like hell pulling us apart. We might lose skin."

He smiled, and Derek's stupid heart plopped out of his chest and right into Stiles's hands.

Stiles curled up next to him, pillowed his head on Derek's outstretched arm, and dropped off to sleep faster than Derek would have thought possible. Derek could only look at him, eyelashes splayed against his pale cheeks, mouth half-open and stuck to the skin of Derek's arm.

_I love you, Derek wanted to say. You're perfect for me and I'm in love with you and I would give you anything you wanted if you asked._

But he bit his lip, held the words back, because it was too much. There was still a kernel of fear inside him that Stiles would ask to leave.

_And if you aren't willing to let him go, then is it really love?_
Derek closed his eyes against the sudden pain in his heart. After all, he already knew the answer to that question.

Stiles had been pulled into this situation because of Derek's mistakes. And then he'd made gifts, and given Derek space when he asked for it, and didn't kiss him until he asked for it. He'd fought by Derek's side and trusted him to keep Scott safe, helped Derek confront Peter. He'd been compassionate and funny and kind and fiercely, blessedly loyal.

He deserved better. He deserved a choice.

And Derek could give it to him.
"Stiles!"

Stiles bent his head over the library table and steadfastly ignored Scott's voice in favor of perusing the books and making notes. Just ten more minutes with this one, which was a more detailed family history of the Argents, and then he would let himself take a break and go back to the book that had very, very detailed sexual positions.

Granted, the positions were mostly men and women, but he had a feeling he and Derek could make the necessary modifications.

The early afternoon sun poured through the wide window over Stiles's back, pleasantly warm, and he was alone in the library but for Lydia and Allison, who were quietly conversing on the other side of the magnificent room while Lydia worked on needlepoint and Allison fletched a quiver of arrows. It was a peaceful scenario, one Stiles had come to enjoy over the past couple of weeks, and he would cheerfully murder his brother if he ruined this oasis of tranquility.

"Stiles!" Scott's voice was closer, this time.

Stiles flipped to the next page. "I don't care, Scott."

"But—"

Stiles didn't bother looking up. "Have Peter and Kate escaped the dungeons?"

"No." Scott sounded confused.

"Has Gerard managed to resurrect himself from his beheading?"

"Of course not!"

"Are any of our family members grievously injured, or otherwise close to death?"

"No, but—"

"Then I. Don't. Care," Stiles repeated firmly. "You said you had no need of me after lunch, I said I would be in the library until it was time to dress for dinner, and it is not yet time to dress for dinner. I have several thousand books to read and only a mere two weeks in which to do it. So, as you have informed me it is not an emergency, I do not care. Go help your betrothed fletch arrows."

"Derek asked for an annulment."

Stiles's heart stopped, and he spun to look at Scott, his arm smacking into the desk as he did and upsetting his inkwell. He grabbed it before it spilled onto his books and notes, blackening his fingers instead. "What?"

Scott handed him a handkerchief, and Stiles wiped his shaking hands.

"Derek asked to speak to his mother and me after lunch," Scott said, a little breathless, as if he'd been running. "He asked his mother if she was still willing to treat with King Chris, and she said yes, and then he asked if our treaty would still be valid without the marriage, and I said yes, and then he said our arrangement was unnecessary and he asked if we would grant an annulment."
The entire world tilted, and Stiles felt off-kilter, as if he'd stepped wrong somewhere and now he was falling. Derek wanted an annulment. Derek didn't want to be married to him anymore. Why didn't Derek want to be married to him anymore?

"Did he say why?" Stiles finally asked.

Scott shook his head. "That's why I came to see you! I thought you two were getting along."

"So did I," Stiles said weakly.

Apparently, he'd been wrong. Apparently, last night hadn't been about their relationship or trust or comfort or love. Instead, it was... what? Derek's way of saying good-bye?

"Stiles?" Scott sounded concerned, now. "Are you all right?"

"You just told me my husband no longer wants to be married to me; what do you think?" Stiles spat.

"I believe he went back to his room," Scott said. "If you wanted to ask him why."

Yes. That sounded like a fantastic idea. Stiles stomped toward the doorway. "If I kill my husband, I'm counting on you to help me prove it was justified."

Scott's soft "Oh dear" was the last thing Stiles heard before he left the library.

***

The distance from the library to Derek's chambers was not a terribly long one. It was, however, long enough for Stiles to move past his shock and well and truly into mind-wiping, eye-blurring anger.

Why the hell couldn't Derek have come to him first? They could have talked about this, could have figured it out. They could make it work. But no, apparently Derek didn't want to talk to him, never wanted to actually talk to him, not when it was about anything important.

They had been doing so goddamn well over the past few weeks, too. There had been talking, and teasing, and sex—so much wonderful sex—and Stiles had thought maybe, just maybe, with the threats gone, they would have an actual chance at being married, being together, and possibly even being in love.

Apparently he'd been bloody wrong on that account as well.

He reached Derek's door and slammed it open so hard the knob likely cracked the plaster. Derek jumped up from his desk, eyes wide, staring at Stiles like he wasn't entirely sure what was happening.

"What in the bloody fucking hell do you mean, you want an annulment?" Stiles demanded.

Derek's jaw dropped, but Stiles barreled on, the first question having unleashed every thought that had been bottling up in his mind since Scott had told him. "Did I do something to upset you? Did I, at some point during the many deep and meaningful conversations I thought we were having, actually insult you to the point that you no longer want to be around me? Was last night you telling me good-bye?"

Derek took a step forward. "God, no. Stiles—"
Stiles's chest squeezed, like a giant fist was crushing him, and he had to force the next words out. "Did you think you couldn't talk to me about it? You had to go to my brother first?"

"I didn't go to your brother; I went to your king," Derek said. "I was going to talk to you about it tonight, I swear, I just had to know if it was a possibility first."

"A possibility?" The fist around his chest squeezed harder. "Why the hell would you want to know about a God-forsaken possibility like that? What did I do?"

Derek crossed the room in two steps, steadied Stiles with one hand on his elbow and another on his shoulder. "Nothing, Stiles, you didn't do anything. I just didn't want to get your hopes up."

All his thoughts crashed together, spinning like the wheels of an overturned cart, and Stiles could only stare at Derek. "My hopes?" he repeated, when he found his voice again. "I'm sorry, what about my current reaction makes you think this has anything to do with my hopes?"

"Because you didn't get a choice."

Stiles was back to staring again, because no. He didn't understand. Derek was speaking words, but none of them made sense all strung together.

Derek let go of him and stepped back, giving him space. "When we first met, you said this," he gestured between them, "wasn't what you pictured for yourself. You were supposed to marry for love, not politics. You were supposed to have a choice." Derek stepped back over to his desk, started fiddling with the papers there. "You should have that choice."

Once again, Stiles felt as though the world had gone off, and he couldn't quite find solid ground. He remembered that conversation, yes, but he hadn't thought about it in weeks. It seemed so far away, such a tiny thing, but Derek had remembered.

"Is that what you want?" Stiles asked, and he didn't even recognize his own voice, it sounded so small.

Derek looked up at him, brow furrowed, perplexed. "What?"

"An annulment." Stiles cleared his throat. "Is that what you want?"

"I want what's best for you." Derek's gaze went back to the papers. "I want what you want. That's all."

"No." Stiles shook his head and forced his voice to be louder. "No, you don't get to do that. You don't get to turn it around on me. What do you want, Derek? Do you want an annulment? Do you want to be free of me? Is that it?"

Derek sighed. "Stiles—"

No. Stiles wasn't stopping until he got a damn answer. "What do you want?"

"You want to know what I want?" Derek dropped the papers back onto his desk and turned to face Stiles fully, his face uncharacteristically open. "I want you. I want to wake up next to you in the mornings and fall asleep next to you every night. I want to see you smile, hear you laugh every single day."

Stiles couldn't move, couldn't really breathe. He didn't know what was more shocking: what Derek was saying or the fact that he was using more than six words to speak about his feelings.
Derek crossed the distance between them, and took Stiles's hands in his. Stiles could feel him shaking.

"I want to comfort you when you're sad, take care of you when you're hurt. I want to be annoyed when you steal the covers or spend the night in the library because you forgot to stop reading. I want to argue with you until we're both hoarse." Derek touched his forehead to Stiles's. "But more than anything, I want you to be happy. I don't ever want you to feel trapped with me. I want you to have a choice. That's why I asked about the annulment, so I could let you go, if you wanted it. Because I love you."

He hurt. His throat was sore, so tight he thought he would choke with it, and his heart had swelled so much Stiles was certain his chest would burst. Every inch of him buzzed and his eyes burned with tears he refused to let fall. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a shuddering breath.

Were good things supposed to hurt like this?

Derek gently kissed his forehead. "Stiles—"

"I want kisses." Stiles refused to feel embarrassed at how shaky his voice sounded.

Derek pulled back, forehead creased in confusion. "Kisses?"

Stiles nodded firmly. "Yes. Lots of them. At least three a day to make up for the ones you withheld from me at the beginning of our marriage. And they had better be good ones, or I'll sue you. Breach of contract."

Derek's face softened into a smile, and he brushed his thumb across Stiles's cheek. "More kisses. Understood. What else do you want?"

"No separate chambers. We're sharing a bed from now on." Stiles took another unsteady breath. "And absolutely, positively no affairs. Sneak around behind my back and I'll have a brand-new wolfskin rug for my chambers."

Derek chuckled. "Fair enough."

"And I want... I want... bruises and bites and marks all over me." Stiles waved a hand up and down his body. "Unless one of us is deathly ill, I want everyone to know that..." And then his throat did close up and he couldn't speak any more.

But apparently it wasn't entirely necessary, because Derek tugged him into a tight embrace. Stiles buried his face in Derek's neck and fastened his arms around him, anchoring them together. For some reason, it made him feel more like crying instead of less.

"And I want you, too," he whispered into Derek's neck. "I don't want a bloody annulment. I want this. With you. I love you."

Derek held him tighter, and Stiles felt the curve of a smile against his neck. Then, Derek hoisted him up and dropped them both onto the bed, caging Stiles to the mattress with his arms.

"What are you—"

And Derek kissed him, deep and long, licking into his mouth, and every thought in Stiles's mind vanished like a wisp of smoke except for more. He opened his mouth wider, letting Derek in, arching his whole body into the kiss. The tightness in his body loosened finally, and he melted away under Derek's touch.
Derek nipped his lower lip and sucked lightly at Stiles's neck. "One down, two to go."

***

Stiles lost count twenty-seven kisses and two messy orgasms later.
After one unexpected marriage, one unexpected kanima, a funeral, a coronation, and several expected (and unexpected) werewolves, His Royal Majesty King Scott McCall and Her Royal Highness Princess Allison Argent finally wed.

At King Chris's decree, mourning had been suspended for two days in order to properly celebrate.

"Victoria would have wanted her daughter to dance," he'd said, and Allison had smiled tremulously before embracing her father in front of the entire assembled court.

Now, Derek watched her spin across the ballroom in Scott's arms, the two of them shining like a white beacon amid the crowd. Even from his distance, Derek had no trouble making out the giant smiles they both wore.

It was good. They deserved some happiness, after everything that had happened.

Instinctively, Derek scanned the ballroom again, looking for his pack. It didn't take him long to spot Boyd and Erica on the ballroom floor, Boyd holding Erica as if he were never letting her go. It took him a little longer to find Isaac, dancing with Cora. Laura was across the room, pestering Jason unmercifully, judging by the glower on his face. And his mother was at the head table, deep in conversation with King Chris.

It eased some bit of tension he hadn't known he was carrying to see them all together and know they were all safe. It wouldn't last forever, but right now, it was enough.

He smelled Stiles before he saw him, and Derek ducked his head to hide the smile spreading across his face. Stiles sidled up beside him with two goblets of champagne and winked. "You look thirsty, husband."

"And you've come to fix that?" Derek asked, accepting one of the glasses.

Stiles raised his glass and tapped it against Derek's. "It's my husbandly duty to ensure you never want for anything."

Derek took a sip of champagne and covered his smile with the glass. "You're ridiculous."

"You still love me," Stiles said.

Derek's whole body warmed at the thought. "Yes, I do."

Stiles's smile changed from slightly suggestive to one that nearly split his face. "You should dance with me."

"Dance?" Derek repeated.

"Yes." Stiles polished off his drink and set it aside. "Dance. We didn't have the chance at our wedding, so we should do it now."

Dancing with Stiles because he wanted to, not because they were in the midst of an argument. He was more than fine with that idea.
Derek grabbed Stiles's goblet and set both aside, then let Stiles pull him onto the dance floor and swing them into a waltz. He was not terribly surprised that Stiles wanted to lead.

"You're so pushy," Derek teased.

"Oh, so you'd rather not dance? Shall we go stand by the wall again?" Stiles wiggled his eyebrows. "Perhaps find a dark corner where we can kiss until someone spots us?"

Derek rolled his eyes, but had a feeling Stiles could see the blush he felt rising on his face. "With my luck, it would be my mother. Or your father." He looked up and spotted Captain Stilinski dancing with Queen Melissa, both of them with smiles and adoring gazes to rival Scott and Allison. "Oh. Well, maybe not your father."

"What?" Stiles swung them around, and his eyes widened and he actually squeaked. "We have to find Scott. He has to see this."

Derek chuckled. "I'm sure your brother will be fine if you tell him all about it tomorrow."

"But you don't understand. We've spent a year trying to get them together. A year," Stiles repeated. "And that's after the previous two years of watching them pine from afar."

"Lydia was right; you two are like gossipy old ladies."

Stiles pinched him. "We are not. And where is Lydia, anyway? She ought to see this."

Derek searched the crowd and spotted Lady Lydia's resplendent dress just to their right. "Over there." He gestured with his chin. "Silver dress. Dancing with the... hm, I don't recognize him. Light brown hair, blue jacket, looks too pretty to be real?"

"You're too pretty to be real," Stiles said, and then he groaned. "Ugh. That's Whittemore."

Derek frowned. He'd not heard Stiles speak like that about anyone from his court thus far. "I thought I'd met everyone from the McCall court."

"He's not with us. He's from here, one of the minor lords in the area." Stiles rolled his eyes. "Allison introduced us. He's absolutely insufferable. I'm certain that if he met your brother, the resulting explosion of smugness would crush us all."

For the first time that evening, Derek felt a shadow on his heart. It was an ill-kept secret that Mother had been less than pleased with Jason after everything came to light with Peter. "I don't think Jason has much to be smug about, right now."

Stiles clapped his mouth shut and his brow furrowed in contrition. "Sorry. I didn't mean—I'm sorry."

Derek shook his head and kissed Stiles's forehead. "It's all right."

The furrow smoothed out a bit, and Stiles pressed his cheek to Derek's. "Come on. Let's go somewhere a little more private."

Derek shivered at the warmth of Stiles's breath against his ear. "I thought you wanted to dance?"

"I have something to give you."

Derek felt his eyebrows shoot up, and heat ran the length of his spine.
"Not my cock," Stiles said hurriedly. "Well, I mean, yes, but not now. This is something else, I promise."

Derek bit his lip to keep from laughing, and Stiles groaned and dragged him out of the ballroom, waving briefly at Erica and Boyd as they passed. Derek followed without resisting, enjoying Stiles's grip on his hand, the way it tightened like Stiles was worried he'd slip away.

They wove through the corridor, and then Stiles pushed through a door that opened into the gardens. The night air was quiet and cool and smelled of flowers, roses and night blossoms and others Derek couldn't immediately identify. Flat white stones practically glowed in the moonlight, their paths weaving through the garden. Stiles pulled Derek along until he found a bench, and sat him down.

Derek swallowed, suddenly overwhelmed with the memory of the last time they'd been in a garden. "You know, we could have returned to our chambers."

Stiles bounced a little in front of him. "I know, but the garden was closer and this is secluded enough. Besides, this began in the garden at your castle." The side of his mouth ticked up in a half-smile. "It seems appropriate."

For some reason, that made Derek's heart beat faster. "So what do you have to give me?"

"Close your eyes."

Derek obeyed, but still listened to the rustle of Stiles's clothes, the way his heartbeat kicked up a little and his scent shifted to nervousness. He wanted to tell Stiles not to worry, that there was nothing to be nervous about, but then again, Derek had no idea what Stiles was about to give him.

"All right, open your eyes."

Derek did so, and found himself looking at a sheaf of papers. "Um..."

Then his eyes caught the words Marriage Agreement at the top of the first page.

This contract does set forth the terms for marriage between His Royal Highness Przemyslaw Stilinski (heretofore known as Stiles) and His Royal Highness Prince Derek Hale (heretofore known as Derek).

Dazedly, Derek read through the whole thing. He found the clause for Stiles's mandatory three kisses a day, the one about sharing a chamber and a bed, and one clause that was nothing but the words NO INFIDELITY written in all capital letters and underlined three times. Another clause detailed when Derek was allowed to drag Stiles out of the library and potential punishments for stealing the covers. One entire page covered nothing but their sexual relationship, which made Derek's face flame, and ended with the words explicit, informed consent.

He didn't have the first idea of what to say, wasn't sure he could say anything over the lump growing in his throat. All he could hear in his mind was what Stiles had said at the first meeting in the garden.

We have to make this work on a personal level, right?

He'd known Stiles was serious about making this a real marriage instead of just an arrangement, but seeing this contract—a contract just between the two of them—made his heart swell and trip over itself in happiness. This was a real, physical reminder that Stiles wanted him. Wanted them together.

Stiles fidgeted with the sleeves of his coat. "I put in everything I could think of, but there's a section
at the end for adding amendments. Which we probably will, the longer we know each other. But I think this is a good start. And since we ended up together over a contract neither of us had much say in, I thought a contract we both read and wrote and signed would be a better way of proposing."

"Proposing?" Derek repeated, because apparently his mind wasn't working well enough to form sentences on its own.

Stiles's pale cheeks flushed and he ducked his head. "Well... yes. I wanted to—I mean, I know that we're already married, but I thought that—"

"Yes."

Stiles stop talking and blinked at him in something like shock. "What?"

"Yes." Derek put the contract aside and grabbed Stiles's hands to pull him close. "I want that. Yes."

The shock faded from Stiles's face, replaced briefly by pleasure before twisting into a mock scowl. He tugged away from Derek. "I haven't even asked you anything."

Derek raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly at the ground.

Stiles made a face and knelt, then took Derek's hands in his own. His expression smoothed out, sobered, and then Stiles looked up with those earnest amber eyes, as open as Derek had ever seen them. "When we met, I said this wasn't what I pictured for myself. And it still isn't." He took a shuddering breath and squeezed Derek's hands. "Being with you is better than anything I could ever have imagined. And given the choice, I would choose you every time. I love you. I want—I want to be your husband. For now and forever."

Derek couldn't breathe and he couldn't look away; he could only sit there and listen to Stiles's words and his rapid pulse, which didn't falter once.

"Will you marry me?" Stiles finally asked.

Derek grabbed Stiles and hauled him up onto his lap, then kissed him before Stiles could say another word. He tasted sweet champagne and Stiles's gasp of surprise, and managed to elicit a whimper before Stiles pulled away.

"I take it that's a yes?" Stiles said, his voice rough and his lips shiny from their kiss.

Derek nodded and brought one hand up to Stiles's shoulder, rubbing his thumb over the bite they both knew was there under the layers of cloth. "Yes. It's always yes with you... Przemyslaw."

Stiles's jaw dropped. "Oh my God, you can actually pronounce that?"

Derek grinned and nipped at Stiles's chin. "I'm very good with languages."

"Oh my God," Stiles said again, and rested his head on Derek's shoulder. "First amendment to the contract: Never call me Przemyslaw."

"But it means one who is clever or ingenious." Derek turned his face into Stiles's neck and breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of a wild forest and a nighttime garden and sheer, unadulterated happiness. "I think it suits you."

"You suit me," Stiles muttered.

Derek couldn't remember the last time he'd been this happy. It felt like his smile might crack his
face. "And you suit me, husband. You suit me perfectly."

Stiles pulled back, an unfathomably fond look on his face, and he cupped Derek's cheek. "Now that that's settled, perhaps we should sneak off to our chambers to consummate our marriage, hm?"

Derek couldn't help the chuckle that spilled out of him. "Sounds perfect," he said, and tugged Stiles back down for another long kiss, drinking down Stiles's laugh and the promise of a future together.

He was in love with his husband, and his husband was in love with him. It was glorious.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

OH MY GOD IT'S DONE. *collapses*

It seems somewhat appropriate that I'm posting this final chapter from IHOP less than an hour before starting NaNo 2014, when I started writing this fic at midnight at this same IHOP exactly one year ago.

If you had told me then what the response would be, I wouldn't have believed it. Even now, I really can't believe it. You guys have completely blown me away with your comments, asks, and recs. I completely failed at responding to all of them, but each and every one means the world to me. <3

I hope you've all enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it. You are the absolute best, every single one of you.

A special thanks goes out to my beta, Eris, who is absolutely phenomenal, and to geeky-sova for her amazing art.

And thank you, all of you, for reading.

If you want to flail about Stiles and Derek and the rest of the pack, come find me on Tumblr or Twitter.

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!