**Regress to my mean (and kiss me pretty)**

by *The_Readers_Muse*

**Summary**

**Dammit.**

It was going to be a long day.

**Notes**

Disclaimer: I don't own MTV's Teen Wolf or any of its characters, wishful thinking aside.

Authors Note #1: This story is meant to fit into the canon events of season 4 until just before the end of 4x12, "Smoke and Mirrors" where it goes very AU. The premise is that Scott and
co. escaped Kate in Mexico and return to Beacon Hills without the showdown we saw in the final episode where Kate is 'defeated.' In this au Derek still 'evolves,' but Chris doesn't go with the Calaveras to track down Kate, but rather returns with the whole pack to Beacon Hills. – This is a Bobby Finstock/Chris Argent fic, with minor references to: Stiles/Derek & Lydia/Parrish here and there.

Warnings: Spoilers for seasons three and four and one or two vague illusions to things that have happened in season five. *Contains: sexual content, blood, guts, gore, canon appropriate violence, references to using alcohol as a coping mechanism in both past and present tenses, kidnapping. - There will be more warnings to come as the story progresses. There will be 40 chapters and this fic will update once a week.
He woke up to the sound of his phone buzzing off his bedside table. The idea not really computing as he fumbled blindly, nearly upsetting his watch and the glass of water before his hand closed around one of the metal-cool edges and reeled it in by the cord. Not realizing he hadn't opened his eyes until the brightness of the screen hazed like the surface of the sun across his closed lids.

No. He told himself firmly, cracking a lid experimentally when the phone buzzed again - insistent – and promptly hating himself for it. He'd only been asleep for what, five hours? He didn't care what was going on, after the backlog of paperwork he'd just weeded through, he didn't deserve this shit.

Ugh.

He mashed his face deeper into the pillows, heavy with the siren call of sweet, sweet oblivion when the phone buzzed again. Then again. Ratting across the pitted-rough of the wooden table as he ground his teeth in frustration. The numbers on his clock bled a blurry red as he lifted his head, jerking himself up and over with a groan. Cursing when the phone popped off the charger and clattered onto the floor. Nearly blinding himself again when he fumbled with the lock screen and swiped."

"Beacon Hills Search and Rescue - Priority 1 Alert: Notice for all volunteers to assemble at 4:30am at Predator Ridge. Missing person's case: 2 year old Allie Henson. Believed to be abducted from home after a break and enter while parents were out of town. Babysitter in intensive care, unresponsive. Was able to give a brief description of assailants to Emergency services on scene. Victim sustained serious defensive and offensive wounds attempting to fight off assailants. Child was alive at the time of assault, believed to be."

He closed his eyes. Holding back a sigh as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, toes digging into the carpet as he yawned hugely - jaw cracking. Mind slowly ramping up as he tried to remember where he'd put his gear. Wondering if he'd actually gotten around to getting a fresh set of batteries for his headlamp. He'd been a part of Beacon Hills volunteer Search & Rescue since he'd been old enough to shoot a flare gun. His mother had lived for it. Dragging him along with her to each and every one, even if it was just to set up the first aid station or pour the coffee."

'This is how a community works, Bobby. Everyone pulls together for each other. Like one big family. There is nothing you can't do when you have the support of a community behind you. And what do families do? They protect each other. Every one of us has a responsibility to look out for one another. If you support your community. They will support you.'

His phone buzzed again, this time with a picture. Showing a little girl with spazzy red hair, a gap-toothed smile and dimples fat enough you could lose your finger in. He sighed, feeling something settle in the center of his chest as he ran a hand through his hair."

Dammit.

It was going to be a long day.

He was adjusting the straps of his backpack, separated from the thinly milling crush when Argent and the Sheriff found him.
"Alright there, Finstock?" Chris asked, handing him a steaming cup of coffee he guzzled down gratefully. Eying his yawn as the man adjusted the straps of his hunting rifle. Sending the Sheriff a look he wasn't quite sure how to quantify when one of the deputies – Parrish something – called for everyone's attention.

"Just fine," he grunted, clearing his throat. Nearly scalding himself as he took another pointed sip of what he was certain was probably the most profoundly awful cup coffee he'd ever tasted in his entire life. "Late night is all, paperwork is a killer."

"Don't I know it," the Sheriff returned, smiling sympathetically. Looking back over his shoulder where a huddle of kids were bunching up – collars up and cold in the dawn chill. He followed the man's gaze, pleased to see a good turn out from his classes. Catching sight of Scott, Kira, Stiles, Lydia, Liam, Malia – and weirdly, the Hale kid who was talking closely to Scott and Stiles for some reason.

"Seems like we've been doing this a lot recently," he finally blurted, carefully not mentioning that some of the most recent actually involved the Sherriff's own son and some teenage psycho who'd somehow wormed his way into the starting line of his team.

"True," Argent replied, fastening his marker ties to the front of his belt, easily accessible for when they set out. "But this time, from what the Sheriff tells me, it's pretty cut and dry. It was a normal B & E kidnapping. The girl's parents are on a red eye back to town. They think, if she's lucky, the teenager that was babysitting might pull through. The kid has been missing for just under five hours. They found the kidnapper's car in this lot, one of them dead behind the wheel. Gunshot to the back of the head. Probably never even saw it coming. Looks like the other one took off into the woods on foot."

"For once there's no sign that this is anything more than some asshole wanting to start fresh. Maybe make a couple thousand selling her to some family that wants a cute kid but doesn't want to go through all that adoption hassle," the Sheriff agreed. "Money always talks."

"I didn't know the others weren't," he returned slowly, eying the two of them strangely now. Getting the distinct impression that there was something going on he wasn't privy to as the men exchanged looks again. It was Beacon Hills after all.

He was still waiting for an answer when Parrish's whistle blew, summoning the Sheriff to the front of the crowd to get them all up to speed and into groups. He let himself get caught up in the tide, half aware that Argent was still standing beside him as the group came together – condensing and quietly loud.

It was time to get to work.

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He was paired up with Argent and Deputy Parrish. And while he quickly started feeling like the odd one out, he found himself falling into his usual head space without much difficulty. All three of them knew what they were doing, which gave him space to focus on his surroundings.

He marked his trail as he went, blue ribbon tied to the occasional trunk or branch to indicate not only his trail and way back, but if one of the others wandered this way, they'd know that his grid was already searched and they could move on to the next.

It didn't take long for them to eventually wander out of sight of each other, but he could still hear
them. Parrish's quiet footfalls, light and almost bird-like as they skirted over bone-dry twigs and mouldering undergrowth. And Argent's heavier ones, mature and sure. Able to pick out the *click-click-clink* of the man's jacket zipper as it hitched against the stock of his rifle.

It was almost too loud, actually.

*Weirdly loud.*

Overwhelming and-

He closed his eyes, fists clenching at his sides as he strangled the ribbon in his palm.

Focus.

*Focus.*

He sucked in a shaky inhale and almost choked on it. Overwhelmed by a sudden smell. Baby powder. Wet cotton. Crusted salt. Expelled shot. Only just barely able to hear the muted little whimper that aired up from the damp moss and dew-wet leaves as his head snapped up. Eyes narrowing as he wheeled east, marking ribbon fluttering free and forgotten from his hand.

*Holy shit.*

*He knew where she was.*

He was off running before his mind even processed the shift.

He found her in a shelled out hollow, wrapped up in an undershirt, a thin blanket and a pair of neon pink booties. There was a bloody smear on her forehead that wasn't hers, but otherwise she looked fine. Completely unimpressed of course, but lighting up like the fourth of July when he scrambled up the bank and into view.

*Oh, thank god.*

He let go of a relieved huff of air, tasting her unhappy tears on the breeze as she smiled up at him, red-hair thin and haloed-messy on her head. Chubby hands wind-milling, gap-toothed and babbling to be held as the sounds of the forest pressed in around them. But he found he barely cared, too busy making sure she was unharmed. Tickling her sides just to hear her murmur nonsense up at him as he lifted the back of her shirt and tested her joints. Breathing a sigh of relief that felt like it came all the way from his boots as he finally started to relax.

*She was fine.*

Parrish and Argent would have heard her by now, they had been so close. In fact, he could hardly believe he'd beaten them to it. He cocked his head, half-listening. Expecting to hear them approaching, Parrish talking into his radio. Only there was nothing. He couldn't hear them at all.

*Maybe they'd wandered off in the wrong direction?*

"Hey sweetheart," he cooed, lifting her gingerly. Tucking her close to his chest as he shrugged out of his backpack and pulled out a thermal blanket. Wrapping her up as he checked her over again. Pleased to see that despite being tired, hungry, and host to a full diaper issue that was really really... *pungent*, she seemed no worse for wear. "Whatcha doing out here, huh? We've been looking
"How the hell did you get all the way out here anyway?" he muttered, talking more for her than anything as she looked up at him, grubby hands patting curiously at his face as he gave her a bit of water to sip. "You're a sausage link with arms. Or, more like five sausage links stuffed together. I don't care how grown up you think you are, you definitely didn't walk all the way out here by yourself. Save that rebellious milestone for your parents to enjoy in your teenage years. Believe me, it will come along soon enough. They will be utterly thrilled."

He looked carefully around the hollow, noting the shoe impressions that carried on behind the fallen log and out of sight, indicating that the kidnapper had probably ditched little miss ginger when she became more trouble than she was worth. Leaving her here for them to find. Probably hoping the search would give them time to get the hell out of Beacon Hills before the DNA and bloodwork found at the house could ID them.

"Alright, whatever, you're safe now, chicken little," he told her, hoisting her high up in the crook of his arm as the thermal blanket glinted a warm metallic in the weak morning light. "Let's get you home, huh?"

"Quack," she replied firmly, sleepily. Because apparently chickens quacked now. Pudgy hands curling around his collar as he swung his backpack on and fumbled with his phone. Unsurprised by the lack of a signal, he merely ignored the blinking bars and instead took a couple of snap-shots of the area. Making sure to get more than a few good ones of the foot prints leading off deeper into the brush before he pocketed it again. Figuring the Sheriff would need them for the investigation.

"Pooh!" she squealed delightedly, apparently host to some epiphany he wasn't privy to. Watery blue eyes widening happily as she patted his face. "Bear-bear!"

He raised an eyebrow before he figured he'd just go with it. Rolling his eyes as she smeared dirt all over his chin. Suddenly smelling half a dozen things he was pretty sure he'd never been able to pick out before as somewhere close by, a stick cracked.

Finally!

"Sure, I'm Winnie the Pooh. I can deal with that. Lucky for you I am a mature adult who has extremely high self-esteem, young lady. But be careful with labels when you grow up, kid. People are easily offended, you know."

He turned around when another stick cracked, high on relief and that honest sort of pleasure that comes from seeing a particularly good happy ending coming together. Expecting to see Argent and Parrish hustling down the trail.

"Hey! I found-"

Only there was no one there.

He blinked, looking around him. Realizing for the first time that not only was he alone, but that he didn't even recognize where he was. There was no trail. No markers. No sign that anyone other than him, the baby and the footprints had been in the area for years. He straightened, looking around wildly before his eyes dropped down to the markers still attached to his belt.

Aw, crap.

The baby burbled, curious and drooling against his neck as he turned in a slow circle, trying to make out his own set of tracks as he strained to hear some sign of the others. He could have sworn Argent
had been less a couple of yards away only a few minutes ago. Only now nothing looked familiar at all.

He checked his watch reflexively, shocked and swallowing hard.

*Two hours?*

*Well, this was just perfect.*

He sighed, dropping his head into his chin. Half wondering if he waited long enough someone would save him from his own stupidity. How had he managed not to mark his trail? That was a rookie mistake. One he'd never actually made, if he was being honest. Having gone through more than few lectures of trainers sharing horror stories about people forgetting to mark their trail. Forcing a pause in the search for the *actual* victim just to find the one green behind the ears idiot who couldn't remember to tie around a tree to mark where he'd gone. Hell, he didn't even remember how he'd gotten from where he'd picked up her scent to where he was now.

He cocked his head, mentally checking himself.

*Picked up her scent?*

*What was he? High?*

*Christ.*

He edged out of the hollow, eyes to the sod as he followed his own tracks backwards. Pant legs skimming through wet ferns as he muttered nonsense to the girl in his arms. Too distracted by the way the tracks seemed to space out every now and again – almost like he'd been running - to realize she'd fallen firmly asleep against his shoulder. Dirty little hands still fisted tight in his collar as his heartbeat lulled her down.

He wasn't sure why, pride maybe, but he waited until he found the trail before he covered the girl's ears and blew his whistle. Able to pick out the nearby sounds of more than a few search parties already converged and close before he looked down at the girl in his arms and personally thanked whatever deity was responsible for helping him find her.

Because the way he figured it, with all the things that had to go right for this to happen today, he had to be the luckiest sonofabitch in all of Beacon Hills. Or maybe she was. Honestly, he had no idea how things like this worked themselves out. All he knew was that he was tired, dirty, but most of all, *grateful.*

"Chicken little needs a diaper change!" he called, marching out of the treeline as the Sheriff led them out of the woods. "Maybe like five actually," he amended. Getting another whiff as the girl giggled. Clearly enjoying the attention as the people ringed around them flashed smiles and relieved laughter like it was going out of style.

"I am pretty sure the contents are actually a Hazmat issue," he muttered. Only shutting his mouth about it when a taxi screeched into the parking lot and a set of tearful parents that looked no more than kids themselves came sprinting across the parking lot towards them.

*Oh boy.*
And if he'd been less busy fending off the overly enthusiastic clutches of mother, father and baby, he might have noticed the odd grouping watching closely from the sidelines. Confusion and softened interest chief across their features as the Sheriff, Argent, Parrish, Scott, Stiles, Derek and Lydia all talked in hushed tones. Eyes darting from him to the treeline behind them as the hive of Police, EMS and gawkers flowed and condensed around them like a water over rock. Smooth, stream-lined and with the air of people who'd faced similar odds before and had barely scraped out the winner.

If he'd been less busy, he might have wondered about that.
Chapter 2

He was halfway through his morning run – dripping sweat and probably looking all sorts of uncomplimentary – when Chris Argent fell into pace beside him. He startled a bit, making a move to take out one of his ear-buds. It was more out of politeness than any real desire to catch his breath long enough to form words. Focusing more on where his feet were going as he edged towards the side of the trail in case the man wanted to pass.

But Argent just flashed him a closed mouth smile and shook his head. Keeping pace with him on the trail with the clear intent to stay before setting his eyes to the horizon. Matching his stride uniformly as the tree-line flashed by on either side.

And, okaaaaaaay then, he could jive with that.

Weirdly enough, it worked. Because soon enough he forgot about being self-conscious, forgot about feeling jittery and instead, just ran. Breathing in the simmering burn throbbing in the pit of his lungs as the smell of sweat and the harsh pants from the man beside him started to leech into his headspace.

He'd only ever seen the man on this particular trail a few times and most of those had been with a Glock strapped to his thigh and a crossbow in his daughter's hand. Hunting had been the explanation. Which honestly made sense considering this trail edged more into deep-woods territory than cross-country. It was less popular with the soccer moms and spring to fall runners. Still, he'd always preferred it for that reason. It was quiet, secluded – off the beaten trail, so to speak. But considering he'd seen Argent in the dirt lot gearing up for a run a handful of times before, mostly when he was wrapping his up, he just assumed he'd finally caught the man during.

He was nearing the end of his usual route when he made the decision not to stop, merely arching a brow when the man looked at him questioningly as he angled right at the next fork. Falling in beside him as the back of the man's shirt grew dark with sweat. It was almost invigorating. He felt energized, alive!

He wasn't consciously aware he'd started pulling ahead until Argent was forced to put on a sudden burst of speed to even them out when the terrain jolted uphill. Growing narrow and rough as he took the opportunity to take the lead. Feeling a fierce sort of rightness stain through him at the idea of the man following close. It was like everything was as it should be. Baser and coiled. Finding himself eying the trees for potential threats as they raced down the trail like wild things. The man would be safe as long as he was in front. He would protect him. Keep him-

His hand slapped around a trunk as he used his momentum to fling himself over a narrow hair-pin in the trail. Feeling more than hearing the man do the same behind him. He choked on a laugh. Primitive and wordless as the sound aired out and Chris stumbled somewhere behind him.

The path eventually widened again and he was surprised by how much he'd managed to pull ahead. It startled him long enough that he lost his rhythm and Argent was able to re-take his place beside him. But what really upped the weirdness factor was how utterly wrecked the man looked. Hadn't the man just started his run when he'd caught up to him?

He blinked, surprised, realizing Argent was soaked with sweat. Shirt sticking to him like a second skin, sweat beading down from his hair-line in trickling streams. They hadn't been running that long, had they? It didn't feel like it, yet he could almost sense the strain the man was under. Side-eying the muscles that were clenching in the man's jaw as calloused hands curled into fists at his sides.
And call him a deviant, but it certainly painted a pretty picture, that was for damn sure.

He'd always been a sucker for a pretty face and Chris Argent wasn't an exception to that. Hell, he'd never been if he was being honest. Personally, he'd always been of the opinion that someone in the Argent family tree had sold their soul to Satan somewhere down the line because – damn – they were one attractive ass family.

Still, it wasn't just about the looks. Like all good, worth-while and completely unattainable things the world dangled in front of him on a gilded string, it was really about the whole package. And while he kept mostly to himself these days - he'd always considered himself equal opportunity as far as potential partners went.

*Hey, a coach could dream, couldn't he?*

Chris had always been the black sheep of his rinky-dink family – speaking as one himself - that much was clear to see. He didn't have half a clue about what the Argents actually did on any given day, but what was pretty obvious was that Chris had always been the one who'd actually cared. Not exactly the wear-his-heart-on-his-sleeve type of caring, but the kind that'd saved his ass on the playground and lacrosse field more often than the second-hand embarrassment of his high school memories were comfortable lingering over.

'*He was also a widower who had recently lost his only child on top of it, Finstock,*' a snarky voice reminded him. *'Sure know how to pick 'em. I mean, hell, what do you even call a person who's lost a child? Is there even a word for something like that?’*

They hadn't been friends, not exactly. But a long time ago they had been something. Meant something to each other, whatever that something was. And when the Argents left town midway through junior year, yeah- that'd hurt. In more ways than one. His life had been hell until he'd finally had that growth spurt his mother had been promising since he'd been six years old and weedy. Filling out – owning his tall, stocky frame and broad chest like he'd been born to do just that. He was left alone after that. Especially after he flipped Brunski on the practice field after years of built up anger and aggression. Pinning him to the ground as the winded asshole wheezed, telling him if he ever touched him again he'd do worse. He wasn't sure where the brave words had come from, or if he'd even meant them, but Brunski had stuck with taunts from then on.

Even back when they'd been in school together, Argent had always been an enigma. An enigma wrapped up inside an oversized, tastefully beat up leather jacket, motorcycle boots and host to a smile that probably could have made an angel cry.

In other words, completely out of his league.

And none of that had changed.

Kind of the opposite really.

Only Chris didn't seem to get the memo because when they finally packed it in, the man was actually smiling. Stretching, talking with him idly about the whole Allie Henson thing as he casually upended the remains of his water bottle over his head.

*And wow, okay.*

He was definitely going to file that moment away in his wank-bank for future reference.

*Because, Jesus.*
"You know, a lot of people are talking about what you did the other day," Chris remarked, wiping his face as water trickled down the clean lines of his neck. "Pretty impressive. I didn't know you had tracking experience. You should come hunting with me sometime. I haven't bagged a buck in nearly three years."

There were probably a half a dozen things he could have said to that. About a quarter of them even sounded great in his head. Something disarming like, lying through his teeth and saying, 'why yes, all those years of tracking experience I learned from a distant uncle twice removed.' Or, 'yeah, sorry for leaving you and Deputy Parrish in the dust on that one, must have wandered off. You know how it is out there, everything looks the same. I am just glad I could help, honesty.'

Instead, what he said was-

"Hey, I'm starved, want to get breakfast?"

And yeah, okay, he might be out of practice at this.

Funny thing was, he got the impression he wasn't the only one.

The man laughed as they walked through the doors of the rundown diner. The expression honest and open as he ran his hand through his hair and looked around. A mess of salt-tracked stubble and an exceptionally handsome jaw line he kind of wanted to trace with his tongue.

"Oh man, I didn't know this old grease spoon was still around," Argent exclaimed, nodding politely to a couple of patrons as they passed. Letting him lead the way to his preferred booth in the back, nearest the kitchen.

"It's more grease than spoon these days," he shared, smiling right back. Pleased the man approved as he slid into the booth after him. Trying not to dwell too much on how the other man immediately claimed the side that gave him a good view of all the entrances and exits. Keeping the wall at his back – defensive and offensive all at the same time.

"But hey, what's a round of triple bypasses amongst friends?" he finished, waving. Settling down in his seat only to inch up again a couple seconds later. Seeing who was the line-cook for the morning rush before shouting out a greeting without filter.

"Come here often?" Argent asked, brow raised. The words lacking the inflection that would usually accompany a question in favor of stating the obvious. Grin devastating. And really, he was getting way too old for all these not now boner moments.

"Sure," he replied easily, smiling as Jessie, the usual waitress, headed towards them. "God knows I barely know how to boil water. It's awful actually, I am a complete stereotype – cue the useless bachelor. It's a good thing you left Beacon Hills back when you did, because I am pretty sure this town has swallowed all my aspirations for becoming at all culinarily competent. At least you had a fighting chance."

The laugh that left the man's lips came out wholesome and surprised, like he'd forgotten what genuine amusement sounded like coming out of his own mouth as Jessie slammed down two coffee mugs like shot glasses and asked that one, singularly important question in almost any social situation.

"Regular or decaf?"
They talked for a while over half-decent coffee he could actually feel rotting through his intestines - catching up and trading stories. Delicately tip-toeing over the yawning divide that existed between what he could say and what he felt he should. Getting the distinct impression that regardless of how much he wanted to tell the man how sorry he was about Allison. How she'd been a good student – bright, smart and going places – he knew it wasn't the right time.

The minutes spanned into about half an hour and honestly, he was surprised to realize he was enjoying himself. A lot. So much that he kind of forgot about the whole breakfast thing until Jessie click-clacked down the chipped white tiles with her heels and whipped out her notepad and pen.

"Your usual, Bobby?" Jessie asked, already scribbling. Barely acknowledging his nod before she turned towards the man sitting opposite to him with an interested smile. Giving him a clear up and down as her hip cocked – inviting. "And for you, darlin'?"

"The salmon, please," Chris returned, smile open but careful. Brittle around the edges in a way that gave him the distinct impression that he wasn't the least bit interested in the brunette's open invitation. "With yam fries if you have them?"

And while he was pretty sure it was just indigestion, something in him flip-flopped with relief. Disquieted by the woman's sudden attention. But finding something equally gratifying in the way the man turned his attention right back on him as she arched a brow, slightly miffed at the dismissal.

He was about to say something, something that would soothe the sting of hurt in the girl's eyes and maybe get them back to where they'd been before she'd arrived when Chris' words actually registered. 

Salmon.

Oh, man.

Fuck yes.

It was like, well, he wasn't even sure there was a word to describe it. Like he'd been craving something all his life but had gone this entire time not knowing what. He might be drooling. With all the saliva pooling in his mouth it was hard to tell. It was like a missing piece of his life had suddenly connected into place. A craving that just-clicked.

He swallowed thickly. "Wow, that sounds good! Is it too late to change my order?" he piped up, getting a surprised eye-flick from both of them as he shrunk back a couple of inches. Suddenly hyper-aware of how loud he'd said it. How desperately excited he sounded about something so stupidly normal he didn't even have an excuse for himself.

There was dead silence for a smattering of beats before-

"Is that some kind of a joke?" Jessie dead panned, fixing him with the stink eye. Like she figured he was making fun of her on purpose or something.

"Uh?" he managed intelligently. Flushing slightly as Chris looked from him to Jessie in confusion. Clearly picking up something he wasn't as the woman sighed and posed her hand on her hips. Looking down her nose at him with a look he did recognize. The one he wore from 8:30am to the closing bell at school. The: I don't get paid enough for this shit look.
"Bobby, you're allergic to seafood, remember?"

Oh.

*Oh, right.*

"Will that be problem?" Chris asked, concern leaking through. Just like it always did when talk of his allergy came up. Reminding him of all the barely remembered horror stories his mom had used to cycle through like a broken record in his teens. Drilling it into his head every time he forgot to take his epi-pen to school or a track meet. "I can order something else."

"No. No, its fine," he replied, waving Jessie and the menus away. Distracting himself with an over large sip from his coffee before he shook his head. Running his hands down his face in frustration as the desire set down roots. Imagining he could smell it already as his taste buds sang in anticipation.

He shuddered a bit at the idea of it being cooked. Raw would be better. He knew that without even having to think about it. *They did that in Japan didn't they?* Raw and still twitching. Wriggling on the rocks as the roaring tang of the river echoed inside his head. Sharp teeth stripping the sweet flesh right from the bone.

"Bobby?"

He jerked, realizing Argent was still staring at him.

"Sorry, I am not sure where my head is at today," he replied weakly. "I must really be hungry."

He finished his steak and eggs - bloody rare and dripping - in a clear pout. More than a little bit concerned about why he was suddenly craving something that he was ninety-nine point nine percent sure he had both never tasted and would most definitely *kill him* if he tried.

Did he mention his life had gotten weird lately?

Like, profoundly weird?

Because it really, *really* had.
Chapter 3

He lasted three days before he finally caved. Carefully sitting through yet another breakfast with Chris – enjoying himself immensely as they talked Lacrosse and secretly found Jessie’s not so subtle jabs about rude bachelors hogging up her best booths hugely amusing – before he commandeered their tab on the way to the bathroom and pulled Jessie aside for an order to go.

He returned to the table, bill paid and flushed with success (or just whatever level of insanity he was currently operating under) as he waited for the order to cook. Getting treated to a devastating Argent special when the man smiled at him. Insisting he’d get the next one as he slid out of the booth and clapped him on the shoulder. Tossing on his leather jacket and telling him he’d see him the next morning for their run before making to leave. Dark jeans perfectly worn and leaving nothing to the imagination as he watched that pert ass disappear out the door with a cheerful ding-ding from the motion sensor.

And really, he was getting too old for all these, not now boner moments.

It wasn’t until he was home, sitting down at his table with the container – which for some reason Jessie had double bagged, wrapped in plastic and duct taped shut like he was five years old – on his left and his epi-pen on the right that he let it all sink in.

He stared from the fish to the epi-pen then back again, leaning back in his chair like he was examining the two options from all angles. Feeling like he was playing an aquatic version of Russian roulette as he tried to get the idea of what he was about to do to mesh in his brain.

This was the stupidest thing he’d ever done.

Like, the dumbest.

On a Greenberg level of idiocy.

Which, quite frankly, was saying something considering that the last monumentally stupid thing he’d done had wound up with him drinking half a bar and being found ass naked in the woods by half of his graduating class. Coming out of the hospital a week later minus a testicle to exposure and a hell of a story that no one was really interested in hearing unless it included rehab and some bullshit twelve-step program.

Which, yeah, not his brightest moment.

But all that didn’t change the fact that the fish had long since cooled and he was still practically drooling. Saliva running thick as it slicked down from the roof of his mouth. Forcing him to inhale – throaty and deep – as he swallowed convulsively.

He wanted something that would kill him.

This was his life?

No, he didn’t just want it. He needed it.

He didn't know how he knew, but he knew how it would taste.

How it would hit the back of his tongue when he tore into it.
He ripped the container open jerkily, epi-pen at the ready.

Fuck it.

It was probably the best thing he’d ever tasted in his entire life.

And he didn’t die.

So, naturally, cue an entirely different kind of freak out.

It wasn’t just the salmon.

In fact, the salmon was more like a metaphor for...for whatever the hell this was.

He figured that much was pretty damn clear by now.

He skipped his next morning run and then the next. Spending most of his free time pacing through his house and staring at the bottle of Jameson Irish Whiskey he’d pulled out of the back of his empty liquor cabinet. Trying to fight off that familiar itch - that phantom burn in his throat - as he weighed the pros and cons over and over again. Losing track of the time as the hours after school and practice blurred together and he realized off-handedly that he hadn’t slept in over forty-eight hours.

Just like it’d been fifteen years ago, the bottle was half full and tempting. Honey-dark, expensive and by all counts, his drink of choice. It was something he’d kept after his decision to go sober. A reminder. A warning. Daily proof he could measure of not just his sobriety, but his strength of character, will power, dedication. And now-

He nearly jumped clear out of his skin, startled by a knock on the door. Not exactly sure how he felt about it when he came around the corner of the living room and found Chris Argent on his front stoop, eying him through the spotty glass with a determined expression.

Busted.

“How the hell do you know where I live?” he asked, by way of greeting. Already running at the mouth before he’d finished pulling the door open. Getting a nose full of clean sweat and fading cologne as the man stood there, smiling thinly, still in his running gear. “Jesus Christ, did you run here? That’s...miles. Many of them.”

“We had a date, remember?” the man returned, rubbing at the back of his neck like he ran what was probably hours out of his way on a whim every other day.

He nearly choked.

“A dat-oh.”

“Besides, when you didn’t show again I figured something might’ve been up, and I didn’t have your phone number so~” Argent trailed off, cocking his head like he had when they were younger after he’d finished picking him up out of the dirt. Brushing him off and muttering uncomplimentary things as Brunski and his cronies stalked off, laughing.

“Look, Argent~” he started, running a hand through his hair as he looked down at himself, a mess of
bedhead, bare feet, old jeans and a blue long sleeve shirt that had certainly seen better days. Vaguely planning where he was going to drown himself after this train wreck of a conversation was finally over.

“Chris,” the man insisted, correcting him cleanly. Flashing that low simmering smile again as he advanced a step inside. Using his momentary fish-tailing to wedge himself firmly through the door, toeing off his shoes with the air of someone who’d already decided to stick around. “That’s my name, Bobby, you used to know it, remember?”

And okay, fine.

He could tell when he was being out maneuvered, thank you very much.

“It’s a nice place,” the man commented after a brief look around. “You said you did the renovations yourself?”

“More or less,” he returned, feeling a titch more comfortable now that he felt they were back on even ground. Trying and probably failing not to make it obvious as he inhaled throatily – breathing him in. Suddenly realizing that he’d missed the man’s company somewhere between seafood-related panic attacks and his burgeoning mid-life crisis.

“My dad was a contractor so I didn’t come into it completely useless. It was a fixer-upper when I bought it, but I couldn’t argue with the price. I always get side-tracked when school starts but I think I’ll get the basement refinished by the winter. You should have seen the bathrooms when I took possession. Unsealed grout ahoy.”

His feet curled into the thick carpet, plucking at it fitfully. Finding the dynamics of whatever they were – friends or otherwise – far less clear here then they’d been during their breakfasts at the diner. Threatening to edge into something that seemed far more intimate by the second. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had someone over other than the kid that delivered pizzas. And his elderly neighbor who kept showing up with potted plants to ‘brighten up his front deck’ in a thinly veiled attempt a passive aggressiveness: Beacon Hill’s suburbia style.

Then again he hadn’t so much as invited Argent in than the man had gently steam-rolled his way inside, so-

“Hey, you want a drink or something?” he asked after an awkward moment, muffling a nervous cough as he bypassed the sofa. Jerking a thumb towards the kitchen in silent question as he allowed his eyes to wander. Sweeping down to linger across the neck of the man’s sweat soaked shirt before he rolled his eyes. Still not exactly sure why someone would go so out of their way just because he’d missed a few morning runs. “I don’t care how good of shape you’re in, if you jogged here all the way from the trail your body is probably the Sahara – or you know, dead.”

“Wouldn’t say no to some water,” Chris admitted, following him into the kitchen. “But still, that’s pretty rich coming from someone who can run cross country like you do. I thought I was in good shape before I started running with you. Apparently I overestimated myself.”

“You are though,” he blurted, fumbling a bit with one of the glasses before he jammed it under the tap and flicked the stream to cold. “Very, I mean.”

“But not like you,” the man pointed out. “What you can do? It’s pretty impressive. You have to admit. You’re in your element out there. When we finish you’re barely winded. I wish I had that kind of stamina.”
“There’s nothing special about me,” he returned with a shrug, internally panicking at how effortlessly he was suddenly lying out of his teeth. Feeling a strange sort of calm wash over him as he bald-faced lied to someone who certainly didn’t deserve it. “I chase hyper-active teenagers five times a week. I have to earn their respect, same as they have to earn mine. Don’t get that by being a slouch.”

He took a moment to struggle between nature and nurture as he set the water down in front of him and set about putting a careful distance between them. Flirting with half-truths and allusions as he tried to find that one singular phrase that would unknot the tension currently residing in his shoulders. Knowing it went without saying that once upon a time, back before Allie Henson, all that had actually been true - more or less. But now?

In the end he didn’t know how long the man had been staring at the bottle he’d completely forgotten about before Chris finally curled a thumb around the neck and reeled it in. Reading the label with an appreciative whistle as he froze in place. Suddenly realizing how it must look. How-

“Thinking about sharing?” Chris grinned, tapping at the tightly screwed cap before he twisted it off and took a whiff. Sighing in obvious pleasure as off to the side, his mouth went dry for at least a half dozen reasons.

“It’s barely 4pm,” he pointed out, only mildly protesting. Relaxing in millimeters as he wracked his brain, trying to figure out if he still had a proper scotch glass kicking around. Probably did, god knows the eternal pat-rack in him never let him throw anything away.

“And your point is?” the man returned playfully.

He ended up answering his own question when he unearthed one from the depths of his cupboard. Washing it out and pouring him a generous measure before capping it and sliding into the chair opposite with the beginnings of a slow smile.

“You aren’t having any?” Chris asked, swirling the amber liquid around in the tinted, antique crystal before taking an appreciative sip. Making a downright obscene sound in the back of his throat as he tipped his glass towards him in toast.

“Fifteen years sober,” he returned with a shrug. Not needing to say anything more than that as the man paused in mid-sip and carefully put his glass down. Eying him cautiously, but surprisingly without judgement.

“I’m sorry. I thought-”

“No, don’t be,” he replied, feeling a wry grin make tracks across his face as he knuckled the back of his head. Watching him through his lashes before he met his eyes and continued, meaning every word. “I’m not.”

“Besides, you might have just saved me from doing something extremely stupid,” he admitted, honestly wondering what might have happened if he had been forced to stare at that stupid bottle any longer. Left alone with the unsurmountable shit-hill that was his own thoughts as the hours ticked past and he still felt nowhere close to being normal. “It was a good scotch fifteen years ago. It deserves someone who can appreciate it.”

Somewhere outside someone started their lawn mower. A flush of cool-heat filtered through him, making him grit his teeth as the rattling back and forth of the distant gears vibrated up through his molars. Sick coiled like hunger in the pit of his belly as the gas-roar turned grating – deafening - in the narrowing space. Walls closing in around him like a panic attack.
“So, fifteen years sober,” the man remarked after a while, distracting him. Leaning back in his chair as the potent liquor did something overly complimentary to his muscles. Smoothing out the rough edges as the man stretched in place, smile reeling out with a lax sort of comfort he remembered all too well. “No offense, but you can understand why someone might ask why you have a bottle of very nice whiskey on your kitchen table. Remove temptation? Change the habits that put you in proximity of what is negatively affecting your life? Isn’t that what they teach you in therapy?”

“I am kind of…going through something right now,” he managed, picking his words carefully but still feeling the shiver of relief that came part and parcel with letting someone in. Sharing the weight that had been building ever since he’d lost time in the woods all those weeks back. Ever since-

“So am I,” Chris admitted, tone losing a good fraction of its merriment as the mood sobered like a sudden slam on the brakes. Reminding him of all the losses the man had suffered over the past few years.

“I can compartmentalize but things get through sometimes. I suppose that’s why we all have our vices,” the man continued.

“You know mine,” he pointed out, feeling it was time to even the betting pool a bit. Soaking in the relative cool of the table as he leaned forward. “What are yours?”

The laugh that barked out was self-criminating and tired. A mockery of what could have been as the bitter scent of emotional burn out threatened to rise thick in his senses. He squeezed his eyes shut. Feeling like all kinds of an asshole. He’d been so busy being a self-involved idiot he hadn’t even noticed. Chris has always been the strong one. The rock to everyone’s river. It almost hadn’t even occurred to him that all this time the man might have been smiling the same time as he was screaming.

“Got a few hours?”

“Matter of fact, I do,” he declared, determinedly topping up the man’s glass before clinking his water against it. “So drink up. Because if this is going to be a wake to our better judgement, one of us better be drunk enough not to feel awkward about it in the morning.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Chris replied, huffing another laugh – lighter this time - as the hunter watched him through the veil of criminally long lashes. Trying vainly to figure out how he’d managed to find someone in this tiny, godforsaken town he could legitimately see himself spending the rest of his life pining over.

They were halfway through some shitty sci-fi movie when Chris finally roused himself from his end of the couch. Warm limbs tangled around his in an extremely comfortable way he was content not to dwell too much on as he propped himself up on his elbows and fixed him with an inscrutable look.

“There was something Victoria- my wife used to say. That you can have your vices and know them, but that it’s different, harder, when your vices know you,” Chris started. “Something tells me you went this entire time not even taking that bottle out of the cabinet. What changed?”

The words he could have said got stuck in his throat.

What changed?

Everything.
"So, what’s on your mind, Bobby?" Chris asked again, taking careful sip from his glass. Still savoring the flavor as he eyed him intently. Expression open – like a predator inviting its prey to take the floor. Only softer, gentler, as he fingered the neck of the bottle he’d brought over with him to the couch with a subtle flare of crooked fingers.

“Honestly, you wouldn’t believe me if I tried,” he whispered.

“You might be surprised,” Chris replied, gaze piercing. Watched first hand as the blue-foam flecks of the man’s eyes darkened and rippled outwards. Pupils over large with the potent liquor, but still razor sharp.

He swallowed hard.

And yeah, maybe he would.

He drove him home in the morning after a failed attempt at pancakes and a brief scuffle over the use of his tiny little French Press. Because apparently he hadn’t been hallucinating when Chris told him he’d run all the way from the trail to his house like a complete weirdo.

And really, when did utter and complete insanity become so flatteringly hot?

Only problem was, when he came home he could still smell him. In his car. On his clothes. In the seat opposite him at the table. On the couch. It was like the man had glued himself to the inside his nostrils. Thick and inescapable as his dick twitched in response – jerking like his nose and his prick were connected to the same string. Firming up against his zipper – going from half-mast to full interest fast enough to make his head spin - as he breathed it in. Getting in as much as possible before exhaling shakily.

“Shut up,” he muttered, glaring weakly at the bulge in his jeans as he leaned back against the door. Feeling mildly harassed as the man’s words rang loud in his head. Promising that if he wasn’t at the trail the next morning he’d be at his door, bright and early. Ready to drag him out for breakfast personally – whether he wanted to or not.

Oh god.

He rubbed at his face, the callouses on his palm rough and flaking in a way he didn’t remember feeling before. It was almost enough to tear his attention away from the profoundly disturbing problem going on south of the border as he tried to remind himself that he wasn’t some sex-crazed teenage deviant anymore. And that he probably should have at least a modicum of self-control over his own libido by now.

His cheeks heated, overwhelmed by a sudden onslaught of sensory information as he slumped into the living room - eyes darting back and forth like he half expected the man to be standing right there, waiting for him.

It was all impossible information.

Things he shouldn’t have been able to pick out.

Because he could tell where the man had slept on the couch and how he’d stayed in the same
position for most of the night. He could tell how deep the man’s scent had permeated into the fibers. Hell, he could even pick out the siren call of arousal that’d threaded itself deep – like sometime during the night the man had ground himself up against-

*Oh, for the love of crap!*

He needed a cold shower.

Or maybe the end of the world via a second Ice Age.

But yeah, a sub-zero shower needed to happen, like yesterday already.

It didn’t help.

And he still hated himself.

Go figure.
He spent the next month after Allie Henson's rescue not so quietly going stir-crazy. It wasn't just restlessness or the whole not sleeping thing – which, he was pretty sure was going to become a serious issue sooner rather than later. *It was everything.*

Something was wrong – off.

Something was wrong with *him*.

Something *had* been wrong with him for a while now.

Something was-

His back door creaked – rusty and piercing when he exploded out of it at five in the morning for the eighth time in a row in a vain attempt to stop himself from thinking about it. Avoiding everything. The anxious churn of his gut. The not sleeping. The sudden rise in appetite. The boundless energy. Strength. The increase in half forgotten dreams that ended with him kicking off cum-slicked shorts halfway through the night. Getting humiliating flashbacks to the wet-dreams of puberty as he suffered through a purgatory of continuous *wantneedmusthave* – especially whenever Chris was around. Even the snatches of lost time he'd experienced in the woods. The certainty he'd felt when he'd caught the girl's scent. The itch that had started crawling under his skin not long after the whole CDC thing. He ignored it all in favor of letting his feet beat a new tempo as they carried him deeper and deeper into the woods during his morning runs.

It had been a chore once. He remembered that. Keeping himself fit enough to keep up with the brats as he chased them around the field with his whistle. Only, somewhere along the line, all that had changed. Now he needed it – *craved it*. Now he was throwing himself into harder and harder routines at the gym just to exhaust himself so he could get some sleep at night.

He ran with Chris in the mornings every day now. The routine unspoken but welcome. They did breakfast almost as much. But even when they didn't, they still finished their run together. Heading back to their cars, laughing, sweating – being men, he guessed. Only when he got into his car, he just guzzled water. Looking like he was going to leave until Chris waved and pulled out of the gravel lot. Waiting until the diesel rattle of the man's truck hitting the blacktop wafted back before he scooped himself out of his seat and back onto the trail. He wasn't sure why he didn't tell him. Why he went through the same charade a handful of times a week. He'd played with it more than once, telling himself he didn't want to hurt the man's feelings. Telling himself he wasn't doing anything wrong. That he was just using it as a water break – socializing.

But every time he unstuck his throat long enough to tell him. To nod the man on and continue along the trail when Chris packed it in for the day and made no mention of breakfast, a soft little voice always managed to bury deep. Whispering and fearful with some long forgotten instinctual tell as every inch of him went on point. *Alert.* Quivering with the knowledge that all roads from that conversation would only lead to more questions and side-eying. To Deaton doing a repeat of that really creepy encounter in the Supermarket at nine thirty at night in the middle of a profoundly awful rainstorm not long after the Allie Henson thing. Something that'd ended with him rabbiting down the frozen foods section, tail between his legs. Biting down on the urge to turn and show his teeth and not stop until the man ducked his head and looked away. Crowding him into the baked goods section until the scent of the man's submission wafted clean and clear in the changing air.

So, yeah, something inside – a voice, a feeling, a *whatever* - urged him to be careful.
Predator to predator.

And for once, he listened.

But soon, even that second wind a couple times a week wasn't enough. He started running in the evenings as well, a dangerous thing in Beacon Hills, he knew. But he couldn't help it. He had to get out. Had to feel the air on his skin. Breathing in the scent of crushed pine and ripped up sod. He started straying from the pavement and well-worn trails in favor of going cross-country. Finding a strange, visceral sort of joy in it as he leapt over fallen trees and wound his way through the wilderness. Demanding more and more out of his burning muscles than he knew his whole almost-pushing-forty-thing could safely do anymore.

*Only he could.*

*And he loved it.*

And yeah, that was new.

Awesome, but new.

And from what he could tell, it'd paid off. His mirror, for example, was a lot more complimentary these days. His clothes fit a little better. Snugger in the chest and arms then he swore they'd been before. Not that he'd been out of shape. *Hell no.* It was more like, he'd accidentally managed to recover his old twenty-something definition. Back when he'd actually given half a crap and had less than a quarter of the responsibility he currently did now.

*Jesus Christ, he had abs now. How was that even a thing?!!*

It was almost like his doctor-ordered exercises after the whole 'arrow impalement thing' he was still repressing had spawned a pre-mid-life crisis – minus the penis shaped sports car.

Problem was, he wasn't as much of an idiot as his students probably liked to believe.

He wished he was.

But he wasn't.

And despite the confusing, conflicting mess that was currently his life, there was one feeling he just couldn't shake. One thing he knew for sure. One thing he knew down to the dense porcelain of his bones and the spidering creep of the blood vessels that layered over top of them.

*Something was coming.*

He could feel it.

Something different.

Something new.

Something that twitched under his skin like hackles threatening to rise.

*Something bad.*

And he had a strong suspicion that he wasn't the least bit prepared for it.

But hey, what else was new?
Chapter 5

Willful obliviousness was a survival mechanism he'd perfected early on in Beacon Hills. He had a set of rules he lived by. A mantra that'd kept him more or less intact - minus that stupid arrow - over the years.

He didn't dwell on the crazy shit. He didn't get in bed with the crazy shit. He didn't get curious. In fact, like any sane person, he pretended the crazy stuff never happened. He looked the other way. Kept walking. Kept on pretending that there had to be some sort of logical, rational explanation for all the weirdness that went down around him on a regular basis.

As far as he was concerned, he had it all figured out. He didn't ask why there were chains in Stilinski's locker or why the spazz-attack usually spent half his class pouring over crime scene photos. He didn't ask why Scott and Stiles attached themselves to the team strays or why he got the feeling that far more went on behind the scenes in his own locker room than he probably ever wanted to know.

He didn't wonder how a trapped arrow had found itself lodged in his chest. He didn't push it when no one at the CDC could give him a satisfying answer for why he went from feeling like the utter shit of the earth to one hundred and ten percent fine in less than a day. Hell, he didn't even allow himself to dwell on how McCall, a kid so asthmatic and fledgling that you might have expected his own mother to have done a mercy kill ages ago. A kid who he'd watched train for seasons - suddenly turn into not only an all-star player, but one with team captain potential almost overnight.

No, he'd just taken his blessings where he could and stuck his head firmly in the sand. Because while it wasn't the prettiest or most inspiring thing in the world, it was the smart play. Play smart. Be smart. Win smart. Or, in other words- survive.

So, that was why, one night - just before he'd wrapped up the last of his end of season paperwork - when the sound of screams, gunshots and inhuman growls echoed from the lower lacrosse field, he almost called 911 and walked the other way.

Almost.

He ran to the window, nearly upsetting a stack of precariously balanced invoices as his chair shot out from under him with a scream of stressed suspensions and worn out screws. Trying to see through the gloom - because, yes - of course there would be fog – that'd settled across the upper field.

He slammed over to the filing cabinet and fished out his binoculars. Fiddling with the focus one handed as he smacked the redial on his phone with growing panic. No one was answering. What the hell?! Something was going down on HIS field and what? No one was home at the big house?! This was what his tax dollars were doing? No way was he going to stand for that.

When he finally got them to focus, he nearly dropped them all over again. Hands shaking – shock-numb - as he caught the tail-end of a muzzle flash, highlighting hulking figures and writhing shapes. People dressed like- was that a skull? An animal skull?! Christ. He jammed them back on his face, nearly taking out his god damned eyeballs as a smaller figure flew backwards, hitting the light pole. Short circuiting it so that the field was momentarily bathed in a flash of blinding light and, oh-
Sweet fucking Jesus.

Then he was running.

The truth about the almost pro-thing was complicated.

And embarrassing.

And weird.

But mostly just complicated.

The truth was he could have gone pro. Pro Lacrosse. Pro cross-country. He'd had the skills. The drive. He'd never let it go public, but yeah, he could have. There hadn't been a sport that the school had offered that he hadn't tried for a least a season. But going pro would have meant leaving Beacon Hills and for some reason he just hadn't been able to do that. It had been everything he'd ever wanted and he'd just-stalled.

He'd thrown away the first letter. The second. Even the third. His own coach nearly had a nervous breakdown when the semi-pro scouts started blowing up his phone instead. Ending up sitting him down and giving him that same stupid speech he'd given McCall years ago about meth of all things, trying to get his head back in the game. Telling him that eventually the universities would stop calling. That eventually they'd move on and leave him spinning in the dust. And they did. And for reasons he still didn't understand, he'd breathed a sigh of relief alongside that of self-hatred and disgust.

He careened down the dark hall, keys thumping and ill-regular tempo against his thigh as he almost collided with the main supply closet. He ignored the Lacrosse and Basketball gear and instead dove towards the dusty back.

Where were they?

*Dammit, this was the last time he let Greenburg do inventory!*

Where-

The quiver of rusty, short-stocked javelins felt remarkably insufficient in his hands as he crept down the embankment on the edge of the field. A far cry from the confidence they'd brought when he'd fished them out of a tangle of climbing gear and taken off down the hill at something just less than stampede-speed.

*But now?*

*Now he felt like he was bringing a wooden bayonet into World War Three.*

He probably could have stood there for years and still not understood exactly what he was seeing. It wasn't just surreal, it was impossible. Completely, profoundly, *stupidly* impossible. It was like a dystopia, an offending reality poisoning the ground around it the longer it stayed put. Like a cancer spreading, he inhaled, hating it. Watching as the hulking shapes wrapped in fur and bone slashed the
air inches from Kira's whirling sword. They weren't right. Those things. They were meat puppets. An abomination of nature. Imbalanced and stringed through with unnatural regrets and awful power.

He didn't know how he knew, he just did.

He could smell it – *taste it on the air*.

As it was, he got most of the situation in snatches and formed his own assumptions from there. The distant shouts and growls turned out to be a battle raging where half of the soldiers were his own damn students. Stiles, McCall, Liam, Lydia, Malia, Kira - the same core group he saw almost every day. He caught flashes of the Sheriff and Parrish embroiled in the same hot mess. Back to back with Chris and Derek who were right in the thick of it as a woman – blonde and completely terrifying - flashed insanely long teeth and slashed into Scott's chest. Scott who was all glowing red eyes, pointed ears and oh-

Well, all that weirdness certainly made a whole lot more sense now.

Sort of.

Okay, not really, but he was working on it.

The thing about Lacrosse was that it was a game that was at least fifty percent strategy as it was anything else. All the parts - strength, speed, skill could be working in tandem, but if you didn't have a good game play? Well, you might as well not get out of the bus.

And, just like all his strategies, once applied to teenagers and a random assortment of grown ass adults who clearly should have known better, naturally it all went *tit up* before it'd even started.

Kind of like right now.

Because before he could get into a position he figured would give him the cover and distance he needed to let loose the second coming, four things happened in quick succession. The sheriff's gun jammed. Chris had to reload. Lydia screamed high and wailing loud. And one of the crazy animal skull people flung Kira and Liam to the side and grabbed Scott by the throat. Raising him high in the air and wrenching his throat to the side, baring it as the angry cat lady slithered up, triumph clear.

After that, there wasn't time to do anything but react.

"Hey!" he yelled, getting their attention as all three of them turned, giving him the opening he needed as he hauled back and let the first javelin fly. Feeling the burn in his arm and the sick jerk deep in his gut when it lanced clear through the thing’s head. Punching through the narrow gap in its helmet to pierce sideways, temple to temple.

"Get your claws off my team!"
"Run!" he yelled to Scott as the kid staggered, clutching his ribs as the thing that'd been holding him crumpled and the crazy cat lady hissed. Yowling high and viciously surprised. Only the kid didn't because apparently some things never changed and McCall was still an idiot. An idiot with red eyes, long teeth and claws and okay- maybe he could stay.

"Coach! Get out of here! Go! Don't-"

He missed the next one, aiming for the woman but missing by millimeters when she dodged with unnatural speed. Sending the javelin hissing off into the long grass as he fumbled with the third. Feeling the ground shake as two of her skullied up cronies started running down on the field towards him.

"Bobby! Run!"

He should have.

But he didn't.

In fact, he barely even flinched. Some unknown feeling kept him grounded. Telling him to dig in his heels and fight back. Surety burning in his blood like lit adrenaline as he drew his arm back, vision tunneling. Screaming like a maniac as his next shot took down the one on the left, piercing its thigh clean through as it stumbled and roared. Falling to its knees and spasming – all animal confusion and spreading rage. Body riddled with bullets as Chris, Parrish and the Sheriff unloaded into it. Keeping it occupied as the horrible thing struggled to get up under the onslaught.

*For fucks sakes, did these things ever die?!*

He was so focused on aiming at the one still coming at him that the sudden, hissing slash of sharp claws scoring down his back from behind came as something of a surprise. Making him arc, wordless, javelin slipping from nerveless fingers as he fell to his knees, crumpling. Feeling every inch of the butter-soft tear as her claws sunk deep and ripped away – flesh burning.

"Bobby! No!"

He screamed without sound, body contorting. Knees hitting the dirt as exposed nerves spread agony like liquid flame all the way down his back. Feeling the hot rush of blood welling up and streaming down as the tatters of his jacket fluttered in the growing wind. His mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Feeling his lungs strain even though he had no words to back them up. Not sure if he even wanted to try fighting off the static that was threatening at the edges. The far corners of the field splaying dark. Highlighting the fighting figures as Chris' gun went lax in his arms - watching in horror, frozen and cut off.

"Coach! **Coach**!"

He looked up, fingers curling in the long grass as a haze of gun-smoke wafted through the foggy chill. Watching as a couple different mouths made the same sound. His boys. His team. Chris. Yes. Chris. He found him again in the haze, watching as the man's lips pulsed and spread. Wondering if they were thinking the same thoughts. Courting the same regrets. Or if-

He kept his eyes on him – refusing to look away. Not even when the woman circled, looking from him to Chris before laughing, low and throaty. Growling an order as the creature closest hauled him
up by the neck, bone dagger flashing high.

"No! Kate! Please! NO!"

He blinked, not understanding as a sudden trickle of blood seeped down from parted lips. Coating across his teeth as the thing rumbled in triumph. Keeping him pinned, feet swinging impotently half a meter off the ground as he looked down in time to watch the point of a dagger blossom out the front of his chest.

He didn't feel it.

That was the strange part.

The good part.

The bad part.

He couldn't feel a thing.

His head nodded off to the side - catching movie reel footage of the carnage around him. The broken off yell as the Sheriff held Stiles back. The way Scott, Liam and Malia were racing across the field, speed inhuman but still too far away to make any difference. Kira crumpled in a heap by the end zone, unmoving. The stricken look on Chris' face as they shared something without words, something like an apology for what could have been as the grim line of Parrish's mouth thinned further. Putting bullet after bullet into the creature holding him. Feeling the impact like shock waves through muscle and bone as he kicked without strength, digging his fingers into its arm as he tried desperately to breathe.

He searched its face on reflex – desperate. But the eyes were dead and unfeeling. Making him quail as the darkness stared back. There were no warmth in them. The spark, the thing that'd made them human was long gone. Lost in a broiling pot of blind obedience and mindless animal rage. But that didn't stop him from gasping, pleading. Using the last bit of breath he had in him to try and bargain for his own life.

"What did you think you were going to do?" the woman hissed, prowling around them. Features caught somewhere between feline and human, all smooth planes and razor sharp teeth as she showed him the curl of one of her claws, snapping them straight as a strip of jacket-covered skin was flicked off into the long grass. Purring with a sick sort of pleasure as her delicate tongue licked the digit clean.

"You thought you could save them? Save him? You're nothing. No one. Weak. Hell, you're even more useless than my brother," she sneered. Voice taking on a timbre that he already figured would get old quick. Over confident and hyper aggressive, like the shitty super villains that haunted late night TV and those awful sci-fi movies he enjoyed hating too much to turn off.

She gripped his chin, slicing lines down either side of his cheek – holding him firm when he tried to wrench himself away. The scent of her burning inside his nostrils like something acrid and on the edge of rotting. Offensive and over strong – stinking like overcompensation. Like desperation hidden behind madness and a brave face.

"You smell pretty," she purred, ducking her head close as Chris tried to push through the crowd, cursing and fighting when Parrish and the Sheriff held him back. "I can see why he likes you."

"But then again," she added salaciously, tracing the weeping cut she'd carved into his cheek with cruel finger. The wound on his back throbbing in time as the sensation of phantom knives settled
down roots amongst dying synapses as the world went distinctly fuzzy around the edges. "My brother has never been the best judge of character when feelings are involved. After all, look at me. Did you know he was supposed to kill me? He couldn't do it. And now, look at this mess."

He tipped his head to the side, eyes unfocused as she snorted in disgust. Watching over the curl of her shoulder as the creature he'd pierced through the thigh with the javelin pulled it clean out, wound healing like it hadn't been there at all.

And wow, unfair much?

That was a foul on the play.

Cheating.

It wasn't-

But that was when he remembered.

Strategy.

His hand scuffled on the thing's arm for purchase as it ripped the knife free. Head tipping back, weak, not having to play it up as he waited for the right moment. Until the thing lifted the dagger again and he let one of his hands drop behind him. Fingers slick with his own red as they curled around the stock of the flare gun he'd shoved in the back of his belt like an afterthought - practically swimming out of the mess Greenburg had made of the supply room when he'd spotted the case and grabbed it on a whim.

He might be dead, but he could give the others a fighting chance.

Time to run.

Time to regroup.

Time to-

"Heal this," he snarled, using the last of his strength to wrench his arm up and jam the barrel of the gun between its teeth. Pulling the trigger as the world promptly exploded into a haze of fire and darkness.

The force of the woman’s backhand sent him flying. Tumbling ass over tit into the brush and down the embankment that ringed the treeline. Landing in a painful pile of ripped clothes and ragged strips of skin as he slammed into a mouldering log and tried to remember how to breathe.

The relative silence that ushered in its wake was almost eerie.

He kind of hated it immediately.

"So, this is how I die," he muttered, more or less okay with it. Dying wasn't that bad actually. He felt almost okay? Fine? There was pain sure, but even that was distant and unimportant. Separated from the fight and all the impossible shit that it entailed, the world seemed remarkably calm. Teetering on a balance between good and bad, but weirdly relaxed all the same.

Internally he knew what this was. It was nature trying to work itself out. He didn't know how or why, he just knew. Live or die, it was about restoring that balance. And not just to Beacon Hills, but everywhere. This was bigger than them. Bigger than all of them. Except it was here that nature was
making her stand. A focus point where the lines between worlds blurred and the fates, like Lady Justice, used their scales to weigh the blood of both the innocent and the guilty alike.

He looked up, watching the clouds flirt like wisps between the stars. Wheezing as his vision blurred and the lung he was pretty sure had been punctured somewhere along the line, deflated completely. Still, he didn't regret it. It'd been right. Protecting his boys – his team. Chris. They deserved to be kept safe. Deserved to have a fighting chance. Every chance.

He just wished that-

Happy thoughts. He told himself, squeezing his eyes shut as the blare of gunshots started up again – grieving and angry. Happy thoughts. Happy thou-

He looked down at his hands, blinking. Huffing with fuzzy amusement when he couldn't get his eyes to clear. Unsure of what to think about it when his nails started to harden. Growing thick, dark and long as his dying brain tried to make sense of it. Dwelling on it for a handful of moments before giving up as a sear of warmth shuddered through him.

He let his hand fall back to the ground beside him. Thoughtlessly digging the tips into the soft loamy dirt as the moist cold of the ground hit his skin like steam rising. Letting go of reality in fractions as the skin around his mouth pulled taut. Crawling with the itch of a dozen different muscles he swore he'd never felt before – clenching, releasing and expanding.

Anger. He recognized the emotion burning heavy in his chest slowly. Almost like he was a stranger inside his own skin. An outsider to the process as a feral sort of rage laced red across his vision. Making everything simple, clear – profound – as he bared his teeth to the quarter-moon. Feeling the rightness of it soaking into his skin as the dry snap of breaking bones echoed around him.

Inside him.

He didn't understand that.

He didn't need to.

Because when the long lonely howl of a pained young Alpha echoed out like a last stand, he knew without question that in the middle of all this madness, that was something he did understand.

He woke up on his kitchen floor, ass naked and covered in blood, to a flurry of knocking on the front door. He was dirty and smeared with mud, littered with stuck-on leaves and spindly twigs as pale limbs splayed out. Arrowing back to the rear door, which, for some reason, was wide open.

He blinked down at dirty tiles, letting the very unflattering string of drool stay where it was as he lifted his head cautiously. Gritty fingers slip-sliding on half-dried wet as he levered himself up in inches. Groaning as what felt like every single muscle involved pinged in protest.

Jesus Christ, he felt like he'd gotten hit by a bus.

Or, you know, an asteroid.

Maybe a small moon.

"Come in," he answered reflexively, stupid and bemused as he stared uncomprehendingly at his
blood-caked hands. Grownly cognizant of the gore trapped under his fingernails and the taste of red that still flirted with the plush of his lower lip.

He blinked again, wide, deliberate and slow. But nothing changed. The stain stayed. Hell, everything stayed. He just stared blankly. Not really aware of what was going on outside of his own head as a brief, half-panicked scuffle broke out on the front stoop. There were a handful of familiar voices, something about "doing this properly" and "not knowing for sure," before he lost interest and let his hands fall into his lap. Cock flaccid and caught in the crease of his thigh.

He didn't feel much of anything really. Everything was just sort of numb. Which was actually kind of okay considering he probably would have been freaking out. Should have been freaking out. Because let's be honest, he wasn't calm in emergency situations. He was an emergency situation. That was how he dealt with all the crap he didn't know how to deal with. By vocalizing everything that came to mind without filter. Usually very loudly.

But right now? Right now he was riding the not caring train all the way to the station.

That's because you are in shock, you idiot.

He was still having an inner debate with himself when the door creaked open and a small herd of people peered around the door jamb. He stared up at them uncomprehendingly. Feeling a fragile smile spread when he caught sight of Chris behind the Sheriff's right shoulder. Trying and failing to find a reason to get too concerned about it when Stiles, Parrish and Lydia's mouths dropped open like they were one animal. Scott and Derek sniffing the air like bloodhounds, eyes flashing before-

He followed their gaze, looking down at himself and hey- pants.

Those would have probably been good.

Boxers, maybe.

Briefs, even.

Not well, nothing.

He looked up at them again, a worrisome blanket of static spreading. Idly realizing that Chris had pushed to the forefront and was looking down at him with eyes that had started to warm in increments. Expression disjointed, torn between relief and something that looked a whole lot like a very healthy dose of inner conflict before-

"Well, this is awkward," he drawled weakly, promptly solving the problem of what came next by passing clean out before any of them could say so much as a word in response.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

*This chapter is told in Chris Argent's perspective.

"Bobby! No!"

There was a weight on his chest. A familiar thousand pound cancer curdling heavy in his throat that paged back through the years - decades, centuries, maybe more. Hearkening all the way to the beginning before yanking him right back. Back to the present where Bobby had just disappeared, bloody and dying over a distant ridge. Where Kate had strips of skin hanging from her claws and Scott was falling backwards – whining. Insides spilling out as he clutched at them, trying to keep them in as Kate laughed and swiped her claws again.

He hissed air through his teeth, vision blurred as a sudden sheen of tears nearly unmanned him. Forcing himself to blink them back, blink them all back as he compartmentalized. Forcing himself to forget, just for a little while, that yet another person he cared about had gotten caught in the crosshairs.

It flashed stark and crimson-slick in his mind's eye. How Bobby had charged onto the field. Eyes flashing dark, throwing himself into a confrontation he had to know he couldn't win. But did it anyway because of them – him - because it was the right thing to do. Because that's what he'd always done, ever since they'd been lanky freshmen together and he found himself picking the kid's ass out of the dirt every other day. Wrestling with that ever present curl of recognition every time their palms had met and he'd brushed the stupid idiot clean of dead grass and dust.

He'd ignored it.

Ignored that little voice in the back of his head telling him to look closer.

To take a chance.

To fucking get over himself and not care what people might say and just-

He bit down on the inside of his cheek and ruthlessly shoved the pain away, locking it down in a box only he had the key to as he raised his gun and squeezed the trigger. His bullet missed her by less than half an inch. But the next three caught her square in the center mass, sending her yowling away from Scott as he skidded through the wet grass. Catching the kid before he fell as they went down together. Gripping his shoulder's as the Alpha panted – whining – red eyes dull. Threatening to go dark as he slapped clawed hands out of the way and jammed a bit of intestine back into the wound. Pressing down hard as it started to heal.

Slowly.

Too slowly.

He looked up, taking it in. Half-deaf as Parrish and the Sheriff covered them. Too bad they were losing. The one Bobby had one-shotted with the javelin barely made a dent. He squinted through the fog of gun smoke. Watching detachedly as Kate turned her sights on Stiles and Lydia, lips pulled
back in an ugly snarl as she tossed her hair back, berserkers closing in on either flank.

He was a soldjer. Good at taking orders. Smart but not too smart. His wife had always been the thinker. Like his little girl. Like Allison. But a good soldjer always knew when he was outmatched. When they couldn't win. Only thing was, they didn't have much say in the matter either way. The decision to either retreat or go for the gold was made for them -above them. They were the ones that gave the orders. Who you were supposed to follow and trust. The people that decided who lived and who died. People like Gerald and-

But maybe he wasn't just the good soldjer anymore. Maybe, like Derek, somewhere along the line he'd evolved. Gotten smarter. Harder. Started thinking for himself. Outside of the box. Setting fire to a rulebook that'd left his ass out to dry one too many times for him to believe blindly anymore. More liable to bend than break clean in half.

So maybe that was what made him do it. What sent chills of burning heat shivering through his blood as the taste of ferocity slicked across his tongue like living blood. What made him bold – brave – even when every cell was screaming. Watching his own death in slow motion as a Berserker sent Malia and Liam flying, forcing Stiles and Lydia to scramble back. Pale and unprotected as Parrish and the Sheriff realized one moment too late that they'd been cut off and-

"Call them, Scott," he urged, nose nudging against a pointed ear as he leaned close, desperate. Feeling the liquidy squelch of pooling fluids lap like waves over the top of his hand. Feeling the shredded skin slowly knit itself as he held the wounds closed. Feeling the pressure points of claws through the rough of his jacket as the kid clung to him - painfully young.

All of them were.

Allison had been right.

Right to-

"They'll band together for their Alpha – for you," he yelled, feeling the heat of him burning fever-hot against his chest as Scott looked up at him. Understanding dawning like an unhappy ending a long time coming. Like regardless of the choices they'd both made, it was always going to come down to right here and right now. And them with everything to lose.

"If this is going to be a last stand, let's do it properly, huh?"

Scott nodded. Gritting a nightmare-mix of sharp fangs and blunt human teeth before he dug his claws deep into the torn up sod, tossed back his head and howled.

None of them were really expecting the deafening roar that answered.

Part of him knew the moment that roar echoed out. Feeling the vibrations ripple through the air before settling deep and permanent under his skin. Part of him knew when the massive bear smashed its way through the trees and into the field. Razor sharp claws flinging massive clods of dirt as it got in front of Malia, Stiles and Lydia and sent the two closest Berserkers flying. Part of him knew when it circled close, posturing and huffing, keeping its huge bulk – easily three or four times larger than any bear was supposed to grow - between them and Kate as it reared up on two legs. Musky and snapping as it growled and ground its teeth. Not even so much as flinching as Kate hissed and danced forward. Slashing ineffectually at its hairy pelt before one meaty smack of its paw sent her flying. Shocked and wounded as fear flashed in the whites of her blood-shot eyes for the first time
since she'd cornered them.

Part of him had always known.

But he didn't really let himself accept it until the bear ripped apart the last Berserker like tissue paper and disappeared into the brush after Kate with a long, loping gallop. He didn't accept it until the lull gave him the opportunity to slide Scott's head onto Kira's lap and stumble into the tree-line where he'd last seen him. Yelling Bobby's name as the forest muted itself to stillness, anxiously waiting for the other shoe to drop. Vaguely aware of Derek and Parrish at his heels, yelling for him to stop, to slow down, but he couldn't because his heart was pounding. Choking and thick in his throat because Bobby was out there somewhere, bleeding and probably dead and all because of-

Only they didn't find him.

All they did was a pile of shredded clothes and a trail of ripped up undergrowth that led all the way back to the Lacrosse field. There was steam still rising from the ripped up soil as the paw prints of the great bear took over where human left off. Leaving him with nothing to do but reach down and pick up a sliced up pair of runners – the same ones the man wore on the trail every morning - as something tight - something like hope and dread mixed together, coiled like sick in his gut.

When he looked up, it was Derek's eyes he met.

"Find him."

He was still clutching the torn up shoe in his fist as Derek nodded and took off running. Shifting in mid-stride as the Sheriff and Stiles staggered into the hollow behind them just in time to watch the forest swallow him – panting, pale and drawn.

The 'keep him safe' was silent.

But by this point he was pretty sure the younger man knew anyway.
Chapter 8

The shift from sleep to wakefulness wasn't gradual or even staggered. It was like a switch had been flipped. He went from nothing to everything in point three seconds when his eyes snapped open and the sound of a heartbeat – distinctly not his own - hiccuped in its rhythm.

"Hey, hey- you're alright," Chris soothed, chair creaking as he leaned forward, knuckles firming into the edge of the mattress like he wanted to touch but couldn't quite bring himself to risk it. "I've got you."

He blinked, the motion exaggerated. Eyes clearing out the crusts of sleep and pillow-blur before looking down at himself, uncertain for a smattering of beats. Realizing he'd been laid out across his bed, covered in a thin blanket and nothing else. Bare skin more or less clean as a basin of dirty, red-stained water slosh-sloshed gently at the man's side.

And wow, really?

The connotations of that were just a little bit more than his uncaffeinated mind could take at the moment. Because first, that meant that someone probably had to carry his naked ass across the house and into his bed. Naked. As in without apparel. Naked. And in front of at least a good quarter of his Lacrosse team. His students for Christ sakes! And then the sponge bath. Which, honestly, was too much for him to dwell on right now. Especially if he was right about who'd done the actual sponging and-

Oh for the love of crap! Could his life get any more like a bad lifetime movie on the Women's network?!

"What happened?" he croaked, for once sounding about as horrible as he felt. Fingers splaying out, searching and fitful across the coverlet as blood-rimmed nails flashed damningly into view. Very much aware that all this was really just a smoke screen for the fact that he was drawing a big fat blank on the last few hours. That he had no idea how he'd gotten here or when he'd gotten home from his mound of paperwork or if-

"I could ask you the same question," Chris hedged, like he was holding something back. Absolutely nothing like the sly looks they'd started exchanging over the breakfast table at the diner for the past few months. Nothing like the banter that edged so close to flirtation he wasn't sure where the line between them stood anymore – or even if there was one. All that warm familiarity culled by a razor-edge of careful professionalism he'd never noticed before.

He hated it. Hated it because it felt like distance. Betrayal. Fear.

He blew out a long breath between his teeth before levering himself up against the head board – muscles screaming. Letting the sheet slide down to his navel as bruised toes wriggled free on the opposing edge.

"Well, then we are both going to be disappointed because I have no freaking idea."

He looked up at his ceiling, seeing an imprint of the night sky and a precarious quarter moon rather than the oddly-shaped water stain and uneven plaster. It was a weird sort of double-vision, only it didn't go away when he shook himself, scrunching his eyes closed for a handful of beats before opening them again. Hell, if he closed his eyes he might even be able to taste the tang of his own red trickling between his teeth. Hazing in and out like gun smoke and fog as Chris' face took shape in the
gloom. Fierce, gun aimed and-

He jerked, electric.

"The field!" he blurted, remembering. Sitting bolt upright as his knee popped, nearly braining Chris in the face as the sheet fluttered back to earth and he was scrabbling at the covers for purchase. Frantic after the fact as the rusty taint of iron – iron from the javelins he'd thrown, killing one of them threatened to overwhelm him completely - "That woman! Crazy Cat woman!? You were there. She was trying to- the kids?! Are they okay? Is everyone still-

The expression on the man's face flickered, shifting gears in pieces until a warm hand curled around his shoulder – weighty and calming – as the man leaned forward, mouth moving. Sending a fresh burst of his scent tumbling through the air. Worn leather. Dirt. Gun oil. And something that was uniquely Chris. Something he would recognize anywhere. Something that-

"They're fine, Bobby. You saved us, all of us. Don't-

But he wasn't listening. Instead, his hand flew to his chest. Feeling the phantom sear of the dagger point piercing straight through. He twisted, desperate, heart pounding. Mindless of the sheets pooling in his lap and the swathe of pale freckled skin he was showing as he craned his neck, trying to see his back.

"That woman," he hiccupped. "Those things. I was dead. I felt it. How? I was dead!" he repeated, trailing off uncertainly, body thrumming with misplaced adrenaline a couple hours too late as he buried his fingers in the dark blue cotton down and tugged. Ramping up to what promised to be a truly spectacular panic attack as his breathing raced – shallow and pitchy at the close. "Did all that actually happen? Like with the claws and the crazy-

The chair squeaked, a precursor to Chris leaning forward, before-

"Do you want the short answer or the long one?"

He glared.

Asshole.

Then glared harder, forgetting about all the reasons why he should be freaking out in favor of watching in real time as Chris' expression gradually morphed from humor - or maybe a thinly disguised emotional breakdown, it was hard to tell from this angle – to a full out frown that gained traction like a tidal wave. Racing for shore as the soft lines on the man's face sharpened and he knew – just knew – he was in for it a good ten seconds before the man even opened his mouth.

Because alongside of dragging him to bed and playing nurse-maid, it seemed as though Chris had also been nursing a not so insignificant amount of righteous rage to flavor his juvenile sense of humor that insisted on making corny jokes in the middle of his pre-mid-life crisis.

"Christ, Bobby. What were you thinking?" Chris rumbled lowly, like it could have been a snap if the words were sharper. "You had no idea what you were dealing with – who you were dealing with. You could have died! Do you have any idea what I would have done if you'd-

And no.

Stop right there.

That was just unfair.
"It wasn't like he'd asked for this!

"Well excuse me if I didn't come prepared for a Mexican standoff a'la the supernatural," he snipped, sarcasm dripping slow like molasses. Grated raw and exposed as he gritted his teeth and forced himself to keep his eyes front and center. Refusing to back down on this when he knew he was right. When he knew he'd done the right thing. The alternative hadn't even been an option.

What was he supposed to have done?

Turn tail and run?

Hell, no.

Not on his watch.

Not on his field.

Not with-

"I was in my office, finishing up paperwork!" he slapped back hotly, yanking at the sheets in his lap until they were a puddling fort of safety that made him feel a little less vulnerable. "Admin has been riding my ass about deadlines and I lost track of time. I was heading out for a coffee run when I heard- whatever that was. Actually, no. Fuck it. I want the WHOLE story. What the fuck was that?!"

The expression he got in return was more of a grimace than anything, like Chris knew how it sounded and hated himself just a little bit more when he forced the words out. Sounding like every shitty action movie ever where the hero sticks to his guns. Doing that stupidly attractive and stunningly overused: 'I can't involve you in the clusterfuck that is my life and you deserve better than me' tripe, right before the climax kissing shit that always tends to happen at dusk – facing a rolling horizon and-

Wait, did that make him the heroine?

Crap.

And okay, maybe he was letting his analogies get away from him a bit.

"It's complicated."

"I get that. But I'm still asking," he pressed, mashing his hands over his eyes until they flashed red and white. Blazing sporadically in the corners of his retinas like internal lightning strikes. Feeling like he was being extraordinarily patient with this entire shit-show as Chris did his best to edge and deflect.

"I don't know if I'm the best one to explain," the man admitted. Confusing him as a rapid-fire burst of emotion and conflicting signals rippled through the air above their heads. He could smell them, he realized. The emotions. Chris. Breathing him in on a level that layered itself deep, anchored and still as the world kept spinning around them.

He’d heard someone once say that everything had a scent. That anger aired out like the bitter tart of freshly cast iron. And that love always took the scent of the thing that comforted you the most. That smelled like home and grass clipping and that freshly baked bread your mom used to make before she discovered what a bread machine was - and coincidentally didn't stop talking about it for the next thirty-seven years. But he'd thought it was all a bunch of hippie bullshit designed to find your inner-hug-a-tree spirit and sell more bad, tie-dyed t-shirts on 420.
Not so much, apparently.

Not when Chris was sitting in front of him, smelling like exhaustion and grief. Like one close call too many and indecision that curled like a slow, simmering flame already threatening to burn. Like spilled gasoline inches from a lit match. And every warm, comforting thing he liked to drown himself in on the bad nights and keep close on the others.

"How do you fit into all of this?" he asked softly, fingers flexing. Having to physically restrain himself from crawling across the mattress to rearrange the frown that'd up taken residence. "You aren't like them…but you aren't like the Sheriff, are you?"

He cocked his head, breathing it in as Chris' expression softened fractionally in surprise. Startled to realize there was more. Half hidden under the surface and yearning to be coaxed out and smoothed. There was internal conflict laced with a falling face-first sort of determination that made for a disturbingly heady combination. Something that made him flinch as much as it did preen with pride. Part of him saw it as proof. Proof of how strong his mate was. How, despite everything that told him to run, to distance himself, Chris had already chosen him. Accepted him. Wanted him. And the other part-

Wait.

What?

He forced a sneeze, trying to clear his head. The entire thing made him itch. Fighting the instinct to just pull the man in and forget about everything else. Forget about the people waiting outside, snooping around his living room. Forget about how much his life royally sucked right now. Forget the paperwork he still had to finish and just roll Chris underneath him and press him down into the mattress until he didn't smell of anything other than him for the rest of his life. Sinking into every groove, every spare inch of him and just breathe. Maybe forever.

He didn't realize Chris has been talking this whole time until the chair creaked – seriously, did everything he own creak? – leaving him mentally scrambling to catch up. Getting the just of it pretty quickly as the man basically gave him a brief overview of the Argent family tree and who the crazy cat-lady with the sharp claws actually was and whhhhooboy.

Awkward.

"Hunting has been in my family for generations. As long as there have been wolves there have be hunters keeping them in check. Balanced. We make sure things like this – things of the supernatural variety - don't spill out into the normal world. Or try too, anyway. People getting caught in the crosshairs seems to be happening a lot lately. It wasn't always like this, but Beacon Hills is-

"And am I a supernatural thing?" he broke in, less of a question then it was a fact. It was an assertion he was still coming to grips with, but figured was pretty obvious by this point considering he'd kind of died – as in had the deed to the ol' farm in the sky clutched in his bloody hands - and now didn't have a scratch on him. Not to mention he'd gotten attacked by a were-jaguar, also known as Kate fucking Argent, who rolled with a posse of animal warriors. And had just watched a good chunk of his Lacrosse Team get sharp and hairy.

"Yes."

"So…conflict of interest much?" he sing-songed, fighting the urge to knock himself out with
something very heavy. Because honestly, consciousness was overrated and he was feeling vulnerable enough to start wounding with words if something in his life didn't start making sense. Like, pronto.

"Welcome to my life," Chris returned, chuckling darkly.

"No offence, but your life seems like shit," he returned, snippy but without the cruelty that could have tinted it as humor danced like a lit flame in the man's eyes.

And maybe it was because his world view had tilted more than seventy degrees in a truly horrifying direction since yesterday, but he found himself choking on a full out belly laugh. Contagious and clean as Chris snorted and followed him down, just like he knew he would.

They had to.

The alternative was crying or maybe throwing up and personally-

He'd take manly, slightly hysterical laughter any day.

He didn't realize he was scenting the air, chin tilted up until Chris caught his eye and he jerked like he'd been burned. Not even realizing he was doing it as embarrassment slithered like shame across his cheeks.

God, what the hell was he doing?

Get a hold of yourself, Finstock, you aren't a god damned animal.

"Uh. What's cooking?" he asked after a painfully awkward handful of beats. "You order take out from the diner or something?"

"No, that's probably Stiles, everyone has been up most of the night so Liam, Lydia and Parrish hit up the grocery store as soon as it opened."

"You let Stilinski loose in my kitchen?" he repeated, the idea not quite computing. Feeling a distinct pool of dread curl in his stomach as he pictured his oven spontaneously combusting. Setting the drapes on fire as the utter spaz attack ran around with a fire extinguisher that never quite managed to reach the flames. Legs flying out from under him as an entire carton of eggs smashed across the tiles, catapulting him out through the sliding glass door and killing his grass with the spewing remnants of the extinguisher.

"He's actually pretty good," Chris replied, putting the brakes on the nightmare currently unfolding in his mind's eye. "He's been cooking for his dad since grade school. From what I understand, he's basically pack-mom when it comes to stuff like this. Things get a bit crazy around the full moon, not to mention werewolves just eat a ton regardless."

He blinked, thinking he might have understood a good quarter of that before he grunted and decided he didn't care. His life was currently in shambles and he honestly had no time or energy to be sympathetic to anyone else's crazy right now.

"I will not be responsible for my actions if he blows up my kitchen," he grumbled, swallowing thickly. "I don't care how well he can flip on omelet." Surprised to realize he was almost drooling. Suddenly desperately hungry as he bit off a groan and swung his legs off the side of the bed.
Choosing not to comment when the man side eyed him like he knew exactly what he was thinking.

*Which, was really unfair by the way.*

He was still surveying the landscape of his floor as the aches and pains in his muscles gradually sorted themselves out. Half-wondering if he even had any clean clothes when Chris cleared his throat.

"Look, Bobby, I'm not sure what's going on with you or why. How it started or if it's ever going to stop. But I know you're confused - angry - god knows I understand," the man told him, fingers knuckling down his scalp with a sigh. Oblivious to the way the sun was slanting through the blinds, highlighting the odd silver hair in his stubble in a way that made his mouth go dry.

Unsure of what to do with the observation when he realized his hands were physically *aching* to touch. Wanting to bury them in the man's short hair and smooth it flat. Smearing his scent deep into the man's skin. Breathing in the scent of him, nose buried in the crook of his neck – calming and sure.

*There was recognition thrummed inside him now.*

*Animal and baser.*

*Almost like-*

"I know this is a lot to take in, but I need to know one thing. That thing you were going through? When I came over and you were- was this it?" Chris asked, words tight like he was trying not to lose them. Like he was steeling himself for something as the hunter captured his gaze and held it fast.

And yeah, he could see why. He'd taken lacrosse balls to the junk without protection that he'd rather hit repeat on than tackle *that* clusterfuck of a question. The hard part was it wasn't even about reluctance either. It was that he honestly didn't know anymore. He could guess a fair bit of it was, but at the same time it felt – *well* – like it'd been a long time coming. Like it had been something he'd been waiting on his entire goddammed life and as much as he wanted to run from it, he knew, *oh god he knew-*

"Yes- no?" he sighed, molars grinding together as the words came out about as shitty as he'd expected them to. All choppy and stream of conscious-style as he tried to make some sense out of the past few months and get it out in a hundred words or less. "Maybe? I think so, but honestly? I don't have a clue."

But Chris just nodded, pleased. Hell, he even caught a glimpse of a smile in there somewhere as the man's hand clasped his shoulder roughly. Catching him so off guard he nearly fell over.

"Good. If you had a half decent answer I wouldn't have believed it," Chris remarked, leaving him with the distinct impression he'd just been conned as the hunter's ridged posture relaxed in increments. "We should probably get out there. Deaton should have arrived by now and the others are waiting."

There was silence for a while after that. Sharing it equally between them as the soft sounds of hushed conversation floated in from the living room. Almost painfully normal before he finally stirred, stretching a bit as his stomach growled. This time a bit too insistently for him to ignore as he groaned. Half-heartedly weighing his options between food and having to put on pants before the sound of Stiles yodeling: *Breakfast time, chumps! Come and get it while it's hot!"* basically made the decision for him.
"I suppose it's time to face the music," he muttered.

It wasn't until he was halfway through the search for pants - for some reason just accepting the fact that Chris was going to stay there, half-slouched in the chair and watching him through the fan of his lashes – that something only just occurred to him.

"Wait, why do we need a vet?"

Then, sometime later-

"You think I am a WHA T?!!"
"You don't understand, it is more of a calling," Deaton hedged, looking like if he had any hair on his head he’d be pulling it out right now as he glared across the room at the veterinarian. Daring him to get close enough to snipe at as he kept himself wedged in the most cornerier of corners like he was preparing for the apocalypse.

"Well, call it back, because I don’t want it," he bugled. Refusing point blank to be reasonable about all this when he could just yell about it. Feeling a modicum of safety in his corner and through Chris’s silent – but distinctly long suffering support – at his side.

He just couldn't wrap his head around it. It didn't matter where he looked. Or how many times he watched Derek and Scott drop fang at him to prove that in fact, he was not hallucinating. It was almost hysterical in a sad sort of way. Brain going nope nope nope, like it was caught in a loop and scrambling to do an illegal u-turn as everything they'd told him added up and worse - started to make a whole lot of sense he wasn't ready for.

"You know, this was a lot more fun when I thought this was all a bad dream," he said plaintively. Thinking fond thoughts of his mindlessly boring life and all its equally boring routines that he'd stuck to like glue just as much as he’d voraciously hated them. Comfort in the familiar or whatever.

Of course, by that point Deaton was talking again. Saying stuff he should probably be paying attention to rather than working himself up into a tantrum. But he was being selfish and petty today, god damn it. He'd decided. He was taking a day off from reality. A full on siesta. A strike. Whatever you wanted to call it. Everything else could just kiss his ass as far as he was concerned.

He wanted his stupid life back. Before all the complicated bloody bits got involved. He didn't care how much McCall sung its praises, how he was better off - stronger. It was a double edged sword and the kid was dumber than dirt if he didn't get that the world had just made him its newest chew toy.

"The Honaw-Catsina or werebear," Deaton added, fixing Scott with a baleful glare for apparently coining the name in his absence. "Was supposed to be a protector. Known mostly only to the Native American tribes that came into contact with them. As you might guess their name varies from group to group, but the Honaw-Catsina was the last known surviving term for the creature. It was considered to be an ancient guardian of nature and the natural order. Its purpose, as I understand it, was to maintain balance. They were very rare, very sacred. It's no wonder it found its way into the world again – especially here in Beacon Hills," the man added, eyes sweeping around the ensemble ringed randomly in his tiny living room. Making up everyone who'd been on the Lacrosse field the day before, minus the Sheriff, because apparently someone had to work for a living around here.

"I've never heard of them," Derek admitted slowly, eying him speculatively from his position against the wall near the kitchen. "My mother never mentioned anything like them. And he's not in the bestiary?"

"No," Lydia answered, flipping her hair back with the same careless grace that gave him flashbacks to her mother when she was around the same age. Or, you know, a week ago, whenever he’d last seen her. "Definitely not. Whatever Coach is, he isn't in there. And that's assuming he was even meant to be. You said this was more of a calling, right? Not a hereditary supernatural condition? Like
born wolves, wendigos or-" the girl trailed off, eyes flickering from him to Parrish before fixing him
with an apologetic half-smile that he didn't have the heart not to return.

He shifted, suddenly feeling uncomfortable and strangely exposed in his corner. Itchy under the
weight of more than a few eyes when his chair creaked embarrassingly loud. Wishing somewhat
insanely that he could just curl up like a pill bug and sleep for the rest of his life. Sleep was good.
Simple. He liked sleep. You didn't have to think. Worry. Work. Bleed. You didn't have to do much
of anything really.

"That's not surprising," Deaton continued, "According to what I was able to dig up, they went
extinct centuries ago when the modern world went Industrial – its supposed golden age. The natural
order tipped too far out of balance too fast. And without their influence, well, you've seen the world
lately. Beacon Hills alone is a good example of what happens when that kind of positive force is
lost."

He dug his bare feet into the carpet, eyes down. Self-muted in a way he hated already as he forced
himself to just sit back and listen as the phrases "monster Kodiak bear" and "sacred duty" got passed
around like cheap booze at a college party. Which, okay, he could admit he didn't exactly excel at the
whole brain to mouth filter part, but really. Could the universe cut him some fuckin' slack already?

"Honestly, at this point there isn't much I can tell you other than myth and legend," Deaton finally
posed, frustration lining his forehead in deep squiggly waves that pinged his childhood memories of
his mom teasing him. Telling him his face would stay like that some day when he pouted over
having to clean his room.

"The old ways have been lost and the keepers of that knowledge all too often died with them," the
man remarked with a sigh, eyes angling across the room before they settled on him again. Giving
him that same disconcerting jerk in his gut he's experienced in the grocery store weeks before.

"Your family," the man asked slowly, like he was putting a thought to voice before it had finished
percolating in his upstairs. "Have there been any ill-regularities? Old family stories shared down
through the generations about an odd occurrence or even a person? Something at wouldn't seem like
much more than an interesting piece of family trivia but under the right light might-"

"Uh, I have a second cousin who became a lawyer and moved to the Dominican Republic with his
third mistress?" he replied voice whip-crack steady, adding just a fling of sarcasm at the end to
highlight how deeply he was currently floundering.

Deaton sighed. Lydia muttered despairing under her breath – because ugh boys. Stiles choked on a
word that might have been the start of a sentence before Kira shushed him. Making an abort mission
signal as Liam twitched and Derek somehow managed to frown with just his eyebrows.

But Chris? Chris just huffed out an amused snort, leaning into him a fraction – as if in solidarity
before straightening. It wasn't much. But somehow it was enough. Making him smile – wan and
small – as his inner five year old did a mental high five. Distracting him enough to pull his head out
of his ass to get some fresh air at the very least.

That is until Pain in his Ass #3 decided to pipe up from the peanut gallery.

"Look," Stiles started, "I get that we are flying blind here. But this whole thing- there had to be some
sort of trigger right? Something that started it? I mean, maybe he doesn't need to be bit - okay yes, I
know this has been established, thanks," Stiles snarked when Scott opened his mouth, flailing a hand
before railroading over whatever his friend was about to say in his hurry not to lose his nerve.
"But I don't think anyone has missed that things haven't been the same with Coach since-

"But he hasn't smelled any different until now, until he changed on the field. We would have smelt that, right?" Scott cut in, looking at Derek as if in reassurance before the man shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. Arms crossed so that the tips of his fingers flirted with the tight cuffs of his sleeves. And yeah, he was beginning to think that pissed off at the world in general was just his default expression because the way he was looking at Stiles was-

Stiles, for his part, just carried on, ignoring them both.

"Could it have been, I don't know, uh- an arrow-maybe?" the spaz attack continued, looking far guiltier than he had any right to be for the whole thing 'accidental impalement' thing to really fly anymore as he levered squinty eyes at the kid from across the room. Demanding he give up all his secrets immediately.

"No," Scott returned, chewing on his lower lip like a frustrated puppy. "When I took his pain he didn't feel anything other than human. This wasn't your fault, Stiles. It wasn't."

He turned. Looking up at Chris with an: I'm too old for this shit, please translate this frown.

"Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not," the man agreed, blue eyes flashing amusement and concern as he looked him up and down with a heated, exaggerated drag that suddenly left him with a whole host of other problems to deal with. "But I'll fill you in later."

It was obvious that he'd died. Or maybe fallen and hit his head and was in the hospital somewhere, coma-dreaming or something. That was the sane, rational explanation he was currently clinging to the coat tails of. Not the brand new world – which was actually the old one but 110% scarier now that he was in the know, apparently. A world where there were werewolves, berserkers, magic, were-jaguars. Sentient trees and banshees and-

"So, what are you again?" he asked Parrish, breaking up his own train of thought as Chris blew out a stale breath of air above him. Smelling of moist-warmth, exhaustion and a few other things that made his throat go thick as the deputy just smiled and fixed him with a patient look from his place between Lydia and Kira on the loveseat. Completely ignoring the conversation that had been going on around them as it spluttered to an indignant stop.

"No idea," the man chirped tiredly, running a hand through his short hair as Lydia petted idly at the draped sleeve of his leather bomber jacket. And huh – okay, it was pretty damn obvious where that mess was heading.

"Well, this is bullshit," he muttered, more to himself than anything as Parrish's smile turned into a full blown grin, then a chuckle. Like somehow, in all this mess he'd managed to find a kindred spirt as the younger man leaned forward and fixed him with a look.

"You're telling me."

Right, anyway.

The whole thing was distinctly unfair on so many levels because honestly, he seemed to be the only one not taking this well. Getting disturbed on a whole new scale of apocalyptically bad as Stiles remarked how this was basically just another Tuesday night for them when they explained for the sixth time how he'd exploded out of the brush. Charging onto the field like a full on freight train of
bear – fur, claws, teeth, bad attitude and everything in between. Taking out two Berserkers in his first charge before planting his hairy ass in front of Chris and Scott - whose injuries they were for some reason skirting over - protecting them as he swiped and snarled at Kate.

He'd apparently, since he was getting all this second hand, sent her flying with – what Stiles was quick to say, despite a guilty look at Chris - a very satisfying smack. The hook of his claws taking a chunk out of her arm in the process, enough for her to turn tail and run. Clutching her arm and nearly falling over herself as he gave chase. Only pausing to take out the last Berserker trying to corner Malia, Stiles and his father – apparently by tossing his full weight on it and bringing it down, snapping its neck with a single jerking tug - before rolling off and loping into the brush after her.

Because that right there, that familiarity with all this bat shit insanity?

Yeah, not interested.

"You know," Deaton started, looking thoughtful as he tapped his chin with his forefinger. Eyes darkly bright as he fixed him with an inscrutable look. "There is one legend I know that might be of some use."

Chapter End Notes

Reference: I did an extensive amount of research trying to find a word that might be appropriate to use, specifically one that could be applied widespread and not one that was specific to a certain tribe or local grouping. I kind of failed. In the end I had to create something unique using words and meanings from the local languages. No disrespect was meant in the creation of this term.

*Honaw-Catsina: "Bear-spirit"

- Honaw: Hopi people's word for: 'bear'.

- Catsina: Personification of the spirit of a physical entity (animal, plant, person)
Chapter 10

He dealt with the majority of it by- well, mostly not dealing with it at all. Instead, he let his eyes glaze over as the veterinarian…emissary or whatever Deaton actually was talk about sacred duties and blood-lines.

It wasn't that he didn't care.

Because he did.

A lot.

I mean, hello- this was his life that was being screwed with here.

Only, he kept getting distracted – because obviously he was a sadist - like his brain was intellectually cock-blocking itself on purpose every time some new tid-bit dropped casually from someone's mouth. Like an atomic bomb masquerading as a birthday piñata or-

"Alright," Chris thrummed, startling him out of his thoughts as the word issued like a command. Making a strange churn of memory burble up like indigestion in his belly. Like somewhere, somehow, he'd heard that exact tone of voice before. "Let's wrap this up."

Deaton frowned, trailing off in mid-word, not looking entirely pleased at the interruption. But surprisingly enough, Derek mirrored it. Looking him over before nodding from where he'd been leaning up against the door frame.

"He's had enough for one night. We should be easing him into this. Not piling it on all at once. The grade curve is steep, but all this doesn't have to happen right now."

He was about to second everything about that- because honestly, not only was he still starving, his head was pounding, he had Kate-skin stuck underneath his fingernails and he was pretty sure he'd gone permanently cross-eyed since the first half-hour. Only to get distracted when Liam fidgeted in the corner of his vision. Puppy eyes imploring like he wanted desperately to creep around the settee and bury his face into his leg and just breathe for the rest of his life.

"Need to pee or something?" he challenged, immediately feeling like all kinds of an asshole when those same sad eyes widened in betrayed hurt.

"Aw crap, he didn't mean it like that!"

"God, he was such a jerk."

"Why was he even allowed around kids in the first place?"

"Christ."

"It's you," Scott responded, rousing himself out of his internal monologue as Liam shrunk a good half an inch – turtling into himself in a way that made him look far younger than he was. "You're giving off anxiety, pain - emotional pain in waves. We can smell it. In a pack these are signals, markers to what we're feeling and what we need from each other. Everyone broadcasts them – humans, animals, weres. Most of the time without even being aware of it."

"But I'm not a wolf," he answered slowly, mostly just double checking because his life was a disaster
and he wasn't going to put anything past fate these days.

"No, but you are pack, or almost pack," Derek amended. "You've been on the fringes ever since Scott was bitten, by proximity of nothing else. Those type of bonds are formed loosely and usually don't graduate into anything else. But they are there. You don't have to be a wolf to be pack. Pack is home. Familiar things. People you care about."

Beside him Chris shifted. Fragile and sharded through with broken things.

Things that made the inside of his nose twitch and burn.

"Liam is young and was only turned a couple of months ago. You're his coach, his teacher. A positive authority figure. And now a powerful supernatural something on par with his own Alpha but separate enough that there is no contention for leadership. So, yes, that makes you pack," Derek explained, mercifully finishing as Liam turned beet red and regressed another quarter of an inch.

"Ah, shit. Sorry," he tossed at him, the seriousness of the words sounding strange as they left his mouth. Forcing himself to stand on stupidly, wobbly legs to slap a hand on the teen's shoulder. Just like he did at practice when the team was trotting in from the field – flushed face and triumphant – or you know, sometimes crying. "I'm alright, kid. It's just a lot to take in, you know?"

The kid watched him through the fan of his lashes for a precarious handful of seconds before relaxing into it. Looking from him to Scott the back again before making a tiny sound – kind of like a snuffling puppy diving face first into its bowl kibble – shooting him a nervous grin that only managed to yank up one corner of his mouth.

"I know what you mean."

He blinked and yeah- he guessed the kid kinda did actually.

Fond thoughts of raiding his fridge and sleeping through the next decade were pretty much moot point though, considering the fact that Deaton's eyes had lit up with interest. Like he'd found himself in the middle of particularly fascinating science experiment and he was the only one wearing the rubber gloves and safety googles.

"Inhale, all of you," Deaton suggested, looking around at the others as Lydia's head cocked in interest. "What do you smell?"

"Blood," Liam replied hesitantly, moving a couple inches closer. Gaze flicking from the red under his nails, then back up to the magically intact back and chest he still didn't have a satisfactory answer for other than – 'standard supernatural healing abilities'. Something the others had all agreed on unanimously before moving on to the next point of business while his brain was still scrambling to catch up.

But then again, he supposed his skin managing to knit itself back together kind of paled in comparison when you had Parrish, who had apparently been set on fucking fire and really, what was Beacon Hills anymore anyway? Not only managing to walk away, but trail ash and soot all the way back to the station to personally beat the stuffing out of his would-be murder. Who also happened to be his work partner.

Awkward.

"Ripped sedge grass," Derek added, scenting the skin with exaggerated wuffs that sounded throat deep and almost painful. Eyes flashing Beta blue for a split second before he shook his head and continued. "The deep woods two months before the salmon run. Hunger."
"Sex," Malia replied bluntly, confused like she couldn't figure out why no one else had said it. Taking another deep breath before letting it rush out between her teeth, wrinkling her nose as her gaze slid from Chris, to himself, then back again like she was watching a particularly interesting tennis match. "Or at least the tension part of it. Unresolved. Cloying. You need to have sex. Right now. You both stink."

Horrified detachment was a wonderful thing. It was like he was feeling his cheeks heat up second hand as Chris shifted again. Warm – no – too warm against his side. And wow- In retrospect all those breakfasts and morning runs kind of seemed pretty damn obvious now. All those long discussions about nothing. The easy laughter. Taking jabs at each other and trying not to mess anything up because what they had was tenuous and fragile and probably the only good thing he'd ever had going for him in his life and holy shit-

Scott cocked his head, cutting in with the same grace as a runaway cement mixer. Pointedly not meeting either of their eyes before frowning as his flashed red. Inhaling almost violently as he strained to capture whatever freaky bombshell his werewolf nose was currently stuck on.

"I smell all of that. Chris. The house smells like him. Which is, oh- But there is something else, something- it's not new, but…sharpened, maybe? Almost like-" Scott started, before trailing off in mid-sentence, the tips of his ears flushing a rather unflattering shade of magenta as Derek's eyes widened a fraction beside him. Clearing the floor as Stiles made a cut off sound in the back of his throat, somewhat reminiscent to that of a dying cat.

"You smell like Coach," Malia informed him, with absolutely zero in terms of filter as she fixed the man beside him with a look like she fully expected them to get down and dirty right then and there. A truly romantic setting when one considered their captive audience. Not to mention the dryer sheet he could see half hidden under his coffee table and the small collection of popcorn kernels which had apparently created the beginnings of a great empire between the carpet threads by the couch.

God, when had he last vacuumed anyway?

He let his forehead crack down on back of his chair. Hating his life with a passion even he was mildly impressed about as throats were cleared and a smattering of muffled giggles broke out across his living room. Honestly wondering what the hell he'd done to deserve this as the others talked quietly amongst themselves.

And yes, clearly this was a thing that was actually happening to him right now.

Because you know, fuck his life or whatever.

He ran a hand over his face. Chickening out on trying to catch Chris's expression in favor of nursing the smoldering ruins of his pride as he toed a dent in the hardwood at his feet. He must have been a fucking asshole in a past life, because frankly, this shit was getting pretty over the top.

What did he do?

Shit on God's lawn personally or something?

"But-" Scott broke in, back peddling valiantly, because really, bless him. "He does smell different now. All this? It's new. It's like…peeling off a layer but in reverse."

Stiles snorted, muttering something about onion and ogre metaphors before Derek cuffed him on the back of the head. Setting them off on whirlwind of bickering – or at least on Stiles end. Derek just ended up glaring a lot. Stilinski painfully - as in holy god this kid - oblivious to the fact that Hale was
staring at him with a profoundly ridiculous amount of fondness for someone he wanted to drop kick into the bleachers almost any day of the week.

Clearly they were not the only ones that deserved the label of 'unresolved tension stinkers.'

Because really, you didn't need a werewolf nose for that crap.

"Exactly," Deaton maneuvered, gracefully retaking the stage before turning his sights back on him. "Am I correct in saying this shift might have started after you found the child? Allie Henson?"

"It was definitely when the weirdness started, I think," he agreed, tongue feeling thick and useless in his mouth as he rolled his dry tongue with a sludgy click-clop. Feeling the inane need to actually contribute something useful to the conversation as Kira and Scott whispered quietly.

"Yes and no," Deaton returned like it was a trick question and by just answering he'd already half failed. "Because what we are proposing here is that your abilities gradually evolved overtime, as you matured, so did they. But when Allie Henson went missing, you hit a sort of second puberty, if you will. Meaning that when your abilities were needed that was when they started to manifest fully. That is what created this extra layer Scott mentioned. I think you might be more similar to Parrish's condition than you realize. His powers were activated through external circumstances. And, in a way, so were yours."

Awesome.

A second puberty.

Wow, his life just kept getting better and better, didn't it?

"I don't get it though, if what you're saying is true then shouldn't I have been able to smell it? Shouldn't he have smelt different than a normal person right from the beginning?" Scott asked, nose scrunching like he did in class when he was honestly stumped on something. Trying to turn the hamster wheel in his brain faster and faster to get there.

"Why didn't I smell it before? Or even Derek? He came back after years away, shouldn't he have been able to smell the difference?"

"Not necessarily," Derek returned. "I was never close enough to tell any real difference. Besides, every time I've been around him, he's smelled like wolves – still does underneath. You've probably all scented him more than once over the years without thinking about it. He is a pack extension. Like Deaton and Parrish. Besides, if we're right and he was born this way, who says the same rules for Supernatural creatures even apply to him? You did said this was more of a calling, right? Well, most of the things we deal with have been either born or turned. So, that makes him different. Unique. If he's supposed to be some ancient protector of the natural order? That's applying our modern understanding on an ancient rulebook we just don't have."

Deaton sighed, visibly troubled.

But Stiles just stared, visibly awed.

"Dude, I think that is the longest I have ever heard you talk about anything ever. Are you okay? Do you need an ice pack? Can I check for scars? Like, are you a pod person? Oh god, please tell me it's not the alien invasion because honestly, I don't think I can handle any more F.U.N. in my life right now."

Derek breathed out through his nose. Loudly. Like a threat.
"There are people I'm going to have to speak with," Deaton finally admitted, rubbing the crux of his finger across his chin. "Most of them are remote, secretive and notoriously selective with whom they choose to meet with. It may be sometime before they decide to accept me. I am afraid this might take some time."

"I don't think time is going to be a problem," he muttered. Ignoring the looks of sympathy as he slid out his chair and shuffled resolutely into the kitchen. Staring morosely into his empty fridge as everything in the past few months seemed to crash down on him at once.

It wasn't until his house was more or less empty – and the two of them were surrounded by demolished take out containers and determinedly not talking about the giant fucking elephant in the room - that he blurted out the question he'd been sitting on ever since he'd woke up mid-sponge bath. Body humming with the realization that his life had done a complete 360 and there was absolutely no re-spawn option to click on.

"Did I hurt anyone? Chris, did I-"

He knew the answer before the man even opened his mouth. Deflating in relief when he saw the truth of it blitz out in the back of those stupidly blue eyes before Chris leaned forward – earnest and determined. Feeling the embarrassing sheen of tears trying to make headway before he blinked them away.

"No, you didn't. Listen to me, Bobby. Don't do this to yourself," Chris urged, abandoning his chopsticks in the sweet and sour pork. "Don't beat yourself up for what could have happened either. Because it wasn't like that."

"Wasn't like what?" he repeated dully, looking down at his pink-scrubbed hands. He hadn't been able to get the blood out from under his nails. He'd been in the bathroom for almost a half an hour after everyone had left. Scrubbing himself raw. Throwing himself in the shower and wielding a bar of soap like a flogger. Feeling a couple seconds away from a full on Macbeth-style breakdown before Chris knocked on the door, yelling over the fan that food was here.

"You might not remember it, but you were in control, you had to be. Derek followed you for hours and you let him," Chris insisted. "You followed Kate's trail until she found a car and left town. You avoided people, Bobby. Derek said there was a couple times you went deeper into the brush just so you-"

He swallowed hard. Clinging to that sliver of hope before a new surge of guilt threatened to surge like vomit streaking up from his gut. God, his life had gotten so messed up. He didn't think he could do this. Hell, he knew he couldn't. He didn't want it. He didn't want any part of this. For fucks sakes, he wasn't-

"But those things, on the field, they were people once…I could smell it, I-"

"Hey, hey, look at me," Chris urged. The sudden closeness making him blink. Realizing that somewhere along the line Chris must have moved. Because now he was crouched in front of him, jammed uncomfortably between him and coffee table. Hands curling around his, hiding the red-raw skin from view and covering it with this own. Giving him something new thing to focus on as his nostrils flared and the scent of them – like all in capital letters THEM – sliced neatly through the strings of his impending panic attack.
"You protected us. You saved us. Scott. Stiles. Derek. Lydia. Me. All of us. We're only alive because of you. If you are going to overanalyze anything, maybe that's what you should be focusing on."

And so he does.

He fell asleep on the couch with Chris settled in beside him. Fingers flirting with the label of some cheap, non-alcoholic beer he kept around because he still likes the taste and lets him drool all over his shoulder. Mouthing idly at the wet patch before realizing – hazy and off-handedly - that he'd somehow managed to forget freaking out about it at all.

It wasn't until later that he finally found the words he wanted to say.

Long after Chris had made a nest on his couch using the same sheets he'd set out the last time. The time when the dork had run actual miles, all the way from the trail to his house just to stare at him with judgey eyes and drink all his alcohol. Laughing about the polka-dots when he'd tossed the sheets down the hall at him. Rolling his eyes as the idiot had staggered off to take a piss before falling head first into the couch cushions, snoring like a god damned chain saw. Because apparently grown-up sleepovers that occurred in separate rooms with your clothes on instead of off was another thing that happened in his life these days.

"Is this weird?" he asked, fingers twitching half-heartedly when the man tucked the corner of the ground sheet around the end cushion and shook out the comforter. "Now, I mean? Not just with the whole me thing, but with you being- ah what you are and then me being- me?" he articulated, probably badly.

Chris just stared at him for a good couple of seconds. Like he was decoding the Bobby-babble and trying to make sense of the butchery he'd made of the English language before answering.

"You mean because I'm a hunter and you're…whatever you are?" the man asked slowly. Lips quirking like he was fighting off a smile. Something he appreciated an embarrassingly large amount considering a pathetically large chunk of his emotions seemed to be riding on the outcome and he really wasn't sure what he'd do if-

He nodded so quickly he nearly gave himself whip-lash.

"It doesn't change anything," Chris replied firmly. Looking him dead in the eye as his lungs reminded him that breathing was a thing he should probably be doing more often. "Does it make things a little more complicated? Yes. But I like complicated."

"Really? Because I don't," he muttered, valiantly ignoring the fact that he'd absolutely loathed his mind-numbingly boring life only a handful of months ago. Stuck in a rut that seemed to be decades long right up until he'd somehow exploded into an alternative universe where nothing made sense and everything was kind of terrible except for the fact that Chris was currently within arm's reach and smelling absolutely amazing, so-

"Well, I am sort of complicated," Chris replied, as a smile – boyish and shit-eating – made it all the way to his face this time. Blue eyes flashing, warm and inviting play. Teasing even.

His reply, as cringe-worthy as it was, charged the air with an entirely different sort of challenge. Something that was no holds barred and so bare in terms of intent that he almost couldn't believe made it out of his mouth in the first place, but hell if he was taking it back now because holy shit did he mean it.
I like you," he amended, watching the clean lines of the man's back flex through the soft material of his borrowed shirt. Worn in that comfortable way that turned cotton butter-soft and plaint against the skin. "So I guess I'm stuck with whatever that comes with."

And wow.

Smooth moves there, Finstock.

Way to woo a guy.

Christ.

But Chris just smiled. Eyes crinkling in the corners in that way he did.

"We both kind of have baggage don't we?" Chris replied, rueful but without the sting. Running a hand through his hair before scratching down his stubble - tired. Expression laced through with a hundred and one different shards of personalpersonalpersonal that lasted right up until he shifted, sobering quickly.

"What if it happens again," he asked quietly. "What if I hurt someone?"

"I won't let you."

Oddly enough, it was the most comforting anyone had said to him in years.
Chapter 11

He woke up at noon the next day with a sleep-headache. Part horrified, part impressed but mostly just full on pathetically grateful it was officially summer break. And while he knew he was alone. Figuring it out for himself when he did that stupid head cocking thing Derek and Scott kept doing the night before. Cluing in to the complete absence of any Chris-related sounds, he still shuffled out to the living room anyway. Yawning and scratching at his bare chest as a small mountain of pillows and folded sheets leaned innocently from the far corner of the couch.

There was a note on the fridge and freshly ground beans in the French press just screaming for some hot water. He read it between mouthfuls of leftover take out. Where Chris mentioned he had to take care of a few things at home but would be back later to pick him up - something about being expected at Derek's around five? He arched a brow at that, re-reading it just be sure. Uncertain of when he'd been signed up for the equivalent of werewolf YMCA. But having no real excuse to get out of it other than full on mutiny which honestly sounded like way too much work before he was properly caffeinated.

The second pot was already brewing by the time he slogged through the most pressing of his phone messages. Feeling a strange mixture of guilt and glee as he fist pumped at the ceiling and breathed out a sigh of relief. The deadline of all session paperwork extended until the following week due to the apparent vandalism of school property – ie: the lower Lacrosse field – which the police were still investigating.

He was rinsing out his cup at the sink, swirling the dreges down the drain before filling it with water and downing that in quick succession when he looked out the window. Coffee cup loosening dangerously in his hand as he looked out in horror at his back garden.

Because, as his nosy neighbour had pointed out, all adults had gardens. Something about adding "a refined and mature air" to the neighbourhood or whatever. Only his lame attempt at keeping the neighbourly peace had been utterly and completely destroyed. Trampled like something very big had just up and rolled in it. Stripping his spindly little tomato plants clean before over turning the pots of soil and flinging it everywhere. Almost like something big and hairy had-

Son of a bitch!

"I am not really one for sparring, boys," he told Derek and Scott warily, looking dubiously around the former's massive loft apartment and the training mats that had been littered strategically across the floor.

"It's a good idea to know your strengths," Derek countered, arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against a pillar. Eyes flicking lazily over to where Stiles was sitting backwards on one of the kitchen stools, playing some sort of game with Liam on their cellphones and not really paying attention.

"When you know your strengths, your weaknesses, you can control them, use them in the right ways."

"Deaton was right, we have no idea what we are dealing with," Scott added, looking over at Chris as the older man kicked at the fraying edge of one of the mats. Toeing a rather suspicious looking stain before circling around to stand next to him – worn sweats hush-hushing. "Right now we know nothing, and that's dangerous."

He narrowed his eyes, suspicious. Really not liking where this was all heading. But knowing that he
was probably going to end up doing it regardless. *Eventually.* Because while there were some indignities in life he'd more or less resigned himself to suffer, he wasn't just going to sit here and take it and *not* dish it right back again. He'd spent far too much of his life surrounded in teenage angst and hormones not to be petty enough to want the last word. *Every. Single. Time.*

"Look, I have zero desire to spend the evening with my back to a mat because you boys have decided that you want to poke the sleeping bear," he sniped, holding up a hand to forestall Stilinski who he knew – *just knew* - was already perking up behind him with some sort of bear related pun he was already grinding his teeth about. Able to smell the warm tones of Chris' amusement as the man sauntered off. Bare feet *twoodck-twocking* as he crossed in front of Derek, making a bee-line for the ancient looking iPod dock Liam and Stiles had been squabbling over when they'd arrived.

"Have any of you even thought this through?" he pressed, "because I can think about a hundred and one ways this could all go completely FUBAR before the first water break. I don't-"

The switch was like whip-lash.

Like liquid-movement.

Quicksilver and far too fast for even him to catch before-

"Someday you won't have a choice!" Derek snarled, leaping forward. Grabbing Chris by the arm with clawed hands and yanking him back. Eyes glowing beta-blue before the wolf hauled back and punched Chris square in the gut.

The world stuttered.

The next thing he was aware of was slamming Derek clear through the loft's inner wall and through the drywall of the second. Inertia carrying them until they hit the concrete of the outer façade with a bone-snapping thud that caused the beta to howl in pain.

"Coach! Stop! Shit! Derek!"

Clawed hands tightened around the threat's throat, feeling a vicious sort of thrum arc through him as they painted the skin around them red. A heady counterpoint to his deafening roar as the wolf went limp in his grip. Flinching as the force of it rained plaster and brick-dust around them like powered-rain.

He snapped his teeth, watching his reflection warp in the wolf's eyes. Getting a glimpse of coal-black eyes, long incisors and a nightmare mouth full of sharp teeth before his body registered the weight of Scott and Liam hanging like limpets from his shoulders.

"Bobby!"

He shrugged, annoyed. Grinding his teeth at the other wolves only to *whuff* when the scent of cub filtered through the glare of anger-red. He growled into the older wolf's throat, feeling the sound reverberate all the way through deep tissue and bone. Promising violence for what he'd done. For touching his mate. For hurting him. For-

"Bobby, hey, look, I'm alright, see? Derek didn't mean to hurt me. He was helping us, remember?"

He blinked. Suddenly assaulted by the scent of *mateyesmineyeild* as Chris' voice curled into the air around them like a balm. Soothing and warm. Like the late spring sun just before the unrelenting heat of summer.
Mate was fine?

Yes. Because mate was strong. Worthy.

But mate had been hurt.

Threat had attacked him.

Now mate wanted him to stop?

Why?

His grip around the wolf’s throat lessened slightly, easing off the windpipe a fraction as the one his mate called Derek gasped for air. Distracted as mate wedged himself close, murmuring quietly. He didn't understand the words, but as they lowered in timber, turning smooth and encouragingly open, he realized he didn't need to.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

- This chapter will be told in Chris' perspective.

"Bobby, hey, look, I'm alright, see? Derek didn't mean to hurt me. He was helping us, remember? But you protected me. And look- I'm fine, see? I know he won't do it again, just like I know part of you is in control right now. You've only shifted only part way, like Scott and Liam. Not like on the field. This is different. And I think that means that some part of you knows Derek isn't a real threat. That he wasn't really going to hurt me. Were you, Derek?"

He had Bobby's focus almost completely on him, coaxing and prodding until his grip around Derek's neck was more of a scene accessory than any real threat. Thinking he might even be able to get Bobby to forget about the low throb still twinging in his gut and all the reasons why he and Derek were going to have a little talk about manners when Scott accidentally made things a hundred times worse.

He wasn't sure if it was his alpha nature finally raring it head or if the boy honestly thought it would help, but the moment the alpha's warning growl aired out, every muscle in Bobby's body seemed to screech on point. Hackles up and fangs glinting in the fractured light of the ruined apartment. Suddenly knowing, deep down in the very marrow of him, that he was going to have to do something drastic to avoid bloodshed.

It was like a switch had been flipped, because without warning Bobby wrenched himself away. Putting himself in front of him, protective and snarling. Crowding him safely out of range as Derek crumpled into a heap on the floor and Scott's eyes flashed red.

Bobby gave the moment a lull to breathe before pulling back and answering the alpha's challenge with pitch-black eyes and a roar that rattled the rafters. Making Scott's howl sound like a newborn pup whimpering in comparison as everyone – including him – flinched back at the force of it.

"Well, that answers more than a few questions," Stiles cracked shakily from the far corner, looking from Scott to Derek to Bobby then back again - worriedly. Liam pressed safely behind him as the kid peered over the senior's shoulder. Yellow eyes glowing bright despite the torn expression on his face. Watching the two predator's posture at each other. Fighting similar instincts – the urge to protect and claim – the usual antler-crashing of two dominant males with no room or desire to back down.

Meaning, it was up to him.

He had a hand on Bobby's shoulder, squeezing firmly as the other wavered out into empty space. Palm up as he gestured for Scott to stay where he was. Ignoring the indignant *whuff* and bristling posture as he ducked under Bobby's outstretched arms and shoved himself firmly into the man's chest. Breathing hotly into the curl of him – mouthing at the skin he found there. Murmuring wordless croons of encouragement and praise, anything and everything just to get the man to calm.

He kept it up until Bobby chuffed, confused but growingly interested as he focused his attention on the long line of exposed skin that went from the tips of his fingers to the muscles of his shoulder. Silently thanking whatever deity was listening for being dressed for sparring – his tank worn and
loose around his chest. Giving Bobby better access as he scented him. It was a ritual he'd seen performed more than once, only this time it was different. Bobby took him in with deep shuddering breaths that seemed more about affirmation and something that ran a little deeper – a little hotter – than family bonding or ill-intent.

Because he knew.

Somehow he just knew.

Bobby would never hurt him.

He couldn't.

His eyes squeezed shut on their own accord, heat pooling in his belly as Bobby rumbled – pleased. Could he sense it? Smell it? Did he know? He shivered involuntarily when a warm tongue flicked across his pulse point. Laving with quiet delicateness before his hips shifted and suddenly he was biting back a groan as the unmistakable bulge of the man's hardness firmed damningly against his own. Breathing into it unsteadily when clawed hands settled on his hips. Hiccupping interestedly into the cradle of his thighs with lazy intent as whatever he figured was left of his higher brain functions started melting out of his ears like he was seventeen and stupid all over again.

Christ. This was not a good time for-

"Oh my god," Stiles hissed, inching forward to help Derek to his feet as the sound of broken bones snapping back crackled into the forced quiet like a silent scream. "This is why you," Stiles accused, glaring pointedly at Scott and Derek. "Are not allowed to make plans anymore. I mean, holy crap, you're both grounded! What the hell even was all that anyway?! All aboard the: this was a terrible idea train!? And what, you thought punching his…whatever would do what exactly!?"

He waited until Stiles had Derek propped up against the doorjamb before he caught the beta's eyes and jerked his chin.

"Go," he urged, mouth like sandpaper as Bobby's hands bunched warningly in the fabric of his shirt. Keeping him pinned, cocks grinding like lit sparks every time one of them shifted before he swallowed hard and forced the rest of the words out. Feeling strangely like he was living one of those moments you only heard about on late night TV and bad sci-fi movies. The ones with the big words and all those big feelings that end up being a long time coming all wound up into one very complicated animal. "All of you."

Like an epiphany but older.

More.

Better.

"Are you okay with this?" Derek rasped, voice only a little bit wrecked, hoarse around the edges as his wind-piped unkinked itself. But with a tone that aired out like he knew. Like-

"Yes, go. I'll be fine," he assured, keeping Bobby anchored as the man huffed into his neck. Snuffling and inhaling deep like he was taking in as much of his scent as he could. Digging his face deep into the crook, dark eyes half-watching as Stiles and Liam slung Derek's arms over their shoulders and paused in the doorway, hissing for Scott to follow.

Only Scott didn't move.
And after a moment, Bobby noticed.

Raising his head and showing Scott his teeth in a clear challenge.

*Damnit.*

"Scott, his triggers are protective based. Lower your head and don't meet his eyes. Look away," he ordered, knowing what he was asking even as the words left his lips, sour and stilted as the teen's shoulders stiffened into a brutal, aggressive line.

*Alphas don't back down.*

*They just don't.*

*But Scott was different, a true alpha as well as young, maybe-*

Scott's eyes flashed, lips pulling back on their own accord. Enough that Bobby started to pull himself to his full height. Only pausing when he clung tighter, repeating his name like a mantra. Forcing him to divide his attention between them.

"Bears don't care about the hierarchy of wolves, Scott," he hissed. "They are both apex predators, but wolves won't chance attacking one without a large, healthy pack at their back. A male bear in its prime doesn't have the same issue. Nature moves for them, around them, and they lumber through it. They have their own order and the alpha males dominate that order. They only keep it through violence. Fishing spots. Mating rights. The choice selections of any kill. Those are the alpha's right. And right now, that alpha is him. So. *Back. Down.*"

For a long, tremendous moment he actually thought Scott was going to refuse. But then, just when he figured it was all over, the kid grudgingly – jerkily - lowered his head. Claws sinking into his own palms and drizzling red all over the hardwood. But it was enough of a signal to allow Stiles to inch over and start tugging him away.

"Someone's been doing their research," Stiles chirped, still edging on slightly hysterical as he grabbed Scott by the collar and towed him another inch out the door.

But he just arched a brow.

"The school's Lacrosse coach turns out to be an all-powerful, half ton spirit bear and you're telling me you haven't?"

The moment the door cli-clicked shut and the sound of an engine roared to life, Bobby was back to pushing into him greedily – like stealing. Like any moment, the man fully expected him to push him away. Even now, half-shifted, there was still a part of Bobby that was firmly entrenched. That quiet hesitation when it came to things he didn't think he deserved.

Something sharp and breakable settled into the curl of his chest when Bobby called out for him. Making a deep, pitching sort of sound in the back of his throat when his resolve finally broke - allowing his palm to curl down the side of Bobby's cheek. Nerves electric with the sensation of stubble and first time-everything's as he tried and failed to get his breathing under control.

Everything in his body felt loud. Pulling tight on the cusp of something as he licked his lips, staring up at the ceiling as Bobby pressed open mouthed kisses into his collarbone and down his neck. Dragging long canines down the thin of him until the air thickened with tension and arousal and the weight of the moment – the weight of what they were doing – bore down just a bit too hard.
This wasn't right.

It felt right.

It felt like being whole.

But Bobby wasn't there, at least not all the way.

He was only half-present and something about that just didn't-

A pleased sound escaped Bobby's throat, one hand dropping down from his hip to nudge pointedly at his crotch. Making him suck in a breath as sharp claws tangled dangerously with the drawstring of his sweats. Staggering a bit when Bobby burrowed his nose into his hairline, like if he tried hard enough, he'd manage to find what he was craving.

Was it his scent?

Was this what all this was about?

Maybe even from the very beginning?

Was there something he was giving off that only Bobby could detect?

Something unique – special?

Something like the feelings that'd been slow-roasting in the pit of his belly ever since that moment in the parking lot when Bobby had come out of the undergrowth, Allie Henson riding high in his arms. Changed in a way he hadn't known how to make sense of the same moment as something soul-deep and visceral settled contentedly in his chest.

The irony was, he'd known.

Somehow he'd known and he hadn't even tried to run from it.

All those runs, breakfasts.

All those long talks that'd spanned through the night.

Christ, how could he not?

It was a living craving spreading like tendrils into his bloodstream.

Knowing instinctively that even if he wanted to, stopping this – whatever this was - would be like trying to outrun gravity.

He sucked in a series of growingly wrecked breaths, half-aware they were stumbling up against a pillar, hips grinding like a series of very deliberate afterthoughts as he tried and failed to remember when he'd been this turned on. When he'd wanted something this much and-

"Bobby…"

His head was spinning. Lids slung low as pitch-black eyes bored into his own. Making the muscles of his throat twitch as he swallowed, nervous. Blood thumping too-loud in his ears. Thrumming with arousal, anticipation and the ice-cold awareness that he had to stop this. Somehow. Before-

His heartbeat stuttered when Bobby pressed the advantage of his larger frame and used the hook of
his claws to tear his shirt clear off. Abruptly turning all those years of training, all those preconceptions and legitimate fears he’d been having about his own mortality and indeed- *morality* into distant, speed-bump blips of arousal-tinted concern.

"Mine," Bobby growled, startling him so much that the hand he’d apparently buried in the man’s hair somewhere along the line, abruptly clenched tight. The word was distorted, mangled around too many teeth. Thick and dripping clean with something damn near savage – quiet, but savage all the same.

He swallowed, pulse jumping like that single word had said it all. And really, it had. Heartbeat double-timing it in his chest as his own better judgement became the ultimate threat to his self-control.

*He wanted this, but not like this, not-*

*Damnit.*

"Bobby, hey, look at me…"

But the only response he got was Bobby grinding back into him like he wanted to tear him apart and put him back together again. Claws receding as his hand disappeared down the front of his sweats and firmed around his cock. Making him arch and bite off a moan as the moist heat of Bobby’s palm reminded him how it’d been since anyone had taken care of him like this. Of how long he’d wanted exactly this and-

The reality of it – of what they were doing and all the reasons why he didn’t want to stop – stole his air in a singular heady rush. Making words impossible. Words like: "stop" and "please" and "not like this" all got lost before they could make it out of his mouth. Rebounding inside his head like a question even though he was more than aware that it hadn’t started as one. That he would never, not like this-

Except now Bobby was chuffing with pleasure, nuzzling into the corners of his lips as he jacked him slowly. Growling as pre-cum crowned the slit. It sounded perverse, especially in his head, but it was hard to look away. It was everything about the moment that kept him there. The way the angry, purpling tip of him could be clearly seen, half-strangled against his waistband. The confident heat of Bobby pressing against him. *Wanting him.*

He groaned. Knowing he was going to hate himself for it. Knowing that as much as he didn’t want to stop this was only going to make things worse. He needed Bobby with him, fully- not like this. Hell, he was already fighting the sickening lurch in his throat that had been there the day he’d made his first kill. Pressing and awful like a weight tearing him open from the inside.

*Stop.*

He needed everything to just-

"Bobby, *Jesus*-please! Stop!"

To this day he wasn’t sure if it was the tone – conflicted and halfway between a yes and a no - or the words themselves. But the hand on his cock slowed – confused and jerky until it ringed lax around him. Sluggish, like he was wading through quicksand, before Bobby's head tipped up. Panting with blunt human teeth and eyes that were already back to their usual hazel-streaked brown.

"Hey," he murmured, pleasure-slurred and only a little bit bitter as the gut-churning pull of his oncoming orgasm punched itself in reverse. Making him grit his teeth as his balls ached and some
little voice in the back of his head started *hollering*. Throwing abuse like breaking furniture as the completion that had been promised, that lingering phantom-sense of rightness that still yawned out like the sunrise, spluttered and died as his pulse thumped out, hollow and sullen.

_Fuck._

"Hey, Bobby…come on back," he urged, eyes squeezing shut when a distraught whine issued from the man's throat. Knowing if he looked now, if he met his eyes, it would be all over. "That's it. Now come back all the way, huh? I'm not going anywhere. I'm safe. You kept me safe. *Shhh*-that's it. Good. I see you, hey-"

Then Bobby was scrambling off him. Eyes horror-wide, painfully aroused and panicked before running head tilt into the worst possible scenario like it was his *god damned job*. Meaning Bobby rabbited, slamming out the door without his shoes. Leaving him with a hard on and the lasting impression that Bobby wasn't going to let himself get within a fifty mile radius of him ever again.

Something which was bad for a whole host of different reasons, honestly.
Chapter 13

He was wandering aimlessly – tacking through the woods alongside the road like the fucking shadows were hiding all the answers - caught in a feedback loop of arousal, disgust and self-hate when he heard it. The quiet, telltale sniffle of tears followed by a quiet curse and the unmistakable smack of a palm hitting a steering wheel in frustration.

He inhaled without really thinking about it, getting a nose-full of tepid anger, burning radiator fluid, expensive perfume, that distinctive- familiar tart of hair spray and-oh.

He ran a hand through his hair before walking out of the brush. Aiming for casual, like he was out for a jog in his track pants and worn t-shirt – now just a fraction too tight in the chest and arms – a not so subtle reminder that he was probably going to have to go shopping sometime soon. Letting his eyebrows rise like he was surprised to find Natalie Martin pulled over the side of the road in the moonlight-dark – hazards flashing – her jag's radiator quickly smoking as she gripped the wheel like she wanted to break it.

"Natalie? You alright?"

The smile he got was fake, practiced and slid neatly into place after she started. It was strange that he could see it, the lie that existed under the skin when she flipped back her hair and gave him that coy little wave she gave everyone with a penis within a five mile radius. Hand to her chest, heart hammering hard as he made an apologetic gesture and motioned for her to pop the hood. Nearly choking himself on the fumes as the radiator puttered and steamed.

And- yep.

He knew exactly dick-all about cars, but in his expert opinion, there definitely needed to be tow-truck involved. Probably yesterday. In fact, the expression'dead as a doornail' came appropriately to mind. Especially when one took into account that a bunch of the hose-whatsits were no longer attached to the shiny thingamajigs.

"It must be a factory defect," she remarked, only slightly defensive as she slipped out of the seat, stiletto heels click-clacking across the blacktop as she joined him by the hood. Lips pursed thin as the careful little mask wavered another half-fraction. "It's brand new! I just got it shipped here a month ago! Damn it!"

He watched her go, clamping down on a hundred or so comments he might have made without thinking a couple of months ago. Before he could hear the too-fast thrum of her heartbeat and was stuck breathing the acrid scent of exhaustion and worry that was threatening to take her apart right then and there. Knowing, somehow, that this wasn't the time.

Instead, he held the door open for her as she slipped back into the plush luxury seat. Shimmery, coal-grey sun-dress tucked neatly underneath her, flowing out in a way that emphasized the bare curve of her legs. A sight that he might have killed himself dead just to be privileged enough to witness a second time around. Instead-

"Car problems notwithstanding, you alright?" he asked again, feeling the strange need to make her understand that it wasn't really the car he was asking about as her manicured nails – a dark blue shade that warped oddly in the halo of the flashing hazards – stilled against the wheel.

Natalie had always been smarter than people gave her credit for. Like mother, like daughter, he
supposed. So he wasn't too surprised when she sighed and deflated. Breath leaving her in a
shuddering rush that made him wonder about the last time she'd gotten a good night's sleep that didn't
involve either red wine or the chalky aftertaste of doctor prescribed sleep-aids.

*How could someone be struggling so much and still be so strong?*

"I am having a moment," she confessed, looking determinedly back out the windshield like the
answers to all of life's questions were out there and it was just her steaming, shittily made car that
was holding her back. Sitting ramrod straight in her seat and stinking of conflict. Giving him
flashbacks to five or six minutes ago when he'd been glaring at the treeline and demanding the same
out of the darkness. Trying to forget the way Chris had felt against him. How he'd smelled. How he
almost let himself-

"I can see that," he returned slowly. Nodding, because all important revelations deserved nods.
Especially when he'd somehow succeeded in not shoving his foot into his mouth or whatever it was
he usually did that ended up with her shooting him that patented unimpressed look and stalking off as
only a determined Martin woman in two-inch heels could. Carefully, loudly and with regal pride.

"Ever have one of those days where it feels like everything has piled just a little too high?" she
asked, sounding remarkably small as the seat seemed to swallow her. A single tear making tracks
down her face as something in his chest pulled agonizingly tight.

He crouched down in front of the open door. Close but not stifling - not crowding. Just being there,
like there was solidarity in that careful, polite closeness as his calves folded and the hairs on the back
of his legs flirted awkwardly with the blacktop. But as for the distance? Well, he shouldn't have
bothered because she turned into him regardless. Winding her arms around his neck and crying into
the crook of him, soaking his shirt in tears as she shuddered softly – delicately. Like even now, when
they were both taking a chance on one another, she was still holding something back.

It took a minute to realize he was holding her back – gently, like one wrong move and he'd break her
– but firm enough for her to know he meant it. Letting the simple comfort of the moment sift through
his thoughts like a balm. Reminding him, however harshly, that regardless of his own problems, the
world didn't revolve around him and that people – normal people – were still going through life,
living, hurting, then waking up and doing it all over again. Facing the world head on, not hiding
from it. Not running from it, which basically summed up his experiences over the last few months.

*And honestly, he got it.*

*Sometimes you just needed to cry.*

She pulled back eventually, sniffling. Half-laughing in that nervous-embarrassment sort of way he
was intimately familiar with – ie: his life in most social settings – before giving him a watery smile.

"I'm sorry, today has just been so- oh, I must be a mess!" she exclaimed, automatically going for her
compact as she fished a tissue out of her purse and daubed carefully at her eyes. Glancing at him
apologetically as the salt-tracks of her tears started air drying across his neck and shirt.

He just snorted. "You're lovely." Because it was true and for once it was ironically so far from a
come on she actually laughed and looked up at him with red-streaked eyes that for the first time that
night started edging towards an honest smile.

"What are you doing out here, Bobby?" she asked, with the air of someone that was eager for
distraction and deflection, regardless of which one came first. Determined to seize it by the coat-tails
and never let go. "It's late."
"Jogging," he answered, because it wasn't entirely a lie and frankly, with his shirt and track pants, he certainly looked the part.

"You have no shoes," she pointed out, eyes flicking down with an exaggerated drag that seemed to linger a bit too long on areas that certainly didn't include his feet. Making him startle a bit because-holy shit she was right. He must have left them back in Derek's loft.

_Crap._

He'd been walking for hours, running, beating an angry tempo through the underbrush. He winced. Looking down, fulling expecting to see ruined soles. Only, well, they weren't. They _should_ have been wrecked and bleeding – hell, even just a little bit sore after his hissy fit through the forest. But, nope, nothing.

He swallowed hard.

"Natural running – it's _uh_ a trend. I was trying it out."

The look she gave him said it all, but thankfully she didn't call him out on it.

"God, I need a drink," she muttered, eyes blank and overwhelmed. Shoulders threatening to cave inwards with the same weight that'd been aching across his shoulders for days, but for some reason couldn't stand to see it breaking across hers.

"Ice cream?" he suggested.

At first she just looked at him like he'd suddenly sprouted three heads and was proposing they commit public indecency together. But then he got to watch her jaw work first hand. Tensing and releasing with the air of someone who had said no a bit too often in her life before she looked him right in the eye with that trademark Martin expression, a deadeye mix between sultry and frightening and nodded.

"God, yes."

He got them four scoops of triple chocolate – the kind you gain ten pounds just looking at - in a waffle bowl. Something which earned him a look like- _what kind of heathen are you?_ Right up until she took her first bite and make a noise somewhere between an orgasm and regret, tucking in like she hadn't eaten anything so delicious in years.

And hey, maybe it was because self-control wasn't exactly a thing he had in excess, but knowing Nat and how she picked bird-like through her expensive salads in the lunch room, it was probably true.

He herded her safely to the furthest booth – the dingy cramped one by the bathroom. The only one that was out of sight of the counter. Silently daring Greenberg - who was inexplicably working the till - to say something as he aimed for casual. Bare feet _stick-sticking_ awkwardly to the dirty tiles as Greenberg paled and dropped the twenty he shoved at him. Making him roll his eyes - hating the fact that the universe just wouldn't let him have nice things - right up until Natalie let go of a surprisingly girlish giggle and flipped her hair back. Kicking up a wisp of fading perfume and sweet smelling lotion that suddenly made him feel like he was sixteen all over again. Half afraid, half transfixed about the entire idea of girls and the boobs that came along with them.

The irony, of course, was that it wasn't exactly long hair and gorgeous breasts that were dominating his thoughts these days. More like two day old stubble, blue eyes, tanned arms and a boyish smile on a face that had seen more than its fair share of heart break.
"It looks good on you, you know," she decided as they twitched with chocolate overload and fought over the small hoard of napkins they'd been allotted. "Happiness...whatever you're doing these days? It's working."

He wiped his mouth, licking at the corners as he fished a bit of brownie out of his bowl. Not really sure what to say to that as she watched him through long lashes. Getting the distinct impression he was being examined as he arched a brow and tried for disarming.

"I've been doing a lot of running lately, hitting gym a bit."

But she just shook her head.

"Sure, I mean, you look like it, but- I am not sure, there's something else," she hummed, spoon flicking lazily. "You act different too, it's something in the way you hold yourself. Like you're finally comfortable in your own skin maybe? Like you've found your niche."

"Only a few decades too late," he muttered moodily. Then, because he was curious and someone like Natalie Martin was probably the safest person he could ask- "Is it that obvious?"

Her smile was beatific, reminding him of all the guys who'd had a crush on her all through high school – himself included. "Only to people with eyes," she remarked. "But then again, you've been something of a topic of conversation around town lately. Haven't you noticed?"

He blanched, almost choking on a hazelnut.

"After all, it's hard to believe how you can find the time to even think about going to the gym when you spend most of your free time saving toddlers and rescuing stranded motorists from their smoking cars. Tell me, Bobby, is there anything you can't do?" she teased, voice lowering down to a playful purr that just made him cough up a laugh. Feeling a blush spread down his neck as he stabbed at his half-melted ice cream half-heartedly.

Still, embarrassment aside he actually let himself think about it. Because really, wasn't that a question? For all he knew, the answer could be no. That was the whole point of that little exercise at Derek's loft. Wasn't it? He didn't know anything about what he was or what he could do. How dangerous he was or if-

"I am pretty sure I still can't dance," he offered lamely.

He was saved from any further Spanish Inquisition moments when her phone chirped.

"It's Lydia," she replied with a sigh, smiling small but with an undercurrent of fondness that felt familiar even if for the life of him he couldn't figure out why. "Sometimes I think she forgets who is the child and who is the parent here. She called me a taxi. Can I drop you off somewhere?"

He was staring off into space - vaguely aware that his phone had been vibrating against his thigh for about twenty minutes - when she startled him by speaking again. Tasting the hesitation in the air as she chewed on the corner of her lip like she was fully expecting to be laughed at.

"Hey Bobby, do you ever get the feeling there is something going on in this town? Something no one is telling anyone about?"
"You have no idea," he told her. Because honesty tasted good in his mouth and maybe he was having a bit of a moment about it too. Or, you know, a couple months' worth of moments. *Whatever.*

But she just grimaced like she believed him, waving at the taxi that'd pulled smoothly into the lot before sliding gracefully to her feet. Shaking her head when he made to do the same. Instead she just pressed a gentle kiss across his temple and sailed out the doors, already on the phone with the towing company. Leaving him alone in the booth with two empty bowls drowning in chocolate-melt, turning the words that'd left her lips just before she'd gone over and over in his head.

"That was what I was afraid of."
Chapter 14

He ran mindlessly. Not really aware that it wasn’t quite light out or that he wasn't wearing a shirt—
again. Something that he figured was probably going to become on issue somewhere along the line.
Cutting fast through the thick brush of the deep woods, far away from prying eyes as images from
the loft two nights before flashed bloody and badly lit in his mind’s eye. Vaguely entertaining the
possibility of seeing if he could now actually run fast enough to escape his responsibilities as second
hand embarrassment and muted horror washed through his mind’s eye like an overflowing sewer
grate.

He’d done the only thing he could when he’d come back to himself, peeling himself off of Chris and
nearly falling over himself in horror and confusion. Painfully hard as the world shifted – or maybe
just his understanding of it. The animal under his skin howling a negative as he wrenched his hands
out of the man’s pants and tossed himself across the room. Fumbling with the door like he’d never
seen one before as every instinct he had demanded he go back and claim him.

*His mate had given his permission.*

*Accepted him.*

*Wanted him.*

*The man was his.*

*There was no denying it, no room for debate or second guessing.*

*There was a sense of rightness to his scent when he’d offered him his throat.*

*A complicated burst of arousal and want, ageless and without boundary.*

*It had been centering and clean, like the changing of the seasons.*

*But not like that.*

*Not—*

He wasn’t surprised when Scott and Derek fell in beside him. He'd smelled them coming. Trampling
through the long grass as they whipped between trees. Picking up the pace until the forest blurred
and the smell of wolf and sweat rose thick in the air.

“Wanna race?” Scott challenged, light and full of humor as one of his eyebrows wriggled itself up at
a ridiculous angle. Nearly braining himself on a low-lying branch as the alpha ducked just in time.
Making Derek’s far more stoic expression all the more unbelievable as he looked between them like
he was waiting for the punchline.

And, because he was apparently five years old-

“*You’re on, McCall.*”

They ended up in a tangled, growling pile close to an hour later when Liam jump tackled them from
the trail edge during a hair-pin curve. Taking down all three of them in a mess of playful snarls and awkward nuzzling - adolescent and unthreatening as he let himself get pulled down with them. Swatting the pup on reflex as Derek’s claws raked across his back and Scott tried and failed to give him the dirt equivalent of a face wash. Or at least he was right up until he watched Derek and Liam catapult over the edge of an embankment, down a small cliff and into a flower-padded gully and- oh hell no.

He scrabbled comically at the lip, prying century old roots out of worm-addled dirt, determined not to go without a fight. Part of him still clinging to the idea that he was normal and very much breakable. Watching first hand – and only distantly freaking out - as his nails grew into long dexterous claws. Anchoring himself deep enough that he was hanging from the edge, caught between satisfaction and terror as Liam catcalled from the gully underneath. Or at least he was until Scott flew, ass over tit after him, and pulled him down with him. Laughing manically, like a complete and utter lunatic as he yelped and they fell – possibly forever.

It was a weird sensation when he landed belly up, bouncing and rolling through the stupidly cinematic long grass and ferns. Feeling it was only fair to hook Scott by the armpits and toss him halfway across the gully with an irritated roar. Making everyone laugh – including himself - when the alpha nearly took out a sapling and caused Derek and Liam to skitter out of the way like frightened cats trying to avoid the fall out.

And, because it was only a matter of time, the three of them decided to work together and eventually he let himself get wrestled flat into the grass. Not really sure if there were words to say when the frantic scuffling and snapping lessened down into languid stretches and yawns and furnace-hot bodies that curled around his like they did this every day.


Those were the words not being said but airing out nonetheless as Scott watched him through eyes that were slung low – half-mast and content. He breathed in, throaty, leaning back with his arms bunched under his head, the steady weights of the others curled around him. Forcing each other to bend and intertwine as his personal space bubble wasn’t so much as popped as it was decimated completely.

And strangely enough, that was okay.

It felt like denning.

Like home.

And no, he wasn’t a wolf. No matter how good this felt, how right, there was a stark difference between them. A sense of awareness that not only differentiated the species but also kept the majority of his strength in check. Knowing, perhaps in the same way that the wolves knew how to hold themselves back around normal people, that he had to do the same with them.

Cubs.

In the darkest corners of his hind brain, that was what they’d always be. Vulnerable and eternally half-grown even when the entire group of them were saggy and grey and perusing brochures for ‘hip retirement resorts’ that were really just a fancy name for ‘live here till you die’ places and “spend most of your children’s inheritance on Bingo Sundays in the common room.” An observation he was going to probably have to keep to himself considering he got the feeling that none of them, even Liam, would probably appreciate the comparison.
He watched the forest canopy move with the world. Listening to the leaves make that pleasant, but completely indescribable sound they did when the wind filtered through them. Chewing on a laugh when Derek let out a rattling snore from somewhere around the vicinity of his right armpit.

And honestly, he wondered about himself sometimes, about how he was actually dealing with all this. He couldn’t say without lying to himself that the confusing clusterfuck that had become his life was all bad anymore – or ever had been. Because sometimes he felt like he was falling apart, wondering if he was losing himself to whatever the hell this was. And other times, like right now, he felt remarkably calm about it. Just accepting the fact that part of him was already aware that he was on another tier when he came to the whole Supernatural freakshow and the jury was still out on if anything could actually come close to kicking his ass.

Only thing was, he didn’t care about all that. He cared about this. Right here and right now. But mostly, he just cared about Chris. About his life without Chris in it and how much he knew, deep down to the very marrow of him that he’d rather fucking die. A realization which in itself was terrifying, only not as terrifying as it should be.

He felt weird about it.

Calm.

But weird.

“It's not always like that you know,” Scott rumbled quietly, eyes flashing red only briefly before simmering back down into fondness. “What happened on the field? At Derek’s the other night? Sometimes it's like this…good.”

He blew out a breath like a sucker punch. Not realizing how much he needed to hear those exact words until they aired out. Heart doing that funny thing in his chest as Liam buried between them and he found himself thinking about Chris and that stupid eye crinkle he got when he smiled.

And yeah-

He was starting to get that.

“I'm starving. Can we eat?” Liam whined an indeterminable time later.

He yawned, popping his head out of the pile as the smell of crushed pine and dense soil made him sigh with contentment. Fully planning on sinking back down into the moving sea of warm limbs and pliant flesh and never moving again only to have his awareness of time and space come rushing back a few seconds later. Finding himself half smothered under a knot of combined skin that belonged to Parrish and Lydia - whom, quite frankly, he had no freakin’ idea when they’d arrived.

Realizing in a yes, this is my life now sort of way that the sun was high and more than a few hours had passed somewhere in between him leaving his house and getting baited into a werewolf version of a puppy pile.

He resisted the urge to face palm, getting distracted when he looked over his shoulder and caught sight of Kira and Malia tucked under Scott’s arms and Stiles stuck around Derek like cling wrap. Feeling a lot like he was trying to create his own language to understand the dynamics of all the different relationships that somehow seemed to be existing seamlessly alongside each other as he looked around him and wondered why he wasn’t freaking out about all this like he probably should.
be. Just blinking a bit when Parrish’s hand curled around his bare shoulder and kneaded into him with blunt nails. Echoing Lydia’s syrupy sound of approval as she watched them from where she was caught in the crook of his arm. Long hair tickling across his chest in curly, reddish waves that caught the light every time his chest rose and fell.

And really, because why the hell not, he found himself answering.

“I know a place.”

Chris was waiting in their booth at the diner when they piled through the door. Sporting a massive plate of fish and a determined expression as the man jerked a finger at the spot beside him and the others peeled off like dew in the morning. Crowding to the other side of the restaurant like a single, clamoring animal. Already calling out requests for coffee and menus as Jessie had a silent, but decidedly dignified coronary behind the front counter.

“Traitors,” he hissed, hating himself for quite literally walking himself into this one as Chris stared at him pointedly. Broadcasting a look that quite clearly stated: get your furry ass over here before I get up and do it for you.

And wow- he didn’t know he could be aroused and completely terrified at the same time.

*Woo, self-discovery time.*

He hesitated, tugging fitfully at the collar of the shirt he’d dug up from the depths of his car that smelled like sweat and stale air. Feeling decidedly unprepared for this level of emotional blitzkrieg even as he inhaled the man’s scent like it was oxygen. Looking from Chris, to the fish, then back again. *Crap.*

“We are going to have a conversation,” Chris declared, index finger tapping smartly on the scuffed table as he slid into the booth like a guilty child. “But first, you are going to eat.”

*Well, okay then.*

“He did it on purpose, Bobby,” Chris sighed patiently. In the same way people say don’t wear your shoes on the carpet or don’t run with scissors. Like it was painfully obvious and he was the only one not catching the neon painted clue bus.

“But why? I almost killed him. *I wanted to.* He had no right to touch you!” he hissed, suddenly dangerously close to a snarl before he freaked himself out when he realized his nails had turned jet back. Lengthening without his consent before he stuffed them under the table and breathed sharply through his nose.

“*Jesus Christ,”* he hissed, counting down from twenty as Chris shifted and tangled their legs together. Soaking in the steady warmth of him under the gum-studded wood as the man watched him with an expression he couldn’t quite figure.

“He hurt you,” he muttered after a handful of beats. Almost sulking as the wrongness of it threatened to take him down all over again. Hoping that it passed for some sort of explanation as Jessie steamrolled across the linoleum and refilled their coffees without asking. Leaving him with nothing to do but watch as the man’s pupils expanded the slightest of bits as neither of them made any move to pull away.
He licked his lips reflectively, feeling a self-satisfied curl of warmth in his gut when Chris followed it. Tinting the air with-

“They were right about us flying blind,” Chris started slowly, clearly thinking the words through before he let them fly. “Deaton is still trying to get answers and when Derek asked about training, about testing your strengths and weaknesses, well, it made sense. I’ll admit I didn’t think that was exactly what he had in mind, but we learned something valuable out of it – your trigger is protective. It isn’t aggression. Knowing that now gives us an advantage later.”

He could feel the weight of the kid’s eyes from across the room.

Probably eavesdropping with their stupid super-hearing bullshit.

But considering he was still one with his pettiness he didn’t turn to look.

Refusing to give them the satisfaction.

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Refusing to give them the satisfaction.
onto his lips. Echoing each other with a painfully familiar rhythm he didn’t question this time around.

“Then let’s go home.”

He nodded numbly, letting Chris throw down a wad of bills and herd him quietly out the door. Muzzily distracted by silent symphony playing underneath the man’s skin as Chris tangled their fingers together the moment they were free of the dingy glass doors. A steady rock he couldn’t help but cling to as they stumbled out into the open air.
Chapter 15

Chris was silent during the drive home, turning the radio up a couple of notches as his knee jiggled - struggling with the automatic urge to switch it over to his favourite station just to put a bell on the sickeningly sweet domesticity of the moment.

*Christ, they were both goners.*

*His end of his bachelorhood was literally visible on the horizon.*

*It was also kind of weird how okay he was with that.*

*Like he’d just been waiting.*

*All this god damned time.*

*His whole life.*

*Everything.*

*Like it’d always been a straight shot right to this moment, this place, this-*

His Adam’s apple jumped rather damningly when he found himself staring at Chris’ hands. Watching the subtle play of the tendons and muscles. Wanting to follow the criss-crosses of old scars with his tongue and work his saliva deep.

So that he would know.

So that everyone would know.

*His.*

He blinked. The man wasn’t wearing his wedding ring, just the ghost of the band sandwiched between tanned skin. *And really, when had that happened?*

Thankfully, the neck of the seat belt strangled him before he could do or say something monumentally stupid. Pathetically grateful for the minor case of whiplash as his teeth clacked together and Chris braked in front of his house with a jerk. Slamming his SUV into the quickest, most brutally accurate parallel park his neighbourhood had ever been blessed to witness. Or, you know, horrified by, if one considered Mr. Pottermeyer’s twitching front drapes.

“I can hear you thinking,” Chris remarked hoarsely, looking straight ahead. Jaw clenched tight like a headache as he stared unabashedly. Twitching against the seatbelt as his body demanded action – movement. He’d never liked being still. Even before all this. He’d always had too much energy under his skin. “Tell me.”

He sucked in a breath, thin and lacking. Feeling like he had to be half-suffocating to let something like this go as he fought with the realization that the best case scenario here was facing Chris’ derision and disappointment. And *god*, he had no idea if he could handle that. If he could-

“I’m not like that,” he started, squeezing his eyes shut. “I am not what you think. Everything you said at the diner? Here at the house after what happened on the field? With you, Deaton and the Scooby gang? That isn’t me. I’m not that person – that morally superior whatever everyone keeps telling me I am. I’m a fraud. *I feel* like a fraud. I have to be, otherwise-”
“Otherwise, what?” the man parroted, gaze piercing like he’d caught him in a lie. “Otherwise you’ll have to deal with it? Otherwise you’ll have to do what you already know like breathing? What you know is right? Bobby, you’re smarter than this. You know you can handle this. You just aren’t letting it in.”

“Maybe I don’t want it to,” he challenged, fingers curling like claws into the upholstery. Hating himself for how conflicted he felt. How half of him felt like settling and the other was still trying to fight a battle it knew it couldn’t win. “There are some parts, I can’t—”

Chris pulled the keys from the ignition like an open-palmed slap.

“Who you are is what you are. You can’t run from that. It’s the same thing. Two sides of the same coin, don’t you get it?” Chris stated, turning in his seat so that they had no choice but to meet each other’s eyes. “All of this? Everything that happened at Derek’s- at the school? It’s just the physical manifestation of it.”

He looked down at his hands, kneading fitfully at the grooves in the leather seat.

But they were just kid gloves for the real danger that existed underneath.

_The animal._

He’d been lucky so far.

Lucky he hadn’t hurt anyone.

_Killed anyone._

Well, killed anyone that wasn’t trying to kill him back anyway.

But how long was that going to last?

How could he be sure-

“Scott told me about what you did for them with Meredith last year. You trusted them, hell you tazered Brunski, twice. Got him arrested. On their word alone. A handful of kids pleading for something that couldn’t have made any sense. But you did it anyway. Did you even ask afterwards? You didn’t, did you? _Jesus, Bobby._ Don’t you see? You’ve been a balance for good ever since you refused to leave town after your senior year.”

He opened his mouth, heat flushing across his cheeks. But Chris beat him to it.

“Yeah I know about all that. All the universities that came courting? All those free ride Lacrosse scholarships? Coach called my folks practically frothing at the mouth, said you had no idea what you were doing and were throwing your future away. I guess he figured I could talk some sense into you even though I’d been gone for years and was ass deep in training. Angry at everything. I told him you could make your own damn decisions and hung up. I hated you. God, you have no idea, do you? It took me ages to stop looking at people and not see your face. And Victoria—" Chris hissed. Fists balled up tight before he punched the inner of the wheel so hard that the dashboard whinged – creaking dangerously.

“It never made sense till now but you weren’t were you? When you refused all those offers? Lied to everyone that asked? You weren’t throwing anything away. You _couldn’t_ leave, could you?”

He licked his lips, shaky and thin in his own skin. Throat so painfully dry that if there had been even
a drop of moisture he would have probably choked on it. But instead of letting him answer, Chris just shook his head. Rueful, angry and unashamedly fond.

“Bobby, you’ve been keeping the balance for years. The other night you just brought out your claws. Something tells me you know it too.”

“But—”

This time Chris shut him up with his lips.

Unsurprisingly, it worked better than words.

“You know, you really are handling this well,” Chris told him, later when night had fallen and they’d camped out on the couch without socks. Watching reruns of Star Trek: The Next Generation and decimating his supply of microwave popcorn. Trying to scrape the taste of chrischrischris off the roof of his mouth as his semi-hard on stayed more or less in an upright position despite the fact that their make out session in the car had been hours ago and he swore that if he’d been anyone else his fucking balls would have fallen off by now.

“This is not something you need to be okay with right now. Hell, what you’ve been through? It is okay not to be,” Chris continued, eyes flicking from the flat screen, over to him, then back again. Completely missing the big climax on the planet as Geordi LaForge instructed the Romulan how to construct the beacon. Finding a shaky sort of middle ground as they shuddered with relief, half-embracing as the signal finally started to send.

“But I will have to be eventually, right?” he posed, breathing through all the words they weren’t saying. Everything he knew deep down that he was slowly coming to terms with, despite his lips being slow on the uptake.

The look Chris gave him wasn’t quite pitying. But it was close enough to put his hackles up.

“I’m really not,” he sighed, pulling at a snagged thread on the ankle of his sweat pants. Idly wondering when the other man would hit his limit. When he did something, said something that would make him just snap. Everyone had one. That line of fucked-up-crazy they drew in the sand when it all became too much. Where their hands would go up, defensive but firm, and he’d end up with yet another ‘we-were-almost-something’ for his Dear John collection.

The brutal part, of course, was that he might even let him.

Because the truth was, he was pathetic like that sometimes.

“Not what?” Chris asked, gaze remarkably steady as the episode went into commercials. Something about head colds and plastic teapots. He wasn’t really paying attention.

“Handling this well,” he answered.

“Bobby, look at me,” Chris demanded, making him realize he’d lost time somewhere along the way because when he did Chris was right there. Crouched down in front of him on the edge of the coffee table. Blue eyes warm but surprisingly hard this time around.

It felt better than sympathy.

He paused the episode as Geordi and the Romulan were transported directly to the Enterprise’s bridge. It was a scene that’d always fascinated him. The Romulan had this intense, animal wildness
clear in his eyes as he looked around. Padded shoulders hunched like he was expecting a blow. But it was his trust in Geordi that kept him calm – still. It was almost pathetic how much he related.

“You’re afraid.”

“I’m not ready for this,” he countered, vaguely wondering if self-hate had a taste as he courted the idea of drowning himself in his laundry room sink.

“Neither was I,” Chris pointed out, wry but with a glimmer of a one-corner smile. “But then again, it usually isn’t up to us. Most of the time the choice is made for us. You and I are equal in that, at least.”

“Well, that *sucks,*” he stated blandly. Dead panning it so hard he was aiming for cast-iron. Keeping it that way until Chris huffed a laugh – honest and clean like he couldn't help it.

“Yeah, it does doesn't it?” the man murmured. Snorting a bit to himself as he looked away, stretching. Nearly giving him hot flashes when his eyes automatically followed the long clean line of him. Watching as the hunter knuckled a calloused hand through his short hair.

“Still. It hasn't been all bad, has it?”

He opened his mouth to say *hello, where have you been with the blood, death, destruction and supernatural mid-life crises* before he let it hinge closed again. Staring back at warm eyes and a crinkled smile. Coasting on the intimate knowledge of *yesthisismine* and *probablygonnaputaringonit* – and okay-

Maybe it hadn’t been *all* bad.

Only thing was, Chris knew it too.

The absolute bastard that he was.

*Ugh.*

They ended up chickening out when it came to the revelation of any other truth-bombs. Content to tangle limbs and soak up the closeness of one another as the universe seemed content to tone itself down for the time being. Eventually turning off the tv in favor of not talking about much of anything, really.

It was a nice change.

Personally he wasn’t sure how much more soap opera style angst he could take.

*And he worked in a god dammed high school!*

It was technically the next morning by the time they packed it in for the night. Automatically jerking a thumb over to his dresser so that the man could at least change his shirt. Trying not to make a fool out of himself when Chris shucked his jeans right there in the god damned hallway. Turning the air muggy with lazy arousal and the scent of *mate* and *home* all mixed into one. But he put on the brakes when Chris got out the spare sheets and started making up the couch.

“Don’t be stupid,” he yawned, floating in that almost-conscious sort of place where everything was remarkably simple and perfect and honestly, he had no idea why they’d never thought about doing
this before. Towing Chris gently down the hall and into the bedroom like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Lips playing with a syrupy-slow grin when Chris just let him – wordless and keenly open as he poked him over to the side he liked least and fell face first into his pillow.

It took a bit longer for Chris to get settled. Throwing his clothes on the chair beside the bed and shuffling around in the sheets. Treating the duvet as something to be conquered rather than shared as he rolled himself up in it with a pleased sound that made him smile into his pillow. Listening offhandedly for the tell-tale *clink-click* of a Glock being set on the bedside table before relaxing completely.

Truth was, you’d think, being what he was – what he knew about this town - that Chris would sleep light – fitful. Half-awake like the eternally good soldier he was. Only, well- he didn’t. Chris slept like the definition of a fucking *train wreck*. Hard. Fast. And completely unsympathetic to any and all innocent bystanders.

He snorted, half annoyed, half amused as the man star-fished out, snoring obnoxiously. Already resigning himself to tossing and turning as he propped himself up on his elbows with a closed mouth sigh. Mutinously deciding that if he couldn’t sleep he might as well enjoy the view. Only to be staggered by the realization a handful of minutes in. Knowing with sudden and complete surety that he would throw himself in front of a thousand sets of claws just to keep Chris safe.

Maybe Chris wasn’t a deep sleeper at all.

Maybe it was about trust.

Him.

*Huh.*

He didn’t freak out. He was too far gone for that. Instead, he just rolled his eyes. Breathing in time with Chris’ pulse until he slipped off into sleep like it was nothing. Gathering the man’s limbs into his chest and rolling them, scooping up behind him as he pressed his face into the man’s neck and breathed. Relaxing for what felt like the first time in *months*.

He couldn’t be sure-

But he was halfway convinced he hadn’t slept that deep since the *womb.*
Chapter 16

It was a couple days later. Otherwise known as once he'd gotten over himself. That he showed up at Derek's place with power tools and a shit ton of plywood. Ready to wage all repair-related war as he flashed the wolf a grin when the kid burst into the clearing. Shirtless and covered in a thin layer of sweat from a mid-morning run. They exchanged understandably weary looks until he tapped at his tool kit and the kid nodded. Gesturing for him to follow as he loped inside to change.

Awkwardness aside, he still like an asshole for taking out an entire wall of the guy's loft.

By accident!

He could justify it anyway he wanted, but it didn't get rid of the sneaking suspicion that this was the type of thing fruit baskets and I fucked up flowers were probably invented for. Only he had a feeling that in this case, neither would be appreciated. It left him in a weird sort of empathic limbo to be honest. Like- sorry for almost killing you and breaking your apartment, but you kinda had it coming, only not really.

There just wasn't a Hallmark card in existence that would sum that all up.

Which, of course, left him with power tools.

It was all really awkward. But luckily, Derek didn't emote so much as speak silently with the craggy mountains he called eyebrows. So he figured he was off the hook as far as any messy theatrics were concerned. How the kid could stand to be within five feet of Stilinski at any given time without committing homicide was a complete mystery to him.

Opposites attract, maybe?

Ew.

Anywho-

"I don't understand how you guys do it. You're ridiculously calm about this and it's freaking me out. I mean you and Scott? Liam? Kyria? Apparently half my current and past team," he snarked as he jammed the proper bit into the end of his drill and tested the charge. Still a bit sore about the entire 'Team Supernatural' thing after Scott had finally spilled the beans about the last couple of years.

"The epic shake down on the field? And now this? I mean if someone took out an entire wall in my house I would probably be hospitalized for a mental break. But, I suppose that's just me and the pathetic attachment I have for my half-assed renovations."

"The other day, it was you making a point. A point I goaded you into on purpose and without your consent," Derek reminded with a shrug. "A couple of weeks ago it was Kate and her Berserkers kidnapping Scott and dragging him to Mexico."

"Besides. I've been wanting to do some renos, anyway," the wolf explained, holding the wood steady as he knelt down and drilled into the frame of the window. Neatly covering the remaining shards of glass with plywood. "I've been talking to an architect a couple of towns over that's interested in a challenge. Though I don't think he completely understands why I want reinforced concrete and steel girders in the walls. That will probably be an interesting conversation, sooner or later."
"Why bother?" he grunted, reaching behind him for a screw. "Seems like every supernatural baddie in a hundred mile radius knows where you live, anyway."

The snort that followed was genuinely amused. Probably the most honest expression - other than anger - he'd seen the kid make since, well, ever actually.

"I've been starting to wonder."

They worked in silence for a while. Enough that he gradually started taking comfort in the familiar. Enjoying the dangerous rasp of rough-edged plywood skating across his palms. And the steady, honest sort of confidence that came with being in your element and knowing it. Figuring they could rustle up something better in terms of temporary covers for the cavernous, body-sized holes in the plaster when Derek suggested just covering the rest with the thick roll of building plastic he'd brought with him as a liner.

It didn't really occur to him that it was probably why the kid had said yes to all this in the first place until Derek broke the silence with something only a few tones shy of reproach. Reminding him so much of his mother – because yeah, he'd known her too, small town yadda-yadda – that he nearly did a double take.

"What's this really about, Coach?"

He gave him the fish-eye without really thinking about it. Determined to let the broken windows and beat up walls speak for themselves. You know, like a normal person. Leaning backwards as he tried to judge if the board he was about to hammer was more or less level.

"What happened between you and Argent after we left?"

Crap.

"Would you know if something had?" he countered. Hesitantly curious even though he was mostly convinced he wouldn't like the answer.

What was a bit of personal mortification in the grand scheme of things, anyway?

He was pretty sure he'd lost whatever was left of his pride a long ass time ago.

Probably around the same time as his testicle.

But hey, details.

The brow Derek raised in response was surprisingly damning.

"Right," he drawled slowly, clutching at the shreds of his dignity by their frayed little edges. Mentally flipping the universe the bird for never seeming to cut him a break before slamming the hammer down a bit harder than strictly necessary.

"I've been initiated into a cult of perverts," he muttered. Sticking a screw between his lips as he hunkered down to get a better angle. Catching a scent from outside that he hated immediately and hated even more when he realized he could tell exactly what animal it was coming from.

"I was born like this, born a wolf," Derek reminded, staring right back in that overly focused sort of way that automatically made him panic. Reminding him of one of those 'no pants' type dreams. Irrational fears mixed with too much caffeine.
"Yeah-yeah, I got the cliff notes version," he returned. Mentally reviewing the series of conversations he’d had with Scott and Chris about pack structure and the differences between bitten and born wolves. Something which Derek hadn't been particularly helpful adding to, at least until now.

"Let me guess," Derek replied, setting down the drill in favor of catching him cleanly. Eye to eye and uncompromising until a jolt of irritation caused his hackles to prickle. Fighting the urge to sneeze as the overwhelming musk of wolf filtered thick through the air. "He smells good. Different. Better than anything you've ever smelled?"

His head jerked up, startled. Sending screws pinging across the hardwood as his mouth fell open.

"It's what wolves call true mates, most supernatural creatures have an equivalent. Humans – regular people – would probably call them soulmates," Derek explained, holding his eyes again but this time the glare a fraction softer.

"He had a wife," he protested, tongue peeking out to trace his lower lip – thoughtful and reeling despite the innate urge to defend. Even if it was for his mate's deceased wife.

Wait.

What?

"And now he has you," Derek replied. Like it was simple, easy even. Jesus. His hand curled into a fist at his side. Feeling the faint pin-pricks that heralded the formation of claws before he calmed. Forcing the roughness back and inhaling sharply.

"Do I feel like this – about him - because of what I am? Now, I mean? Or-" he hesitated, fixing his eyes on the screws glinting between the floor boards as he gave voice to something that had been bothering him ever since that night at the loft.

"You're the only one that can answer that," Derek returned, seeming to hesitate for a second before continuing. Like he wasn't sure he should say anything at all but couldn't keep quiet about it either.

"But if you want my advice, don't over think it. He's here, now, and considering he's texted me twice since you got here, it's for a reason. Maybe you don't need to look any further than that." Derek told him, frowning a bit when his phone vibrated and pinged the first line of a text across the screen. Getting a quick glimpse of the label: "Stiles" before he scooped it up and pocketed it.

"But however you need to justify it, do it quickly. These things tend to work themselves out, one way or another. And trust me when I say it's better to keep your other nature well fed rather than half starved."

He gave up on the plywood and thunked his head against the frame, groaning.

"It's true, you never really leave high school, do you?"

He nearly gave himself a concussion when Derek barked out a laugh.

"Maybe you should take your own advice," he shot back later, belated and just a little bit petty after Derek had snarled at his phone for the fifth time and clicked it to silent. Taking a moment to crack open some sodas and take their obligatory 'doing manly stuff with hammers' break.

Derek's expression was nonplussed when he fixed him with a look mid-sip. A sense of calm that was completely ruined when one considered his eyebrows were rapidly approaching critical mass. Not
even needing his super-senses to know the kid was suddenly looking a whole lot like a cornered animal.

An *emotionally constipated* cornered animal, but hey, details.

"I'm new to this whole 'supernatural run with the wolves' bullshit, not an idiot," he pointed out. Watching the man down the rest of his coke and somehow *not* burp – which, holy crap that was *not* natural - and haul a stack of six two-by-fours across the room with apparent ease. Reminding him he could probably do the same now. Probably without even regretting it in the morning.

Did supernatural creatures get backaches?

Was that a thing?

*Okay, so- still really new at this.*

"I'm around whiny teenagers enough to recognize mutual pining when I see it," he continued. Knowing he was just digging his own grave all the deeper at this point when Derek suddenly turned. Nearly knocking him on his ass as the armload of two-by-fours swung with him. Forcing him to duck at the last second as they whooshed dangerously overhead.

"You're comparing me to a pining teenager?" Derek stated, bland but startlingly incredulous. Like absolutely nothing in his life had prepared him for this moment.

He shrugged, not really thinking about it as he swung up the kid's load in his free hand and lugged both – three or four hundred pounds of weight across the room – easy as blinking. "Hey, I just call it like I see it."

The pause that followed was stilted and awkward before he broke it.

Not exactly back pedaling, but close enough that he ended up getting snarky about it.

"And if I'm wrong then I suggest, with the week I've been having, that you just let me have this one."

"Touché," Derek commented, eyes bright like an unbirthed smile as the faintest trace of *humans/tiles/warm/home* rose up from the kid's skin like a silent tell. All things that would have been hidden from him before. Good things. *Honest things.*

And yeah, maybe he was.

But then again, maybe the world owed him a couple of minutes to breathe before shitting all over him again.

He ended up accidentally re-asking the same question a half dozen times before Derek finally snapped. The infamous Hale temper flashing to the forefront as the man ripped out an entire line of crumbling plasterboard and bent nails with a single violent hook of his thumb.

"Look, I'm going to save you a lot of trouble and just cut right down to it. I asked Chris the same question not long after you guys finished- whatever you were doing after we left," Derek growled, handing him the drill he'd asked for a bit more forcefully into than necessary.

"Or *not* doing," he protested hotly, glaring death at the crooked screw in his hand before dropping it with a sigh and snagging a new one. Miffed at the insinuation. But even more at the fact that while
something had happened it hadn't exactly happened enough either.

*Talk about being torn in a dozen different directions at once, ugh.*

"He told me you were friends back in high school, before he moved away. And reconnected after the Allie Henson thing," Derek started bluntly, clearly fed up. "You can think what you want. Hell you can keep hiding from it for all I care. It's your choice. But I know Chris Argent. I knew all the Argents."

"I know how he thinks, both as an enemy and an ally and I've never seen him talk about someone like he talks about you. He keeps it close but people like us can tell. I know how a person smells when they mesh with someone and you guys do. It's up to you to figure out the details," Derek finished, a firm but silent *'and leave me the fuck out of it'* ushering in at the wings as the kid handled the hammer like a sword and accidentally punched a thumb-sized hole into the plywood.

"No pressure," he muttered, rolling his eyes as he snatched the hammer safely out of Derek's reach and plunked a two-bit into it instead.

"I know how it sounds, but go with your instincts," Derek remarked after a couple minutes. Chewing at the words as they came out like he wasn't too keen on letting them go in the first place. Clearly nearing his quota of social interaction for the day.

And he wasn't the only one.

"I know you aren't comfortable with this yet, but the animal knows. What it wants? What's right? Deep down it already knows this part is easy. It's *humans* that make everything complicated, especially when they don't need to be."

He wasn't sure why, but his thoughts went to Allie Henson and her salt-track tears.

*What was it she'd called him?*

"Don't treat the bear like it's something different, something separate inside you. *It is you*. It's *always* been you. You just couldn't access it. All you have to do is understand that side of yourself and lay down common ground where they differ. Bring them back. Make yourself whole. Born wolves have to make the same transition when they learn how to shift. But you have to want it. *Accept it*. If your bear wants Chris, it's because you do," Derek uttered, trailing off as he wet his lips. Looking thoughtful for a fraction of a beat, like he was trying and failing to think things through before he just spat up what he was mulling over without filter.

"Bears don't mate for life," he pointed out somewhat pathetically. Certain of that much at least thanks to a brief google search that'd ended almost as fast as it'd started when he accidentally clicked on the related images link and was treated to a virtual buffet of bear attack before and after photos.

"No. But you aren't just a bear, are you?"

*Christ, he barely knew which end was up nowadays let alone-*

"Most supernatural creatures do," Derek pointed out, silently gesturing for the tool kit before continuing. "In pack one of the most important bonds is between the Alpha and their true mate. When they find each other they never take another. It's fated. Nonnegotiable. A true bond is rare, especially when it's between a were and a human, but it happens."

And, because he was still feeling slightly suicidal-
"Like you and Stiles?"

He scooted not long after that. Not putting it past Derek's eyebrows to become sentient and join the revolution of overly aggressive eye contact he figured was really just a smoke screen for Derek wanting to murder him and bury him in the backyard.

Besides, promise of imminent violence or not, the kid had given him a lot to think about.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

This chapter is told in Chris Argent's point of view.

He was watching Bobby run a bunch of kids around the field – the newest batch of Lacrosse hopefuls from the community outreach program he apparently ran during the summer - when Derek slid into the bleachers beside him.

"Did you know he did this?" he asked eventually, sipping at his cup of coffee as the shrill blast of a whistle made him grin into the hazing steam. Watching the wolf out of the corner of his eye as he took in the scene. One eyebrow threatening to rise as Bobby yelled something intelligible at one of the kids doing laps around the goal-posts.

"No," Derek replied honestly. "But are you really surprised? I've been doing some digging. He's always been like this. He doesn't stop. The Search and Rescue thing? This? That's just the surface. It's like the alpha of a wolf pack. Only he's claimed this entire town as his territory. He's spent his life trying to cultivate it, improve it – protect it."

"Doesn't seem fair," he mused, not exactly angry but wistful. Remembering the hungry look on Bobby's face when he'd told him about some of the places he'd visited over the years during one of their many breakfasts. They hadn't exactly been vacations. More like neighbouring states and the occasional country that needed hunters for some big threat. But they'd been more than Bobby had ever got. "It's all one sided. He just gives and gives and gets nothing in return. If we're right about what he is, that means he literally can't leave. Ever. He's suffered a lot for this predestination crap already. Seems like salt in the wound to keep him running for it."

Derek nodded, thoughts clearly elsewhere as the moment lengthened and he settled in to wait the kids out. Letting his thoughts reel back through the last few weeks like the fact they were all still here - still together and trying - deserved its moment in the spot light.

They'd gotten through the full moon unscathed. He'd had a week after everything had happened to coax him into it. Convincing Bobby to go with the others to the old Hale house to transform, just in case. And it wasn't exactly unfounded either. The fact that they weren't sure if the moon was going to affect him or not was a legitimate concern. And while he hated to be predictable, it was better to be safe than sorry.

God only knows what they would have done if something actually had happened. Because regardless of the fact that Derek and Scott were pointedly not talking about it, he had a sneaking suspicion that after what happened on the field, there was very little in the way of comparison between them and Bobby when it came down to brute strength.

Bobby had grumbled and whined about it, dragging his feet like it was point of pride before principal. But when he'd let it slip that Scott and Derek had invited him as well, he'd been suspiciously easy to agree. Which had been more than a little bit gratifying, if he was being honest.

They hadn't done much of anything since that night at Bobby's house. Mostly it was Bobby being skittish and him trying a bit too hard to respect that. But the man's eagerness to be around him –
honest and warm – had made him smile regardless. Reminding him that all he really had to do was reach out and Bobby would crumble. It wouldn't take much. They were almost there on their own. It was just a matter of getting over that last hurdle. That last niggling pocket of resistance that was forcing Bobby to keep him and the world at an arm's length.

Only, he didn't.

He hadn't even tried to push the envelope.

Too afraid that Bobby would run again and all their progress would be for nothing.

It was honestly getting to be a bit much.

He wasn't used to being on the defensive, especially when it came to his own damn life.

And yet, here he was, still riding the god damned middle line.

He'd kept to the dilapidated porch with Stiles and Lydia, thinking it all through while the others had run around. Acting all 'squirrely,' as Stiles had put it, as he doodled absentmindedly around the margins of Lydia's notes on Berserkers.

Bobby, for his part, had just stood there awkwardly in his track pants and nothing else. Bitching about how cold he was even though his body was literally giving off steam. Standing there, right in the center of things, backlit by the full moon like some sort of forgotten god. Watchful and seemingly unmoved despite the tense set of his shoulders and an irritated glare that only made him look that much more at odds with the carousing wolves as they darted around him in lazy circles. Looking for all intents and purposes like he fully expected something terrible to happen at any moment.

Only it didn't.

Unlike newly made wolves and other supernatural creatures, the moonlight didn't seem to faze him at all. In fact, the only time anything got even close to heated was when Bobby decided Liam and Malia were roughhousing a bit too close to where he was cleaning one of his crossbows and caught them in mid-leap at each other. Snagging them by the scruff of their necks with a soft, warning rumble. Holding them up with barely a tremor in either arm, keeping them hanging there, squirming like a bunch of rambunctious pups caught with their napes between their mother's teeth until Liam finally whined. High pitched and pitiful before nuzzling at him innocently.

Stiles had laughed for days.

"You know it's going to have to be you, right?" Derek remarked eventually, breaking the comfortable silence as a ragged cheer rose up from the thin handful of parents watching their kids in the bleachers around them. Hands stuffed firmly in the pockets of his beat up leather jacket as they watched Bobby flail his arms. Herding the swarm of kids in front of him like a watchful mother with clutch of wayward ducklings. Picking up a few of the stragglers and hustling them along as they waddled awkwardly behind him, overly padded and hyper.

"Did you draw the short straw?" he sighed, easing back against the splintering wood. Humor wry but friendly - something he hadn't started associating with werewolves until recently – as Derek shot him a grumpy and shook his head.

"This is more for me than anything. You guys bleed tension. The longer you spend like this…I don't know. It's hard to describe. It's unfinished. It itches," Derek told him, frowning. But there was no censure there, no judgement, just discomfort – confusion. Like for the first time in his life the natural order refused to make any sense at all.
And yeah, weirdly enough, he got that.

"He isn't going to be the one that makes that move," Derek added with a nod. Looking a bit more relaxed now. Like as far as he was concerned the hard part was over and it was up to him to handle.

Which, of course, it was. He'd known long before the field that anything that happened with Bobby would have to come from him first. It was thrilling just as much as it was exhausting, if he was being honest. He knew what he wanted. Hell, he knew what Bobby wanted. It was just a matter of finding the right words.

"I know," he replied, knuckling a hand through his hair as Bobby made liberal use of his whistle and chased a couple stragglers through the last of their suicide runs before laughing with good humor and picking them up by their padding as he whistled the rest of the team in for a huddle.

"It's been a long time," he remarked, more to himself than anything.

Derek shifted beside him. Restless.

"If you're asking for advice…"

"I'm not," he replied firmly, skin prickling heat like the beginning of an embarrassed flush before he clamped down on it and whisked the unwelcome emotion away. Keeping his eyes firmly on the field where Bobby was sunk down on his haunches, showing the kids something on his clipboard.

"Good," Derek huffed, somehow managing to jam his fists deeper into his pockets. Surly as ever but eyes glinting with something he had a sneaking suspicion could turn into a laugh if they gave it enough time. Either way, it was enough to make the lingering wisps of animosity they had for each other thin out into echoes. And despite the fact that this wasn't what they were. Friendly or anything really close to it, he didn't hesitate to bring them firmly into it. Forcing them to face the emotion for what it was as the unfamiliar trill of amusement rippled through him like healing.

"I'd like to think I'm not that far gone," he remarked with a laugh, snorting into his coffee as Derek exhaled like he'd been sucker punched. Letting go of a strained chuckle that sounded like it'd hurt coming up as he mouthing at a few of the milky beads that were balanced on the rim of before taking a measured sip. Making a face when it ran empty and the grits at the bottom caught between this teeth.

There was a couple minutes of silence after that. Like they were both commiserating on the disaster that was their personal lives. Taking a grudging sort of solace in knowing that they both equally as screwed up as Bobby brought out the orange wedges. Talking to the parents who'd wandered down to mingle as the kids bickered over who got the best cuts.

"Besides, I don't think lack of interest is the problem," he finally sighed. Testing the give of his empty cup as the plastic lid warped with it - creaking in warning.

Derek shot him a look that plainly said he'd rather be anywhere else than having this conversation before he nodded and uncurled himself from his slouch.

"His instincts are telling him one thing, while all his experiences – how he knows these things are supposed to work - is telling him something else. He's stuck between those two worlds. What he needs is to be reassured that they're the same thing. That what he wants and what he needs is the same. He wants you, so does his were. I tried to tell him that those things always go together but I think it's going to have to come from you, and you know it."

He raised his head, seeing the difference that was visible in Bobby even now as the knowledge that
everything was just inches from slotting into place surged through his blood like a high. Remembering something that'd come to him in Derek’s loft as Bobby had pressed close. Trembling and already half gone on that pooling feeling of rightness as it'd spread like pleasure in his belly.

What was the phrase again?

*Staying away at this point was like trying to out run gravity.*

Derek was long gone by the time the crowd started to disperse. Leaving him with only a couple seconds to curse the fact that Derek could still manage to pull the disappearing act on him before he unfolded himself from the bleachers and wandered over to where Bobby was rounding up the last of the equipment.

"Hey!" Bobby called, jogging over. Stuffing a handful of pylons into a mesh bag before grinning at him. Wild, wide and happy. Dark hair spiking every which way as his shirt clung attractively down every curve, highlighting the new definition and tone that had been a popular piece of conversation amongst the single moms sitting behind him in the bleachers. "I didn't know you were coming. Kind of early for a Saturday. I had the squirts running laps by 7:30. I'm not sure how some of them even got here alive to be honest. I think half the parents fell asleep in the stands before the first scrimmage."

"Hey yourself," he returned, the muscles in his face stretching to match as the man's grin turned infectious. Bumping shoulders with him as Bobby let go of a pleased sound beside him. "You didn't even make any of them cry this time."

"Is that challenge or a statement of a fact?" Bobby returned, bouncing on his heels as he hoisted three bags at once and slung them over his shoulder like they weighed next to nothing. "Because either way I resent that…or resemble. Anyway, what's up?"

"Come over tonight?" he returned, surprised at how easily the words slipped out after all his over thinking. "My place. I'll cook. Pasta, maybe?"

Right off the bat the offer got him the hairy eyeball. They usually spent all their time together at Bobby's so it was no wonder the man was getting caught up on it. Normally he'd just bring what he needed to cook at Bobby's. God knows the man barely knew how to turn his oven on. But tonight he wanted to make a statement.

"Pasta huh? Sounds fancy," Bobby replied, shifting his balance to his dominant foot as the moment lost its playfulness and started churning deep – rich with promise. "Can I bring anything?"

Still, the man wasn't running, so he decided to take that as a plus.

"Just yourself," he hummed, starting to enjoy himself a bit more than he probably should have when Bobby fidgeted at his answer. Not seeming to settle much at all as the moment thickened into something that had the possibility to turn sappy and sickly sweet if one of them didn't-

Naturally, Bobby always did have a mouth on him.

"Should I be concerned for my virtue?" the man sassed, letting the words drawl out just the slightest of bits as he let go of a rolling chuckle. Getting a secret thrill of satisfaction when he watched the man's pupils expand, interest clear. Making sure to keep them there as he answered – voice low.

"Definitely."
Bobby shuffled a couple inches closer, inhaling greedily like he just couldn't help himself.

He smiled. Not above a bit of dirty pool as he stretched in place. *Preening.* Revealing the long, clean line of his neck as Bobby tried and failed to stop himself from strangling the first few syllables of his reply. Ruining the faux-haughty effect as he smiled innocently back. Giddy on the rush that came with knowing that neither of them where fooling anyone as they circled each other with words and heated glances. Two predators staring each other down in the middle of a field with no prey in sight.

*It was what being alive was supposed to feel like.*

"Hmphhht," Bobby snorted, feigning unimpressed despite the fact his eyes were clearly laughing. "Promises, promises. This is all pretty big talk from the man that doesn't know my favorite brand of sparkling apple juice."

"Sounds like a challenge to me," he returned easily, not giving even so much as an inch as they reached their respective cars. "Seven work for you?"

Bobby eyed him through the dark of his lashes. Pleased, but clearly nervous as he nodded thickly and jingled his keys. Mumbling something about being late for a meeting with one of the Volunteer Coordinators as they said their goodbyes and he waved the other man off.

He, on the other hand, was already savoring the victory.

The board was set, all he needed to do was get the pieces in motion.
Chapter 18

He had nothing to wear.

He knew it was a cliché.

*Oh god was it ever a cliché.*

But facts were facts.

He ended up getting side tracked in just his towel, hair still damp from the shower as he stared into
the disaster that was his closet with muted horror. Suddenly remembering why he'd always meant to
get around to gutting it and putting in something with wall niches and shelves. Making despairing
noises as he lost the towel and waded in head first. Deciding it was high time to get a jump on things
as he started dragging clothes off their hangers and flinging them across the bed. Determined to clear
a path to where the root of the problem – and about fifteen years’ worth of dust bunnies – was
waiting for him.

It was around that point that he realized he was probably stalling.

It wasn’t exactly an unfamiliar feeling.

*After all glacial was still a pace, wasn’t it?*

---

He changed his shirt five times before settling on what he figured was his best shot at not achieving
complete and total embarrassment. *Okay, that was a lie.* It was more like seven or eight different
shirts. Give or take a minor breakdown or two. Realizing he hadn’t been shopping for anything
dressier than new track pants and socks for *actual* years.

*Crap.*

He was halfway out the door before he realized two things. First, his go-to blue and white striped
shirt that was now *definitely* too small in the chest had a massive spaghetti stain down the front. And
second, his fly was undone.

*So, great start, all around really.*

He ended up grabbing a black t-shirt that’d never really fit right until now and tossed himself out of
the house with ten minutes to spare. Peeling out of the neighbourhood with an indignant squeal of
tires. Cursing himself for being such a stereotype as he made vague plans to brave the mall before the
next time.

*…If there was a next time.*

He chewed on the inside of his cheek as he waited for the light to turn.

God knows he needed to go shopping anyway.

He barely had anything that fit anymore.

Hell, even his track pants were starting to get snug in the thighs but loose around the waist. A
product of building muscle and keeping it rather than his slow – very slow, *thank you very much –
descent into comfortable couch-potato sagginess.*
Guess he didn't have to worry about that anytime soon. That was one of the very few pluses about this whole fucked up situation. Supernatural abs or whatever. He figured with all his running and gym training he'd actually earned those. But he couldn't exactly deny that being – from what he was told - this year's version of the supernatural creature feature didn't help.

Somewhere, his thirty-two year old self that'd almost died at the gym trying to work off the realization that he wasn't twenty-two anymore was quietly weeping.

Naturally, Chris didn't have that problem.

It wasn't fair.

Sexual selection had always been good to the Argents, but- damn.

Chris looked like one of those models in the magazines he'd confiscated from Mahealani back in freshmen year. Effortlessly gorgeous in a dark green button up and butter-soft jeans as he opened the door smack in the middle of his clothing crisis. Second guessing everything from his shirt to his god damned underwear as the reality of what this all meant hit home like a two by four to the back of the head.

Honestly- everything just kinda stopped after that.

"Hey," Chris greeted, flashing him a smile that made his stomach lurch in the best possible way. Smelling like every kind of sin imaginable as he leaned against the door jam and offered to take his coat. Mercifully saying nothing when he nearly got tangled up in it. Trying to salvage the moment by shoving the apple pie he'd picked up from the diner into the man's chest. Mumbling something about avoiding the diner for the next couple of days on account of Jessie being a complete asshole about why he needed an entire pie when she knew he lived alone.

But Chris just smiled again, animated and beyond pleased as he looked him over. Seeding the air with warm notes of caramel-sweet approval and building interest as he tugged on the hem of his t-shirt awkwardly.

It was official.

He wasn't going to make it through dinner with his pride intact.

He didn't think it was possible but as Chris put the finishing touches on dinner he managed to forget about the obvious and enjoy himself. Getting wrapped up in the man's disarming grin and easy banter. Talking about anything and everything, but pointedly nothing about half-ton spirit bears or the supernatural. Cycling back through their old conversations. The ones at the diner or in the parking lot after their morning run. The ones that had become normal – something to look forward to - before the field and everything that'd happened since.

It was a nice change. Normal and the pleasant kind of boring he hadn't realized he'd missed until he was knee deep in slouching over the counter, picking at a salad. Watching Chris drain the pasta water in the sink as a cloud of steam wreathed his face in hazy-grey.

The fact that Chris could probably recite half the dictionary and he'd still be there for the z's was completely beside the point.

His Scrabble game needed work anyway.
It wasn't until they'd waged war on dinner and he'd promised his soul at least half a dozen times for more pasta nights in the future that he decided it was time to find his balls and address the elephant in the room. Or bear. Or whatever.

"You know this was all wasted on me, right?" he told him. Rubbing at the back of his head and trailing sheepishly as Chris waved off his offers of help and started stacking plates in the dishwasher. "I'm disgustingly easy."

"Could've fooled me," Chris returned, bringing things to a head rather quickly as he turned around and leaned up against the kitchen counter. Arms crossed loosely over his chest. Threatening to make his mouth go dry as the muscles in the man's arms bunched attractively.

"Well, this- us- it isn't that simple, is it?" he shot back. Wondering with a detached kind of horror why the world had to mess shit up for him when his fucking mouth could do it for free.

"Why not?" Chris hedged, backing him into the corner he'd expected to find himself in when he'd accepted the man's invitation for dinner. "The point is it could be, but you're not letting it. Why? I know you can tell. My scent, what I'm giving off whenever I'm near you. That has to mean something."

He scrubbed his hands over his face. Wondering if there was even a 'good' way to put doubts into words. Making a face as the sickly-sour taste of fear worked its way up his throat like vomit. Hating himself for the fact that he was in too deep to lie. To tell him this was just a big fucked up mistake, so that at least one of them could get on with their lives.

But he was too selfish for that, and he knew it.

"What's going on in there, hmm?" Chris asked, startling him when he looked up and realized the man had shuffled close. Calloused hands inches from his across the counter, flirting with the millimetre of empty air that separated them as he inhaled shakily. He hadn't even seen the man move.

"Everything was going so well before- Christ," he muttered, molars grinding as he forced the words out in pieces. He needed to make the man understand that he knew. He knew how unfair this was. That Chris was probably stuck with him – possibly forever - all because of some supernatural predestination crap he wasn't even sure he believed in. The same brand of batshit crazy that'd taken his wife and his daughter and that probably ruled his life since the moment his parents figured they could fit a gun in his hands.

He laughed hollowly, avoiding the man's eyes in favor of looking down at their hands. Remembering how easily his could warp and curve. How they could turn sharp and deadly whereas Chris' would always remain the same. Strong, scarred and capable. It was almost like the universe had planned it. Two sides of the same damn coin.

"Derek told me to trust my instincts. Complete yuppieville shit like: 'the animal knows or whatever.' That this has always been me. I just didn't know it before," he started, skin itching as he winced and repressed a shudder that had nothing to do with the cold. "Hell, you said it yourself. 'What you are, is what you are,' remember?"

Somewhere outside something small and frightened chittered.

It was sad how much he related.

"But, honestly? I don't know what to think. I know what I want. I know what I feel. And I guess I have to trust that. I don't really have a choice. But, you? How is that fair? I mean, how the hell can
you be okay with this? How can you want this?” he grated, not realizing he'd straightened until he found himself towering over the other man – angry.

He was tired, he realized.

Spread thin and unsettled.

And he wanted Chris like he was the opposite end of a magnet.

"Because the way I see it, if who I am is what I am, then you must be too," he forced hoarsely, voice draining back to a near-whisper as something in him crumbled and he let his worst fears fly. "I don't think I can do this without-"

"You won't," Chris broke in, shattering that tiny breath of space between them by covering his hand with his own. All warm skin and a pulse so familiar he could actually feel his body trying to mirror it. Doing nothing to pull away this time as Chris' hand tightened fractionally around his. Affirming and right. "I feel the same way, Bobby. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

The worst part was that he believed it.

*He could smell it.*

Feeling it simmering solace-warm in the very core of him.

Building like a tidal-wave dirge to his better judgement.

And yet-

"Do you want this?" Chris asked, blunt as anything. Like somehow he just knew. "Do you want me? Do you want this with me?"

He opened his mouth, brain stalling. Fighting with himself over the truth versus what he felt obligated to say. Knowing that if he were a better man, he'd lie. He'd drive Chris so far away that he'd leave town and never get wrapped up in Beacon Hills kind of crazy ever again. Somewhere he could settle down and have a normal life - surrounded by people without a metric fuck-ton of baggage who loved him.

Only, he wasn't.

He'd never been that kind of strong.

Ancient fucking werebear or not.

"You're looking for words when you already know the answer," Chris pointed out. Brutally killing through his side-stepping like they were nothing more than tissue-thin excuses and self-sacrificing bullshit. And for some reason that only made him want to dig his heels in all the harder.

"Do I?" he challenged, frustrated as he wrenched himself away from the counter to pace around the kitchen. Shaking himself like he was coming out of a daze as he tried to think over the rising surge of mate and Chris. The air was saturated with the man scent. Everywhere he went. Every direction. It was dangerous in the way it made him want to bend his neck and yield. Feeling almost drugged, susceptible, as all the reasons he was holding onto – all the reasons why this was something he should be fighting - started to thin like mist in the morning.

"I want this to be real. More than anything. More than I should," he admitted, fisting his hand in his
hair and pulling anxiously. Distracted and growlingly annoyed when Chris didn't back down an inch.

It made him wonder what his life would have been like if none of this had ever happened. Or at least he wanted to wonder. For some reason his brain wanted to shy away from it instinctively. Like the very idea was unpalatable to him now – **incompatible**.

**He was in too deep to turn around now.**

"I want it to mean something. Not just to me, but to you. All this shit about mates and predestination – spirit bears and werewolves and fucking whatever can kiss my ass as far as I'm concerned," he continued, aggression aching like an open sore between his shoulder blades as he forced himself to grind to a halt by the fridge. Keeping Chris at a distance as the words slipped out like molasses dripping down a drain. Thick and painfully slow.

"It's different for you. You have a choice. You've never had a choice before, have you? You got dragged into this world by your family and it took from you. It almost took everything. And now it's forcing an answer from both of us. But this time it has to be different. It has to be you. Your choice. And I want you to have that even though the thought of this – of you, *us*, not being together or- No. You know what? This is a choice. It has to be. And I need you to be sure. I need you to be honest, whatever happens. Otherwise, I don't know what I would do if-"  

He trailed off, choking on the rest of the words.

Letting the silence bleed red until the real crux of it aired out like a last stand.

"I would rather deal with the truth, here and now, than be kissed by a lie," he said quietly. Fisting the granite counter top like it was the only thing holding him up as all the anger and frustration drained out of him like water through a sieve. Leaving him wavering and empty. Wrung out of all the reasons why they *couldn't*. All the reasons why they *shouldn't*. And all the reasons why he was more than halfway sure he'd never be able to let the man go, regardless of his answer.

Which only made things worse, honestly.

Heavy shit for a full stomach, that's for sure.

When he finally forced himself to look up he couldn't help but gape when he realized Chris was looking at him like he'd said something profound. Like he was the last chance and the sunrise all at once. Like he was something that couldn't possibly be real. He nearly choked on his own spit when he forgot to swallow. Watching him take one step, then another. Broaching the space for the second time as something in him broke the moment Chris' hand curled around shoulder, reeling him close. Like whatever happened next needed to be felt as well as heard.

'You have to say it,' he thought silently as a thousand years oozed by. Half pleading as something in his chest twisted like he was dying slowly. *'I need you to be sure.'*

"Truth," Chris repeated, turning the word over in his mouth before letting it free. Lips quiring with the ghost of a smile. Something between: *I know something you don't know* and full on *smartass* before he leaned in enough for their cheeks to brush – stubble to stubble. It was chaste and affirming and *oh so damning* that his knees threatened to give out underneath him.

"The truth is what I believe in," Chris continued, looking up at him with pupil-wide eyes that'd never looked more dark and grounding. "It's what I've *always* believed in. What I feel. What I know. What is. What the world is. It's been a guiding principal. Simple. It least until it gets complicated on you. Feelings get involved and then everything turns into shades of grey. When you aren't sure what you
believe anymore. When you don't know what the truth is. What's right. What's wrong. But you still have to act. You still have to pull that trigger. That's this life. *That's my life.*" 

He thought about the look on Chris' face when they found each other across the torn up field. About the early morning runs and too-long breakfasts. He thought about how the man had felt pressed up against him at Derek's place. About how he'd smelled when-

"But not with you," Chris murmured, the corner of his mouth quirking upwards like he just couldn't help himself. Scarred finger-tips finding the small strip of skin peeking out from the collar of his shirt as he looked at him. "I used to think that was all there was for me. But I was wrong. You showed me that. Everything's different now. Bobby, you're the best possible outcome. You're both. You're the truth – *my truth* - as much as you're the grey area. But I know with you- well, I've always known the answer. You're the only truth I believe in anymore."

And okay-

*What.*

He spent a long moment just staring at him. Trying to process everything at once despite the fact that he was nowhere close to firing on all cylinders on this one. Only really cluing in to the fact that he should probably be saying something in return when Chris shifted awkwardly. A muted sort of anxiety salting the air as the moment dragged.

Distantly he was aware it was familiar.

Like how he'd been second guessing himself all this time.

Trying to downplay what Chris and the others had been telling him all along.

Because Chris wasn't lying.

Not even a little bit.

And he was flat out of excuses.

The two hundredth time was the charm, apparently.

He snorted out a laugh. Happiness and relief bubbling up in his throat in a way that made him hope it was contagious. Mentally reviewing everything Chris had said as another helpless chuckle burbled out into the open without his consent as Chris looked up through his lashes at him, smile wide and guilty-open.

It was so Hallmark he wanted to either die or kiss that smarmy shit right off his stupid lips.

And naturally, since his momma didn't raise a damn fool, he chose the latter.
They didn't kiss so much as crash together enthusiastically. Awkward and just a bit too rough, with lips and teeth that wanted to get friendly quick. Desperate to get over the awkward hurdles so the rest could settle in. It was like unwrapping a particularly good bar of chocolate. The first whiff was good – great even - but the thing was your taste buds were already greedy for better. *For more.*

In fact, it almost felt like-

Chris' teeth tugged on his lower lip, distracting him as the kiss turned into one of those things you just *knew* had gotten better with age. Reaping the rewards of experience and the kind of comfort in your own skin that only time can bring as calloused fingers ghosted down his cheek. Almost cupping it in an effort to get him closer. Reeling him in until they were slotted hip to hip. Feeling every bit of him solid against him as the contact made him hiss.

*Fucking finally.*

He inhaled, nosing into Chris’ pulse point. Slowly allowing the part he'd spent the last few months holding back out to play. Letting its wants and needs meld with his own until he realized Derek had been right all along. They were the same. They'd *always* been the same. He just hadn't been able to access them before. Half of him had been sleeping his entire damn life and for the first time since all this shit had started, he was glad he'd woken up.

He sucked in a breath when Chris' hand firmed across the small of his back. Trying to embrace it, rather than curl away when the animal under his skin started to *stretch*. Rumbling with a bone-deep contentment that made Chris smile into his skin and do it again.

And hell if you'd hear him complaining.

Honestly, it was grounding.

Knowing that minus the freaky shit it was the oldest story in the book.

Two, middle-aged somethings just trying to figure shit out.

*Together.*

For the first time in a long time, he didn't want to press the rewind button.

*He wanted what was right now.*

He figured that meant something pretty important right there.

Chris was glassy eyed and inhaling in low, aggressive *wuffs* when they eventually came up for air. Breathing hard as he let gravity sink him down – inch by inch – around Chris' warm weight. Desperately wanting to shake the growing feeling that-

"Don't take this the wrong way," he started, tongue tracing the seam of his lips as Chris followed it. Fingers curling into the counter to brace on either side of him. Keeping him close and backed into the flat of more than a few kitchen drawers as the man's scent rose thick and possible between them.
Treating him to the pretty taint of arousal and want. "But it feels like- like-"

"We've done this before?" Chris finished for him, blinking. Like the weirdness had only just registered with him. Unnerved by the realization that up until now he'd just accepted it.

*What the hell?*

*Like really-*

*What.*

*The.*

*Fuck.*

*There had to be a limit to the crazy, right?*

"I know you," Chris added wonderingly, thumbing gently down the curve of his jaw, blue eyes searching. Tracing the angles of his face in a way that seemed significant to the words themselves. "I don't know how, but I do. I knew you were going to-"

"Yeah, I'm beginning to get the same feeling," he muttered. Head ducking down to rest on Chris' forehead as they took a moment and just breathed together. Trying to push the thought away before it could cripple him as Chris' chest expanded and contracted. Realizing for the first time that he was taller as well as broader. Only half-heartedly trying to fight the arousing little thrill that came along with it.

And yeah, on some level he was aware that Chris was waiting on *him* this time around.

That whatever came next, what they did or what they didn't, was up to him.

The urge to roll his eyes was almost overwhelming.

Like the man didn't know he'd spent the majority of his life *avoiding* responsibility.

But of course, he did.

Chris was annoying that way.

Annoying and *his*.

He sucked in an unsteady breath. Freeze drying the corners of his lips as the idea settled in his chest. Giving the next swallow an edge of rawness that made him frown into the creases of the man's shirt. Ignoring the muddying dampness of his own saliva as he mouthed into the thin cotton.

There was no way to get around it.

It *did* feel familiar.

Like they'd done this before.

Like they'd been right here right now a thousand times.

Somehow, he just knew.

There was an edge at work here that was more than instinct, more than anything remotely
explainable. It wasn't about body language or mutual adjustment. It was about knowing Chris would let go of that surprised and downright needy groan when he tugged just so on his bottom lip. It was about knowing Chris would fight for the upper hand, and that most of the time, he'd let him have it. Because at the end of the day, he was a push-over like that and frankly- there was no where he felt safer. It was the kind of intimate familiarity most people never experienced, even after decades together, and they had it going strong long before their first kiss.

But maybe that was okay.

Chris' hips hitched into his hopefully. Reminding him there was so many things they could be doing with their mouths that wasn't talking and honestly- he was ready to try them all.

"Kiss now," he decided, giving into temptation as he pulled that sweet little groan out of him in inches - teeth tugging hard on Chris' lower lip. "Weirdness later."

The dinner dishes were still piled beside in the sink as they stumbled backwards. Recycled scents starting to lose their freshness in dusting increments. Vaguely aware that in the cluttered, homey corner of his mind long dedicated to her, his mother's voice pitched indignantly high. Demanding he offer to do the dishes and forcibly barge his way to the sink if denied.

It was only polite, wasn't it?!

His fingers flexed uselessly into claws. Fighting the urge to grab onto something. To dig in, rip through the sheets, even slam a hole through the nearest wall if necessary. Anything to take his mind off the rising tidal wave that felt like it was about to drown him.

"What are you afraid of?" Chris asked throaty-low and close to ruined as he pulled back from the kiss reluctantly. Blunt nails curling into his biceps like a tell that screamed more more more before traveling down to whisper across his tightly clenched fists. Massaging the muscles that connected the thumb and forefingers like he was bidding entry.

"Everything," he rasped, painfully honest.

And he was.

Because life was enormous.

And it had a habit of swallowing him whole.

But Chris didn't laugh.

He just kissed him instead.

It was slow this time, the exact opposite to the way things had started as Chris took his time, nosing into his hairline and trailing kisses. Unrushed and that melting sort of good that sunk deep into his bones like fresh coffee on a cold day. Sliding his hand down the ridge of his spine before catching him by the waist. Letting him feel every inch he'd only ever had hints of before.

The shudder that rolled out in response was genuine and far less mortifying than he figured it should have been. Wondering if it'd really been that long or if his supernatural whatever was partially to blame for the overload.

Either way, this time he was the one that surged up. He was the one that was restless and greedy. Strong enough that when he kissed him, Chris was kissing back and scrabbling against gravity all at
the same time. Not really thinking about it when he found the hem of the man's shirt and ran his hands underneath. Grabbing. Kneading. Blissfully – pathetically -needy about it as he slid his knee between the man's thighs. Just enough to find him hard in his jeans.

He grinned into the shell of the man's ear as Chris hissed.

It was the kind of hardness that was perfect for exactly this.

Hips grinding into Chris' like-

"Bobby."

Chris broke away from the kiss with a gasp he swore he could feel. Catching onto where the rest was going as the man tilted his head and licked his lips in a silent challenge. Pupils dark and overlarge in the low light.

He didn't have to be told twice.

Not this time.

Chris' skin was fever-hot against his when he surged up and took. Making a throaty, appreciative sound into the man's skin when their cheeks brushed. Prickling with the coarse of stubble - sandpaper rough and undeniably real. And for some reason, that was the part that really got him. The part that made him grunt in anticipation as he ground himself deeper – hiking up into the inner of his mate's thigh. So fucking gone on it that he hissed every time Chris' hips jerked against his. Cock so hard through the thin of his jeans that slamming Chris up against the sink just to give them a new angle to rub against only made sense.

And Chris let him. Submitting for a few long seconds, tilting his neck so he could trace the tendon with his teeth. Marking him red until the skin was raised and swollen and he'd lost track of how long he'd had him pinned up against the counter. Worrying his neck like-

He wobbled. Aroused and unsteady when Chris pushed forward, nudging him with the point of his shoulder until they were moving. Wavering back and forth in a weird give and take with gravity until they were out of the kitchen and into the living room.

The sharpness was back on his nails when he made a grab for him and missed. Wanting him closer as a sound – not quite animal, but not quite human either – issued from deep in his throat. Getting a flash of black nails threatening to elongate as the razor hooks kissed the empty air exactly where he'd been standing. Chris just grinned at him. Ducking at the last moment with a shit-eating grin he would have mirrored any time other than right fucking now.

He needed-

He lost the ability to articulate what that was when Chris caught him by the scruff of his neck and forced him against the wall. Leaning up against the side table in a distinctly dangerous way as something on the wall at his back clattered nosily to floor.

And oh-

Oh-

He liked that.

In fact, he might have actually whimpered.
"You're over dressed," Chris growled. Mouth curving into a gorgeous smile that promised every awesome, dark thing as he cupped him through his jeans. Keeping him there – willingly caught – as he shifted minutely. Unsure of how to take it, but wanting nothing more than to soak up every over-saturated second of it. Wanting to go pliant just as much as he wanted to surge up as hungry fingers tugged at the button of his jeans. Flicking the top button open with lazy determination as he desperately tried to keep himself from-

Figures.

_He was falling apart and Chris was fucking window-shopping._

"Says the guy wearing all of his clothes," he snarked, but softer this time. Realizing there was more give to his muscles than he remembered as the light switch dug into his spine. Not wasting the opportunity to buck his hips into Chris' like a reminder. High on the abortive little moan the action produced. Cursing and twitching in his shorts as his cock blurted pre-cum. Soaking the material until it was slick and catching to his skin – wincing at the over-stimulation.

"I'm sure you can change that," Chris returned easily, capturing his hand in his and lacing their fingers together. Rubbing the blunt of his thumb over the points where his nails still wanted to become claws with deliberate intent.

"We have the technology," he returned automatically – roughly. Pupils blown because while he was a hundred and ten percent turned on, he was also a fucking moron that didn't know how sex talk worked at all, apparently. Too caught up on what happened next as they teetered dangerously. Strangling a hiccup when Chris caught his hand and brought it up to his lips. Mouthing at the knob of his knuckles in a way that was downright _filthy_.

It made him think of other things the man could be doing with his mouth.

_Sweeter things._

"You know, you could solve it for us right now, don't you?" the man purred. Breath warm and tickling against his sweaty skin. Forcing him to drown a shiver as he tilted his head, breathing it in as the gentle scrape of bare skin against cotton weave grew almost deafening. "I can always get another shirt. Besides, I can tell you want to. You're an open book, Bobby."

His pulse was deafening in his ears.

Chris wanted him to-

And _wow_, that was hot.

All kinds of hot in fact.

"Pants might be a good start," Chris prompted with a chuckle. Like the absolute asshole he was.

It was the best idea he'd ever heard.

Maybe in forever.

Way better then what he'd done with his claws at Derek's and _oh_-

_Oh, wait._

"I don't know if that's such a good idea, what if- _aghh!_"
They hit the couch, and suddenly he was drowning.

For a long sparking moment that was all there was.

*Chris.*

*Chris.*

*Chris.*

It was a familiar smell.

One he'd committed to memory a long time ago.

But this was rich.

Concentrated.

*Purposeful.*

It was soaked into the layers, into the cushions and the blanket that'd been folded neatly over the side like the man had been bleeding pheromones. Because yeah, that was the only way he could explain it. It was Chris and sex and more of each until he was breathing it in like it was a solid. Willingly suffocating as he turned his head into the cushions and *glutted* himself on it. Wrapping himself up in a scent memory he could track all the way back to Chris laying on the couch days before and consistently ever since. Cock in hand. Fingers slick. Maybe even thinking of-

He made a sound that was all vowels as his eyes slammed shut. Mouth dry, hands almost too tight around the curl of Chris' biceps as the man thumbed the hem of his shirt up in inches. Smoothing an appreciative palm over the flat of his belly. More or less on top of him at this point as the cushions made balancing almost impossible. Crushing them together until the sensation of Chris' cock grinding down against his was almost too much.

"I might have hedged my bets a little," Chris admitted as one of the pillows tumbled onto the carpet. *Christ.* The wreathing scent alone was enough to snap what was left of his self-control as he curled his hands in the collar of his shirt and *yanked*. Pressing him up against in the pheromone-thick fabric as he practically swam through the lingering notes of past and present arousal.

"Gross," he huffed, too far gone to even roll his eyes as he scrabbled with the man's belt. Yanking it free in one compulsive movement - easy as anything as the denim loops screamed a negative and ripped down the side. Biting the inside of his cheek bloody when the excess force caused Chris' hips shoot forward. Slamming up against his with a violent hiccup that made the both of them groan.

"Fuck."

The curse echoed into the hallway as they tumbled off the couch. Body surging upwards as Chris did something that had to be illegal *somewhere* as he slipped his hands down the loose open of his jeans and palmed his cock. Twisting through a jerkily little stroke – awkward with the angle but still enough to make him still – as they wavered there. Knee to knee across the living room carpet like two kids making out in their parent's den. Giddy and on edge as the thrill of discovery trumped the fact that they were *definitely* going to get caught and grounded for the rest of their lives. Forced to pull some pining, PG version of Romeo and Juliet in the school hallway and-

He meant to look at Chris, but got distracted looking down at himself. Shell-shocked by his own reaction as Chris' sudden inhale gusted warm against his skin. His cock was hard and flushed at the
tip, leaking pre-come where it was pressed against his stomach. Peeking out of the slack at the front of his jeans as Chris abruptly did one better. Making him start in surprise as he wrapped his hand around his length - out from the damp mess of his boxers and into the open air. Skin slick with sweat under his shirt as he looked up and found Chris watching him. Imagining what the man would look like with his legs spread wide. What he'd taste like when he swiped his tongue down every crease. What it would feel like to have Chris open him up with just his fingers. Wondering what sounds he'd make. How he'd move. What noises he could rip out of Chris with just his mouth, teeth, tongue.

It's the filthiest set of images he'd ever dreamed up and he wanted to try all of them.

Immediately.

As in he might actually die if they didn't-

"Bobby!"

He'll admit in retrospect that he might have lost patience.

Like a little bit.

Because half a second later he tucked his right shoulder and slammed the man backwards. Just like a tackle in the practice field. Using all that handy supernatural strength to lift him up in mid-movement. Jamming him back onto the couch so that he was budging up between spread thighs. Making short work of his jeans, forcing them down until Chris was splayed out and calling his name thickly. Cock jumping under the fabric of his briefs like the best sort of tell.

"Bobby, shit- just- oh god-"

He let his eyes flick up, then down, licked his lips unconsciously. But not unconsciously enough not to smirk at the groan it pulled from Chris's lips. Or to appreciate the reassurance when his mate's fingers buried themselves deep in his hair. Tugging him forward eagerly as he dragged his lips down the arc of the man's navel.

He had plans, thank you very much.
Chapter 20

His lips and chin were so slick with saliva and pre-come he felt sloppy and over-heated already. Muscles hot – worn and well-used – too busy to taking in as much of Chris as he could to swallow. Switching between a vicious sort of suction and the gentle scrape of teeth that had the tendons in Chris' thighs jumping.

He couldn't get enough.

The way Chris eyes had gone dark, irises expanding as his head fell back against the cushions, groaning. Hips chasing the messy rhythm of his mouth in a way that only worsened the blurt of pre-cum he was currently grinding into the couch front. Cock so hard he could have cried.

Chris tasted like every familiar thing, even if he didn't remember exactly what that was. He pulled back eventually, just to see him like that. Tracing his tongue around the man's crown before flicking at the slit as Chris cursed and fist a hand in his hair. Tugging meaningfully. Grunting out the filthiest noise he'd ever fucking heard as he tried to jam himself deeper. Manners forgotten.

It was so animal. So baser and dark that it pulled at a part of him he'd only really acknowledged when the world hemmed like a dead faint. Something related to the 'live and die with a gun in your hand' type of feeling. Only in his case, it was with tooth and claw, and right now the very idea made his heart jump excitedly.

He pulled back, mouthing the head of his cock with lazy care as pleasure curled low in his gut. Ignoring the sting of his knees against the carpet as he inhaled. Scenting down the length of the shaft before trailing back up and swallowing him down like he'd been born to do just that. Hyper-aware that Chris was watching - taking in every inch of his stuffed cheeks and swollen lips as he moved up and down.  

He could have fucking preened.

The truth was he was gone on it too. A willing participant to a type of energy that was mostly fed by the same as he made noise around Chris' cock. Like giving Chris this was giving him pleasure. And it was. And he might be dying. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this turned on. Dick twitching as he palmed the bulge in his undone jeans. Whining around Chris' dick like it was the best thing until Chris just fucking lost it and started fucking his face. Hips surging up again and again, demanding and just as needy.

It was almost surreal, watching that implacable cool start to fall apart. Watching muscles and limbs that were so capable and deadly start to tense – then soften - in an entirely new way. Making the moment something to savor as Chris gazed down at him with blown pupils. Murmuring his name, encouragement, even curses as his hips chased his mouth. Struggling against the iron grip he had on them before nearly choking himself willingly for the third time in less than a minute.

He'd done this.

Chris was like this because of him.

Him and no one else.

Chris was his.

His to-
His tongue paused along the crease below the man's balls, coaxing out a surprised warble that made him snigger into the man's thigh. Certain Chris would deny any knowledge of it if he remembered to tease him about it later. Either way, it was warming. More. Like everything they did was being highlighted in day-glow colors. Something simple and incredibly complicated – incredibly old – all at the same time.

He decided to take pity on him not long after that.

Curling his tongue around the man's cock again – faster, deeper, more– oh.

Chris' scent was strong now.

It'd always been strong, but this?

This was an explosion.

Like there was something more than just pleasure cusping here.

Something ageless and musky-dark.

Something that recognized them like they'd been cut from the same cloth.

Something-

He wanted to bury himself there – here – as deep as he could reach. He wanted everything. Everything Chris had to give. And even a little bit more than that. He wanted to give- to give and give and give until he was empty and sated and Chris was warm against him. He wanted a hundred thousand moments just like this. He wanted Chris' scent on his clothes. He wanted to reach up and kiss him like this, mouth tart with the man's own slick. He wanted to stuff himself so full he couldn't breathe, then come down from it shaking and half-falling apart.

But then Chris actually was- the hand in his hair suddenly seizing – hungry. He could actually feel it ramping up, every muscle delineated and twitching. Nearly killing him right then and there when Chris made an incredible, impossible sound in the back of his throat. Something that sounded like he was being gutted and yeah- the crimes he'd commit just to hear that again.

Jesus.

The truth was they were both close already. It was too good, too intense, too long coming to make it last. It should have been embarrassing. But it wasn't. Because he could feel Chris teetering on the edge with him. He was about to come against the edge of a fucking couch and he didn't even care. Rational thought was-

The man's cock slipped out of his mouth with a filthy pop when Chris pulled away, gasping for air.

"Not like this," Chris panted. Eyes sparking hot and powerful in a way he didn't understand but ultimately respected. Something about it pickling the hairs on the back of his neck as he nodded. "I want to feel you."

And despite the fact that his life was a blackhole of weirdness these days, somehow that didn't stop the words from making all the sense in the world.

His hands were blurred – or maybe it was the sweat that was dripping down from his hairline. Either way, he had Chris by the ass. Nails digging into each cheek with just a hint of sharp that kept
tugging little grunts out of him. Giving him the purchase he wanted to pull their bodies together –
keeping up a bastardized sort of rhythm as they moved together. Grinding and rubbing until his teeth
were gritted and he was a hundred and thirty-six percent sure he was going to have a god damned
heart attack. Slick with sweat, pre-come and the little bottle of lube he'd ruined when he'd
underestimated how much pressure to use flicking open the lid.

The picture it painted was kind of fucking devastating.

In a mind numbingly hot way.

Obviously.

He was aware that somewhere along the line he'd lost time. He'd blinked and they'd gone from the
wall outside the bedroom – playing with the soft of Chris' neck with his teeth – to sprawled across
the mattress. They were chest to chest and every time he hiked Chris up their cocks brushed like shy
friction. Attacking his mate's lips in a way the animal under his skin immediately approved of. Too
far gone to stop the happy rumbling as Chris wormed close. Aggressive and pushy and wow- if he
lasted more than thirty seconds it was going to be a fucking miracle.

He sucked in a breath. Feeling his chest expand like the act itself was significant. He closed his eyes.
Squeezing them shut until off-centre light flashed like starbursts across his retinas. Fighting back the
part of him - the animal part – that was writhing under his skin. The part that demanded he surge
forward and shove Chris deep into the mattress. The part that wanted to catch him by the wrists and
watch the bow of his back curve and arch as he pressed inside. Balls heavy against the plush of his
mate's ass as the chant for moremoremore deafened him to even the loudest forest sounds. The part
that struggled with the need to bite, claw, claim, mate. The part that was restless and tense like the
first hint of spring rut. Ready to fight for the right to take what was rightfully his.

His mate.

His territory.

His-

"Hey," Chris said lowly, running his hands down his face in soft, peaceful spirals. Making him
realize that somewhere along the line he must have reared back. Pulling himself away with his fists
tightly clenched. "Hey, Bobby- look at me."

He met Chris' eyes eventually. Catching a flicker-flash reflection of himself – mussed hair and dark
eyes that were just a bit too black – chest heaving, shining with sweat, lube and a couple dozen other
things he was too distracted to name.

He shook his head.

"You have no idea the things I want to do to you. With you. But-

"You won't hurt me," Chris assured, bringing him down for a slow, lingering kiss after he'd flattened
his palm down his face in frustration. Muttering nonsense into his palm like it would somehow help
him navigate the very really divide between what he should be doing and what he could be. "Do
what feels right."

Needs grow teeth if you let them.

They can bite and claw and hurt just as easily as the opposite.
They need to be sated, not controlled.

Control is never forever.

Not when you are always hungry.

Indulgence was a counter measure.

The smart move on a loaded chessboard.

It reminded him of the conversation they'd had all those months ago in his kitchen after he'd poured Chris a glass of that fifteen year old whiskey. The kind that'd burned going down. Back when he hadn't known his vices, but they'd known him and used him in the worst way. He wanted to say that maybe this - what he was now - had been a part of that somehow. A way of coping with something he couldn't understand. But deep down he had a feeling it'd just been him. Him and his own weakness.

"I want to do this right," he admitted, pulling back a fraction. Keeping one hand anchored on the back of the man's neck – cupping gently as the gleam of fresh sweat shone through the dark of the man's stubble. Refusing to let himself pull away and ruin everything. Again.

He paused for long moment, thinking it through before-

"I even don't know what that means," he admitted, exasperated. Figuring he wasn't the only one when he caught a glimpse of the angry, weeping red of the man's cock. Crown slick and shining with pre-cum. Enough that it was daubed across his lower belly here and there in generous, opaque blotches.

"Bobby?"

"Yeah?" he answered.

"Shut up."

He managed a low noise of assent when Chris yanked him down and kissed him fiercely. Devolving beautifully into the drag of sharp teeth and nails that scrabbled like they meant it across the back of his neck. Enough that it pulled a growl out of him – then another. Using his weight to force him back across the mattress as his fingers grew bold again. Circling through the lube and pre-cum smeared across Chris' belly as his mate grinned up at him. Grabbing at any part of him he could reach to make marks down – self-satisfied and impatient.

"O-kay," he garbled breathily, predatory only in that awkward, clinical sort of way that came with the knowledge that there was an animal on the other side of the glass and all it would take was a single stone to free it. Yet ultimately deciding to be daring for once as his knuckles feathered lightly across the man's hole, tracing slick across the hungry pink of his pucker.

He chewed on his lower lip so that he couldn't say anything stupid to ruin it when Chris grunted - hole fluttering when he applied just a bit more pressure. Working the tight muscle lax bit by bit until Chris' eyes were closed and his head was tossed back against the pillows. Breaths gust sharply across the curve of his shoulder blade as the man's fingers scrabbled greedily down his ribs. Nearly killing himself trying not to think about how it would feel when-

He sucked in a breath when Chris wrapped a hand around his cock, thumbing at the swollen ridge with lazy intent. Mirroring the slow, purposeful stretch he was using to open him up. Looking ridiculously put together for someone who was covered in lube, pre-cum and the raised welts where
he'd dug his nails in just a bit too hard.

_Fucking fu-

"Let it go, Bobby. Trust me."

So he did.

Chris was so slick his ears burned at the sound it made when he finally sank home. And for long moment he just froze there. Forcing himself to focus on anything else as his cock throbbed, surrounded by searing heat. _Chris_. So tight and so good it felt like-

He nearly fucking _wheezed_ when Chris clenched around him.

"Bobby, please-"

He didn't even agonize over it when he snapped his teeth and bit Chris' lips closed. Listening to the unsteady hiss that escaped the man's throat as he kept him pinned against the mattress. Letting him feel how easy it was to keep him where he wanted as he raked his teeth down the curve of Chris' neck. Scenting him as want and acceptance rolled off him in waves.

His mate was pleased.

His overtures had been accepted.

"Bobby…"

Chris smelled like arousal now. He had for a long time, but this was a sharp, caramel musk that sweetened with age. Making his cock ache as he ground himself deeper. Dragging his chest down the man's belly every time Chris tried to surge up harder. Draping himself over every inch he could reach as he closed his mouth over Chris' pulse point and _sucked_. Worrying the spot until the skin was hot under his tongue.

"Bobby…"

He scented him with a growl, pleasure poised on a knife's edge as his hips wavered. Hushing back and forth in quiet little micro-bursts Chris probably couldn't even sense, but for him was almost an overload.

_God, he felt so-

"Move damnit!"

He nipped his chest for that. Laving at a nipple before dragging his teeth down Chris' side in mock reproach. Snarling into the man's skin when Chris cussed him out - words saying one thing, his body another. Trying his best to ignore the voice that urged him to flip his mate over and just have him. _In the old way_. Instead, he hiked Chris' leg up so it was draped over his shoulder, opening him up just a little bit further as Chris choked on a sound. Keeping him there for an age, wrung out and wanting, before pushing back in with a shattered exhale.

"Yes, Bobby- _fuck._"

His ears were ringing. Unsteady in his own skin as he bowed his head - moving through it. The sweaty strings of his hair cast strange shadows across Chris' belly as they negotiated a rhythm. Feeling him in the most intimate way as he chased the rabbit of his own heartbeat. Wondering, not
for the first time, why it felt like coming home every time his hips rushed back.

They moved like that for a long time.

For every year they'd missed.

Every almost.

Every-

Chris' nails cut deep when he reared back, mirroring the pressure he had on Chris' hips as he held him in place. Teasing him until just the head of his cock was left inside. He showed his teeth when Chris clenched around it - trying to draw him back in – before finally sliding back home. Swallowing Chris' guttural groan as he trailed messy kisses down the arch of the man's collarbone.

The rhythm changed after that, evening out from sharp, quick strokes to something slower – *deeper* - as Chris scrabbled at the sheets. Biting his lips and moaning loudly, completely unashamed. Setting the stage for his latest loss of control as his hips *hiccupped*. Driving forward with a brutal jar, like he was trying to get inside, before he rested his head on Chris' chest and just *moved*.

He couldn't even tell what he was begging for when he realized the hoarse string of "*please, please, please,*" was coming from him and not Chris as his hips snapped forward. Finding the closest thing he figured there was to a god every time Chris rose up to meet him.

But it didn't last.

Instead, it devolved.

And soon they were racing each other to the finish as Chris' hand splayed out to capture his. Crushing his fingers as something in his belly dipped to molten. Realizing in a terrible, guilty, adrenaline-layered rush that to anyone looking it would seem like he was almost *using* him. Balls slapping heavily – *audibly* - against his mate's ass as he wrenched him almost upright, forcing the angle as his muscles burned. Feeling the tug in his navel as Chris sank his teeth into his shoulder, cock wet and almost crushed between them. Sating himself in his mate until Chris cried out again, short and sharp before his blue eyes snapped closed. Chin tipping back like-

Oh.

*Oh, jesus fuckin-*

Chris came like whip-lash. Shooting cum across his belly and smearing it thick across his skin as he fucked into him with an animal sound. Losing the last shreds of his restraint as the jerk of his hips turned wild. Gritting his teeth as Chris clenched around him, riding out his orgasm as he kissed him fiercely. Losing himself in familiar ground as he slammed home once, twice, *again*- Grinding down meaningfully as Chris looked up at him with shell-shocked whites. Holding his eyes as the heat between them turned sticky, humid and *reeking* of Chris.

And honestly?

That was all it took for him to follow.

The hilarious part was he doesn't even remember coming.

At least not outside of muscle memory and lingering, pleasant soreness.
That's how good it was.

*How right.*

Instead, all he remembered was Chris.

"What happens now?" he asked the sheets. Limbs loose and still riding the adrenaline high as he breathed thickly into the crease between the pillows. Cock sated-wet and caught the crease of Chris' thigh. More or less aware that he was slowly crushing him into the mattress as their breaths mingled, stale and moist-warm.

"I don't know," Chris admitted, shoulders shifting minutely against his chest. Tensing for a long moment before relaxing again. Like he wanted to adjust himself but realized it was too much work with him still splayed on top of him. "But when we figure it out I'm still going to be here."

He focused on the in and out part of breathing for the next little while. Senses soaring as the house smelled of *Chris* and *them*. Evolving to reflect the new dynamic as the faint scents of grief and wolf softened even further into the background. Able to hear the neighbours talking quietly in the other room – mutual insomnia over money, apparently. Muttering about cutting corners till the end of the month. That it was only temporary, just until-

"I know this is a lot. We've talked about it, and I know things are better. But believe me, I know you've gone through a lot since this started," Chris told him, petting his flank awkwardly as he fought against the bad angle. "Yet, at the same time I know- I know that somehow we've got this. I know what I'm feeling and it's strong. Stronger than anything I've ever felt. About anyone. And I'm not going to lie, that's-"

"Scary as fuck," he muttered bluntly.

Chris turned his head, smiling with his eyes again, crinkling the corners.

"I have no shame," he continued, settling pleasantly into the moment - reacquainting himself all the familiar rhythms. Babbling just for the sake of it as Chris huffed a laugh into the pillows. "I have no problem saying it. Hell, I'll throw a tantrum again and scream it. But you? You're the big bad hunter. You need to keep up your rep. Can't have the big bad-whatevers hearing you've gone soft."

On the other side of the wall he could hear the whisper of sheets against skin. Two heartbeats quieting down in increments as one of them – feminine and small – curled around the other with a tired sound. Burying affectionate and close – like they could face anything - as the man started to snore.

"You aren't so lax yourself, you know," Chris murmured, turning his head so he could breathe a little easier but not once asking him to get off. "You just keep on surprising me, surprising all of us. And believe me, we aren't an easy bunch to shock."

"Being underestimated is my superpower," he confessed with a yawn. Then-admittingly- "Plus, it's easier that way. When people don't expect much from you."

Chris just chuckled. Shaking his head in that fond way he'd come to recognize as a softer version of flicking someone in the nose. Like he loved you too much to actually put the meaning and effort behind taking you down a peg.

And wow- *loved*?
"But worth it," Chris hummed as he twisted around. Squirming out from under him until their positions were reversed and there were pointy elbows digging into his spine. Quickly deciding that he could get used to this particular vantage point as Chris practically draped across his back like a living, breathing, amazing-smelling blanket.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," he returned, meaning it but not letting himself get too worked up about it either. Too sated to dive back into that particular pot of self-crimination as Chris dragged his lips down the side of his neck. Distracting him to the point that his cock made a valiant attempt to harden from where it was caught against the sheets and his skin.

Was that even a thing?

Being too well fucked to care?

He traced the seam of his lips with his tongue thoughtfully, chasing his mate's taste.

"The truth is, I think what happens now is up in the air anyway. We're still figuring things out. And Kate is still out there. Sooner or later she'll make her move. Hopefully after we hear from Deaton things will start falling into place. But it's weird, the thing is I know we can handle it. I just have a feeling. I know it isn't going to make you feel any better, but that first time? On the field? I knew we'd never been safer. It wasn't just a hunch. I knew it. Just like how I knew the moment we started this in the kitchen. I knew we'd done this before. It was the same feeling."

He counted the spaces between their heartbeats. Wondering for a single, frustrating second if he even regretted getting mixed up in this anymore. It didn't feel like it. And frankly that wasn't even the strangest part.

"No pressure," he groused instead. Despite knowing deep down he felt the same. Settled. Confident. Sure. He shouldn't be, but he did.

"So, let's face whatever this is together, huh?" Chris hummed, sleepy and lax as the weight of the atmosphere slowly brought them down. Distracting him with the words, but more importantly the way he was curling around him. Pushing him this way and that like he was made of nothing more than softness and pudge instead of the muscles and sharpness that lurked under his skin.

The woman on the other side of the wall finally lapsed off to sleep. And for a stupidly long moment he felt a strange sense of kinship with her. A couple months ago he'd been her. Worrying about money and all that stupid shit right up until the moment where your life flashes in front of your eyes and you realize two things. First, you need to get your shit together. And second- you actually liked your stupidly boring life, thank you very much.

Naturally, he'd ended up being a little bit of both.

But this time around Chris was actually waiting on an answer. Ghosting cold toes down the back of his calves before burying them in the ball of sheets that'd gradually made its way down the mattress after a brief tussle over who had to lay in the wet spot. A contest he'd won by cheating, naturally.

"Sounds good to me," he breathed.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face, something important and inherent finally settling.

Hopefully for good.
He had a feeling Chris would make sure of that.
Chapter 21

They were still tangled up in bed – him more or less dead to the world and reveling in it - when the sound of Chris typing on his tablet filtered through the early morning hush.

He yawned, exaggerated and lazy. Tasting the stale of his own breath mixed with a couple thousand things that were distinctly Chris before he even attempted words. Letting go of a muffled "What'sit?" as the stretch of skin he was currently using as a pillow rippled with laughter.

"Research," Chris hummed, one hand scratch-scratching pleasantly across his scalp as he stretched in place. Letting go of a pleased sound as the scratching continued. Completely prepared to take the fact that he was practically purring to the grave before the tablet blooped and Chris settled in to read.

"It's too early," he whined, not bothering to crack a lid as the soft tap-tap of scrolling washed over him in uneven waves. He heard a lot better these day. Sometimes it was a good thing. Sometimes not. As he'd discovered the day Mr. Pottermeyer had invited his on again, off again borderline geriatric lady-friend over for a late lunch and a-

"Besides," he continued hurriedly, needing all the brain bleach. Skidding around trying to do a complete three-sixty and think of absolutely anything else. "It's still summer break. Research isn't a word I know until September."

Chris hummed noncommittally, head lolling against the small mountain of pillows that had somehow migrated under his head. Giving him the distinct impression that this was the first time this bed had seen any more action than sleeping for a very long time.

"I don't usually sleep past six, Chris admitted, tangling their legs together as the muted sharp of prickling leg hair made for an interesting contrast. "I was checking my email and one thing led to another."

He nodded into his pillow. He too had been sucked into the depths of the internet on occasion. Usually courtesy of YouTube. You start off looking up how to repair an ignition starter on your lawn mower and bam, three hours later you're sixty videos deep into the history of New Guinea Singing dog or how to build your own hidden wall cabinet for a hundred and sixty dollars or less.

"Look at this," Chris interjected, angling the tablet down as he rolled over reluctantly. Groaning when the screen flashed with a muted video clip of a large bear ripping up sedge grass after a long winter of hibernation.

"It's too early," he repeated, flinging himself back into the mess of blankets and mashing his face firmly into the pillows. Rude. That was what this was. The fact that the man was even awake in the morning, on a weekend near the end of summer was practically inhuman.

"Did you know that Kodiak bears are the world's largest land predator?" Chris returned, speaking like he hadn't heard him. "For a normal Kodiak - a male can stand over ten feet on his hind legs, around five on all fours. Says here the largest measured in the wild was 1,648 pounds – average is around 1,000 to 1,200 pounds usually. Still, they're omnivores. They spend more time eating grass, plants and berries than meat. Other than fish of course. But Kodiaks are only found on the islands in the Kodiak Archipelgo-"

"Gessundtight," he snarled, rolling his eyes at the ceiling as Chris ploughed on, undeterred.

"-so, think the south coast of Alaska basically. They've been pretty isolated up there since the last ice
age. And because of the abundance of food there's been no real need to migrate. They have smaller territorial ranges than other brown bears, even the ones around here- but again, because of the richness in resources they aren't aggressive territorially much either. Just fishing and mating related-fights mostly. They figure there's around 3,500 of them in the wild right now, give or take."

He sighed, long suffering and just a little bit pitiful. Catching on to the fact that this wasn't something Chris was ready to let go of anytime soon. He rolled his eyes at the ceiling as he settled in for the long haul. Toeing at the knot of sheets wrapped around his thigh as he psyched himself up to face all the things he'd been pointedly ignoring up until now.

"How sure are you that I'm even a Kodiak?" he asked, craning his head to look at the tablet as he settled more or less in Chris' lap. Thumbing at the screen until it stopped and enhanced the picture as Chris paused in mid-scroll. "Like that one?"

"Very sure," Chris assured, fingers resuming their blissful journey through his hair. Lulling him back to that special place that existed between sleep and wakefulness before the man decided to go ruin it. "Except you were about five times bigger and much more pissed off."

He raised a brow, mostly just because he could. Trying to imagine what he'd do if something anywhere close to that size came lumbering onto the lacrosse field during practise. He'd shit his pants. No question. Or- a couple months ago he probably would have anyway. He'd come to realize there were far scarier and more messed up things in this world than a curious bear. Which, despite being roughly the size of a small planet, was ninety-nine point nine percent more likely to be more interested in raiding the garbage cans than turning his ass into chew toy.

He liked to think that was him growing as a person rather than getting his entire life turned upside down. But frankly, willful obliviousness could only get you so far these days.

"Oh, here's a good one," Chris remarked, poking him in the back until he heaved himself over. Stretching his arms over his head, naked and comfortable in his own skin before budging into the mound of pillows beside him. Arranging himself so that he was half on top and half smothered before he looked at the screen and- whoa.

"Holy shit," he breathed, watching the thirty-second clip loop back to the beginning as a shaggy, soggy looking Kodiak sprinted like a runaway horse. Keeping pace with the car filming beside it as muscles and fur rippled with every powerful lunge.

_He had no idea bears could move like that!_

"They can get up to around fifty-six miles per hour. Fast, but not as fast as other predators. And they can't keep it up forever. It expends too much energy. Researchers think that along with the abundance of food, that is one of the main reasons you don't see them being territorial about much outside of fishing spots and mating rights. Huh- Interesting. They seem to have developed a- well, I guess it would be a sort of social structure- a language just to avoid fights. Which makes sense when you think about it. Fighting is a big risk when the majority of your time is spent preparing for hibernation or recovering from it," Chris explained, interest clear. Chewing distractedly – okay, maybe even endearingly - on the inside of his lip as his eyes flicked back and forth, reading.

"But the thing that's different is when they hit you. See the rolling gate? All that power behind it? _Bam!_" Chris protracted, smacking his fist into the open of his palm like was mimicking being hit in head with a bag of bricks. "Probably feels like hitting a concrete wall. Hell, your first charge took out two Berserkers like they were _nothing._"

A muscle in his cheek quirked, pulling tight.
He didn't remember much after he'd landed in the underbrush. He had vague impressions of sinking his fingers – claws – into the soil and hearing his bones shift and crack. But other than that? A whole lot of nothing. It was the only time he'd fully shifted. All the other times he'd been aware. Present. Deaton and Scott had already told him the first shift for any wolf was intense and that losing time – even himself - was more or less normal in the scheme of things.

Unsurprisingly he'd found that of little comfort. Especially when both of them, plus Derek, had encouraged him to try and shift all the way more than once since. Personally, he had no desire to tempt fate thank you very much. And honestly, it felt like he was the only one not taking crazy pills about it. He could make excuses till the bears came galloping home, but that didn't change the fact that he was fucking right.

Maybe.

He'd been an expert at avoiding awkward life realizations before all this.

So why not now?

"Sexual maturity at about five years, but according to this guy most of the females – sorry, sows – don't have cubs until they are around nine. I wonder why that is?"

As far as he was concerned, if it never happened again – ever – he'd be a happy Coach. The little flare ups he could deal with, easy. He'd taken to that part like breathing. A little claw and a little fang had been child's play to get back under control the odd time the nuclear needle had angled red.

Well, minus that time in Derek's loft.

But for the sake of his sanity he was pretending that was all bad dream.

"Apparently their mating season occurs from May to June. Serially monogamous it says, huh. That bodes well," Chris remarked with a wink. "Though they only stay together for couple days, apparently. After the egg is fertilized it enters suspended animation until the fall when it starts growing again."

"So all dining and no wining, huh?" he muttered, forever insulted that his gender always ended up being nature's douchebag. Running off before all the real work is done. "Rude."

"It says here that sometimes male bears cannibalize their own young."

He snorted, eying the scrolling text with renewed interest. Because at the end of the day he was kind of messed up like that.

"Now that I actually do believe," he chimed in. "God knows I've wanted strangle at least half the brats more than once. Especially Greenberg. I'll admit that knowing what those kids are actually wrapped up in makes some of the shit I've caught them doing make a lot more sense now. Kind of. I mean- oh. Well, damn. That explains why McCall went from an absolute-"

Chris just laughed, full-bodied and morning-rough. Throwing an arm around his shoulder and crowding close in a way that was still so new he actually forgot to breathe a little.

"Kodiaks are versatile, intelligent, they have a good survival strategy and often keep their sense of play and curiosity well into a maturity," Chris recited, a sly smile playing at the corners of his lips.

He puffed up his chest. Feeling the muscles expand and contract against Chris' forearm as the relative chill of the pillows made him want to shiver and burrow closer.
"Well, of course they are. There's a reason I didn't come out of this as a were-sloth or were-poodle, I'll have you know," he pointed out, sniffing loudly as smile stretched itself across tangled skin.

"Though, I do think the expectations placed on them would've been a lot more my style," he admitted, sobering quickly as Chris sent him a patient look. Understanding but not pitying in all the ways he appreciated more than he could ever express.

"Bears are cooler though," Chris pointed out fractionally. Like this was a negotiation and he was holding the trump card that would turn the tides in his favor. It stank like dirty pool and personal bias but he appreciated it all this same.

"Way cooler," he agreed, jaw cracking as he yawned. Scratching his chest idly.

The quiet stretched after that. And in the end, he let himself drift with it. Tossing an arm over his face as the sun started to slant in through the blinds. He was this close to nodding off when Chris piped up again.

"Did you know that the Alutiigs, the Aboriginal people native to the Kodiak islands, sometimes hunted the bears? Especially during the last Ice Age when they were landlocked together. They used their meat for food, hides for clothing, even their teeth for jewelry. They have a lot of traditions and folklore about bears. About their similarities to humans and their elemental nature – how their lives effected the natural order and- well – apparently bears were something special on top of it. They believed that the Kodiak had a very strong connection to the spirit world," Chris wheedled significantly, voice just causal enough that he knew he was getting side-eyed like a motherfucker.

He ignored the bait and trundled right into rigorous self-pity.

"Oh my god shut upppppp," he moaned, so sick of manifest destiny and stupid spirit bears he could choke. Sliding off the bed to puddle across the floor in an uneven heap and taking the blankets with him. Breathing in the must of old dust and a thousand different things his nose had no real business being able to pick out in the first place. Wondering if there was a "How to Navigate the Supernatural and your new Hunter Boyfriend: For Dummies," handbook he should be picking up at some point as one of their cells vibrated low battery at increasingly insistent intervals.

Chris didn't just laugh with him that time. Instead he wormed a leg through the tangle of sheets and let it thump against the curve of his hip, mingling pleasantly.

And if he somehow managed to fall asleep like that, well, that was no one's business but his.

Wasn't until later, when they were halfway through breakfast and he was trying to be polite about not eating more than half a tray of bacon, that Chris looked over at him. Courting him through the steam from his mug. Blue eyes ignited and uncompromising before he let the words free.

"Do you feel it?"

He didn't need to ask to know what he meant. He felt like he'd been breathing it in ever since they'd woken up. Like he was staring at the only face in the world that knew the true geography of him. He didn't know how to describe it other than was a lot like being stuck in the hospital with that arrow in his gut - high on morphine and pure oxygen.

Everything was settled. Content. Connected.

Like for once, everything was exactly how it should be.
"Yeah," he swallowed, feeling the moment linger heavy as the admission aired out. Permanent and laced with no take-backs. Also sort of surreal considering they were smack in the middle of a kitchen full of dirty dishes, a humming dish washer and a small river of bacon fat slowly solidifying around the drain in the sink. "I feel it."

Chris smiled, making him duck his head into his chin like some sort of socially fucked up turtle. Reminding him by proxy that despite everything that'd happened so far, he was still Bobby Finstock. Coach of the Lacrosse Team. Sassy, awkward and boring with absolutely zero in the way of clues. And that was a good thing. A grounding thing.

He wasn't used to people looking at him like he was the best part of their forever.

But he could get used to it.

Probably a bit too easily.

The next few weeks passed to the same tune. There were no almost-apocalypses or suspicious deaths. Something he was assured usually rolled around like clockwork this time of year. He and Chris learned how to navigate each other. Having some time to just be as he slowly geared up for the start of the school year.

It was a nice change.

He knew it wouldn't last, so he hoarded it jealously.

He still carried the whole concept of what he was around like an unwanted obligation and Chris, for the most part, let him. Surprisingly patient as the weeks ticked by and the longer they went without any updates from Deaton only deepened the knots in both their shoulders. Creating an unwelcome micro-climate of tension that made his morning runs longer and his 'hand-to-hand' training with Braeden, Derek and Chris edging towards downright brutal.

But considering it also led to moments like the one where he crowded Chris into the corner of the kitchen with expectations in his eyes, he was content to let everything else slide. Deciding to just enjoy it. All of it. Right down to bare feet slip-sliding across the tiles as dish-suds dripped down Chris' elbows. Turning everything slick and just a little bit dangerous as he hiked up his stupidly domestic looking boyfriend's shirt and sucked vicious-red bites down the pale of his collarbone. Something which, according to the wall mirror, was a good look for both of them after Chris returned the favor.

As expected, Scott and Derek showed up at his place unannounced not long after that. One of those first few mornings where Chris had been lounging around like an overly contented starfish and he'd been too pleased with himself to pull on more than a pair of boxers – which turned out not to be his - before opening the door.

Scott had turned a very unattractive shade of magenta. Nose twitching as an entire house full of sex-saturated air and fumed out to meet them. And yeah, awkward.

"Finally," was all Derek had muttered before leaving the floor to Scott to stutter something about a pack meeting and the next full moon. Looking a whole lot like if he could voluntarily stop breathing he would be dead on the front stoop five minutes ago.

It was the predictable sort of mental scarring he both sympathized with and cackled internally about.
But in his opinion, Derek looked a bit too smug about the entire thing. Scott he could get even with when Lacrosse practice rolled around. But Derek? Well, that was a different story. And, being the eternal asshole he was, he knew of at least one person who would be very interested to know the kid actually talked in full sentences on a semi-regular basis.

He waited until they were speeding off in Derek's Camaro before he snatched his phone off the kitchen table and pecked his way through a victorious and very vindictive text.

The answer from Stiles was immediate and predictably hilarious.

Derek didn't talk to him for weeks.
Chapter 22

The school year had just started, and he was balls-deep trying to carve out some new talent for the team, when the weirdly peaceful break from any and all supernatural asshattery finally decided to give up the goat and go right for the god damned jugular.

He was still trying to get back into the swing of things. Juggling lesson plans, new Lacrosse plays and enthusiastically ensuring that all his fantasies of having Chris on every available surface of his house became a reality. So, naturally he was exhausted. It'd been at least two weeks since he'd done more than come home and drag Chris to bed for a few blissful hours. Somewhat cognizant that at least half the man's clothes had started a slow, but steady migration into his closet.

He still wasn't sure what Chris actually did half the time. But what he does know is that he's no longer tripping over the small heap of mail he usually leaves to collect dust in the front hall around this time of year. Nor is the garden he'd abandoned after the whole Lacrosse Field Incident still standing out, haggard and untended like a monument to the last of his adult pride. There was also a bunch of strange smelling house plants hogging the sun in his window sills these days that he definitely doesn't remember buying.

He viewed the changes as par for the course – a negotiation of a shared space - and enjoyed the message they broadcasted regardless. At least until he got jabbed in the ass by a vicious, long-spine cactus. Unintentionally starting an intense and completely silent passive aggressive argument that involved him removing said menace to locations unknown only to wake up the next day to find the stupid thing right back where it'd started.

They never talked about it.

But neither of them ever really admitted defeat either.

He figured that at the end of the day it probably stood for more than just the cactus.

And honestly, he was more than cool with that.

School had been out for a good four hours or so and he was in his office - slogging through a mountain of paperwork. He was doing some quick math in his head. Something about the cost of new jerseys over trying to squeeze another year out of the old ones, when the hair on the back of his neck pricked.

He looked up, forgetting about the pen lid he'd been chewing on as it clattered across the tiles. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary through the dusty blinds that looked out over the Lacrosse field where it was currently pissing rain. Nothing out of the ordinary there. The hall on the other side of his office door was dark, as per usual, because if the School District was anything it was cheap. Also ordinary. Mind-numbingly so, in fact.

He frowned, concentrating. He couldn't hear anything either. Not even Gary, the no-nonsense night janitor who he could have sworn bussed past less than half an hour ago with the waxing machine. Actually, he hadn't heard anything from Gary in a while now and he hadn't been in to collect the garbage or-

He nearly pissed himself when a shadow loomed the other side of the glass.
"Jesus Christ," he hissed, flinging himself backwards with so much force he nearly flipped his chair. Smashing back against the filing cabinets as a startled hiccup left the figure on the other side of the door. He blinked, pausing in mid-panic as the sound threw a completely different spin on whatever nightmare creature he'd previously figured was coming for him.

In the end all it took was a single, distressed sounding peep before he was tumbling out of his chair and fumbling with the door. Wrenching it open just in time to catch her in mid-fall as Lydia toppled gracefully into his office. Looking up at him, soaking wet and shivering, with eyes too young for even half the things she'd been through.

He was about to say something. Maybe her name. Or, you know, an explanation. The basics. But by the time he had her on her feet, uncertain tears were already trickling downwards. Automatically making everything easily a hundred times worse.

He didn't do crying.

Unless it was him doing the crying.

Ugh.

He had her firmly swaddled in his coat and the shock-blanket he kept in the first aid kit for games before he asked her anything. Not exactly sure what to do with her big watery eyes and stringy-wet hair. She was still wearing the same flimsy-thin designer whatever she'd had on during his class in second period. But no backpack or purse.

He had about five thousand different questions along with the lingering echoes of what he figured was misplaced paternal guilt for being responsible for a couple hundred kids on any given day of the week that kept nagging at him to call the Police or the Hospital or at the very least Natalie. But all it took was one pleading, overwhelmed look from her through the wet of her fringe and he was done for.

God, he was so easy it was disgusting.

Instead he made a pot of profoundly awful coffee and settled beside her, content to wait.

So, what? You're basically a supernatural satellite dish?" he questioned. Feeling like he needed to clarify the basics all over again as she made a face every time she took a sip from the styrofoam cup.

"More or less," she replied, pursing her lips. Shivering reflectively as she looked around the room like she was convinced something – or someone else - was supposed to be there. Blinking like she had no idea how she'd gotten here as the clock on the wall ticked annoyingly.

It didn't exactly inspire confidence.

What he didn't get from her, he managed to put together himself. She'd been at home, working on the last few slides for her Advanced Economics presentation and- well that was it. The only problem was, if he remembered his Supernatural 101 correctly, there was exactly no way her losing time and deciding to show up here – in his office of all places - was going to end well for either of them.

Mentally, he ran through the checklist.

Banshee? Check.
Piercing scream? *Thankfully not yet.*

Harbinger of Death? *Oh god- let's not tempt fate, Finstock.*

Often shows up at crime scenes or places of that have seen great tragedy? *Double check.*

Awesome.

Just fucking perfect.

This was exactly what he needed.

If he didn't get these forms in by the end of the night his super was going to-

He swallowed, opening and closing his mouth a couple of times before settling on brute honesty. "So, your uh- thing? Gotta say I'm not jazzed about it," he admitted.

She ignored him, head cocked and distant. But it wasn't her usual brand of *'I am far smarter than thou' ignoring. It was a full out *'I just got forcibly checked into the Supernatural Super 8 motel' type of gone and he hated everything about it immediately.

He shifted uneasily. Hovering on the sidelines as she stood up unexpectedly, blanket slipping off her shoulders to pool across the floor. Swallowing hard as she reached down, running her fingers up and down the chipped laminate of his desk again and again.

"Lydia?"

She didn't answer. But for some reason he knew he could reach her. She was still there. Just distracted. He kept his voice soft and unthreatening as followed her carefully. Letting her roam as her hands drifted from object to object. Concentrating on something he couldn't hear as the little furrow of frustration deepened like frown lines between her eyes.

"Sweetheart, do you know why you're here?"

She paused with her hands on the wall. The one that led out to the locker room and showers beyond that. Making him feel all sorts of weirded out as to why as the distant *plink-plink* of a leaky faucet gave the moment a distinctly creepy vibe.

"No," she whispered, glossy hair air-dry-stiff and fuzzing at the ends as it framed her face. Glowing pale and deathly-stark in the low light. "But they do."

"Who does?" he asked, automatic and without any real inflexion as he straightened. Catching the jump of her pulse as she leaned into the wall. Pressing her ear against the scuffed paint as the delicate rasp of her breathing grew thin and quick.

"The others," she answered, licking her lips before her eyes fluttered closed. Fingers spidering across the white-wash like she was following the vibrations in the pipes. Desperate to catch the rest. "They wanted me to know. To warn you. But something is changing- everything is echoing. They're… confused."

Now *that* bit was interesting.

"Have they ever been confused before?" he posed, noting the sweat beading across her upper lip as she wobbled in place. Already moving forward to steady her when she quavered out an answer.

"No, not like this, I-"
He caught her before her legs gave out. Feeling her heart beating frantic and bird-like against his arms as he half-carried her back to the chair. Tugging his jacket firmer around her shoulders as images of her mother personally *filleting* him trickled in from that dusty corner of his psyche that'd always been instinctively intimidated by anything that didn't have a penis.

"Okay, time out! You alright? Do you need me to call anyone? Parrish? Scott? A shrink? Der-"

He stopped in mid-sentence. Looking down to find his hand captured in both of hers. Dwarfing the small of her palms in a way that almost made him flinch. Forcing himself still as the pads of her fingers moved up, then to his wrists before stopping again. Her blue eyes were huge and stricken as flawlessly manicured nails froze over his pulse points.

"So many lives," she breathed up at him, barely there and faraway as her fingers twitched over his wrists. Looking like she was seeing it happen somehow as a sheen of tears welled up from the corners of her eyes. "So many deaths. Can't you hear them? He's screaming for you. You're screaming. The voices are screaming, but they're all you - him. Together. Never parted. You're-you're the exception. You know that by now, don't you? The darkness takes you, but it can never keep you. You and- not until-"

She shuddered, muscles twitching involuntarily. Quivering in place like she was trying to shake it off as she rocked back and forth. "It's too loud. *Too many.* Too much. I can't-"

He wheezed in a breath.

Then another.

Trying to remind himself of all the ways breathing was important as static hissed at the edge of his vision. Filling the dead air with the whine of dying frequencies that only grew more deafening by the second. Heart threatening to beat right out of his chest, seismic and wrenching, as the oxygen in the air radiated outwards. Destroying everything in its path until suddenly-

The moment she pulled away and he started breathing again was the same moment one of the showers in the locker room suddenly creaked on. Making them jump as the rattle of old pipes and the gargling hiss from the water heater made it sound like the apocalypse was finally making that house call.

*Well.*

That couldn't be good.
"Stay here," he told her, leaving her perched unevenly on the chair as he closed the door firmly behind him.

He looked down when a shivering itch writhed underneath his nails. Watching as dark claws grew in their place – long and dexterous sharp. He flexed them, holding them up as the low, orange-tinted lights flickered fitfully. Glowing sickly and muted from the farthest corner of the room. Trying not to think about the last few times this had happened before he shook the thought away and put one foot in front of the other. Holding his claws delicately at his sides, ready to hide them at a moment's notice.

The steam building in the room from the corner shower loomed moist and humid-heavy. Shrouding the room in the type of dark he tended to associate with low budget horror movies and the overly dramatic shit they tended to have on late-night cable. It had all the atmosphere of impending doom, but none of the scent.

He inhaled, senses straining.

But there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Nothing but grass and sweat and bleach and blood and- wait…

*Blood?*

He almost tripped over a pairing of frustratingly familiar shoes abandoned across the tiles. *Jesus fuc-* He bit down on a curse, heart in his throat. Fisting the heel as the sticky red of fresh blood splattered stark across the pristine white toe. They were the same god damned shoes he'd watched the kid clean neurotically every single day after practice. Taking an actual magic eraser to them like the world depended on them being perfectly clean before he left.

After that, the rest happened quickly.

He came around the corner like a man on a mission. Shoe raised like a battle axe the same moment the water turned off and the *thwock-thwock* of wet feet slapping across the tiles echoed strangely. Like whoever it was both in front and behind him at the same time as the haze of steam parted, he whirled around and-

There was a horrified beat before he remembered how words worked.

"Damn it, Greenberg!"

The kid's face popped out of the towel he was scrubbing over his face to reveal a perfect 'o' of surprise. "Sorry, Coach!" he trilled, making him wince at the scratchy squeak as one of his hands darted up to fist the towel wrapped firmly around his waist.

Someday Greenburg was going to end up dead in the middle of fucking nowhere and the subject of a lifetime movie special, he just knew it. The kid had the survival skills of a fucking ostrich. *Christ.*

He was pretty sure there was a vein throbbing in the center of his forehead as he held up the bloody shoe and tried to school his breathing into something that didn't sound like a winded elephant with a gland problem. Almost pathetically grateful to see the claws had disappeared at some point.
"What the hell happened?" he demanded, shaking the shoe for emphasis as the *plink-plink* of dripping water provided background noise.

"I, uh- well. I ran over a baby rabbit with the lawnmower and then-"

"So you came back to school to shower?!!" he cut off, enunciating slowly as his eyebrows climbed steadily to their new home in his fucking hair.

The kid opened his mouth to reply but he ended up waving it away. It wasn't worth it and he absolutely didn't care. Everything was fine. *Just fine.* Well, no one was dead at any rate, so he figured that had to count for something.

"Finish up and get the hell out of here," he barked, so relieved he could cry as he tossed the bloody shoe off in the direction of the bench and turned on his heel. Keeping a forced march all the way out the door before slumping against the frosted glass with a sigh.

"Who was that?" Lydia questioned, upending the coffee whitener into her mostly forgotten cup.

"Greenberg," he grated, inwardly seething about the fact that the stupid kid had probably just taken years off his life, as she scrunched her nose in confusion.

"Who's Greenberg?"

"Sometimes I ask myself that very same question," he muttered darkly. Scrubbing his hands through his hair as the light flicked off and the sound of squeaky soles beating a hasty retreat down the freshly waxed floors issued for far longer than they had any right to.

It was about half an hour later that he finally broke.

"Alright, that's it, I'm taking you home," he declared, deciding he couldn't handle pretending to stare into the depths of his mug and not at her for another minute. Perpetually on edge for whatever was or wasn't coming next as she tilted her head and looking around the room like a confused Cocker Spaniel. "The super can kiss my ass about the paperwork. How'd you get here anyway?"

She looked around, momentarily at a loss before reaching into her soggy jumper and fishing out a set of car keys. Holding them up with a pointed jingle as he rolled his eyes and smooshed his face unattractively between his hands. Biting his tongue as about a half dozen comments shriveled up and died against the roof of his mouth.

Damn kids were going to give him a heart attack.

"Well, that's just disturbing," he commented. Trying to picture how the hell she'd managed to drive herself here all—*not all there.* That had to be illegal…right?

They were halfway down the hall when the sound of a car alarm blared out into the evening hush. All they had to do was look at each other before taking off. Finishing the last few meters together and exploding out the front doors at a dead sprint.

For a long moment they just brushed shoulders on the foot of the stairs. Staring incomprehensibly at the mangled wreck that was - he was making an informed guess here - Lydia's car. Which was now wrapped around the light pole at the front of the parking lot, spewing gas and sparking. Lights
flashing determinedly, like a monument to bad life decisions everywhere, as the rain obviously chose that moment to drizzle itself into nothing.

"Mom just had it detailed." Lydia groaned, slumping back on her heels for a half a second before surging back up, posture perfect. Cheeks glowing red with the first spot of color he'd seen on her all night.

He choked on a nervous laugh. Feeling the slick of fresh blood trickle between his fingers from where he'd accidentally pressed his claws too hard into his palms. It was the sensation more than anything that made him look. But when he did the skin was flawless. Healed over like nothing had happened in the first place. A muscle ticked in his jaw. Half wondering if they were going to keep doing this as he wiped the blood away hurriedly. Never once taking his eyes off the dark patch of empty space that stood out beyond the entrance to the school.

And honestly, that only ramped his panic up all the higher.

"Insurance?" he asked inanely, voice pitching higher than he'd ever admit to. Because normalcy and sarcasm were the only things keeping him sane at this point.

"Of course."

"Well, at least that's something," he managed, struggling a bit. Wondering if she had Tornado insurance or whatever, because good luck explaining this to the insurance company. And - because his life really was a big bag of dicks - as if on cue, four massive looming shapes materialized out of the treeline on either side of the road. Steam billowing out of the bone skulls they wore as they remained where they were. Waiting.

Oh.

Those things.

He remembered those things.

He remembered the strength of their fingers curling around his neck. Lifting him high in the air after Kate's claws raked down his back, slashing and tearing. He remembered exposed nerves screaming as he'd scratched their arms. Looking into their eyes for mercy, but finding none.

They looked no less scary the second time around. Worse now that he could smell the human tint of fear and despair that lingered in the air around them like the last shreds of their humanity. It made him think of their stories. Wondering how they'd gotten to this point. Who'd hurt them? If Kate had-

He inhaled violently. Getting the same feeling he had before on the field as a gentle, natural thrum of surety rippled through him. They were wrong. Scott and Chris had called them Berserkers. But he'd known them by another name once – long ago. They were an offense to the natural world in every way possible. Nature didn't exist like this. Forced into violence for no purpose than violence itself. It had no place in the cycle – in the natural order. It was not an animal trait. You couldn't command an animal to do this. This was malevolent and leeched in sickness.

Wrong.

He wasn't sure who was more surprised, him or Lydia when a low, threatening growl rolled out to fill the intervening space. Feeling the hair on the back of his neck prickle and rise as the Berserkers shifted in place. Aggressive, but forced to heel by their unseen master.
"So, what does one do in this kind of a situation?" he asked finally, desperately trying not to freak out despite the certainty that was quickly taking him back to what he’d felt that moment on the field. When he’d stood his ground and known. Cracking his neck from side to side and shaking his shoulders loose as the closest Berserker palmed a huge bone-studded club like a threat.

"Uh, besides running?" Lydia asked, looking swamped in his coat as she fist the pockets convulsively. Shivering audibly when a gust of wind made the sleeves billow around her tiny wrists.

"Yeah, besides that."

"Oh, generally call people," she replied, oozing fake nonchalance despite the undercurrent of fear that had taken up residence behind the words. Staring at the creatures uneasily – probably wondering the same thing he was – why they weren't attacking.

He nodded vigorously.

"Good idea. Yes. Let's do that. Call the people. Call all of them," he agreed.

"I already sent a group text," she admitted, clicking her phone on so the glow from the screen lit up the interior of the mesh pocket.

"Good girl," he breathed, hands curling into fists at his sides. Feeling the flex of his claws as they rasped across the material of his track pants. Twitching at the disconcerting catch, like any second he was going to snag the cuticle, even though he was pretty sure it would take a diamond-tipped drill bit to do any real damage. "A profoundly high A+ for quick thinking."

"I might not know why I'm here, but I definitely know that calling first versus waiting is always the best call," she replied archly. Only a little bit defensive as it finally struck him that all this had been planned and if Lydia had been drawn here that meant-

"So, on that note," he bugled conversationally, back peddling magnificently as he eased himself a fraction of an inch in front of her. "On a scale of one to ten, how screwed are we?"

The forest was quiet.

Stilled unnaturally like everything in a half-mile radius had deliberately fallen silent.

"You're a- well, whatever you are," Lydia pointed out, giving him a funny look that said: 'Duh, Coach.' – 'And I have complete faith you will save my ass,' all at the same time. Which obviously made him feel extremely uncomfortable and kind of like he was going to throw up. "Can't you do what you did last time?"

*What did he even do last time?!*

*He still hadn't figured it out.*

*Something about a protective trigger or-*

"Over confidence is never a good start," he slung back. So on edge that he nearly hit the roof when her phone dinged. Momentarily dragging their eyes away from the Berserkers who were still just fucking standing there.. Being creepy. And threatening. And did he mention creepy? "Also, for your information, last time I died!"

"Only for like, a minute!" she retorted, voice carrying. Looking up from her phone with a wince. Face falling like this was the worst thing. "They'll be here in ten minutes."
"Your car?" she said briskly, ready to pounce on the idea when the jingle of his keys *ting-tinged* from his pocket as he shifted. Raising his hands fractionally as one of the Berserkers half turned, looking back at the lane that led towards the main road.

"Chris dropped me off," he negated. Able to actually *feel* the heat of it as she fixed him with a Martin Special and rolled her eyes.

"Back inside then?" she asked, like he was the veteran of surviving shitty situations and not her. Looping her arm around the curve of his elbow, present but without weight. Like a reminder.

But he shook his head. Because Gary the night janitor, Greenberg and at least a handful of semi-familiar heartbeats - that had absolutely no business being at school after hours - were sounding out all over the building. Innocent and completely unsuspecting of the danger that was waiting just outside.

"Run for it?" he suggested instead. Judging the gap between the Berserkers critically. Convinced that if they got the jump on them, they might be able clear the gauntlet before it closed.

"Sounds good."

So they did.
They were hauling ass down the road, barely ahead of them, when Lydia's heel snapped.

"Are you serious?!" he exclaimed, mostly to the world at large as he skidded to a stop when she fell with a cry. Picking up the building pin-pricks of iron on the air as the loose asphalt cut through her tights. Stumbling at the abrupt change in direction as he bent down, scoped her up in his arms and kept on running.

*His life was already too much like a bad horror movie without the cheesy b-rated tropes, thank you very much.*

"These were brand new!" she hissed. Clutching the ruined heel in her hand like it was personal affront. Giving him flashbacks to Natalie and her busted radiator smoking quietly on the side of the road. Smelling like spilled wine and exhaustion.

*Like mother, like daughter,* he supposed.

He was too high on adrenaline to realize he barely felt the weight. Skirting around parked cars and hunkering around the sides of more than a few buildings, trying to keep hidden. Buying them time as Lydia jabbed at her phone, muttering *come on, come on, come on* under her breath until they were forced to explode out from under an overhang just in time to avoid getting cut off as the four Berserkers chasing them were joined by another pair. Nearly swallowing his own tongue when they materialized out of the gloom in the middle of a dead-end intersection whose lights never did anything other than flash orange.

*Fuck.*

"They're coming," she murmured, like she knew. That same pinch of color riding high on her cheeks as he set her down. Keeping one arm splayed out like some sort of half-assed shield as his claws curled around the curve of her waist. Blinding him with the screen of her phone when she thrust it at him. At least half a dozen conversation windows blinking frenetically.


"Not fast enough," he returned tensely as the Berserkers killed the space between them a half a meter at a time. Realizing that even if they could make it into the trees that would lead them right into the suburbs. The new premium development city council had tried to usher in over three decades ago, but had only been approved in the last five. He'd heard they were going to punch the intersection through next spring. Something about revitalizing this corner of town or some bullshit.

He expanded his hearing, not realizing he could until the moment of. Wincing at the sudden rush of sound as Lydia said something intelligible beside him. There were people putting their children to bed. A man out on his porch reading, an old couple laughing quietly about the antics of their dog as it chased a neighbourhood cat around and around one of the backyard trees. A bunch of pre-teens running home before curfew. A couple hundred people, *normal people,* just living their lives. Completely unaware of the danger.

They couldn't risk that.

*He couldn't risk that.*

*He had to do something.*
"Stay behind me," he ordered, setting her down. Voice guttural and low, vocal cords already changing. Baring his teeth at the advancing shapes as his clothing bulged, straining to hold him, before tearing completely. Finding himself leaning down, knuckles to the pavement as his shoulders bunched into signature sloping points. The building muscles rippling and spreading as a tidal wave of warmth soaked through his skin – easy as breathing.

He didn't have to think about. The shift was natural. Like water over rocks, it flowed through him right when he needed it. It wasn't anything like the first time when his mind had been shunted aside. This time he melded with it. Two halves of the same whole finally fitting together – just like Derek said. Like missing pieces finding a home, he was aware but altered.

He vaguely registered Lydia's sudden intake of breath behind him. Hearing her whisper hurriedly into the phone before the connection crackled and she shut it off. Slipping off her other heel and tossing it aside the same moment his giant paws planted themselves deep into the grooves of the pavement. Tossing his head back as he reared to his full height.

He huffed a challenge as the creatures circled.

Looking for weak spot.

They would find none.

They were nothing to him.

*Flies.*

The cub was his to protect.

He would kill the wrong ones.

His mate was near.

He would take him back to their den.

*Chris.*

He kept her behind him as he faced down all six. Threatening to charge as the closest pair started to advance as the cub's heartbeat thumped fast and painful behind her brittle bones. He didn't like the sound – nor the scent that rose in it's wake. She was afraid. Not of him, but of the two shapes swinging thick bone clubs and sharp blades, reflecting the moonlight.

"Coach- are you-"

He roared a challenge that made the forest go still. Momentarily reveling in the sudden surge of darker scents – fears scents – the first he'd smelt from the wrong ones, before he broke the stalemate and leapt forward. Meeting the Berserkers' swinging clubs head on.

The she-cub was calling him by his other skin, distracting him as the skull of the fourth wrong one crunched satisfyingly under his weight. Tossing its body to the side as he wheeled around and loped back to her. Allowing her to dig her small claws into his fur and bury close as the last two backed away. Deferring to the dark spark that ruled them as the flashing orange lights bathed the dark in even deeper shadows.

He let go of it somehow – releasing the strength nature had given him - shrinking back to pale skin to
find himself naked. Pulling himself up to his full height as the sound of screeching cars and a chorus
of ranging howls echoed like backup around him. Feeling their strength and love as the salt of
adrenaline keyed the air like electricity. Eyes fixed on that one pin-prick reflection that stood out to
him like a spotlight in the dark forest overhang. Mindless of the tacky, foreign blood still dripping
down his skin. Winding down his calves to trickle between his toes and stain across the pitted
blacktop below.

Something in the air parted and stilled when Kate made herself known, slinking out of the darkness
that warped the forest edge as the last two Berserkers flanked her. Blonde hair heavy and lank as she
stared at him with hatred in her eyes. Dull, yet blazing. Empty save for the madness that seemed to
be staring right back.

The reality of his future was clear in that moment.

The balance had to be restored.

The sickness culled - cured.

There was no other way.

Not for him.

Not for them.

His upper lip curled with a silent snarl when she let go of a baser hiss. The promise of a dance that
would come later as Chris and the others stood beside him. Ready to fight with guns and claws as
she backed away with her pets. Letting the forest swallow her.

"Well, we knew she wasn't going to stay away forever," Scott pointed out once they'd safely
sequestered themselves in the locker room back at the school. Now blissfully empty of both night
janitors and students.

Trying vainly not to think about the fact that he was pretty sure he had Berserker stuck between his
teeth as they had a sort of- after-attack huddle about it. Shifting uncomfortably in the too small gym
shorts Chris had tossed him when he'd regained enough of himself to realize that yet again he was
bits to the breeze and covered with half-dried blood. Something he already knew no amount of
showers would ever really wash away. Not after he'd smelled their fear. Those last scraps of
humanity that'd made killing them almost-

"Yeah, but what was the point of that?" Parrish questioned, brushing knees with Lydia from his seat
on one of the benches. Looking over at the Sheriff as the man nodded and added his two cents.

"She did give away the element of surprise," the Sheriff echoed, looking more than a bit careworn as
he thought it out. "My question is, what does she get out of that?"

"Again, not a big shocker," Stiles drawled, leaning back against his locker with his arms crossed -
jumpy and fidgeting. Seemingly oblivious to the way Derek was absolutely- definitely hovering
behind him. "She ran off to lick her wounds. Now she is back and bitchier than ever."

It took a second before the kid's brain to mouth filter kicked in before he glanced over at Chris with a
wince. "Uh, no offence."

Chris just tilted a nod, face unreadable before he finally sighed. Straightening beside him like
everything hurt. Giving him the impression of half a dozen worrying things he could tell by scent
alone before he was talking again. "Kate has an end game. She always does. This was just a test."

"If this was a test, did we pass?" Derek questioned, swinging them right into the next big question he was already a hundred percent sure he wouldn't like it at all.

"Probably a bit too well," Chris admitted, leaning into him fractionally - so he could feel the warmth of what wasn't being said. Feeling over warm despite the jacket Lydia returned after Chris had helped him get the worst of the blood off his face.

"So, what? We should have let ourselves get a little bit dead?" he broke in, trying to wrap his head around the entire thing as he backtracked through it. Seeing it play out in hindsight as he realized they were right.

It had been a test.

"No, of course not. It's just now she knows it wasn't a fluke," Lydia explained, having apparently caught the clue bus way ahead of him – as per usual. "She knows what you're capable of now and next time she'll be ready."

Super freaking duper.

Why was it always about him, anyway?

Why couldn't he go back to being the ignored and invisible Bobby Finstock?

He missed that.

Strangely not as much as he thought he would.

But yeah- he still missed the general theme at the very least.

"Think about it, though. She knows us. So, why the test? When this started it was about us. About Derek and me and trying to get control of her abilities. It was about getting even. This is different. Why?" Scott asked, sounding more like he was thinking out loud as his face scrunched up in confusion.

He was looking determinedly at his bare toes before the lengthening pause finally made him look up and sigh long-sufferingly.

"Aw, crap."

"It makes sense," Chris told him later. Much later when everyone had gone their separate ways and he was more or less succeeding at trying to drown himself in one of the locker room showers. "If you hadn't saved us back on the field, we probably wouldn't've made it. She wants to know why she lost."

He bit his tongue on a curiosity killed the cat comment by the skin of his fucking teeth.

"Not to sound like I am encouraging this or anything, but if she has a beef with me why doesn't she just take me out now and stop dicking around from the sidelines so she can get back to murdering half of my graduating class?" he posed wetly. Spitting out a mouthful of mineral-gritty water as Chris paced up and down the tiles on the other side of the room.

"Self-sacrifice has never been something my sister understood," he admitted after a moment. "Even for something she believes in."
"Are you sure you guys are even related?" he tossed out without really thinking. But refusing to take it back when he remembered the way she'd looked at him. How she'd been ready to kill Chris – kill all of them on that field. *Kids.* All for some petty vendetta that made zero sense when you got down and dirty with it. And that was the point, he supposed. Madness never really made sense to anyone other than the person with the claws.

The laugh Chris let out in response was dry and tired. Cracking around the edges like badly poured caulking as he turned around and faced him through the misting steam.

"Lately I've been wondering."

They drove home in silence.

He watched the blacktop pass through the flicker of yellow paint. Wanting to memorize every mile as his bare skin stuck awkwardly to Chris' leather seats. The ones that pinched your leg hairs every time you went around a corner just a bit too fast. An intimate reminder that he was still more or less naked and twitching in discomfort.

Only not for all the reasons you might think.

He didn't care about that.

*He couldn't.*

Because Chris was a mess beside him. Bleeding distress and the stale of decade old tears as they wheeled through another turn. Sensing something building before Chris startled him by punching the wheel with gritted his teeth. Salting the air with anger and self-disgust. Turmoil and conflict ripe on the back-throw as he struggled to find the right words, the ones that would mean something. The ones that mattered. The ones that deserved to be heard when Chris needed them the most.

Of course, the problem was he'd never been very good with words. He'd always sucked at finding the right ones and not having them come out awkward and disingenuous. Not unless he was sitting in front of a computer and had time to think about it. There wasn't a spell checker for your mouth, sadly. At least not yet, anyway.

"It's not a weakness," he rasped finally, rough as he started, but gaining steam and confidence near the end. "Not being able to kill someone you love? *It isn't.* This isn't your fault."

"Isn't it?" Chris retorted, knuckles bloodless as he clenched the wheel. "I could have handled this a long time ago and now, because I didn't – because I *couldn't* - people are suffering for it."

"That isn't weakness," he insisted, swallowing over a threatening lump in his throat as Chris refused to look at him. "Mercy isn't a weakness. It's a sign of strength. Being a good person. I don't know. It isn't black and white, Chris!"

"In my family it is," Chris returned, tires squealing as he yanked the wheel through a brutal right turn. "We were taught that weakness, especially when it comes to emotional attachments, is the most dangerous thing in the world. After everything that's happened, tell me that isn't true, Bobby?"

"Well, then you had terrible role models," he retorted, regretting it almost immediately as the words left his lips with a frustrated snap. Making the line of Chris' mouth thin a fraction. Body language tense and broadcasting the type of distress he could actually taste on his tongue. Acidic and unpleasant.
"You think that isn't true? When I lost my wife – then Allison. It hollowed me. It made me brittle. That's what love is – what love does," Chris grated, angry and maybe just a little bit wounded that he was fighting him on this.

"But you're still here," he pointed out, ignoring the rest to seize on the only thing that really made sense to him. Loss. Shunting aside that pitching voice in the back of his head that was telling him to be careful – to shut the hell up before he made things worse. Just like he always did. "You came back. You got through it. Maybe even for the same reason. You're here, now. That has to mean something. We're here. Nothing good ever comes without a price, right?"

"What do you know about?" Chris replied harshly, voice like a sucker punch as he wrenched the wheel again. Sending them down a service road he was pretty sure led into the middle of butt-fuck nowhere. "Who have you ever lost?"

'You,' he wanted to say. 'A thousand times.' Because something deep inside knew it was true. Getting flicker flashes as he remembered how Lydia's scent had changed when she'd touched his skin. 'So many lives. So many deaths. Can't you hear them? He's screaming for you...he's-'

The stretch of quiet that followed was oppressive and suffocating.

Like most first fights generally were until-

"I'm sorry," Chris told him lowly. Easing on the brakes and bringing the truck to a stop before exhaling in a rush and letting his head thud back against the seat. Aggression bleeding out of him like water through a sieve.

"I know," he returned, because he did. Spreading his fingers so their skin could brush across the seat. Curling just the tips around his as the windows slowly fogged up with the warmth of their breath.

Somewhere outside, a wolf – a normal one – let go of a mournful howl. If he used his new senses, he knew he'd hear more. Other wolves. Owls. Deer. The tiny crackle of mice whispering through the long grass. People. Life flowing and humming and changing all around them. It was one of the few truly constant things in the world. No one was never really alone. You could disconnect from the natural world. Turn your back on the cycles and the order it preferred. But eventually - one way or another - it would always welcome you back.

And that was comforting.

Sort of.

He squinted through the fogged-up windshield, trying to remember if that whole monologue even had a point before- ah, screw it. Deciding to give voice to the niggling little thought he couldn't quite temper down even though this was definitely not the right time - or place - or anything really.

"Would you still do it? After all this? Could you?" he asked without judgement. Just plain old curious. He hadn't grown up with siblings. He'd been an only child. And his mother had doted on him – spoiled him to high heaven so much that the first few weeks at pre-school had been more like full out warfare. So whatever it was that existed between sister and brother, or brother and sister, he had no experience with.

Chris didn't answer.

The silence that followed did it for him.
Chapter 25

After that he was more or less fully in. No more ignoring the furry alter-ego. No more pretending this was magically going to go away. He decided to start giving a crap about the fact that he had a 'thing' — was a thing — and that thing really needed to start getting figured out.

The whole imminent death by kitty claws was probably also a very good motivator.

In the absence of any real progress from Deaton, the general reaction from the others was differing choruses of 'fucking finally!' Which he made Stiles, Liam, Scott and Kyra pay for collectively for the next few practices. Chasing them around the field and making them do double and triple sets of suicide lunges until the three of them were dragging Stiles around by his pads and he had the distinct pleasure of rendering the spaz-attack speechless due to an inability to catch his breath.

Though, that might have just been his wounded pride talking considering Lydia had gone so far as to corner him in his office not long after he'd grudgingly reached out to the others. Verbally berating him for not listening to what the world was telling him, yadda yadda. Because, apparently, avoidance was both useless and unattractive and now they were going to have to do some 'serious catch up' if they ever hoped to break even.

Oh joy.

The next few months passed in a similar fashion. He swallowed his trepidation – and alright, pride – and took up Derek and Parrish's offer of training. Finding himself punching and kicking various objects. Trying to find the right balance between his normal strength and the supernatural kind that had no problem punching through brick or, you know, accidentally disemboweling the practice dummy his first time out.

Because, yeah.

That'd happened.

Lydia and Stiles used his change of heart to sequester him in the school basement after class. Coming up with vague reasons to throw him through the wringer for the sake of 'supernatural science.' They went through the entire list. He stood in front of the creepy tree that looked like something out of the "Evil Dead" for a couple nights in a row - nothing. Mountain ash barriers had no effect on him and all the types of Wolfsbane they tried only made him sneeze. Silver was basically the same deal. It didn't seem to matter what it was. It seemed like everything that was an accepted supernatural weapon or deterrent had absolutely dick all to do with him.

But it only made Lydia and Stiles all the more keen.

In fact, it got to the point that he was forced to stammer out something that was more or less believable when Natalie cornered him in the gym's supply closet and demanded to know why he and Chris were apparently now starred contacts in his daughter's phone.

The words she didn't use reached a level of disgusting he didn't know he was possible of feeling considering everything that'd happened in the past year. Horrifying him into a stunned sort of silence with the insinuation right up until Lydia texted him with what was probably the best worst timing in the world with one of their coded phrases. Allowing him to mutely hold up his phone for her inspection as the words: "I thought you were going to unlock the spare classroom? I need it for a
"sketching session with Malia and Kyra after school," blinked innocently across the screen.

Afterwards, Natalie had just smiled and dragged him off to lunch. Leaving him shell-shocked and so thoroughly confused that he forgot how his fucking tongue worked. Letting her bully him into the back of the lunch room before she laughed and apologized for the ambush. Assuring him that she'd never actually suspected him of anything, but that she'd wanted a real answer when she sprung it on him. Apparently now firmly under the impression that these 'sketching sessions' were code for Lydia meeting boys she didn't want to tell her mother about.

He didn't have to say a word. She did all the talking for him. Creating what she figured was the answer as he nodded in the right places and tried to remember not to miss his mouth with his fork. Wondering vaguely why Natalie hadn't gone into law or politics instead of teaching. Something that would suit the fact that she could be as intimidating as hell when she wanted to be.

He walked away relieved, scarred for life and just a little bit guilty at the idea of lying by omission. Especially with Nat. He knew Nat. Heck, he'd spent half his high school years worshipfully putting her on a pedestal along with most of their graduating class. Nowadays they were colleagues, maybe even friends. But mostly, she was Lydia's mother, she deserved to know the danger her kid was putting herself in. Or, he supposed, the dangers the world had chosen to put her in. That whole banshee-coma-I-see-dead-people thing she had going on. The thing she hadn't signed up for. Just like him.

It was a complicated, this whole supernatural double life thing.

Terrifying and complicated.

The weeks trudged past.

Chris left town for five days right around the time he eventually ran out of excuses to stop declining the Henson's offers for dinner. Wanting to thank him as only a mostly broke young couple could. With dinner at their home on pleasantly mismatched furniture and a mid-priced bottle of wine he declined politely more than once. Feeling guilty considering it was obvious they'd picked it up just for the occasion. But making up for it by shamelessly asking for thirds of the roast beef and yorkshire pudding because it made Mrs. Henson smile and was probably the best thing he'd put in his mouth for days.

Chicken Little lit up like a light bulb the moment he walked through the door. Something which was both flattering and kind of weird considering it had been about a year since he'd seen her and she reached for him immediately. Still, he wrote it off as her just being super friendly and having absolutely zero in terms of self-preservation instincts. Talking to her mock-seriously when she held up her stuffed bear for his inspection, only half aware of Mrs. and Mr. Henson trading pleased looks over their heads from the entrance of the den.

But of course, like all good things, there was a catch.

She wailed whenever he tried to put her down.

Consequentially, he held her for the majority of the night.

It wasn't completely terrible.

He spent the next two days quietly unnerved at how natural it had seemed. Dealing with a squirming arm-load of kid as Mrs. Henson gushed about how she was ahead on all the usual milestones. Trying
to ignore the fact that despite having never held a kid her age in his life before a year ago, somehow
he knew exactly how to hold her. It'd been automatic. Making him wonder how he could almost tell -
before she even started fussing - that the kid was edging towards over-tired. Or why it felt a bit like
something was exploding in his chest when he realized that somewhere along the line she'd fallen
asleep like that. Cradled in the dip between his arm and his chest as the Henson's chattered
animatedly about the preschool they were planning to send her next year.

He ended up burying the feelings deep until Chris returned- energized, tanned and smelling like the
moist, exotic warmth of South America. Distracting him with what he'd come to refer as 'hunter talk'.
Something about the development of a new, and potentially even more deadly strain of wolfsbane.
Filling his house with chatter, abandoned socks and that stupid brand of toothpaste that smelled like a
natural health foods store had exploded all the way up his sinuses.

He walked around like his smile had been stuck on his face permanently for the next week. Feeling a
whole lot like a complete puzzle again rather than just the pieces as Chris' suitcase eventually
migrated down the stairs and into the depths of his basement. Hopefully to disappear forever.

He'd kind of missed him a lot.

*Like, a lot, a lot.*

When Deaton announced that he *finally* had a lead and took off on some plane to god knows where,
Chris was right there. Distracting him. Bullying him into shooting practice, which he was profoundly
awful at. Then crossbow practice which he was *worse* at. Then finally knife throwing which ended
without ceremony after he snapped the seal off one of the pipes in his basement and almost flooded
the place when he threw it just a bit too hard.

He ended up getting one hell of a blow-job after they'd stopping yelling, resealed the pipe and
mopped up, so he couldn't say with good conscience that it'd been a *total* disaster. But yeah, there
were no more training related distractions after that. Not unless they involved a mouth or similarly
shaped orifice.

Because weirdly enough, using his mouth was something he'd always been pretty good at.

It happened more than once as the days stretched to weeks and Deaton continued to be frustratingly quiet. When things got to be too much and he just needed to *be*, he'd find himself caging Chris in and pulling him close. Bullying him with his lips as he pinned him against the chair in his office until his ass was clenching under his hands. Bare thighs flexing and sweat-slick against the leather as he spread his mate's cheeks and pulled sounds he'd never even *heard* before from Chris' throat.

He always kept it up until they were both panting. Until Chris's mouth was lax, while the rest of him was straining. Craning his neck to look behind him as he slicked a finger to add beside his tongue - just to make those perfect hips *snap* into his hold. Attention rapt as he kept his hands on the curve of either cheek, keeping him spread and exposed as Chris swore and writhed every time he flicked his tongue over his hole.

It was- well, *god*.

He didn't even know how to describe it.

Chris had always blown him away, but having him like this?

*It was like breathing.*
And it always left him with the same feeling. The same awareness that even when they did something new, tried something different, it still felt familiar. Knowing how to manipulate almost every inch of each other. Knowing what they liked and what they didn't. Sensing when to hold off. When to apply the barest hint of pressure. When to ignore the words spilling out and get over that final hurdle before the finish.

He'd be lying if he said he never used it to his advantage. The same went for his senses using everything that was rushing thick and vibrant under his skin to keep his mate balanced on the cusp. Until Chris' mouth was moving soundlessly, wordless and over stimulated. Too far gone to do anything but twitch and jerk. Eyes wet with tears and begging for more before the moment broke and they went soaring together. Blacking out like they were caught in some sort of feedback loop that had no concept of time and space and all those rules the real world normally stuck to like glue.

He knew they were going to have to talk about it one of these days, but for now he was content to just enjoy it. If procrastination was his superpower he might as well get some use out of it before Deaton blew back into town and proceeded to drop the next bombshell that would probably ruin his life.

*Again.*

The only other marginally exciting thing that happened while they were waiting on tender hooks was when Ellen - the French sub filling in for Madam Tulliani while she was on maternity leave - asked him out for a drink while Chris was standing next to him in the parking lot one afternoon after school.

She was leggy, blonde, beautiful and blindingly self-confident. The type of woman all the male staff secretly harbored crushes for but were never paid any attention unless she needed something. Only now he was wheeling around to find her looking appraisingly up and down the length of him. Like she was seconds away from demanding a sample to enrich her 'browsing experience.'

The entire thing was one part thrilling, another slightly arousing and the rest downright terrifying considering he could only catch the very edge of Chris' chilly expression as she ignored him, the truck idling behind them and, of course, the obvious reality that Chris dropped him off and picked him up on a semi-regular basis these days.

Okay, forget chilly. The look Chris was fixing her with was positively *sub-arctic*.

The rest of the evening proceeded like a bad romantic-comedy he hoped to repeat someday when his ass wasn't smarting. Finding himself a very willing participant in getting fucked within an inch of his life while Chris worked out his emotions on the subject. Snarling into his skin and wrenching him around, exactly how he liked. Milking his cock with a brutal fist as the man bent him over his *own god damned desk* and fucked into him like he owned every *inch*.

The grooves his claws carved into the desk were close to five inches deep and worse where he'd accidentally bent the metal trim around his office door when Chris had hustled him down the hall and slammed him up against the door. Yanking on the zipper of his jeans and curling his fingers inside before his trembling hands could even find the right key.

It was a journey of sexual self-discovery for both of them. But that being said, he was pretty sure he would forever cherish the memory of Ellen turning an unflattering shade of tomato-red when Chris had politely plucked her fur-trimmed sleeve off the curve of his bicep and kissed him square on the lips in front of god knows how many people.
He was sore for days and had to replace half the furniture in his office.

But he grinned like a loon all the way until the following Monday.

Ellen was understandably miffed.

Two weeks later while they were cleaning up after dinner, Deaton called.

He was coming back to Beacon Hills.
They met on neutral ground outside the clinic the day Deaton and their 'spiritual emissary's' – according to Deaton - plane touched down all the way from Heathrow, London. They got there early, hoping to get the low down from Deaton before teeing up with a complete stranger and walking into the whole thing blind. But, as it worked out, they were leaning against the side of Chris' truck, waiting for him to show up, when a sleek black luxury sedan smoothed to a stop on the opposite curb.

Apparently they weren't the only ones who'd had the idea.

They shared a look when she stepped gracefully out of the car. A tall, polished woman with gently silvering hair that was swept up in a flawless French twist. Wearing a coal grey and red-striped power suit and a thin silver belt. Very much the kind of handsome that beautiful turns into as the years pass. Natural and the best sort of honest.

Despite being absolutely nothing like he'd expected, there was not question who she was. She was the entire package. Giving off an aura of control, confidence and wealth as her business heels click-clacked smartly across the sidewalk towards them. Giving him about five seconds to get his shit together before she was crossing the last stretch and extending her hand for him to shake. Grip iron-strong and all business.

*She was their spiritual emissary alright.*

*If not, they were probably about to be sued.*

*Because hell if she didn't give off some seriously strong 'no nonsense' vibes, like-*

Her wedding ring cut unapologetically into his palm before she released him. Skin porcelain-tinted, tired and freckled as her keen green eyes gave him a clear once over. Seeming to focus on him just a fraction too long to be completely innocent before Chris received the same treatment.

"Bethan Huld-Haldið," she opened, English flawless and tinted with a strong British accent. Smoothing a fastidious hand down the sides of her expensive suit as her driver approached. Gentile and so stiffly mannered he was half-convinced he must have actually pulled something as the man set her briefcase beside her.

"That will be all for now, Harold," she told him, inclining her head without looking away. Taking the simple black clutch he handed her with the air of a woman who expected nothing less. "Please remain available. I will be in touch."

"Yes, Madam," the driver returned, scenting uncertainty and reluctance hidden behind a bland expression as he walked back towards the car. They were genuine emotions motivated by loyalty and friendship rather than anything sinister. Giving him the immediate impression she hadn't been the only one to fly back to the states with Deaton.

*Great, she'd brought a posse.*

"Her driver is carrying," Chris whispered, low enough that only he could hear as the car started and Harold the driver pulled smoothly away from the curb. Voice level but clearly on alert as Chris
scanned the area around the clinic like he expected some sort of ambush.

He on the other hand wasn't so sure. Because despite appearances - despite the confidence and authority she commanded naturally, that made him think: doctor, lawyer, coe or even a 007 spy - there was a small little tint of color in her that all three of them shared. *Trepidation*. She was just as uncomfortable as they were - or at least *he* was. Chris seemed to be doing just fine outwardly. The only difference with her was that she was better at hiding it.

In fact, she smelled… *interesting*. Like the echo of the memory of a smell, there was something about her that made him take notice. Knowing in his gut that while he'd never seen her before in his life, his hind-brain had already settled on the word 'familiar.'

Because that's what it was above everything else.

She felt – no, she smelled – familiar.

"What? Expecting bangles, dangling crystal pendants and unkempt hair?" she challenged, passive aggressive under a diamond-hard smile and a perfectly manicured brow which was now arching pointedly. Startling him firmly back to the present as she looked up at him appraisingly. Having no problem calling him out on what she figured he must be thinking when his confusion made it to his face.

His mouth opened, but no words came out.

That was about as far as he'd got before she started talking again.

"Is this him?" she asked briskly, but without inflection. Not really a question at all, rather a statement of a fact. Gesturing towards Chris with her free hand as a flush of heat rippled through him. "Your mate?"

His arms wind-milled embarrassingly.

Like an especially fat penguin trying to get enough wind to attempt flight.


Chris just stared back at her pleasantly, eyes hard. Body language a hundred thousand yards of hand-crafted steel barricades and a slight lean to where he knew the man kept at least one of his hidden blades.

"My name is Chris," he replied, like the calm before the storm. "This is Bobby. But I'm sure you already know that, don't you?" Neither confirming nor denying as he had a silent heart attack in the background. Because the two of them were *definitely* sizing each other up in a not nice way and *wow* - he didn't need any more bloodshed in his life again. *Like ever.*

She'd barely said five words and he was already scared shitless.

Chris was clearly on the warpath.

And he was the shrinking violet trying to become one with the wallpaper.

*Awesome.*

Well, at least he was being consistent.

He liked to think he was staying with a general theme: pure, unadulterated terror.
God, his life was a train wreck.

The woman just smiled with perfect predator teeth and eyes that promised either violence or many, many law suits. Looking between them for another lingering pause before something seemed to settle in her expression. Like she'd seen something proven true right in front of her as her lip quirked upwards - expression genuine and amused.

"Of course you are."

"You'll have to forgive me," she remarked smoothly. Eyes flicking up to read the clinic sign before continuing. "I would imagine your Mr. Deaton will be rather cross with me for coming ahead. But wanted to meet you for the first time as equals rather than with your… druid emissary present."

"He doesn't know you're here?" he echoed, feeling the need to do something with his mouth other than just gape as an old ford rattled nosily down the road. Exhaling plumes of coal-grey exhaust that made his nose twitch reflexively.

She shook her head.

"I determined the time to meet you after we parted at the terminal last evening. I merely expedited that. I arranged for Harold to take an early flight and arrive ahead of me. He picked me up this morning and here we are. He maintains a working license in at least half a dozen countries so he can accompany me when I travel. Quite useful for just occasion such as this, as you can see."

"Why?" Chris asked, doggedly sticking to the point. "Why not just wait for Deaton? Everything you've said so far has been filler. Get to the point. Stop deflecting."

Her eyes narrowed a fraction. Annoyed and maybe a little bit impressed. Giving him Martin-women related flashbacks as her rose and navy-tipped nails gleamed in the weak sunlight as her hands migrated to her hips.

"Do you ever not load your gun before going hunting, Mr. Argent?" she returned, tone bitter-sweet and razor-edged. Host to just enough of a threat for them to know she wasn't to be trifled with.

*Touché.*

He nearly jumped a foot in the air when Chris' phone rang. Kicking a nervous laugh out of him before he could stop himself as Chris answered with a clipped greeting. Staying on the line just long enough for him to pick up Deaton's annoyed tone before Chris murmured an affirmative and ended the call.

"Ah well, time to face the music I suppose," she replied cheerfully, rubbing her hands together like the assumption she was apparently operating under was a given. Bending down to pick up briefcase with perhaps the most open expression they'd seen so far. "Just as well, I think we are all ready to get started, hmmm?"

He was still kind of lost in his own head when Deaton arrived. Mostly wondering what Chris meant when Bethan pulled a tablet from her briefcase and serenely checked her email. Murmuring under his breath - something about: *'didn't anyone ever tell you not to bring claws to a gun fight? ’* before he started towards the parking lot where Deaton's sedan had just pulled in.

Chapter End Notes
Reference: There is some background behind the creation of Bethan's name that I want to share with you all. The importance of her role in this story in terms of a physical presence is less importance than her function and existence which will hopefully be made clear to you all as the chapters progress.

*Bethan: is the female Welsh form of "Elizabeth" which means: "My God is an Oath."

*Huld-Haldið: The last name was where things got a bit tricky. "Huld" is a well-known female Icelandic name meaning "secret." I couldn't find a last name that meant "secret or knowledge keeper" so eventually I had to bastardized one. I looked up the word "kept" – 'haldið' and hyphenated it in with 'huld' – so, roughly her last name comes out meaning: "secret kept."
"I'm going to be brutally honest with you boys," Bethan started, nursing a cup of tea from a mug labeled: Don't argue with Veterinarians, they know how to neuter. "I didn't believe you two were real. Neither did my parents. The passing down of this knowledge, from what I've recently come to understand, is a scared trust. However -"

"Wait -" he broke in, straightening from where he'd been leaning up against the stainless steel table. "As in both of us? Not just me?"

"That is generally the meaning of the phrase," she replied glibly before frowning. Silver hair haloing attractively in the overhead lights as a curl of steam rose from her mug. "How much do you know?"

He looked at Chris and Deaton before answering.

"Nothing?" he queried, running an awkward hand through his hair as it spiked in every direction. Mashing his palms across his face as he debated the merits of pretending they'd left the oven on or something. Anything to haul ass from this situation and everything about it. Looking over at Chris and Deaton before adding -

"Yeah, basically nothing," he admitted flatly.

She tapped her nails against the faded ceramic mug, deep in thought.

"Well, that's unfortunate," she eventually replied. Dredging the words up slowly like each one had baggage. "I'm afraid I wasn't exaggerating when I said I didn't believe you were real. What tangible information I have is thin and incomplete. Other than that, it's little more than hearsay and fairy-tales, I'm afraid. Stories my grandparents told me when we visited during my childhood. As I feared back home when Doctor Deaton arrived, I'm not sure how much help I can be to you."

He deflated. Half disappointed, half relieved.

"So, what do you know?" Chris asked abruptly, eyes flicking to the briefcase for the third time in under an hour. Tension clear. "There has to be something. Something we can use."

He had under a second to privately mourn whatever progress they'd made thus far before she was firing right back. Clearly taking issue with Chris' tone.

"What I do know Mr. Argent, is that the contents of this case, however pitiful, is the legacy of my family!" she retorted, voice hard. The flat of her palm slamming down against the table with an echoing smack - eyes sparking. Causing the handle of the briefcase to clack noisy and metallic against the table. "And I fully intend to protect it, by any means necessary. Which, I might add, means from you if I see fit to end this venture."

Deaton made a placating gesture.

"We came here for answers. Not a fight," the man reminded. "And even if we were, we would be fighting on the same side. Beacon Hills has been a hot spot for supernatural activity for a long time, but the balance has shifted too far. I believe Bobby's abilities manifested at a crucial time. If we hope to rectify the problems facing us all, here and now, we need to work together. So, please… continue."

"I'm afraid I wasn't exaggerating when I said I didn't believe you were real. Neither did my parents. The passing down of this knowledge, from what I've recently come to understand, is a scared trust. However -"
There's much more at stake here than I believe even we know."

Bethan composed herself while Chris hitched in close. Orbiting back to each other as their fingers brushed under the table. Affirming. Trying to convince himself that some part of him wasn't screaming as he forced his breathing to even. Able to feel Chris doing the same as the man's placid, controlled calm rippled through him. Compartmentalizing. That was what Chris had called it. Shearing everything else away so he could focus on the now.

"Like a field left untended, so much has been lost to the rot of time and skepticism," she started. Words slow and careful, almost rehearsed. Like she'd locked herself in her hotel bathroom and repeated these same lines at her reflection over and over. Every syllable. Every pause. All of it.

"My parents had my grandmother placed in a care-home soon after my grandfather died. Claiming she wasn't making sense, raving about spirits and a sworn duty. How my grandfather's dying wish had been that she remind them of the stories they'd grown up with. The one's they'd turned their backs on. Because there was something important that was going to be willed to them. But only at the proper place and the proper time. Something that would be desperately needed. Something that would change everything. Even the fate of the world," Bethan remarked, voice losing its fiery strength as she trailed off. Suddenly looking terribly small when the hunch of her shoulders was set against the looming shadows that bridged the room. Creating an atmosphere that made his skin itch – discomforting and clammy when he considered that her grandmother hadn't been far off the mark at all.

"My parents thought it was another inheritance. You see, my grandparents were very wealthy. My grandfather was from old money. And when his older brother died in the war, he inherited the entire estate after his father's death. They were one of the few who were able to benefit from the economic boom after the war. He invested heavily in Sears, your American company. And as the company grew, so did their stock," she continued, pausing to take another fortifying sip from her mug as Deaton scribbled something down in a strange smelling notebook on the other end of the table.

"My parents spent a long time going over their legal options. But the will was iron-clad. My grandfather knew what he was doing. There was no mention of another account or anything that could be accessed by either my grandmother or my parents. In fact, there was no record anything like it even existed in the first place," Bethan remarked, stroking her thumb across the smooth finish of the case with a rhythmic sort of detachment.

He wasn't sure why, but it made him picture the swell of ocean waves and different set of hands – still feminine, but younger – doing the same to the cracked leather of an old photo album. Humming along as a gramophone crackled cheerfully from the parlour. Fur-trimmed shoes tapping happily as the wreathing arc of cigar smoke – freshly lit from the study just down the hall – curled through the happy home of dear friends and-

"She was diagnosed with Alzheimers not long afterwards, and my parents? Well, they were relieved. They told me not to mind her stories whenever we visited. That she was being silly or not remembering things right. Getting old, I suppose," she continued, breaking him out of a memory that couldn't have belonged to him as he blinked hugely. Trying to shake it off as the sensation of existing both here and- wherever that was, pulled like nausea.

"So, no. My parents didn't believe. But my grandmother? There was never any doubt. She believed it till her dying breath. Fed me the stories from the time I was old enough to understand the words. She told me that one day I would understand. That I would help her somehow. Carry on their work."

"And you honored that?" Deaton questioned. Asking what he felt to be a completely unnecessary question in lue of the thousands of others all jockeying for position in the air above their heads. What
"No," she replied, the word crisp and precise despite the guilt that lined her features. "Even then, I buried it. You must understand, it was not out of malice. Merely, from my point of view, what with being young, inquisitive and desperate to succeed at university without my parent's interference- it simply couldn't be true. It was too fantastic to believe. Too impossible."

"I hear that," he muttered, as he slumped back in his chair. Spreading his legs wide on either side like the position alone could ground him. Lend him some sort of stability as the world started to do that same blurry, tunneling thing it'd done the morning after the field. Threatening to choke him from the inside out as the world unfurled yet another layer overtop the others he was still learning to live with.

*It was fucking overwhelming, that's what it was.*

"I was with her when she died. I was in my first year of university at the time. I had to take the bus two hours each way when I came up every couple of weeks. I'm ashamed to say I hated it. She hadn't recognized me for years and in truth I hadn't visited for a while. I had the whole arsenal of selfish, young person excuses. Studying. Exams. Not enough hours in the day. It was shear chance I made it in time. She went downhill so fast. And *god*, I remember how lucid she was. They'd taken her off all the drugs. And I remembered looking into her eyes and recognizing her for the first time in years. She was present. And you know what she said? She told me with clear eyes, convinced beyond a doubt, the *same damn thing* she always had. About the ysbryd arth – spirit bear in your language, I believe. About how they would be counting on us. How they would need help. Guidance. And that it would be up to me to."

She broke off. Tears welling up in the corners of her eyes as she strangled a laugh and dashed them away. Startling him with the obvious, that she was a real person with real grief. Expression tremulous and watery as she exhaled in a rush. Trying to regain her composure as she reached up and patted her hair, smoothing the wisps that'd escaped before shaking her head.

"*Christ. Sorry*," she hissed. "That it would be me- that I would be responsible. That was all she talked about, other than granddad. I thought it was one of her delusions. But-"

"Something about it stuck with you?" he finished gently. Feeling a strange sort of kinship with her in that moment. A sort of solidarity at both of them getting flung into the unknown just when they thought they had life figured out.

She nodded, expression grateful and considering as she looked over at him.

"When I was young, before I met my husband, I was entertaining the son of one of my parent's friends in the South of France. Retrospectively, I think my parents were hoping for a lucrative union. Fori was from oil money – new money and at the time my father was hoping to get into the market. So that sort of classist drivel was mostly overlooked. We bonded over mutual dislike of our parent's actions and decided we'd make use of their goodwill for as long as it lasted and travel together on their dime. The usual petty things the young and restless tend to do when they're feeling particularly caged in. One night, after too much wine, I told him everything. The entire sordid story. I never thought much of it, nor did he even mention he remembered anything about it until he heard your request," she explained, nodding to Deaton before pressing on.

"I hadn't spoken to him in over fifteen years, before he contacted me out the blue. Told me he was flying in from Sussex that night. That he had something to tell me, in person. Something important about my grandmother."

"Wren Forijame," Deaton explained, steepling his hands in front of him as the mood of the room
changed. Heavy with possibility. "From a well-known family of seers dating back at least three centuries. Wren didn't inherit his grandfather's talents. But he has dedicated his life to understanding the supernatural and has become something of an authority in the old magicks, last I heard. I'm told his youngest daughter has the sight."

Chris looked up, frowning. Like he wanted to ask but knew it wasn't the time or the place.

"I remembered being suspicious at the time. We hadn't exactly got on and considering it'd only been a handful of months since- you remember me mentioning a final inheritance? Well, it came. I was working late at my office one night when a man made it past security and all the way up to the top of the building without even so much as a call."

"They were from a bank, they must have been. But there was no name. Nothing. Just a card," she continued, pressing her thumb against the briefcase's hidden fingerprint scanner until a muted beep echoed tinnly from the casing. Part of the handle sliding back to reveal a miniature key pad and a flashing screen.

"Very James Bond," he muttered. His inner thirteen year old currently trying not to geek out as she typed it in without ceremony and pulled the case firmly into her lap.

"He was older. Well dressed. Completely unremarkable in every way. He had no defining features. No accent. Nothing. It was like everything about him had been fashioned so he could blend in perfectly with any crowd. A mask, if you will. I checked the tapes only minutes afterwards. There was no sign he'd ever been there. Just this," she supplied, opening the briefcase a fraction to pull out a platinum-filigreed business card.

"Fide per saecula gentem. Fidelitatis iuramenta diu capta. Protectores antiquorum fiducia."

He reached for it without really thinking about it. Feeling the expensive papyrus slide like silk across his skin. There was nothing else on it but some jibberish he couldn't read. No note on the back. Nothing. What the hell?

"My Latin is rather rusty, but from what I could gather, it loosely translates to: 'Loyalty through the ages. Fealty to oaths long taken. Protectors of the ancient trust,'" she commented.

"He explained that before she got sick, soon after my grandfather passed away, my grandmother arranged for this...bank to hold this case and everything in it. And that on a certain, pre-arranged day they would deliver it to her closest living relative and no one else. Near as I can tell, it's like a safety deposit box, but with all the bells and whistles. Untraceable. Operating outside of the law, I would expect. Which was why my parents never got wind of it. I get the feeling they probably handle all of Buckingham Palace's under the table business or some such. I doubt many people could afford the price tag my grandparents likely paid to arrange all this."

"You're telling us you were given this by what? A secret society bank?" Chris repeated. Not incredulous. Not even disbelieving. Instead, he just sounded kind of numb. Enough that he found himself tightening his hold on Chris' hand. Squeezing gently until he got the same back. It made him remember the last time they'd been alone. In the truck before Chris had started the engine outside of the house that morning.

'I have your back. You know that right?' Chris had murmured, pressing his hand across his thigh. The weight heavy and real like a promise as he looked at the sidewalk with single-minded purpose. Feeling himself relax in fractions as he took in the familiar scent. Nerves and anxiety temporarily
shunted aside in favor of glutting himself on what was already his. 'Whatever it is. Whatever it isn't. We can handle it.'

"Essentially, yes," she countered, pushing her mug aside with a firm gesture before setting the case down on the table between them. "And why not? But frankly, that isn't the question you should be asking right now."

She reached into the briefcase and pulled out a single sheet of paper. It was of the same quality and host to the same platinum dipped edging as the business card. Having a thickness to it he could actually hear when she slid it across the table towards him.

Chris snatched it up before it could reach him, and honestly, he wasn't bothered. Too busy taking it all in as Chris' eyes flicked back and forth across the paper before visibly startling. Looking up at him with an expression that on anyone else might have been disbelief. Only on his, it translated into a surprised acceptance. Like he'd seen too much weird shit over the years to be properly shocked anymore.

It was only after Deaton had leaned over to read it that Chris handed it to him wordlessly. Feeling something in his chest pull tight as he forced his eyes down and-

It was the exact date Allie Henson had been kidnapped.

"Somehow she just knew," Bethan murmured, smiling sadly. Gaze inward and far away as his brain kind of just stalled.

Chapter End Notes

Reference:

* "Fide per saecula gentem. Fidelitatis iuramenta diu capta. Protectores antiquorum fiducia" meaning: "Loyalty through the ages. Fealty to oaths long taken. Protectors of the ancient trust."

* ysbyrd arth: Welsh translation for "spirit bear."
"I don't-" he started, only to abandon the train of thought before it could leave the metaphorical station. More or less aware that Chris was grilling Bethan and Deaton with questions he doubted either of them could answer. Struggling just as much he was as they started to raise their voices. Frustrated. Afraid. Filling the air with a thousand different shards of shared emotion.

*How the hell could Bethan's grandparents have known that?*

*They were dead!*

*The briefcase would've been in that stupid bank for decades already.*

*It wasn't possible.*

*There was no way-*

Static rushed to fill the gaps as he spread his palms across the cool stainless steel. Whining like the siren-pitch of dying frequencies as he breathed through it. Feeling the straps of a phantom pack digging into his shoulders, the sweat-tact of his fingers sticking to the plastic tails of his trail-markers. Trying to remember what he'd been feeling before he'd found her, lost in the woods. What he'd been feeling before that unearthly calm had ushered in. Allowing him to focus on what wasn't there. The missing pieces. Everything that wasn't being-

*There was more.*

It was the same feeling. It was about pushing past the hows and the whys in favour of reaching for what was tangible. What he *could* do. Who he *could* save. It was the moment where his head had jerked up in the middle of marking off his section of the search grid – realizing that somehow he knew *exactly* where she was. This was the same damn thing. It was just details. All they needed was the last few pieces of the puzzle and somehow he knew Bethan had them.

"Enough," he growled, loud enough that the building argument stopped in its tracks. Leaving him very much aware that holding the room like this wasn't anywhere close to his forte. That for better or worse he wasn't assertive, at least not like this. But here he was. Doing it like he actually had half a clue. "There's more, isn't there?"

Bethan nodded, face flushed.

"My grandmother called it a guardianship. That they'd been chosen somehow. Chosen to pass on what they knew from generation to generation until the time came when- when what had been lost was returned," she replied hurriedly, face screwing like saying the last few words physically pained her.

He didn't blame her. It sounded like a bad Hollywood script.

Worse even. Like late night work-week television bad.

He could practically see the air quotes.
"Keep in mind I was very young when she told me these stories, but she described it like a cycle. When there was a need, the ysbryd arth and his mate would awaken. Each time they relied on their guardians to find them and pass on what they needed to know. To tell them what they were – and about their purpose. Their strengths, their history, their place in everything. But with the spread of Christianity, the old traditions and faiths were seen as ungodly. Many Guardians died. And, as Doctor Deaton feared, much was lost," Bethan shared.

"There were a number of cycles where the ysbryd arth and his mate had to make their own way in the world. There were also many years where the ysbryd arth couldn't be found, even when the need was great. The second World War, our ongoing failure to preserve our planet, as you all know the list goes on. It was believed by the few that knew of them, until now at least, that their line might have gone extinct. That the world had changed too much, too fast for them to ever hope to achieve that balance again. Nature can only heal if we let it. And so far, mankind has done the opposite."

"Hold on. Cycles?" Chris questioned, forearms bare. Muscles corded and tense as he braced himself against the table – looming low with the shadows. It made him think of storm clouds looming on the horizon and the growing threat of winter. Deciding to just go with the nature-related metaphors for the sake of convenience at this point as he pressed his leg into Chris' under the table. Nose twitching with the sudden flood of barely tempered aggression that seemed to be leaking from the man's pores. "We've been operating under the assumption that whatever this was it was going to be either a supernatural species or a calling. Something passed down. Now you're telling me it isn't either? That it's something- what? Predestined? That sounds almost like-"

"At this point I can't say anything for certain," Bethan interrupted, one hand going up to massage her temple like there was a headache she was trying to stave off. "And it would be disingenuous to all involved – especially you two - if I tried. All I know is that this isn't as simple as an undiscovered supernatural creature or a calling. Something passed down. Now you're telling me it isn't either? That it's something- what? Predestined? That sounds almost like-"

"From what my grandparents understood of the old histories, one of the ways the guardians were able to protect themselves and the knowledge they possessed was to take the written word almost completely out of the equation. The point was for all living descendants to know the lore from childhood. So it could be passed down, father to son, mother to daughter."

"But that didn't happen," Deaton remarked, once again stating the obvious. Making him want to bang his head against the table as a black pit of nerves churned in his gut. Vibrating at what felt like a super high frequency underneath his skin as the tension ramped up another impossible notch.

"No, unfortunately not. My grandparents became guardians a different way. As I mentioned earlier, and from what I confirmed before our flight, is that after the Industrial age there was, well- for lack of a better word, an absence. The ysbryd arth and his mate never resurfaced," Bethan shared, pulling out a small puddle of notepaper and paging through it pointedly. All crinkled edges and chicken scratch, but still mostly legible.

"I wrote down several passages on the plane, things I could remember that might be of use. I know it's not much. But perhaps there is something here that might drum something up," she added, picking up the sheath of papers and spreading it bodily across the length of the table. "If I'd known I would have written it all down. Every story, every word, inflection- everything. But, as you both know, hindsight can be quite brutal on the unsuspecting."

They were snatches of passages more than anything. A handful of words piled here and there that caught his eye as he chewed on his lower lip. Making him feel like he was courting anxiety in the
same way Chris was hinting aggression beside him. A hot mess of a clenched jaw, a jutting chin and
deepening frown lines he had to fight not to reach up and smooth flat with his thumb.

'Guardians are chosen by the ysbryd arth and mate.'

'The trust often follows family lines, but not always.'

'It is a harmony, not a solo. There will always be two, if one dies then the other cannot-

"However, I don't think they are going to give you the answers you seek," she admitted, pressing her
thumb against the edge of the case until another series of clicks echoed. Popping open to reveal
hidden section edged with packing foam.

"But these…" she murmured, pulling out a shallow tray and setting it on the table in front of them.
Letting them see the three protective cases set into the dimpled foam before she leaned back in her
chair and nodded, eyes bright. "These are where the real clues are hidden."

They leaned in as she laid the items out carefully. Getting drawn into the building atmosphere as she
continued talking, unwrapping the first bundle as she mentioned carbon dating and legitimate
antiquities. How she'd had a professional, someone she trusted, look into it specifically. Making
some excuse about family heirlooms that he stopped listening to the same moment she gentled the
bundle out of its case and set it down in front of him.

He blinked down at it. Not sure if he should be disappointed or- well- honestly, he didn't know what
he was supposed to be feeling anymore. Because it was a nail. Just an old nail. Forge-made from
what looked like old iron, the finish thick and pitted with age. It's original color lost under a layer of
discoloration and rust. The only thing he could really make out otherwise was five curved slices that
had been etched across the head.

A maker's mark?

The second case was far more interesting and took at least three times longer to unwrap. Revealing
an Indian arrowhead and a crude musket ball wrapped up in what looked like an old linen shirt
folded inside a deer-skin pouch. The animal hide and linen was ancient and crumbling despite the
banks best efforts of preservation. Adding an authenticity that made his breath catch.

He reached forward like he was drawn to it. Fingers itching to trace the inky edge of the arrowhead
as something indescribable built in the center of his chest. But Chris stopped him halfway. Clasping
his hand in his before squeezing him gently. Sharing a look that made everything he'd been feeling
suddenly far too clear.

They weren't ready yet.

He couldn't put a finger on why.

They just knew.

The last case contained a secondary box with an intricate clasp, richly lined with worn red velvet. It
immediately made him think about museums and dusty antique stores where you had to promise
either your eternal soul or maybe a liver to even look at some of the shit they had mouldering away
in the back.

"It's a crucifix," Bethan informed them, stroking the polished bronze cross with the flat of her thumb
before laying it out across the foam. "Catholic of course, with mother of pearl beads and gold inlay
depicting the Crucifixion. It was likely the necklace of someone who was very rich, perhaps an heirloom passed down through a family. Or an exceedingly generous gift to a priest upon gaining a position in the church.

The gentle *clack-clack* of the rosary beads reminded him to breathe. Throat tight as the ghost of a half-forgotten song threatened to find it's way to his lips. Finding an odd comfort in the sound as the echo of painfully young voices sang to honor the first Sunday of the Advent.

*Salve, Regina, Mater misericordae.*

*vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.*

*Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevæ.*

"What does all this mean?" Chris asked, voice distant as sweat beaded across his temple. Desperately trying to hold it together as he stared hard at the opposite wall. Fingers curling against the metal table until he could feel the metal start to give. Jerking away like it'd burned him as Bethan and Deaton shared a look, watching him warily.

"How the fuck had he known that?"

"They're clues," Bethan imparted, voice kind. Looking up at him not with pity, but with the kind of understanding that comes part and parcel with loss and a few other emotions he didn't want to examine too closely as Chris nudged in beside him. Steady and firm as he leaned in without filter. Inhaling the man's scent as the panic attack he hadn't even been aware of faded around the edges.

"Clues to what?"

"Past lives," she answered with a weak smile. Forging ahead as they baulked. Popping mental *what the hell* wheelies like they were going out of style. Meanwhile, Bethan looked like she knew it. Like she was trying to stave off the Spanish Inquisition as she reached into the main part of the case and retrieved a plain manila envelope.

"To be honest, I wasn't going to come until Deaton showed me your pictures," Bethan confessed, slicing an official looking seal from the back with the pocket knife Deaton handed her. "I was holding quite firmly to the idea that was all some grand joke or a coincidence - anything but reality."

"Why our pictures?" Chris demanded, voice soft this time as she pulled something out of the envelope. Filling the room with the scent of aged paper and dew. Something that wafted like the English countryside on the very cusp of spring.

"Because of this," she replied, sliding the sole contents across the table and into the light. Momentarily blinding them with the glossy finish of an old photograph.

It was a party of four captured in a parlour library. Left to right there was man and a woman, sitting side by side on a black satin couch. Demurely holding hands as a trio of brandy snifters gleamed amber-warm and full from the side table. But what really caught his eye were the two figures on the right. Mirror images of him and Chris, if they'd been ten years younger and standing side by side in uniform. Smiles huge and honest, so close together that if you really looked you could see tangled fingers beside the green-tans that dominated the allied uniforms in World War one.

He barely felt it when Bethan's hand gentled atop his. Looking at him with her grandmother's eyes. With soft tears catching in the shallow creases around her eyes before they could fall.

"She missed you both. So did granddad. They missed you so very much."
And all at once, carved out of a part of him he that recalled the smell of burning flesh and the distant cries of men calling out for their mothers, the ringing in his ears suddenly sounded a whole lot like gunfire and distant explosions.

Chapter End Notes

Reference:

*ysbryd arth: Welsh for "spirit bear."

* Salve, Regina, Mater misericordae. vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve. Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevae, " – is the Latin translation of the Salve Regina, meaning: "Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy. Hail, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry." The Salve Regina, also known as the Hail Holy Queen, is a Marian hymn and one of four Marian antiphons sung at different seasons within the Christian liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church. The Salve Regina is traditionally sung at Compline in the time from the Saturday before Trinity Sunday until the Friday before the first Sunday of Advent. The Hail Holy Queen is also the final prayer of the Rosary.
He didn't sleep that night or the one after.

He was too keyed up to sleep.

Too afraid of what he'd see when he closed his eyes.

He was the entire spectrum of shitty, soul-crushing emotions.

But he also had a job to do.

Commitments to keep.

Lacrosse practise to get through.

General, all around *adulting*.

So, he zombied his way through classes and ran practice in a haze. Mind spinning. Aware on some level that Lydia, Stiles and the rest of them were running interference. Keeping things more or less below the level of: *chaos imminent* as he canceled the pop quiz he had planned in Economics and made them do group work. Staring at the blackboard like it had the answer to all his problems as Lydia started giving an impromptu lecture on balancing a credit card bill that actually had some of them taking notes for some damn reason.

He figured Deaton must have filled them in after he and Chris had left. But not one pestered him about it. Not even Chris. They just let him be. Content to have him figure it out on his own time while Bethan sat in some fancy hotel with her gun carrying chaffer and did whatever the rich and powerful did while they were stuck in a small town with time to kill. Probably Netflix and crappy room service if the stories he'd heard about the local Super Eight was even half true.

He should have felt guilty about it, but he didn't. He milked the teat of *'I have a reason to be a selfish bastard for the next five hundred years'* without even a smidge of shame. Extending his evening runs until even Derek and Scott were forced to drop back – unable to keep up the pace. He let everything go more than a few times, slipping between forms as the woods welcomed him home. Finding space to breathe as his claws scored into the loamy soil as he pushed deeper and deeper into the oldest parts of the forest. The parts that still hummed, alive and healthy with the old songs. That still had the same rhythms and scents as they had hundreds of years ago – maybe longer.

It wasn't about running away.

Not really.

At least when you made it past the surface.

It was about what happened next.

What they had to do next.

It was about everything piling on at once and the fact that there wasn't a form rehab or therapy out there that would ever come close to helping him get through it. He had to rely on himself. On Chris.
On them. And hell if that wasn't a big ass step for him, considering the circumstances.

When he changed, everything was simple.

*Just. Ordered. Raw.*

*Everything made sense.*

It was the human part that always fucked him up. Whenever it was time to put the claws and snout to bed, doubt and uncertainty replaced the steady calm that'd been there only seconds before. It made him understand why some people let their darkest thoughts win. There was consensus in choosing one over the other – *clarity.* At the end of the day, peace of mind was everything, even for the assholes.

Chris came with him sometimes.

Running his hands through his fur as they walked together.

Dual witnesses to the way the forest cleaved it's secrets just for them.

He liked those moments the best.

---

He stalled on the decision of what to do next.

Letting the days pass as he turned what'd happened over and over in his head.

Knowing deep down in that it was probably exactly what Bethan had said.

What he'd felt seeing the nail and the arrowhead, the crucifix and the picture.

That the stories her grandmother had passed on weren't really stories at all, but memories.

Things that'd actually happened.

Things that'd happened somehow, somewhere, sometime in the past.

Still, it was a hard pill to swallow.

Worse, it was one they knew next to nothing about.

Like catching sweat in a bucket in the desert to drink, they were out of options.

He remembered how Deaton's expression had shifted from careful blankness to muted consideration when he and Chris had said as much. Neither of them sure what to do with what they were feeling as the photograph stared back at them. Damning and eerie. The moment only breaking when Bethan unfolded herself from her seat, wrung out and tired.

He'd inhaled reflexively when she did. Wondering suddenly how long it had been since she'd sat on that very same couch. Her grandfather's favourite. The one he'd purchased in the city before Anna could even take a look at it. Sending her and Mrs. Priddy, their aging housekeeper, into near hysterics at the thought of a man choosing furniture of any sort.

"I'm afraid if you want to know more the only option is to attempt a spirit walk," Deaton had cautioned. "If what we've learned today is true there is the possibility we need to consider other options. Yes, even reincarnation. The photograph points to this option quite strongly. Ultimately we
could be looking at multiple lives. We could be dealing with a line that is centuries old. That is why a spirit walk would be vital to understanding who you are. Who you both are - and why. Even if Bethan's information is correct, as priceless as it is it is only a single layer."

Chris didn't even have to look at him. As soon as Deaton finished he was already moving, herding him safely out the door. Telling them over his shoulder they would make a decision later – yes soon, but not now – before ushering him out into the evening chill. Giving him the time to silently contemplate all the reasons why he probably- definitely was in love with the man as Chris strapped him in and started the truck without comment.

Because honestly? He didn't know how he felt about any of it.

He didn't really know what this was all leading up to until one night, almost a week later after what had happened in the clinic, he found himself walking through the doors of the Super Eight on the edge of town.

He avoided the pimply kid in the wrinkled uniform doing their homework at the front desk. He didn't need to ask where her room was. He just followed his nose. Long over that particular slice of weirdness as he separated her scent out from a thousand others. Old scents. Dust scents. Bad scents. New scents. Interesting scents. Rotting scents. It was all there, like once you peeled off the surface layer – what normal people could see, hear, and smell - there was an entirely new world up for grabs. And once he found her scent it was like following a day-glow trail in the middle of a Jackson Pollock painting.

Harold, however, had other plans.

He took the last few stairs at once, idling a bit as the scent trail got a bit more complicated. There were more crossovers. Indication that she'd been out of her room at least a dozen times in the last few days. Sending a smile and an awkward wave as he caught sight of Harold – the chaffer with the gun – refilling an ice bucket in the hall by the vending machine.

"Can I help you, sir?" Harold asked pleasantly, tone starkly different from the force he leveled on the poor ice scoop as the man jammed it back into the depths of the freezer with a sound that made him wince.

"Uh, no, but Bethan-" he started, rubbing at the back of his neck as the man smoothed his pristine three piece suit with a fastidious gesture. Making him feel like a shlub in comparison as his toes wriggled inside dirty trainers. Still wearing his bright red track suit from practise.

"Mrs. Huld-Haldið has retired for the evening. Did you call ahead to say you'd be visiting?" the man answered breezily. Putting him in a weird place where he wasn't sure if he was being slapped on the wrist or threatened as the chaffer moved slowly towards him. Blocking him off from the rest of the hall and presumably, Bethan's room.

Harold, he was getting the impression, didn't like him very much.

"Look, I don't want any trouble. I don't know how much you know about all this- well, okay, the point is- I figure the sooner we get everything uh- sorted out, the sooner you and your boss can catch a plane back to a hotel that doesn't smell like feet and cheap fabric softener," he wheedled.

Harold just raised a brow, hands folded in front of him like the secret service agents did in the movies when the President was making a speech in front of a crowd. Inadvertently pulling the fabric taut around his waist and- ah - so that was where he was keeping the gun.
"Be that as it may, I must insist you-"

The door to their right opened with a whinging creak. Cutting Harold off in mid-sentence as Bethan leaned up against the jam, arms folded. Her white blouse was untucked, silver hair half-down and framing her face as she eyed them speculatively, like she half expected bloodshed.

So, not exactly 'retired' for the night at all really.

He gave Harold the fish-eye. Tempted to say as much before she cut him off at the pass.

"I think that's quite enough, gentlemen," she remarked crisply. "Thank you, Harold. You're dismissed for the evening. I will see you in the morning for breakfast at the usual time, if you please. Mr. Finstock and I have business to discuss."

For a thrilling split-second he actually thought the man was going to protest. But then-

"Sorry about that," Bethan remarked with a smile. Ushering him inside and closing the door firmly behind him. Making sure to give Harold a wave just in case the man was key-hole peeking before the lock clicked. Because at the end of the day he was still that kind of an asshole. Nursing his petty revenge boner at Mr. Gun-toting Chaffer being sent to his room like a naughty child. "He's rather protective, I'm afraid. He's been with me since before I met Frank, my husband. I am very fond of him."

He stood awkwardly in entryway, looking around at the horrendous hotel comforter stretched across a ratty looking queen bed. The top covers pulled back to reveal an even more offensive, scratchy looking under-blanket that looked like it should have been burned fifty or so washes ago.

He felt like he owed her an apology, honestly.

"Pit-bulls are less expensive to feed," he answered without really thinking, feeling his cheeks heat uncomfortably. Mourning the untimely death of his brain to mouth filter as images of Stilinski babbling on about five different topics at once when all he really wanted to do was drown the kid in one of the water barrels out back danced disconcerting in his mind's eye.

He was almost pathetically grateful when it pulled a surprisingly girlish laugh out of her. Looking amused rather than annoyed as she settled herself into one of the armchairs by the window and motioned for him to do the same.

"But harder to get a drivers licence, I think," she hummed, cheeky. Eyes bright with amusement and maybe just a hint of jet-leg mania as she poured them both a glass of awful hotel water and let the moment stretch.

There was a cue there.

Silent but undeniably present.

Truthfully, he didn't know where to fucking start.

It ended up being her that broke it. Watching him closely before she leaned forward, hands rubbing together. Teasing out the tendrils of the moment as the stale, chemical flat of the water he'd just tossed back threatened to make him cough.
"It's been a week," she pointed out, starting slow but with all the hallmarks of the conversation turning into a god damned avalanche of shit he knew he'd only brought on himself.

He rubbed at the back of his neck.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he muttered.

"No," she replied, projecting the emotion with a dismissive hand. Smiling this time as a tractor-trailer shifted gears on the highway. "I had a feeling you'd take your time. My grandmother said there was never a decision you didn't agonize over."

What was the proper response to something like that anyway?

Someone telling you about yourself, from another life?

The mental gymnastics were killing him.

"In fact, according to my grandmother, the only time you didn't take forever and a day to figure something out was the morning Kit- I mean Chris, received his telegram to report for duty," Bethan shared, shaking the ice in her glass idly as moisture beaded around the rim.

"As the son of a rich man, it was expected. At the time it was all excitement. Most believed they'd be home by Christmas. The war wasn't real then. You had a generation who'd grown up hearing tales of their father's fathers during the Boar War. Battles on distant continents. Romanticized. Exoticized. You volunteered the same day. No one was really surprised. You'd been friends since before you learned to walk, practically raised together in fact. Your father was in charge of his father's farming estates. Both of their wives gave birth only days apart. They were both young mothers with their first child, so despite the disparity between classes they sought out each other's company frequently. A kind ear from someone going through the same things as you can mean the world. But it was the sort of commiseration that eventually led to friendship. You grew up together and from then on were rarely apart. There were certainly those that looked down on it, but Kit never did."

"Glad to know my neurosis get carried through the ages," he remarked dryly, sticking with sarcasm as his right knee bounced nervously. Not really sure what to say to the rest as he struggled between curiosity and whatever new bombshell was currently waiting to fall on him.

She fixed him with a look that was fractionally kinder than the first few she'd leveled him with outside the clinic before another smile, wan and tired, spread across her face. "You know, you're exactly how she said. Loud, good hearted, funny. It is so strange to be sitting here next to you. A man I got to know before you were even born."

"You forgot annoying, compulsive and a general human disaster," he hedged. Feeling a bit weird about it when he met her eyes and found only fondness waiting for him.

"The war changed everything. My grandfather wasn't able to join them when they went. He spent a long time being angry about that. He was older, but the three of them had always been close, especially after the accident. He had the pox as a child, weak lungs. But he was just as fearless when it came to the war effort. When the ranks of volunteers dried up and they were no longer flush with bright young things that didn't know the difference between being a foot solider and cannon fodder, he used his status in society and his father's name to join the officer ranks. Proving himself to be a key strategist. He never stepped foot in the trenches, but he fought with them nonetheless. I think the only thing he feared in life was to get handed a white feather and not a bullet."

"How did your grandparents become Guardians?" he asked, suddenly feeling a whole lot like this
was the question he’d really come to ask as she watched him guardedly. Realizing he was almost ravenous to know the same moment as she did. "How did they know? How?"

The ‘know us’ was on the tip of his tongue, tripping around unvoiced like a joint out of place as Bethan flattened her hands over the table top. A textbook example of defensive honesty.

"I'm not entirely sure. It was something my grandmother never talked about. It frightened her, I think. Something happened before the war. Not her, but rather to my grandfather," she started, each word slow and precise, like she was remembering one of her grandmother's stories in real time. "I can only remember her talking about it once. I think I pressed for details at the time, wanting to know more about what had happened in the woods. Probably hoping for some fairy or wood-sprite to appear and save the day, no doubt. Unfortunately this was not that kind of a story. She never talked about it again, not once."

"I suppose I should tell you that to my grandparents you were Robin and Christopher – though no one who knew him ever called him that. He was Kit to his family and friends. Five years before the war, my grandfather and his family, along with Kit, went to town for the winter. Kit's father hated town, rarely went. But Kit was of marrying age and well- 'clearly in want of a wife,'" Bethan remarked with a laugh, quoting something that made him feel stupid for not getting.

"It was an antiquated practise even then, but time tested. Certainly not uncommon for the lordings of large estates. Especially if there were no arrangements for marriage already made. If my grandparent's mother and father had produced a sister it would have been quite likely the two families would have intermarried – being so close. But grandfather was their only child and the sole heir to the estate. As such, he was already married to my grandmother and had been pestered for grandchildren ever since the wedding earlier that spring."

He watched her throat move as she spoke. Finding something intriguing in the details. The subtle play of skin sliding across muscles and joints, sinew and bone. It was mesmerizing – something that demanded attention. Like high heels on an old church floor or a wood fire popping behind a thin metal grate. Each one was sensual in its own way – intimate.

"They spent the winter away – away from you," she recalled with a nod, humming softly to herself before she picked up the thread of the conversation here and there. Weaving a tapestry so human he could almost taste the tang of horse sweat and new leather in the air.

"Grandpa and Kit decided to ride ahead of the party, on horseback of all things. Mind you both families had a car by this point, but that's young people for you. Kit admitted later that he'd missed you desperately and want to surprise you by beating the telegram home. Course, a storm rose up that night and they went missing," she continued with a snort.

He chewed on his lips before they could twist into a half-smile.

Sounded like something Chris would do.

The stubborn dork.

"The next morning you were due at the manor to help the staff get ready, but you were nowhere to be found. The wagon had been loaded, horses fed and watered, bridles set out for the following day, but no one couldn't find hide or hair of you."

"Then, almost a week later - just when everyone had given up hope - you appeared on the edge of the woods in nothing but a ruined pair of trousers. Grandma saw you first through the library window. You were half starved and beaten to hell, eyes wild and hair slicked back with the rain, but
you were alive. Alive and dragging Kit and grandpa behind you on a makeshift sled. Something roughed together with their belts and a single, massive piece of birch bark that looked like it had been torn right off a tree by someone’s bare hands. Somehow you found them - brought them back."

"You made it halfway up the path to the manor before you collapsed face first into the grass," Bethan shared with a smile, leaning back in her chair as she swirled the last of the ice in her glass idly.

"It took three days to get you back on your feet. With Kit and grandpa it took longer, but they healed. And from then on the three of you were inseparable. There was a bond there my grandmother wasn't privy to. But what she did know for certain was that afterwards grandpa asked for the honor. Damn near insisted upon it. He wanted to be the one to keep their secret. To help them in any way he could. And they- you both accepted. I think even then he understood it the best, better than even the two of you. The need for a record. For something to be passed down and accessible so that when you came into the world again you wouldn't be flying completely blind."

He thought about the snatches of memory that were still catching him off guard ever now and again. It was like just seeing the items had woken something more than his curiosity. Sticking him with the weirdest fucking feelings at the weirdest times. The feeling of familiarity with a room full of ghosts. The pleasure of an equally familiar laugh. The double vision that never quite blinked it'self away. Seeing people. Tracing smiles. Watching the flare of a dress hem whipping around the corner in front of him. Listening to the huff of Kit's laughter when-

"I don't what they knew before what happened in the woods," Bethan continued, tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear. "Nor do I know where the nail, the pouch or the cross came from if they didn't. I don't know if there was an outside party. All I do know is that from then on my grandparents were responsible."

"'The gift of life is a debt that can never truly be repaid unless blood is spilled in return,' she recited, closing her eyes for a long moment before opening them wetly. "It was something my grandfather was fond of saying when I was a child. And in a way, he did. He spent the rest of his life gathering information, searching out obscure books and accounts. Tracking down and amassing everything he figured he'd need to take up the title of Guardian. Even after the end of the war. I didn't understand that fully until just now."

His fingers twitched. Splaying out across the armrest like he wanted to touch but wasn't sure if the gesture would be welcome. Grief was such a personal thing. He knew that first hand. When his mother had died he'd pulled away. He'd snapped at people and drank too much. But the other people at the funeral? Hell, barely anyone got out of the place unscathed when it came to touch. Hugs. Handshakes. Half-assed embraces even the people that held themselves the most stiffly ended up allowing. Everyone coming together to grieve like they had it all figured out. It'd made his skin crawl. Hating everything and everyone – especially himself.

Instead, he cleared his throat and did the next best thing.

_Distraction._

"Did we- uh- your grandpa ever say what happened?"

She shook her head, noncommittal as she uncrossed her legs and stretched minutely across the shallow dip in the cushion. Half convinced they'd lined the inside of the chair with god damned _cardboard_ rather than stuffing as he shifted in sympathy.

"That was the part of the story she refused to finish. Trailing off and pretending like it was over when I asked. There was only one thing she really said about it. After they'd gotten you three to the
manor, grandpa came down with some sort of sickness from exposure. Keep in mind his lungs were shite so it didn't take much. The doctors said they were lucky you got him home when you did or he might not have made it. He was feverish for days but during his ravings he mentioned a beast. A wolf with a human face. He had to be restrained at one point, becoming so upset when he recognized grandma tending to him, he started screaming and lashing out. Thinking they were still being chased by whatever it was and grandma was in danger."

"So, what a rogue werewolves?" he asked hesitantly.

"Possibly," she answered, head cocking with interest as the wall clock tick-tick-ticked in the background. "Whatever it was, it pulled at you. I think it pulled you right into the woods the same night they went missing. Just like it did for you with the child and then on the field with Chris and the others when they were similarly threatened. You saved them, Bobby. All of them."

He breathed unevenly into the quiet. Swallowing the absence of words and he mulled it over. Wondering if he should be more disturbed at the fact that he was sitting here, ready to take it all at face value. Knowing somehow that it was true – all of it – as bits and pieces of the puzzle resonated in the heart of him. Like some distant part of him remembered.

"Did we ever come back?" he asked softly, eyes stinging. Feeling the emotion second hand as the acidic scent of spreading chemicals and leaking red threatened to make his gorge rise. "From the war, I mean?"

But Bethan only smiled sadly, shaking her head with those same sympathetic eyes.

"You already know the answer to that."

He let go of a long, pent up breath. Sliding sweaty palms down the sides of his track suit as his head thudded back against the headrest with an audible sound.

Yeah, guess he sorta did.

Chapter End Notes

Reference:

*"Anna," is an Anglo-Saxon name from the Greek meaning "Hannah," meaning 'favor and grace'. Anna is a simplistic and excellent name to balance between cultures. It signifies the past and also indicates family. The meaning of Anna derives from a royal history. It can be a biblical prophetess or Empress of Russia.

*"Priddy," is the welsh word for "bard."

*"Kit" is a diminutive of "Christopher" which is a short form of 'Chris'. I was interested to learn that Chris' name essentially means: "to bear, to carry". I wanted to choose period appropriate names in terms of the pre-world war one timeframe and was delighted to realize that both Chris and Bobby's names are short forms for traditional British names of the period.

"Robin" is a diminutive of "Robert" – much like the name 'Bobby' is. I was also interested to learn that Bobby's name essentially means: "bright
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"If I was that person, Robin or whoever, how can I be me?" he asked later. Speaking between mouthfuls of pizza that seemed to horrify and delight Bethan in turn when he'd got tired of listening to his stomach growl and had it delivered to her room before his usual take-out place closed for the night. "How is any of this even possible?"

"I wish I had the answers, Bobby. But I don't," she answered, cutting him off as frustration and confusion started mounting like anger. Making him feel like a heathen as she sawed determinedly into her slice with a knife and fork.

Really, who does that?

"I don't think my grandparents did either. Somethings just are and that's all there is to it. Maybe it makes sense, maybe it doesn't. But whether we know or not that doesn't change what is."

He snagged a napkin, trying and failing to remember to chew with his mouth closed.

"Guess not," he muttered, going for noncommittal but getting hung up on surly somewhere along the way. Feeling more or less like a grouchy house cat as he slumped in his seat and snapped the tap on one of the cans of pop she'd pulled out of the depths of the mini fridge. A fair compromise after he'd firmly vetoed her offer of scotch on the rocks.

"Bobby, I think the thing you need to keep in mind is that you're not alone in this," she reminded, gesturing with her fork as a piece of pineapple wavered threateningly across the tines. "In every story my grandmother told me, there was always one constant. What you are? What you both are? It's a harmony, not a solo. There's always been two. That is why you found each other again now – because you always do."

"So, what? Soulmates? Is that what you're saying?" he asked incredulously, not even bothering to hide it when he rolled his eyes. Rigidity skeptical in spite of the fact that something deep in his chest uncoiled a fraction – as if in agreement. "What is this? A young adult's romance novel? I already work in a high school, Bethan. I mean, come on."

She sniffed. High, poised and supremely unimpressed.

"What you have with him now? It's just the beginning. It was one of the last things my grandmother told me before my parents put her in assisted living. Even at the time, when such things were frowned on, it was so obvious. You were each other's person in every way two people could possibly be. The way she described it- christ, I'll probably remember it till the day I die. …It was aeipathy."

He cocked his head, frowning.

"It's a lost word," she explained after a beat, rubbing tired eyes as she looked off towards the door like there was another room, different and half a world away that she was somehow looking through. "Rarely used save to mention its rarity. It means an unyielding passion or love of something or someone. A passion so strong that it withstands time, doubt, change – everything. It's pathological. Eternal.
"Funny, I didn't take you for the sentimental type," he muttered, more to disarm than anything as she delicately plucked another slice of pizza out of the box and made appreciative sounds into the crust. Soundly ignoring him.

He didn't blame her.

"Sometimes I worry about what this is doing to me. Changing me into," he admitted quietly, picking at a bit of cheese that'd gotten stuck to the cardboard. Fiddling with his phone as the last few texts from Chris lit up the edge of the screen every time he touched it.

'Where are you?'

'When are you coming home?'

'I'll be here. Take your time.'

"I think you'd be a lesser and far stupider man if you didn't worry," she replied frankly, long nails click-clacking smartly as she rapped them against the table. "But this is different and you know it. This is who you are, not something you've become. The part of you that is the ysbyrd arth has always been there. Dormant. I know it doesn't feel like it, but you haven't changed. This is who you were all along."

He opened his mouth hotly. Wanted to accuse her of talking to Derek or Scott behind his back but she didn't give him the chance.

"Even if it wasn't, say you were nothing more than human and you went onto that field to save your friends but got bit or scratched and became something else. A wolf perhaps? Keep in mind that clean armor is merely untested armor – not necessarily virtuous," she remarked firmly, extending her hand palm up across the table in prostration. Like she needed him to understand. "Sometimes we must go through hell to know we belong elsewhere."

He stared back at her, wordless. Momentarily stuck on it. He understood what she was trying to say. That by being concerned about what he was – what he could do – he was already a step ahead. That it was evidence of good intentions or whatever. And yeah, okay- he got that. It wasn't exactly a huge comfort but he could see where she was coming from.

Still, he'd have to remember this shit for their next big game. He could admit that his Independence Day speech was getting a bit old. This might be a good fill in until the sequel came out. If Bill Pullman didn't have another good one in him in that movie he was going for he profoundly disappointed.

"It goes for anything in life," she added, nodding to herself. Making him feel like an asshole considering his mind had wandered. It was one of the downsides of working around teenagers and never having gotten around to growing up himself.

"Never trust the knight that rides up with their armour undented. They're the ones most likely to run in fear the first time the dragon roars. I would trust the ones with bloodied armor and sorrow in their eyes over the young, shiny peacocks any day. The ones who know what they're capable of and only use those skills in times of need and not solely for the benefit of themselves."

_Huh._

He wondered if he should be writing this shit down.
"Do you want to know what I think?" she asked, just when he thought she was about to tell him to get the hell out so she could repatriate her room and get some sleep. Pushing aside her paper plate as she fixed him with that look again. The one that made him think it was a less a question than it was a challenge. Forcing him to nod mutely even though part of him really didn't.

"When Fori called me, he said something that bears repeating. Something his daughter said to him when he was putting her to bed before he heard Dr. Deaton's request for information. He believed it was some sort of foresight, about you. She said that there's an ancient rhythm that flows through all things. But 'one who runs' isn't part of that rhythm like everything else. You make it. Keep it. Protect it. That is why nothing supernatural can hold you. You're above it. Bobby, I think you are the world. Nature. If it ever had a face."

"Well, that's sort of terrifying," he replied honestly. Dragging a hand through his hair as he let go of a long pent-up breath.

"Completely and utterly," she agreed without hesitation. Readily and whip crack smart. Making him think all of a sudden as they sat together, trembling under their skin about all the things they didn't understand, that someday they might even become friends.

He took the long way home, keeping to the sidewalks and street lights. Ignoring that secret part of him that longed to run as he shoved his hands into his jacket and forced an even, unhurried pace. Trying to figure out how he could feel so unsettled and uncertain, and yet-not at the same time.

It made absolutely no sense.

Which honestly by itself, was kind of familiar.

Even before the fur and the claws came into play.

He crossed the street in front of the school and kept walking. Remembering how the blacktop had felt underneath his claws before he'd flung himself at the first Berserker. It had been simple then, in that moment. Pads moulding into the grooves of the ash-fault before ripping away, doing what needed to be done and nothing more. Lydia had been there, hunkering down behind where that big truck was parked now, phone in one hand, heels in the other.

He shook his head. Right now his life more or less reminded him of that wicked snow fall they ended up getting a couple years back. The kind that comes hard and fast and pretty much out of nowhere. Smack in the middle of the week during mid-term reports where he was stuck between flooring his stupid car just to get out of his god damned driveway and giving up completely. But was too wired to really commit to either.

He knew he was being a little dramatic.

Or a lot dramatic.

But he couldn't help it.

Because the problem was, he knew.

He knew it was true.
Everything Bethan had said.

Everything he'd felt, sensed or remembered.

Even the stuff he didn't know, he knew.

*All of it.*

He huffed out a breath, scraping his soles across the concrete as a deer and her fawn startled from the tree line. Streaking deeper into the forest as the smell wet hide and half-nibbled greens lingered behind them.

It couldn't go on this way and he knew it. Because of him they were all stuck in this weird sort of holding pattern without any actual holding. Slowly getting complacent because it had been months since Kate had shown her hand. Months since there'd been anything close to bloodshed. Months since Beacon Hills had heard anything so much as a scream.

He inhaled slowly, feeling the cooling air zing uncomfortably across his teeth.

That was the worst bit. Knowing that they had to do this. No more half-assing.

He knew things would make sense once they went through with the ritual. He felt it. *Sensed it.* Whatever you wanted to call it. It was all there for the taking. And the point was, he couldn't *not* do it. He'd passed that point a long ass time ago. What he was struggling with was the realization that this was it. All the waiting. All the wondering. It was about to be over and whatever he was, whatever they were together, he was going to have to face it. All of it. *Now.*

And he was afraid.

Afraid of what knowing would mean.

Afraid of the person he'd be.

The person he *was.*

Or worse, the person he *wasn't.*

The person he'd *never* been.

He stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk, fists clenched tight at his sides.

*How do you forgive yourself for all the things you didn't become? How do you justify it? Especially when everyone was expecting some kind of miracle?*

Because that was the thing, at the end of the day, wasn't it?

That was what he was the most afraid of.

Of being nothing more and nothing less than a disappointment.

After all, when you've spent most of your life believing you're a grade a screw up who never did anything with their life, you're already primed to think of yourself and your future in the same terms.

He ended up calling Deaton in a fit of frustration two days later. Sitting out on the porch as Chris watched him from the edge of the garden. Sharpening a knife with slow even strokes. Just being
there with him as the star-strewn sky did a good job at making him feel small.

"What's the catch?" he finally asked, feeling a little bit guilty as the rustle of sheets issued across the line. Slowly dawning on him that it was actually around two in the morning and like most people, the veterinarian had probably sleeping.

Still, to his credit Deaton only cleared his throat, voice sleep-deep and quiet. Able to pick out the sudden strain in the fibers over the line as the man curled his toes across the edge a long shag-style rug and stretched.

"I'm assuming this is about the spirit walk?" Deaton questioned.

"What else is going on around here that I'm balls deep in?" he retorted.

The sigh he got in return was audible despite the crackle of static and the sound of stubbly skin *scrith-scrithing* over the receiver.

"The catch? The catch is that the past is generally best left where it resides. Buried and over with," Deaton answered plainly. Letting the sentence rest like it ended there for a long moment before picking up where he left off. Completely unapologetic as his stomach swooped uncomfortably.

"But in your case..."

"I know. I know," he flashed, tone devolving. Laced with frustration and exhaustion. So tired of running away from all the things he didn't understand that it made him wonder if hibernation was actually a thing he could do now to escape his problems.

Because he *did* know.

He had to do this.

*They had to.*

There was no other option.

*God, he was going to regret this.*

A refusal he knew he'd never voice tipped like the easy way out on the edge of his tongue. Instead, he cleared his throat, meeting Chris' eyes in the low light. Reminding him of that moment in the kitchen after he'd come home from the hotel just before dawn. Withdrawn and emotionally drained as he tip-toed over the squeaky floorboard in the hall only to find Chris sitting at the table, waiting for him.

It wasn't an argument.

They were too tired for that.

But neither was it particularly gentle either.

It was the kind of moment two people have when one is being thicker than a pile of bricks about something that effected the both of them. Because yeah- at the end of the day, Chris understood. The mess that was their lives? What they were? What they'd done? What was still coming? It was all...*weirdness.*

In a word, it was exactly what he needed.
"Bobby, if there is anything I’ve learned so far, it's that there's no such thing as an ideal world. No ideal moment or best solution. So don't wait around for it. The only thing that's up to us is how we deal with it. Remember...it's what we do."

It wasn't until Chris set his knife to the side and nodded that he answered. Firm and strong and everything he figured he didn't deserve as the Harvest moon glowed half-full above them. Closing his eyes into it as Chris hushed close, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and leaning into him.

"Alright. We're in."

Chapter End Notes

Reference:

* Aeipathy: is classified as an unyielding passion or love of something or someone. A passion so strong that it could be considered pathological; it withstands, time, doubt, and change.

* Wren Forijame: the man mentioned in chapter 26 who contacted Bethan about Deaton's request for information. Known affectionately to Bethan as 'Fori', Wren Forijame is also an authority in magicks and from a long line of seers. His youngest daughter inherited the gift
Chapter 31

He let Deaton and Bethan go wild with the magic shit. Choosing to remain oblivious as they enlisted Lydia and Stiles. Deciding he wanted as little to do with the process as possible as they poured over stacks of old books that smelled like humidity and a dust-bunny graveyard.

Honesty, had these people ever seen a god damned horror movie before?

Jesus.

Admittedly, he did stalk the sidelines every once and a while when Chris' expertise was needed. Experiencing a hedonistic sort of pleasure as he watched Deaton’s face get progressively more and more puckered – like he was sucking on a lemon. Until the man was reduced to base syllables and awkward stomping. Expression practically constipated as he and Bethan bickered like an old married couple.

It was five days after they’d given Deaton their answer that Bethan called.

They were ready.

"We don't have to know," Chris said over cedar-seared salmon the night before. His favorite and an obvious bribe. Looking like what he figured the verse 'i'm too hot, hot damn' probably meant, in a navy blue shirt with the sleeves rucked up to the elbows.

"Uh, we kind of do," he negated, garbling the syllables as he jammed another mouthful of fish firmly where it belonged and rode out the endorphins. He still couldn't believe he'd gone most of his life without eating fish. It was a travesty, really.

Chris just raised an eyebrow at him. But he wasn't intimated. He'd survived Derek-level eyebrow expressions, thank you very much. He was a damn veteran of that particular intimidation tactic. …Of course, he ended up caving anyway.

"Look, do I want to do this? No. Not really," he admitted, leaning back in his chair as he eyed the rest of the fish slowly going cold on the counter. "But I'm getting the impression that this is a nut up or shut up type of situation, so-

The expression on Chris' face didn't change.

Underneath the table his leg jiggled nervously.

"What about you?" he tossed out - deflecting - waving his fork at the front door as the words came out with gentle stress. "I know you have your whole compartmentalization thing, but for this?"

"-for this is doesn't work," Chris agreed, finishing his train of thought as he wiped his mouth with a napkin and worried at the edge of the small mountain of mashed potatoes left on his plate. "Maybe it should. Maybe I'm out of practise. But right now? All I am operating on is that it feels right. I've been around this kind of stuff longer than you, I know the tells, and despite the fact that we're going into this blind, there are no alarm bells. No bad feelings. Just-"

Longing.

Need.
"Yeah," he replied lamely, juggling a couple dozen words that all meant the same damn thing. They both felt it. The void they'd been coasting through ever since they'd come together and realized what they were feeling was mutual. They had to do this. "We'll be fine."

Chris stared at him like he'd never seen anything quite like him before. The ghost of a full-blown smile edging at the corners of his lips as he trumpeted false outrage from across the table. Hoping to god the emotion was infectious as he tossed himself headlong into it.

"What, I'm trying a new thing, okay?" he snarked, playing it up. "It's called optimism."

"You are unbelievable," Chris snorted, suppressing a laugh as his fork of mashed potatoes quivered dangerously above empty space beside his plate.

"No, you know what is unbelievable?" he challenged playfully, letting his bare toes drift underneath the table. Skimming the very tips of Chris' socks like an invitation. "How you even got that shirt on in the first place. Like seriously, is it painted on? You can tell me. I can keep a secret. Did you use the rest of the lube or something because-"

He barely managed to dodge the spoonful of mashed potatoes that came flinging across the table at him. Splattering across the kitchen tiles as he watched the fallout and turned back to face him, eyes gleaming.

"Oh, so that's how you want to play it, huh?"

Chris just cocked his head and smirked.

Needless to say dinner got cold and they made a huge mess.

Good thing salmon reheated half decently in the microwave.

"This reminds me of something," he said to the ceiling the next evening. Nearly going cross-eyed trying to keep track of what everyone was up to as Bethan and Lydia painted symbols across his bare chest. He wrinkled his nose at the smell - ocher and dying pine - as Lydia smacked his forearm lightly for him to lift. Winding her brush all the way down until she was slicking between his fingers and making him squirm.

They'd gone through it a couple of times – dry runs before the real thing. So being arranged side by side on matching stainless steel tables at the clinic wasn't a big shocker. Nor were the tall pillar candles and smoking incense wafting from the corners of the room. The only difference now was the paintjob and the fact that the four items from the case – the nail, deerskin pouch, rosary and photograph – had been arranged around them like the points of a compass.

"You know, I think I saw this in a movie once," he cracked, drowning in nerves as Deaton and Stiles finished up their own slurry of symbols beside him. Leaving Chris in the same boat he was. Stained red and black with the thick, tarrish-paint and fucking freezing against the stainless steel.

"Really?" Bethan remarked mildly, double checking the symbols as she flipped through the pages of the old tome without even looking at him. "Because I have a similar feeling, but I distinctly remember it was due to an exceedingly awful adult film featuring gay pornography," she replied, completely without shame.
And *that*- that was not completely outside the realm of possibility.

Chris looked over at him, eyes narrowing like a grumpy cat.

"So much brain bleach," Stiles moaned from a distant corner. Shadowing Deaton as he filled a syringe with the sedative.

"Alright, are we ready?" Deaton asked, looking over at Bethan and Lydia as they grabbed a stack of papers and nodded. Lighting the kindling under the shallow stone basin the man had asked him to drag out of the depths of the basement before they'd gotten started. The damn thing weighed half a ton, the carved symbols on the edges smoothed with age but still managing to leave imprints across his palms when he'd finally dropped it.

"Nothing has changed. Once I administer the sedative we will start the chant. Stiles, please be sure to you start the second verse of the incantation as soon as they start to go under. Keep in mind, the dose I'm giving Bobby is much heavier, it's possible we will have to rely on Chris being under to keep him completely sedated. If our theory is correct, of course. Okay, on my mark…"

He tried to relax as the needle *snicked* in. Choosing to look at Chris as the man's eyes started sag and flutter. Not feeling much of anything as Bethan and Lydia started to recite from the papers spread across one of the free tables. Vaguely aware of Deaton checking Chris' vitals and Stiles bouncing nervously on his tip-toes. Waiting for Deaton to give him the signal to start the background vocals.

It wasn't the first time he felt like he'd been dropped in the twilight zone, and it probably wasn't going to be the last.

He tried to empty his mind like Bethan had suggested, but failed as something Deaton had said just before they'd started ping-ponged through his brain.

"**Many cultures have a myth for reincarnation. There is over 3,000 years of historical evidence that directly correlates to it, in fact. Buddhism is simply the most well-known. While it is more common in the Asian-based religions, the idea is strong in some West African tribes. In fact, many Aboriginal groups believed that one would take the form of their totem or animal spirit and live again after death. Even cross-gender reincarnation was considered possible. The Inuit, for example, believed that those who suffered premature deaths, particularly children, were reborn into the same family at a later time. It was also believed in many cultures that warriors were reborn with birthmarks corresponding to the wounds that felled them. Even Plato believed the soul could undergo frequent incarnations.**"

He stared at the ceiling, idly following the reddish discoloration of a water stain as the Latin verses – why Latin, he had no idea – rippled through the smoky air above his head. He moved his hand, suddenly very aware of his breathing as his breathing slowed. His hand didn't move. Instead, it just twitched. Like only half the command had made it down to his fingers.

"How do we know if it's workin-"

He blinked and suddenly, just like that, he was standing in the middle of a white out.

An empty, shadow free canvas that stretched for as far as the eye could see.

He didn't just how else to describe it.

They brushed shoulders as they looked around, bare feet curling into the white at his feet. More than a bit disturbed when it *gave* underneath him. Malleable and soft like freshly tilled earth crumbling between your fingers.
"Holy shit," he breathed as Chris curled a cautionary hand around his elbow. Recognizing the four bundles arranged around them – north, south, east, west – just like they'd been in the clinic.

But other than that?

Nothing.

_There was just nothing._

Blankness.

Dead space.

A hundred million years of emptiness stretching out till forever.

The hair on the back of his neck pickled. Finding himself gripping Chris just as tightly as the lack of, well, _everything_ started to weigh down on him. The air here, if it was even air, felt muffled and oppressive. Almost like someone was holding a blanket over their heads, just waiting for the right moment to smother them.

He inhaled, trying to break through the haze. A little ball of tension curdling in his chest when he realized he couldn't sense him. Chris was standing right next to him - jeans riding low on his hips, paint tacky and drying. But if he hadn't been able to see him, he wouldn't have known he was there at all.

_Jesus Christ, it was a void._

"Kinda feels like we aren't supposed to be here," he said. Captain Obviousing the situation mostly just to hear himself speak. But instantly regretting it as the words warped into echoes before he could finish. Churning through the air until they preceded the words and he shut his mouth with a horrified snap.

Okay, so that was horrifying.

"We aren't," Chris pointed out, breathing normally despite the tension cording in his jaw. Making him realize that heightened senses or no, Chris was feeling it too. "We're cheating. This isn't how it's supposed to be done, remember?"

His body wanted to shiver but had none of the stimulus.

Deciding to just follow close as Chris made his way over to the first item.

_The Nail._

"Okay," he admitted, pulling him up short. Procrastinating automatically as he found Chris' hand and captured it loosely. Wanting to feel his heartbeat. "I wasn't a hundred percent clear on this part. Where are we exactly?"

"Technically nowhere," Chris replied, running his hand through his hair. "Remember, this is all mental. Spiritual, if you want to think about it in those terms. This is the starting point - a waiting room. Not the final destination."

"A waiting room?" he echoed, cocking his head as drips and drabs from the conversation he hadn't been listening to during the first dry run came back to him. Deaton hadn't been able to tell them exactly what they'd come across, but that it probably would be interactive. What they would see
would depend on their involvement. Kind of like a choose your own adventure book, only with way more likelihood of badness before you reached the end. "Waiting for what?"

"To pick a door," Chris returned, gesturing at the items arranged around them.

Right.

Super.

"Let's get this over with, huh?" Chris hummed, looking up at him with a determined expression as they crouched down beside the nail. The pitted iron stark against the overwhelming white as they reached forward. "Together?"

"Together," he agreed.
"The sun went down hours ago," a familiar voice opened.

He jerked in surprise, chisel clattering noisily against the anvil just before he could finish the last bit of workmanship on the head. But as violent as his startlement was, it eased immediately. Looking up to see a figure he’d know anywhere cut in sharp relief. Leaning up against the door of the smithy as the fatty candles set around the room quavered in their own melt.

He smiled, wiping his hands on his apron as Kris crossed the room. Expression complex but soft as the same dagger he’d made for him nearly a decade before glinted like a stalwart companion in the scabbard at his side.

They wasted no time as they clasped arms, pulling each other close, as was their habit. Sharing something they knew better than to name as the scent of horse sweat and wet fabric rose strong between them. Pulling away reluctantly when the distant cry of the hour was rung from the church at the end of the street.

"I thought you’d gone to town, my friend."

"Gan to," Kris answered, unclasping his cloak and tossing it over a chair. Picking up the nail he’d abandoned beside the forge and flipping it smartly. Running his thumb over the delicate etching with a smile. It was the mark of his forge. Like most prominent blacksmiths, his mark would ensure that the next Lord who purchased from him would know the quality of his iron and reputation. Blacksmith estaat, if you will. "I am on the 'morrow. But that is for you to deme."

Unease knotted through the muscles in his shoulders as he paused in place. Eyes stinging exhaustion as the coals glowed red in their black-shrouded beds. He'd been working too much of late. And his body was not afraid to show it. Business had been good, but he had to confess he had much on his mind of late.

"You talk in riddles my friend, what troubles you?"

But instead of answering Kris merely gestured towards the table, bringing out a skin of red wine and two crude earthen cups from his bag. The same ones he used when he was on the road, traveling between cities when his trade as a merchant demanded it.

"You haven't taken a wife, though I know not why," Kris eventually spoke, breaking the silence when he moved to refill their cups. Voice quiet but etched in stress. Like iron threatening to fracture before it had a chance to be worked on.

"I have no need of a woman," he answered, frowning. Feeling the fading stab of grief prick his heart, just as it always did when mention of his late wife reached his ears. "I already have sons – daughters. They keep me well enough. My Joan is not so easily replaced as some men are with their wives."

"It was not my intent to offend," Kris amended, raising his cup in honor of her memory as he hastened to do the same. "Your Joan was a good woman. Hardworking and lovely in every measure. There is no drede she would have continued to be if the sickness hadn't taken her."

His answering nod was sober.
"But having no need of a woman?" Kris added after a moment, leaning forward as if in confidence. "I don't believe many here would agree. Especially the very beautiful, Miss. Isabelle Baxter. I understand she is quite determined."

He let go of a despairing sound. Half a groan, half a laugh at his own expense as Kris' blue eyes crinkled with amusement.

"Aye, she's a good looking lass," he agreed, drinking deeply - too deeply – as he pictured her as she'd been that very morning. "But a wood wright and a right pain in my arse, if I tell it truly. She has the devil's corage. I would no sooner marry her than stick my head in my own forge."

The man's laughter was a balm. Soothing and full as he leaned back in his chair and soaked it in. He'd missed this. Kris was away so often, especially after he'd married his Joan. It felt oft like there was a thread patterned strong between them, always pulling them back together when they'd strayed too far apart. Joan had been patient with him. Often teasing that Kris was his first love and that her and God would forever come second.

In truth, it had often felt that way, though he knew that was a sin.

"Why are you here, my friend?" he asked after a time. Feeling the warmth of the wine working through his sore muscles – relaxing whatever tension existed between them. "It cannot simply be to conseil me into taking another wife, I know ye better than that."

But there were no words in response. Only silence. And when he looked up, Kris' eyes were coals, smouldering in soft reverence and desperate want. Aware that the thread that bound them together had suddenly pulled painfully tight.

He was a widowed father of four taking solace in the arms of his closest friend. Uncertain of when things had become so changed between them as Kris kissed him fiercely. Gripping his shoulders like he never wanted to part. Groaning into his mouth as his hardness – turning him breathless at the audacity of his own yearning - brushed against the inner of his friend's thigh.

He drowned in the rightness of it when Kris took him in hand. Fielding the echoes of his own cries when his hips hitched into the curl of the man's fist. Finding a kind of relief in the sound, like he was taking his first true breath in over a century, as Kris murmured lewd praise into his skin. Stirring something deeper than desire - deeper than need and want as the nails of his free hand bit viciously into his palms. Leaving him distantly shocked when the soft trickle of blood began to smear between his fingers. Understanding everything and both when he realized the pain made sense. It made what was happening here and now seem like it had been meant to be – fated by the very God in heaven himself.

For the first time in his life, he wanted to know what blasphemy tasted like.

He wanted to own it.

*Use it.*

And have it for his very own.

So when Kris tipped his head and captured his lips, he bit down. Sharing the revelation. Swallowing the sounds that rose in the man's throat as he surged up and pinned him to the stones. Breathing hard as he saw his expression – and the knowledge that this too was soaked in righteousness – reflected back at him in his chosen's eyes.
The sound Kris made when he wet his fist - mixing his release with the half-dried red they will both exclaim over later - almost hurt him to hear. Turning him greedy and wanton as his member twitched, straining against his breeches. So, naturally, he set out to do it again. To make up for all the time they've spent apart as the hope of the coming years warmed the late fall air with the strength of the summer sun at its height.

He was the last breath they took together and nothing more.

They snapped out of the fragment with a violent jerk. Staggering, trying regain their equilibrium. Unsure which way was which as the thick iron nail gleamed harmlessly up at them.

"Fuck," he remarked articulately, watching Chris squeeze his eyes shut and shake himself. Cock actually going so far as to twitch - like the utter traitor it was - as he recalled that first time. The moment where everything had fallen away.

"Ready?" Chris asked. Realizing they were gradually orbiting away. The ground underneath their feet revolving and rippling until they were in front of the next bundle - the arrowhead and musket ball.

"Hell no."

Chris sent him a grimace, but still reached down touch it anyway.

He watched the man wind his way carefully through the trees.

Ignoring his brothers as they shifted restlessly behind him, waiting for his signal.

But he didn't give it.

*He couldn't.*

The pale face might have crossed onto their lands, but other than his father - leader of their people - this man was the only one who'd faced the beast and lived.

He was alone now.

Running.

*Lost.*

All the makings of an alliance that would be dipped in their favor if he handled this correctly.

He knew the value of the white man's steel. The way their weapons belched fire and smoke and could hollow out the bravest warriors with just a single shot. But he coveted the value of a strong man who was good and pure at heart better. Finding himself unable to shake the feeling that here, amongst all things growing and green, he'd finally found one for himself.

They'd been tracking the creature when distant screams had ripped through the air. Echoing from the direction of the small white man's settlement that had been built at the forest edge. Outlying farms. Thin crops. Nothing more. They'd arrived in time to watch the beast fling itself from the loft of a burning barn and run howling into the trees.

Only one man escaped the carnage. Splattered red with the blood of the screaming woman he'd tried to save from the beast's claws. He wasn't sure if it was madness, bravery or stupidity that made the
white man brandish his gun and follow the beast into the forest. The same forest that had birthed a
demon that had the power to turn a man rabid. To make him shift and howl at the cusp of each and
every moon. To make him forget himself. Or perhaps become his true self. Even his father, wise as
he was, did not know the answer.

They followed silently, spreading out behind him. Flanking him much like birds flying south for
warmer woods come winter. He was wearing no furs to ease the night chill, only a thin linen shirt
and tan trousers held up by loose suspenders.

_Sleep-clothes_, he remembered, cocking his head as he kicked off the side of a cedar. Embracing the
kiss of the wind on his face as the man stilled. Gun up and aimed, etching out in a wide circle as his
oldest memories continued to provide the comparisons. Remembering things long forgotten.
Memories. Sensations. Moments where he could almost remember the details of his father’s face.

His hide boots hushed through the undergrowth as he leapt boldly into the branches of a wide,
mother-oak. Waiting until his brothers were settled in the trees and overgrowth around him before he
lifted his bow soundlessly - satisfied when the man sank into a crouch. Long rifle flaring out as he
looked down the sight, turning a tight circle on his heel.

The pale face knew he was not alone.

He watched the man’s breathing hitch as he pulled back the string, turning his cheek into the softness
of the raven’s feathers he’d tied there so the arrow would fly just as swift. This man was so attuned.
He felt what he felt. He could sense that much. He understood the feeling of the wind. The way it
changed just before an enemy struck. He understood, just like he did. Or maybe _because_ he did.
There was a distinction there he could not unravel.

His brothers often joked that the newcomers were weak their flesh.

That they were not made the same way as those that honored the land.

But this one was different.

And now he believed he was being hunted still.

But not by the beast.

This was a different sort of hunt.

The luck of the ancestors was with him today.

For he recognized a gift when he was so honored with one.

There was thunder in his bones as he lowered his bow. Bare chest gleaming sun-bronze with animal
grease and the sacred paint the mothers had smeared across his skin when his war party had left
camp. Every breath he took was a whirl-wind built high like a roaring fire as he signalled for his
brothers to stand down. But in spite of the turmoil, his mind was clear. _Focused_. Like the dawn of
spring after a long winter.

When he stepped out into the open, the man whirled to face him.

But he did not fire.

Something stilled his hand.
"The beast you hunt is the same we seek," he spoke in the man's tongue. Stumbling a bit over the unfamiliar words as the man's eyes widened.

"You understand me?" the man questioned, looking him up and down before realization dawned bright in his eyes. "You're not-"

"I speak your tongue," he remarked, shouldering his bow with a dismissive wave. Unopen to talk on that subject as he pressed his advantage. "The beast that attacked your people is from the spirit world. It will hunt you now. It has your scent."

The man's hands tightened around his gun. "Let it," he growled. Skin ruddy-pale the fading starlight. "It took lives that must be answered for."

"It has taken from us as well, from my people," he replied slowly. "But tonight is not the night for more blood. Come. You are welcome in my tent if the leader of my people gives you welcome. When you are ready, we will hunt together."

It took a long, agonizing moment, but when the man extended his hand for him to shake, he took it gladly. Memorizing every inch of the blue-eyed stranger as his brothers filtered through the trees. Completing the circle that joined all things as they made a pact before the sacred trees. Each of them alive with the knowledge that this was only the beginning.

He was of three names and two worlds. Born Ruprecht to his settler parents. And named Dark Wind by the family that chose him when sickness took his parents and neighbors. Adopting him into their tribe when they came upon him as a child, half-starved amongst the dying stalks of corn his father and brothers had planted. He'd loved to run then. Long hair flaring out behind him as he giggled and darted between the huts in the village, chased by his new mother and her other grown children. He had brought laughter back to a people who had little to laugh about as the white men pushed ever present at their borders.

He was renamed Dark Claw when the beast attacked their village not long after he brought the pale face to stand before his father. Fighting fierce as the bear spirit that had flowed into his body when the screams of the little ones had roused them from his tent. Letting him borrow its great strength as he fought side by side with a man he might have drawn arrow against if not for the great evil that demanded they work together.

The same man who had looked upon his new shape and remained unafraid.

The man who had accepted the gift of a new name.

Becoming Notched Arrow in his people's tongue when the beast had been defeated.

The same man he eventually made his as the elders sang, thickening the air with prophecy.

He was the last breath they took together and nothing more.

He dug his fingers into the soft white of the void as they snapped back from - from whatever that was. A memory. A snap shot of a past life. The cliff notes version of reincarnation 2.0. Honestly, it probably didn't matter. Uncertain of what it meant when Chris remained hunched over beside him. Curling in. Bearing down. Face over saturated in the surrounding brightness as the absence of any other sound started to spread across his senses like an oil slick.

"Are you okay?" he rasped, kneading his fingers into the stiff of Chris' back before he hauled them
"Are you?" Chris returned hoarsely. Looking up from where the Rosary shining like a beacon in front of them as a rush of dread prickled the hairs on the back of his neck.

He didn't answer.

He didn't have to.

"I didn't ask you here for forgiveness father. Just your understanding," the blue eyed man remarked from behind the crude bars of his cell. Leaning back across the rickety sleeping bench as his worn leather boots hissed through the stale-smelling rushes that lined the floor. "And if I'm being plain with you, perhaps a pull of brandy if you have it?"

"You killed a man, my son," he reminded. Because clearly the man needed reminding. Trying not to judge, though he did look like the rough sort. A gun for hire – a mercenary. It wasn't an uncommon thing these days. He shook his head, crossing himself and murmuring a quiet prayer for the man who'd been slain. A nameless traveler who'd drifted in for the winter months. Promising the mayor his labor and skills in exchange for food and lodging until the snows melted.

"No. Not a man, father. A beast. An unholy demon," the stranger remarked, blue eyes like flint as he looked him up and down. Tone so firm that it almost demanded belief. "Do you recall the child found dead below the Clinch? A girl of barely eight? I've been tracking the thing that killed her. I tracked this creature to your town and waited until he showed his true face. Is that not what you do, father? You protect God's work, do you not? You save their souls? Teach them about God's love? Well, in a way, so do I. The only difference is I used a poisoned blade made of silver rather than the good book."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek, wetting his lower lip as his collar grew strangely tight around his neck. Finding himself oddly conflicted as he looked back at the man but found only surety and curiosity in his expression. Realizing with a start that the stranger was looking back at him just as strangely. The reality of the emotion they seemed to be sharing as indiscernible as it was impossible.

"You speak of an apparition? A solider of Satan?" he asked after a moment. Carefully ordering his thoughts as his fingers curled in on themselves. Successfully supressing the urge to reach through the bars and demand answers to the questions he didn't even know how to put to words. "But I saw only a man. A man bleeding the same blood as you or I. If this was an act of temporary madness or you have proof of your innocence, perhaps-"

The laugh the stranger let fly was achingly bitter.

"There is no proof your sheriff will accept, you know that," the man cut in, words tinted with anger for the first time. Yet still looking remarkably resolved for someone who was likely spending their last evening on this earth in a jail cell. "He is too deep in the pocket of your mayor – the man that lines his purse - to care about the truth. Otherwise he would have told him about the way the creature's wounds smoked like a fire lit from within for hours after the body had gone cold. Tell me father, is there any being on this earth so close to hell that it burns with that same fire when it's been slain?"

He opened his mouth but no words came to him. There was no psalms he could recite. No words of council or comfort. No explanation for the feeling of rightness growing heavy in his breast. He'd visited dozens of criminals, heard thousands of confessions. Absolved the unrepentant of their sins and watched them go on their way to commit them all over again. Firm in the belief that as long as
they repented, their souls would be saved.

And out of all of them, he believed this strange, violent man was telling the truth.

"Tomorrow he will stand in front of the town and make an example of me. He will hear my evidence, nod, then say that regardless of the reasons I had for killing- I took the law into my own hands. And for that, the punishment is clear, am I right?"

He nodded, expelling a breath as the man inclined his head and settled back across the wall, arms crossed. Looking for a long moment like a man on the cusp of some great action before he checked himself and let the tension in his shoulders bleed away.

"Well, I suppose there are worse ways to go."

He sent the grocer's boy to fetch a bottle of brandy not long after that.

"Why did you join the priesthood, father?" the stranger asked as he swallowed what was left in his glass with a pleased smack. Layers shucked like walls between them as he scritched a hand through his beard.

"I felt-" he started, blinking through the haze of alcohol as the worn leather of his grandfather's bible sat forgotten on the Sheriff's desk beside him. "I felt there was something missing in my life. A heavenly ledger that perhaps only in spirit was out of balance. I believe God's word settled that restlessness in me."

He was strangely captured by the motion when the stranger slid the glass back through the bars. Feeling as though his very bones had gone brandy-thick and gentle.

"Perhaps we aren't so different after all then, father," the man remarked, gifting him with a wan smile as his hand ghosted across his side, as if remembering the holster the deputies had taken from him when he'd been arrested. "That is the same reason I carry a gun."

He was trying to understand the comparison when the man leaned forward unexpectedly. Keen eyes taking him in, from white collar to black cloak. Lingering on his face as his long hair failed to hide the expression he was sure was showing freely across his face.

"Tell me honestly, father. Have we met?" the man inquired, voice low like someone might hear despite the late hour. "From the moment you entered the room I've been trying to place you. Please understand, I'm asking for no favor or special treatment when I say this, but I feel as though I know you – though I realize that is impossible."

He shook his head mutely, though taken with the idea. Certain it would explain the strange feelings that were roiling and twisting inside his chest. Watching the man leaned back with a frustrated huff, clearly deep in thought.

He bowed his head, praying for guidance. Certain he could discover the path the lord wished him to take if he could find a way to speak plainly to a divinity he had long known to be all powerful, but largely silent.

The next time he raised it, the morning sun was shining high and bright through the east window. Filtering through the bars of the stranger's cell as the man met his eyes with an oddly sympathetic expression. As if it was him that was to be hanged rather than the other way around.

*It was almost dawn.*
He was seven deadly sins of regret and misplaced remorse as he followed in the condemned man to the hanging tree. Praying that God might ease the pain in his heart and the spreading ache inside his bones as the sheriff adjusted the noose around the man's neck after the evidence had been heard and summarily dismissed. Just like the man said it would be.

Losing what was left of his faith in the Sheriff's ruling when the man lifted his head and met his gaze. Eyes wide like he was experiencing the same divine realization. Finding a connection in that final moment as the Mayor nodded for him to recite from the Bible he was clutching – forgotten and near ripping in his hands.

He was the feeling of empty relief as he slipped to the ground at the man's feet when the Deputy kicked the ladder out from under the stranger's feet. Watching his boots twitch and shake as he reached up and grasped him by the sole. Putting every ounce of himself into that last action as the man wheezed – agonized above him. Choking on the ghost of that last lingering pull as people shouted and fanned the air above him. Their voices already faint and far away.

He was the last breath they took together and nothing more.

They came back tangled together on the floor. Asphyxiating in inches as Chris clawed at his throat. Breathing in harsh, pitching wheezes that sounded painful coming up. He didn't know what else to do but grab his fingers and hold tight. Whispering nonsense into the curve of Chris' shoulder as he wilted into him willingly. Forcing him to draw on a reserve of strength Chris didn't seem to have in him as he dragged them over to the final object.

*The photograph.*

Everything else was on autopilot as Chris' head lolled back and forth, caught in the curve of his chest. Feeling a crushing exhaustion weighing heavy on his back – physical, mental, emotional, it didn't matter. It was like the void was trying to squeeze them out. He gritted his teeth when Chris collapsed beside him. Lashes fluttering and weak as he watched him turn. Mouth making sounds his ears couldn't hear.

His eyes were having trouble focusing when he grabbed his mate's hand and pulled him the rest of the way. Half collapsing in front of the last stone pedestal as he reached out and slapped his palm against the glossy image.

They had to finish it.

"I could've been yours, you know," Kit murmured, eyes glazed and far away as they looked up at the night sky. There were dark clouds building in the west, promising rain and screaming mortars as the cold mud that lined the trench chilled them to the bone.

"You are mine," he snapped back, pulling him close. Pressing a stained bit of gauze – the only thing the medic could do for him – tighter against Kit's chest as the sound of gunfire echoed down the line. Trying to hush him as he coughed. Thumbing the slope of his cheekbone as thick bubbles of red collected at the corners of his mouth. Wiping them away as best he could whenever they threatened to make tracks down his chin. "I think you've always been, yeah?"

"I'm cold, Robin- god, I'm so cold," Kit shivered, quaking against him as he turned. Free hand slapping out for his pack but finding Peter's instead. Half covered in rubble and muck as the poor lad remained where the last mortar had felled him. Face down and in pieces. Another young life ended –
ardent for that desperate glory that'd eluded them all from the first day they’d set foot in this god forsaken place.

There was no glory in war.

That was the rub of it – the grand lie.

War was hell.

"I've got you, Kit. Stay with me – yah hear?" he urged, hissing a breath as the sound of sniper fire pinged dangerously close. Keeping quiet until the rustle of advancing troops grew distant again.

His fingers were shaking as he undid the straps of Peter's pack and pulled out his blanket. Trembling like he was the one with the hole in him as Kit's blood dripped between his fingers. Dragging the filthy wool over them both as Kit's teeth clacked sharply.

"Talk to me, eh? Keep me company?" he hummed, unbuckling Kit's helmet and smiling down at him as he carded his hands through the man's sweat-stiff curls. Just like he'd always wanted to when night fell and he was alone in his bed. Mind running wild with thoughts no man should rightly have for another. Not like that. "You know I don't like the quiet. Come on then."

"Tell me what you miss most about home?" he insisted, after Kit's mouth opened and closed without sound. Horror and grief rising like bile in the back of his throat as the man's pulse counted out weak against his fingers. Ignoring the frantic call of- "Gas! Gas! Quick boys!" as a German plane flew close overhead. Skimming their defenses as a sickly cloud of yellow-tinted death fell slowly to earth.

"I am home," Kit whispered, one hand reaching up to tangle with his. Smiling with his eyes one last time, just for him, as dirty nails caught against the coarse-dark of week old-stubble. "I am home."

He was the last breath they took together and nothing more.

They tumbled through the void in a free-fall. Feeling the barriers ripple and convulse – closing in fast. Aware on some level that it was trying to expel them as he found Chris' hand and reeled him in. Curling around him protectively as the soft press of white suddenly slowed their descent and squeezed suffocating around them. Constricting. Crushing.

*He was the same soul a thousand times.*

*He was-*

*They were-*

They woke with twinned gasps.

Shuddering and aching after a thousand different losses, a thousand different wounds.

Lives upon lives.

He barely felt the weight as Deaton gripped him by the shoulders, trying to get him to focus. Catching the abortive movements as Stiles and Bethan trying to do the same with Chris. Wanting to keep them down, safe, when in reality they needed anything but.

They found each other like that.
Between the bodies and voices orbiting clumsily around them.

Feeling a raw awareness settle deep in their bones.

Becoming one with the ghosts as a thousand years, maybe more, collected and settled.

*It had always been them.*

*And it always would be.*

---

It wasn't till they stumbled outside and reacquainted their lungs with the open air that something in him just snapped. Letting go of a growl that rattled as Chris' eyes narrowed. Baring his teeth like a challenge of his own before taking off into the trees.

He caught him. *Of course he caught him.* Bringing him down against a side-winding spruce the moment they were far enough away from the clinic and the worried voices. Fingers tangling like they needed to affirm it through touch. Losing himself in it as he caught Chris' lips between his teeth and kissed them bloody. Gripping him fiercely as they slammed deeper into the woods and rolled down an embankment.

He watched with rising excitement as Chris wrenched off his belt and fumbled with his zipper. Reliving a dozen moments that had played out just like this as they reeled out like the best kind of feedback loop. Connecting them to past pleasures as everything compounded on one another – soaring and screaming in their blood like a high.

Chris was a mess of wild hair and bruised lips underneath him. Angry and aggressively close to being naked before he ripped the boxers clear off the man's hips and sucked a trail of red marks down his navel. Snarling when strong fingers pulled sharp at the roots of his hair. Dragging him back up by force so that Chris could return the favor.

This time when Chris kissed him, there was no niceness in it. There was nothing even remotely gentle about it. It was what it was and as unstable as he felt – as they *both* felt – it ended up being exactly what he needed.

His teeth were sharp against his tongue. Incisors dropping as his hips hiccupped into Chris'. Pushing into it as their cocks ground together – catching on the occasional patch of sweat and pre-cum that made them hiss. Smoothing the roughness of it as they move against each other frantically.

He wrapped his arm around his mate's torso, holding him there against the grass and wet leaves. Mouthing at the shell of the man's ear until the jump of his pulse brought him down to the curve of his jaw. Rubbing his face deep into the crease until Chris found his cock and squeezed.

He made a sound – half animal, half human - when he flipped Chris onto the dirt. Digging his fingers into the plush of his ass as Chris wheezed his name into the soil. Somehow managing to be both debased and fucking smug about it as he pawed at the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a packet of lube. Ripping into it with shaking fingers and reaching behind him to slick his hole. Always one step ahead of him as he shuddered into the knobs of the man's spine. Realizing in a detached sort of way that this was exactly what he'd always been afraid of. Of losing control, just like this – just like that moment at Derek's. And yet, just like Chris had promised, it was okay. And they both wanted-

He breathed roughly into the back of Chris' neck as he watched. Dick throbbing – hell, *leaking* – across the small of Chris' back as he groaned aloud. Giving it as long as he could stand before he took over. Slapping the man's hands away as he jerked him up on his hands and knees. Chuffing low
in his throat until Chris lowered his head into his arms. Watching him through the slits as he angled his body so he could look at him.

_Breathe._

_Hey, hey- look at me._

_Shhh, I've got you._

The fractures that separated the past from the present faded. Hazing clean like dew in the morning as the echoes from every life he could remember – every life that was a part of him, of both of them – allowed them their privacy. Resolving themselves into restless obscurity in favor of making room for _this._

He hissed at the sensation when he slicked himself up with the last of the lube and pushed in. Almost taken apart by the realization that in spite of everything it was just like it always was. Everything else pushed cleanly aside by the comforting familiarity of Chris curving up to meet him. Back arching as the muscles under his skin flexed and strained. Clenching hotly around him as his claws dug pin-prick bruises into the curl of his mate’s right hip.

_Fuck._

It felt just like the first time.

Just like the second and the third.

It felt like too much - _too tight._

It felt like he was going to break him.

Like he couldn't possibly fit.

Able to could feel the man's pulse beating around him.

Like-

Then, just when he thought he'd have to pull out, that he couldn't handle the closeness, Chris uncoiled somehow. Relaxing as the world sighed along with him. Arms wavering as he took everything he had to give and pressed back for more. Molding their hips together in the oldest of ways as he took his first real breath in hours. Fitting together, impossibly perfect. Just like they always did.

It was still the same.

_They were still the same._

And just like always, he was still overwhelmed and breathing harshly when Chris cursed and started writhing underneath him. Greedy for friction. For him to just _move._ And just like always, he kept him still. Shaking his head as he mouthed a noiseless laugh into his skin. Wondering how it was possible to love and need someone so pathologically that he doubted there was even a name for it. But getting distracted as Chris started murmuring his name over and over. Telling him it was alright when he leaned back and realized his claws had drawn blood. Covering his hands with his as he pressed them back down over his hips. Unable to do anything about it because the need for more was so shockingly urgent.
The dark of his claws were stark against the white of Chris' hips.

But somehow, this time he knew they belonged there.

They moved together like that for a handful of beats, neither of them in an mood to make it last. Just needing as his hips moved faster – pace turning punishing without his consent – as the burn for moremoremore seared through him. It was so good he wanted to cry, or maybe just scream. Either way the jury was out the door along with what was left of his brain cells. Finally finding that connection he'd been craving all this time – solidarity, community, belonging – as he pulled back and sank himself hilt deep. Hips hitching as he worked himself deeper, slicking a filthy hand into Chris' hair as he let go of a mangled sound.

Because he felt.

Oh god, he felt.

They weren't dead yet.

That was what this really was about.

He held onto that like he needed it to breathe.

It wasn't as comforting as it should have been.

But then again, that had pretty much always been their kind of luck.

"I think I know why I started drinking," he remarked afterwards, sprawled in the dirt and forest-dark. An answer to the unspoken question Chris was asking with his eyes as the clouds weaved slowly between the stars overhead.

He wanted to run, scream or maybe just collapse into the long grass and never get up again. He wanted to make a wound he could see. Something that measured up to what he'd lost – what they'd lost. A marker. A memorial. Something. Anything. Not nothing.

Chris shivered, skin overwarm and almost feverish as he stared blankly into the darkness. Expression impassive, calm – forced. Fists clenched at his sides like by sheer force of will he convince himself that everything was alright. That he wasn't still hearing the echoes. That some part of him didn't remember the burn of the hangman's noose. The sharp pain of the bullet that'd bled him dry of foreign soil. The-

His fingers itched as he wrenched himself upright. Jingling his keys in his pockets. Restless and angry as a thousand distant thoughts burned across the inside of his eyelids. Turning every blink into a pantomime of flash photography. He'd seen Chris die a hundred times. He'd seen the world change – for the better and for the worse. He'd watched friends and family age and die. Buried children – his children. Lovers. Wives. Husbands. He'd witnessed the old forests thin – choking on the coal dust that coated their rotting branches. He'd watched the old ways become forgotten then remade new. He was the sole survivor of a thousand dead languages. Cultures. Traditions. He had seen the earth change hands and had minded the beings who'd shared it.

Something in his chest convulsed.

Stomach churning.
He was full.

**Choking.**

But instead of doing something stupid like get in his car and drive to the liquor store or punch something he'd immediately regret breaking, he let Chris pull him back down to earth. Letting him hold him through the night as they faced their new reality much like they'd always done.

**Together.**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Reference: the following are translations from basic Middle English words used in London during the 1400's.

*gan to: began to.
*estaat: state, standing, rank.
*deme: judge/decide.
*Joan: Middle English name, a popular common name at the time. The female version of "John" meaning: 'God is gracious.'
*drede: doubt.
*Isabella: A name that was often used by common people in Europe in the 1400's. In Hebrew the meaning of the name Isabelle is: "Devoted to God."
*Wood Wight: 'wood' – meaning: mad, crazy. 'Wight' – meaning: a person, a creature. I slapped them together to created: "a mad creature."
*corage: heart, spirit.
*conseil: to council, advise.
*aventure: chance.
*Ruprecht: the low German derivative of "Robert" – in which "Bobby" is also a derivative.
*Clinch: Reference to Clinch Mountain. The well-known Moccasin Gap, also known as Big Moccasin Gap, is a pass in Clinch Mountain, a long ridge within the Appalachian Mountains, at Gate City, Virginia. This gap has a long history as a passageway through the mountain. It was used by the Cherokee and Shawnee, and was the first gap through which the Daniel Boone Wilderness Road passed on its way to the better-known Cumberland Gap and Kentucky.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

*This chapter is told in Chris’ perspective.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He waited in the parking lot of the hotel until her driver left, distracted and pushing a cart of luggage, before he slipped in through a side exit. He leaned against the pillar just in front of the window. Skimming a hand down the concealed Glock in his chest holster as the driver loaded the car and drove off. He let the moment rest for a handful of beats after the car disappeared around the corner. Waiting until the kid at the desk was distracted by his phone before he crossed to the stairs and headed to her floor.

Bethan answered his knock after a staggered moment. Sensing the whisper of fabric hushing across the interior of the door as he looked down the hall – making a note of the exits. The sound was indicative of someone making good use of the spyhole before she clicked the lock and opened the door. By that point, he was more than ready for her. Expression masked in a generic disarming smile he knew she saw right through, but used anyway.

"Mr. Argent," she remarked smoothly, without any hint of surprise. Composed and polish in a tan pantsuit and black heels. Looking for all the world like this visit was her idea as she motioned for him to come inside. "I wasn't expecting you. You'll have to forgive the mess. Do come in."

He catalogued the room in seconds, the open carry-on, the tablet and smart phone still plugged into the wall charger. A first class ticket back to the London left beside an empty cup of coffee from the only decent place in town.

"You're leaving."

It wasn't a question.

"As promised," she returned wryly, toeing open the mini fridge and setting two bottles of import beer on the little wooden table by the window. He waited until she was settled and had taken a sip before he did the same. Trying to calculate how the rest of this meeting would go before she broke the ice for him.

"You don't like me very much, do you?" she asked, cocking her head elegantly – gently aggressive. That same wry, predatory smile dominating the corners when he arched a brow in response.

"Bobby does," he returned. Because he did. Bobby was easy, malleable. Adaptable in at least half a dozen different ways he wasn't. It was something that made life in general both interesting and annoying. He took a careless swallow from his beer, not bothering to elaborate. Thumb making tracks through the sweat beading off the glass as she eyed him frankly.

"Bobby strikes me as someone that while…verbose, genuinely hates very few," she posed. More of an observation than the retreat he was hoping for as he heaved internal sigh and tried to decide exactly how much he was willing to share.
"It's a rare trait. That kind of genuineness," she mused, tapping at her lip with her forefinger. "It isn't naivety. Rather, a careful sort of gentleness, I should think. And believe me, I don't take it personally. Not with you."

He skipped the easy part.

The one where he told her that it really was personal.

That there was something about her that rubbed him the wrong way.

Something that reminded him of-

"I knew him when we were in school. Before my family moved away," he started instead, arms crossed over his chest. Comforted by the warming chill of gun-steel strapped there. "I've never seen a kid so mouthy. Taking the brunt of all those fights – bullies - when they were never really about him in the first place. God knows I picked his ass out of the dirt enough to know. I figured he was dumber than a pile of rocks for it, honestly. Because he never learned. The next day he would be right back at it. Getting punched in the halls, stuffed into his locker, the works. He was a walking target to begin with – least until he got a growth spurt."

She smiled. Worrying the label of her beer with dark purple nails. Lifting the edges bit by bit as the rattle of a housekeeping cart issued from the end of the hall.

"His sense of fairness, I expect. Right and wrong. Balance. The truth often does get us in trouble, doesn't it? He was lucky to have you. He is lucky to have you."

"I think it's the other way around," he admitted, letting an answering smile – small and careful - make it all the way to his eyes before vanishing completely when she tapped her nails against the tabletop.

"Or both," she returned, gaze fervent and animal-aware. Knowing without having to ask that Bobby felt exactly the same.

"How are you handling all this?" Bethan asked bluntly. Broaching the question just when any other person would've started to relax - caught off guard by the loaded question. Adding another layer to the tension cording in the meat of his shoulders as she finished. "Another soul sharing your story? What a mind job."

"It feels impossible," he allowed as she nodded easily, purple blouse almost sheer in the cheap overhead lights. "I can swallow a lot - believe a lot. The things I've seen…but-"

"A lot of what is supposed to be impossible is possible," she offered, smoothing a hand down her slacks. Thinking the words through before voicing them, like for the first time since she'd arrived she was going off script. "They said it was impossible for humanity to reach the moon. That it was impossible Earth wasn't the center of the universe."

He frowned, not quite grasping where she was going with this.

"But that's about humanity," he interjected, leaning forward. "Human error. This is different."

"Is it?" she echoed. "You're human. Until a year and a half ago Bobby believed he was human as well. What is it to be human? The definition is troublesome to be sure. The ability to reason. Emote? Self-actualization? The awareness of our own existence? Every supernatural creature you've faced and perhaps even killed in order to protect others had those same characteristics. There are always layers underneath. You know that better than most."
The first time Bobby had asked him if he was a monster flashed uncomfortably to the forefront. Remembering the horror on the man's face that day in Derek's loft. The strength and self-disgust in the recoil. He thought about what would have happened if everything was different. If it were back to a few years ago and he'd met Bobby transformed and freshly feral in a back alley. If-

"We've gotten distracted from the main point," she admitted, leaning forward. Expression keen and animated as something itched like a memory in the back of his mind. "You and Bobby are proof there's something else. Perhaps not Biblical, but evidence of a plane of awareness that breathes in time with the earth. We're all her children, as they say. But perhaps like the angels created first by God in Christian mythology, you and Bobby were born a bit closer to the womb?"

"That-" he started, wetting his lips. Unsure of how he felt outside of shock and outright censure. Wondering if all this was just a hypothetical conversation that was supposed to play out in your head rather than make it to your lips. Finding him almost grateful when she huffed out a laugh and waved her hand dismissively.

"It's all very poetic, I know. Not exactly logical. Philosophical twaddle mostly. But you feel it sometimes, don't you? Especially now? That surety? That something in your core – in the way you define yourself - has settled? That there's something else you're connected to. Something more. And not just to him, but to everything. Everything that surrounds us. Everything that makes us, shapes us and has the ability to tear us apart."

He breathed in slowly before exhaling the same way. The women had always been the leaders in his family. The thinkers. He was just a soldier. Or he had been, once. Now he was something more. It made him aware of the smallness of his own perspective. And it was disconcerting in the same way. The realization that the plot of your life doesn't quite make sense anymore.

"He came to see me before the ritual," she admitted, pushing her bottle aside still half full.

"I know," he answered, unsettlingly aware of his own heartbeat.

"It's never him that dies first. I don't know if he can. He always loses you. Not the other way around. Those lives you saw? What was the one thing that remained constant? One can't live without the other," she told him, expression losing its predatory edge in fractions as she looked across.

"Whatever this problem with your sister is- whatever you think you're going to face, trust him. Don't let him watch you die, not again. Even the strongest souls have a breaking point. Don't let him find his because you feel responsible. You're a matched set, two halves of the same whole, so face it together."

He thought about that moment on the trail not long after Allie Henson's kidnapping. Seeing the naked joy spread across Bobby's face as they'd ran side by side. Watching the self-consciousness melt away as he took them deeper and deeper in the forest. Remembering how Bobby had looked - sun lancing through the trees – picture perfect and baser despite his running clothes. He'd looked like he belonged there. That he was made there. And that he was discovering it all for the first time without even being aware of it. Like a child learning to crawl, then walk, he'd watched the world change into something brand new right in front of Bobby's eyes.

"What is he? Really?" he asked quietly, heavy with the same boring flaws and anxieties he'd been gnawing on ever since he'd watched Bobby slip through the trees with that missing girl riding high in his arms. Suddenly cognizant that some things defied explanation.

This time Bethan's smile was sad.

Like she knew.
"My mother used to describe him as river water," she answered after a moment. "Gentle and furious. Old and new all at the same time. If there was ever a being that could stand for nature it's him."

"But this isn't just about him," she pressed, silvering hair wisping softly at the temples in the humidity. Looking across the table at him with an intensity that felt invasive. Reacquainting him with the sour-stale of vulnerability as her hand fell, open palmed across the table. "It's about both of you."

"If there's anything we learned from the ritual it's that you're the anchor. You help him channel his focus. You keep him grounded. That's why he followed you down in the spirit walk. If he's the hammer in all this – the brute force – you're the nail. The purpose for the action and the focus of it."

He felt a flush of heat, unwelcome like embarrassment, spread up the collar of his shirt.

Flicking through all of it mentally, like he needed at least part of it to be a lie.

An exaggeration.

*Something.*

But he came up empty.

Just like he knew he would.

"This isn't something either of you can do alone," she murmured. "Not even if you wanted too."

He waited until she'd finished the last of her beer before he broached the question he'd originally came to ask. Deciding to cut right to the chase as her cell phone started flashing on silent. *Missed Call. Missed Call. Missed-*

"Do you want to do this anymore?" he asked bluntly, toes curling in his boots until he felt the joints crack. Cathartic and settling as Allison's old speech about setting off early onset arthritis played like background noise in the back of his mind.

She blinked, delicately owlish. Like he'd finally managed to surprise her.

"The Guardianship," he continued after a beat, running a hand through his hair. Clarifying as she remained painfully silent. "You've done your part. We can make other arrangements if you want to step away."

"Are you saying my services are no longer needed?" she asked, smile wry and icy-sharp. Jagged around the edges like a slow moving glacier.

"No," he answered honestly. Because he wasn't. Regardless of his dislike, that wasn't what this was about. Deciding to take a chance – to trust Bobby – and stack all his chips on the table for her to see. "It's just- the people that know us, who help us, *who help me.* tend to end up dead."

Her expression was interesting.

On anyone else the facial tick would have been pity.

But on her it translated differently.

Grief and loss were loner emotions. After the main event they were mostly shunned, even misunderstood. People generally didn't know how to react to someone who was grieving. It was too private. Too personal. Our social constructs were conflicted on how you were supposed to act if you
were on the outside looking in.

But there was one thing that stayed the same.

And that was the expression on people's faces when you reminded them what you'd lost. It was an expression that twisted the mouth and lingered like discomfort for causing the same. Sympathy expressed in micro-fractions of social acceptability before the reality of the real world eventually forced the conversation past it.

But Bethan was different.

Which was the whole point, really.

It was the reason he knew, deep down, that even though they were on the same side, there was always going to be that little voice whispering in his ear. The one that told him to watch his back. To keep in her his line of sight. To herd Bobby away whenever he could and not relax until she was on the next flight out of town. Giving them a couple thousand miles of breathing room. After all, you didn't need to be a wolf to know that whenever there was more than one Alpha in the room, you had to be careful of the amount of throat you bared.

"Those four lives," he started slowly, fingers itching for the comforting weight of a Glock as he changed the subject. Knowing full well she didn't have the answer but deciding to ask anyway. "Why can't we remember more?"

"Believe it or not my grandparents had a theory about that as well," she returned easily, forefinger whorling through the table-sweat left by the bottle. "They believed it likely had to do with the break between incarnations. When the world changed too much, too fast and all that knowledge was lost."

He mulled it over, considering.

"Bobby says he feels them. That he knows there were others, but he can't access them. Every time he tries they just slip away," he clarified. Trying to imagine how full his head would be if they somehow managed to find a way to know the others.

*Hell, he was barely handling the one they were in if he was being honest.*

"The poetry of the world is never dead," she hummed thoughtfully.

"John Keats, he replied easily, automatically. It was a throwback to a high school literature class where he'd not only learned a thing or two, but found himself secretly enjoying it once they got past the flowery, romantic stuff.

He still remembered how it'd felt paging through those crappy anthologies. Feeling for the first time in a long time that he wasn't alone. That these poets who'd lived and died hundreds of years ago somehow got it right. Tapping into *exactly* what he felt every time his parents told him to put his homework away and practice instead. To hit a target over and over. To clean his father's guns. To learn how to kill and not ask questions. Never once stopping to wonder if *this* was the life he wanted.

The poem itself was an stand in for the phrase: "life goes on." That no matter the season – whether in the drought of summer or the ice of winter – the rhythm of the world never stopped. It fit so well to their situation it was hard to believe it hadn't been created solely for them.

"You're just full of surprises aren't you?" Bethan smiled, arching a sarcastic brow despite the fact the smile reached her eyes this time. Undoubtedly genuine.
He smiled back. Swallowing the part that told him it was a weakness.

An indulgence even a predator couldn't afford.

"Maybe the world just needed to change its rhythm for a while," he answered softly.

He came back home to find Bobby perched on the only dry part of the deck with a pair of BBQ tongs, determinedly trying to grill steaks in the middle of the pouring rain. Looking remarkably like he regretted everything but was slogging through it because it was now a point of a pride.

The laugh that bubbled up almost escaped. Finding himself grinning into his jacket collar as he tried to remember what his life had been like before Bobby had literally barged his way back into it. He watched him for a minute. Just drinking it in. Startling himself when he realized he could see them in him – all those other lives. Like right now with the line of Bobby's shoulders reminding him of Robin when he'd set his mind to something.

He supposed that was the point.

It was about looking at shades of the same color, not completely different ones.

"I can smell you being all creepy in the shadows, you know," Bobby snarked conversationally. Clicking the BBQ tongs mock-threateningly before he turned around, inhaling visibly.

"You went to see her?"

"Yeah, figured I'd tie up some loose ends before she skipped town," he answered, checking his watch. "Her plane leaves in about thirty minutes."

"Why don't you like her again? I mean, she kind of saved our asses with the whole briefcase thing. We'd probably still be running around in circles with Deaton's head shoved up our butts if it hadn't been for her," the man pointed out – shaking his head.

"I told you, it's a predator thing," he returned, unclipping his holster and setting it on the outside sill that looked into the kitchen. Sparing a look up at the dark overcast sky with a critical snort.

"Yeah, I call bull crap on that," Bobby remarked breezily, peeking under the lid as the BBQ hissed bitingly. "I would know after all, I am a predator."

"You're my predator," he corrected, more or less aware that he was probably spending far too much time around teenagers and corny day-time television.

Still, the cheesy line was completely worth it just to see Bobby roll his eyes in that way he did when he was secretly pleased. Muttering despairingly under his breath despite shooting him a look that had absolutely no reason to be outside of the bedroom.

"Ugh, please. Woman's Network much?"

They talked about nothing for a while after that. Decidedly neutral in all things as Bobby flipped the steaks and chattered on about the new marinade he was trying. How they didn't have half the stuff but he made it anyway. And why was red wine vinegar even a thing? And oh- they needed to go get a meat thermometer next time they went shopping because apparently he'd been on a cooking blog.
and basically been told he was a heathen.

"Are we okay?" Bobby asked eventually, tone uneven and questioningly gentle. BBQ tongs clacking together once, then twice, as if to point out the gravity of the situation as the teasing mood sobered almost immediately. "Because to be honest I'm not comfortable with this being a hello now goodbye situation. I feel like I just found you and-"

"I know," he broke in. Cutting him off at the pass before he worked himself up into a proper rant. Aware that this had been brewing on and off for the past few days.

"You do?" Bobby repeated, nonplussed. Side-eying the rain that was starting to spit sideways as he edged a bit closer to the house.

"Yeah," he affirmed, lips twitching as the BBQ hissed fitfully. Smoking like a lit flare until Bobby tossed the tongs away dramatically.

"Great, so what? We panic together now?" the man replied sarcastically, looking about as fed up he felt.

"Sounds good," he answered, unable to do anything else but laugh aloud as Bobby rolled his eyes.

"Asshole," Bobby muttered good-naturedly. Not doing much to fight a grin of his own as they looked at each other through the downpour. Feeling equally ridiculous

This was what he was stuck with.

Probably for eternity.

It actually sounded kind of perfect, to be honest

He couldn't help but kiss the indignation right off the man's lips when he reached behind him and flicked off the propane. Enjoying the way Bobby's pupils dilated as he leaned in and rested a hand on his hip. Tugging at Bobby's lower lip with his teeth until the man shuffled a half-step closer. Warming into him greedily as he went for the tie on Bobby's track pants.

Dinner could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Reference: 'The poetry of the earth is never dead' is the first line from "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" by John Keats.
Chapter 34

They handled it more or less pretty well in his opinion. The couple that reincarnates together stays together. You'd think it would be weird – awkward even. But it wasn't. Instead, he was on the opposite side of the spectrum. Because unfortunately for his anxiety, it just made sense. Which was weird. But considering the circumstances, he'd decided that embracing things with at least some measure of grace was his only real option at this point.

He thought he'd feel different.

Or at least they'd feel different.

But it was the same deal there as well.

He knew ultimately that was the point.

They were layers of the same.

They'd always been layers.

The only difference was they knew it now.

He was still a bit of a mess – stuck between settled and manic. But again, because this whole thing had forced him to get all philosophical, he figured that might just be him in a nutshell. Always walking the balance. Trying to keep his morals more or less where they were supposed to be despite being scared as shit.

He didn't necessarily think he was a good person or a bad one.

Just a person.

Someone who was trying.

He figured even if everything went to hell, that had to be worth something in end.

---

He was sparring with Derek and Parrish - because that was a thing he did now - when he got a text from Chris.

'At store. Remember, you're on dinner tonight. Anything you need me to pick up?'

Aw crap. Dinner, right.

He frowned at the screen, checking the time. It was late, almost seven already. It was probably easier to order pizza or squeeze into the diner before it closed then scrambling to make something at this point.

He was about to type it in when his phone dinged cheerfully.

'If you say the diner or pizza again I will get Deaton to neuter you.'

He rolled his eyes, hunting and pecking around the screen. Hitting send the exact moment he ducked an undercut Derek deflected off in his direction - just because the kid could be a little shit like that sometimes.
'That's only if Deaton can catch me.'

The answer was immediate and right to the point.

'You sleep like the dead. Besides, who said he'd be working alone?'

'Bluffer,' he typed, grinning into his chin until a punch landed just a bit too hard behind him. Making Parrish's eyes start doing that glowing thing and suddenly he had his arms full of slightly out of it deputy - whose skin might or might not have been to wisp with ash - to bother waiting for a reply.

Someday they were really going to have to figure out Parrish's deal.

Because honestly, he was pretty sure the position of Human Torch was already copyrighted.

It wasn't until they'd finished up and were toweling off for the night that he noticed his phone was blinking. He tossed Parrish an off-centre salute as he started towards the car. Nodding his way through a vague promise about taking him up on his offer as a part-time assistant coach for his outreach program during the summer.

'Try me.'

He grinned, able to picture the exact expression that would have come along with the words. Doing that thing with his eyes that was probably responsible for breaking more than a few hopeful hearts in the grocery line before he finally made it to the register.

'Attitude is everything,' he sniped back, amusement clear.

It was only when the phone vibrated that he realized there was another text. A delayed message that probably hadn't gone through before because of the crappy reception around here. He frowned, shoes rasping awkwardly through the gravel as he scrolled down. Wondering if his phone was doing 'that thing' again before he realized the next one was time stamped almost ten minutes later.

'I didn't know you were home. Come and help me with the jdijji'

The cursor blinked.

But he didn’t use it.

He called instead.

First Chris' cell.

Then his home phone.

Chris' cell again.

Even the landline in Chris' apartment that he mainly kept for appearances.

But no one picked up.

"What's up?" Derek asked, moseying over from the stack of mats. Hair sticking up in every direction as he tossed his towel into the laundry bin.

"Dunno," he returned, distracted. Struggling a bit as he tossed his shirt on one handed. Trying to convince himself he was just being paranoid. That the feeling of
The kid frowned, looking like he was going to say something more before waving him off. Looking up at the sky like it was a metaphor as the moon peeked - half-crescent and sallow - through the pluming clouds. Humidity building so heavy in the air he could practically taste the electricity as he punched the car into gear and sped off towards home.

It wasn't until he pulled up in front of the house that everything went on point. Heart leaping into his throat as he took in the yawning front door and abandoned grocery bags. He stumbled out of the car, momentarily fighting with his seatbelt as his brain surged ahead of everything else.

"Chris?"

He fumbled with his phone, hitting redial as he looked around. Because the worst part was there was a lot to see. The truck door was open too, interior lights draining the battery into a deserted street as thunder rolled – low and faint in the distance. An empty holster that smelled like Chris was flung half-hazard across the passenger seat, leather straps snapped. Ripped. The keys for the house were still glinting in the front lock, rocking back and forth as the door creaked slowly – hinges rusty.

"Chris!"

He nearly jumped out of his skin when the jingle of a familiar ringtone rang out from underneath the porch steps. Screen flashing like a beacon through the wood slates.

He didn't need to reach down and grab it to know it was Chris'.

He didn't need to run into the house and search room from room.

He didn't need to call 911 or shake his neighbors awake just in case they'd heard something.

He just knew.

*Chris was gone.*

*Someone had taken him.*

**Panic.**

That was literally all he was made of as he raised his hands and pressed them against his ears. Trying to block everything out as the ground underneath his feet whirled unsteadily. Feeling the frantic pulse of his own heartbeat through his temples as he turned in a slow circle, taking it all in. Looking for something, anything that would tell him where they'd taken him as the tightness in his chest threatened to squeeze him breathless. It wasn't like any form of panic he'd ever experienced. There was just nothing in his experience that could compare. This was a full-body reaction to something he couldn't change or control.

He was just gone-

*Chris was gone.*

*How did this happen?*

*Who could get the drop on someone like Chris?*
Someone who'd probably been born paranoid and had a plan b for literally everything?

He sucked in a deep breath and nearly choked on it.

Bringing himself up short when he realized he could smell it.

*Chris.*

*The people who'd taken him.*

*Everything.*

Holy crap, he was a moron!

He inhaled, closing his eyes as he scented the air.

Trying to focus.

Trying to- **there!**

The scent trail was lit up in day-glow scent impressions that translated into a wavering trail of footprints and the odd, foot-swipe smears that made him think of practice lunges or a running jump. They'd been waiting for him. Watching. Humans and worse. Scents that made his nose twitch in disgust and familiarity. Seeing flicker flashes of those Berserker things hulking like a bad acid trip in the back of his mind as he peered into the dark – heightened senses picking up everything.

They'd parked down the street – diesel engine - double-door van, one driver.

Then they'd over powered him.

Quick enough that there was no struggle.

**No struggle?**

He followed the melding scents as they shifted and warped in the growing breeze before finding the one that made the rest make sense. One that made him gag and pull back as the acidic bite of chemicals singed his nostrils.

*A sedative.*

*They'd gotten him with a god damned sedative!*

He remained rooted long enough to figure out what direction they'd gone before he whipped around and ran back to the car. Almost breaking the damn key clear off when he jammed it into the ignition and burned rubber down the street.

They had a head start, but if he could just keep following maybe he could figure out where they'd taken him. Chris was still alive. He could feel it. Besides, if they wanted to kill him they would have done it already. The kidnapping routine had to mean something. They wanted something. Which, of course, made one wonder exactly what type of crazy they were dealing with here.

This was her brother, after all.

Kate wouldn't, would she?

She wouldn't kill Chris.
Right?

Why would she have even gone after him in the first place?

And why now?

It wasn't like there was anything new going on that she might want to-

He was stopped on a red at the intersection three lights from the edge of town – the direction that led deeper into the mountains – when he heard it. The growing rev of a tractor trailer coming from the east. He didn't look over right away. Instead, he winced. The sound setting his teeth on edge as whoever was behind the wheel shifted gears like they were grinding stone. Kicking the speed up instead of down for the light. Ignoring all the warnings the city had put up for that very reason a few years back when a semi driver lost control at the intersection and rolled.

His eyes were already there when the semi appeared around the corner in a blur of movement. Clipping cars going both directions as it careened down the center of the road. Jerking crazily as every impact forced the driver to wrench the wheel back around to compensate.

Oh-

His claws extended, itching black around the tips as they grew long and sharp. Curling around the steering wheel as realization hit the same moment the sound of frantic honking blared through the low-lying mist. The person behind him reversed with a squeal. Shouting something garbled that could have been either a curse or a warning as the light changed to green in front of him.

He knew that smell.

*Lit ochre and the moldering rot that killed growing things from the roots up.*

"Oh, you bitch," he breathed, gripping the wheel like a brace as the headlights of the semi filled the windshield. Blinding him to slits with the glare as he fumbled with the wheel. Stuck in a quagmire of micro-gestures and jerky half-movements as a hundred different ideas rose to the surface just a half second too late.

The last thing he saw before the tractor trailer slammed through the intersection and t-boned his car off the road was Kate's laughing face through the dirty windshield. Feline features manic and warped as her blond hair spilled around her face in a wild tangle. Lips pulled back like a smile as she slammed down on the gas one last time – adding insult to injury.

After that, it was all black.

He woke up on his back in the dirt. The knotted roots of old growth trees digging into his spine, spearing-sharp and unforgiving. A reminder that not everything in nature was inherently kind. Feeling broken off, shards – *discarded* - as he blinked up into the forest canopy. Able to catch the kaleidoscope glimmers of distant stars between the branches as he tried to orient himself. Trying to understand the where's and how's as the smell of leaking gas and disturbed earth churned thickly in the air above his head.

For a worrisome collection of minutes everything was blank.

He didn't even have questions, no less answers.

He looked behind him without getting up. Trying to work his way through a strange sluggish fog
that was threatening to sink him back into the dark if he let it. Like a phantom limb on the verge of pins and needles. His head brushed through the dirt, feeling the crackle of last fall's leaves *hush-hushing* underneath him as he blinked at the steaming wreck of his car. Its momentum brought up short, slammed into the cradle of two trees spaced almost directly in front of each head-light. Rear lights illuminating the face of shallow cliff and a broken guardrail hanging on by just about nothing far overhead. Creaking back and forth in a very unsettling sort of way through the thick cover of trees.

*He'd gone right through the damn windshield.*

He looked away. Not wanting to think about the hole in the glass and how it was stained red around the edges. Listening vaguely as the wail of a siren started up somewhere above him. Wondering, as he floated through the disconnect, if the Sheriff and Parrish would be called to the scene. He hoped so. The other cops were assholes. He blinked again, trying to make sense of the double- no, *triple* image before it fuzzed away again. It felt like that cognitive dissonance thingie his therapist had gone on about after the whole testicle losing incident. Because his actions in relation to what was going on just didn't make sense.

*Was it shock?*

*It had to be shock.*

*Could he even get shock?*

He frowned, weighing the odds without any sort of strong emotion at all. Wondering distantly how many bones he’d broken as he felt something in his spine and calf snap painfully back into place. Healing in real time as the numbness dissipated and he slowly regained enough feeling in his extremities to realize that his belly and shoulders were glittering with shards of glass. Bleeding sluggish ribbons down his shredded track and field shirt like the world worst tie-dye job as he idly thumbed the long, thin spike of glass currently embedded in- maybe his spleen? It was hard to tell.

*Shit.*

*Had he actually broken his spine?*

*Jesus Christ.*

He turned slowly, levering himself up on his hands and knees as flashes of memory and motion sliced through the deceptive calm he was still more or less operating under. Like the world was bringing him back into the fold in inches before jumping right into miles. Shaking his head as the flashes started coming faster and faster.

The front door had been wide open and creaking.

The taint of sweat, fear and chalky chemicals curdling on his tongue.

Chris' holster in the truck with its straps cut - Glock glinting inside.

It was the same one Chris left on the bedside table every night before they went to bed.

Muzzle to the door, but always within reach.

Mirroring the shotgun he'd wedged under the bed – just in case.

Kate's snarling face and blown pupils on the other side of the dirty windshield.
Mad eyes reflecting the light from the flashing intersection like a metaphor.

Chris!

He wrenched himself to his feet. Horror dripping down his spine when he realized he couldn't sense him. The trail had gone cold - too contaminated by the tang of leaking gas, blood and burnt rubber. But as quickly as the fear spiked, another emotion - unfamiliar and bright - flared to the forefront. Sending him reeling as anger - sickly-hot and completely unforgiving - scorched its way to the surface like a fire roaring through his blood.

People often talk about rage with the same language they do an orgasm.

Things like seeing red. Whiting out. Fading to black.

But the truth is that's all bullshit.

Rage is a headache throbbing between your eyes. It's the worrisome blank of static and that clammy, sickly feeling that comes right before your throat convulses and you start dry-heaving. It doesn't make everything suddenly crystal clear any more than it blinds you to the rest.

Rage just is.

It's brutal and unforgiving, but at the end of the day it's still just an emotion.

No more at fault for its existence then the brief moment where it rules you completely.

His claws extended as he let go of a vicious growl – half animal, half human - as he ripped off the tattered wreck of his shirt. Ignoring the glass as he stood half naked in the weak moonlight, chest heaving.

His lips pulled back, feeling his teeth lengthening and reordering themselves as the urge to do something – anything - screamed in the back of his head. He wanted to run. To stop breathing. To lash out. To shatter his claws against something he could tear apart. To find his mate's scent and destroy every last shred of everyone who was responsible for taking him.

Kate.

But he didn't do any of those, he did the one thing that was completely against his baser nature - the solitary bear that lived alone and relied on itself to get by - and circled back to connect with his human parts.

He threw back his head and let go of the single most frightening sound he'd ever heard come out of his throat. A roar that carried on and on and shocked the very forest still.

It took time, a few ageless moments where his chest heaved. Watching his hands switch from blood-stained fingers, to claws, then back again before he heard it. A thready, rising chorus that issued from all directions as the pack rose to answer.

They were coming.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The deadly calm he was existing in would have been terrifying if he could feel anything else.

As it was, it took everything he had to stand stock still in the middle of the clinic as Deaton tweezered bits of metal and windshield out of his skin. Chris was too far away for him to feel. He couldn't sense him. There was just nothing. A hole. A yawning, empty awareness that was threatening to swallow him whole the longer he stood around doing fucking nothing. It'd never been like this, even when Chris had left town for hunting business, he'd always been able to sense him. Even if it was only the distant throb of an echo.

It was almost like Chris was-

"They aren't ready," Lydia argued in the background, heels click-clacking across the concrete as his jaw clenched sporadically. Realizing that somewhere between getting half-dragged to the clinic and Deaton snapping on a pair of starchy smelling rubber gloves, the room had become a whirling hive of activity.

"They have to be," Stiles shot back, running a hand through his hair as his molars ground together. Impatience only building the longer the entire circus went on as Parrish, the Sheriff and Derek talked in hushed voices by the door.

He barely felt a thing when Deaton pulled a long shard of metal out of his chest. Daubing at the wound once, then twice before all there was to do was wipe blood off the freshly healed skin.

Attention momentarily distracted by the tray of bloody glass as the pieces flashed in the amber lights – reminding him the moment before Kate had-

"We haven't even tested the dosage range, Stiles!"

He snarled gutturally, making Deaton jump beside him. Medical tweezer clacking nervously like anxiety as the man took a half-step watch. Watching him closely, like he knew, as Scott's eyes flashed red from the opposite corner of the room.

"Look, I know that- you know I know- ugh- but we don't have a choice. If you have a better idea I'm all ears, fingers, toes, etc."

This was a storm that was starting now. He could feel the power of it rising. Thriving. Rising. Writhing. It was a feeling that was grounded through his clenched fists and spreading fast. But it wasn't a blind emotion like the rage that'd ruled him until the others had found him in the woods. Instead, it was surety - authority. Like some part of him he was still getting used to had suddenly been struck by the knowledge that this was something he had to fix.

The responsibility was his and his alone.

There was no question.

No doubt.

This was about restoring the balance.
"What I don't get is how Chris was dosed without it affecting Coach?" Stiles interrupted, exaggerating the syllables as Derek spoke quietly to Parrish by the door. Relaying something on his radio to the Sheriff as the words- 'car wreck,' 'hold off for now, but-' 'witnesses statements are still being taken.' Making him question his ability to mark the passing of time, considering last time he'd looked the Sheriff had been right there next to them.

"Their bond is symbiotic, yes," Deaton answered, pulling out the final piece of windshield from his forearm before taking a sterile wipe and cleaning him off with it. "But there is always choice to consider. Bobby choose to follow Chris during the spirit walk. Keep in mind, proximity is also a factor. It's likely he felt something, perhaps unfocused or dizzy at some point – an echo from Chris' side of the bond. But since it was unwelcome, it's unlikely a normal sedative would've any more effect than that."

"But-" Stiles started, running aground before he could properly start when Lydia flicked his chest and fixed him with a look. Making the kid flap his hand around and gargle his words before correcting himself. "Okay, so, maybe not what we should be focusing in right now, I get it."

But he wasn't listening.

Chris' absence was a hole in his chest.

An abscess.

A wound that was bleeding out underneath his skin that no one could see or touch.

That was the worst part. The fact that the others could run around making plans. Arguing. Talking. Wasting time. While all he wanted was a wound he could see. Something that would make sense. Something that was living proof of the feelings that were threatening to eat him whole. He needed a mirror. A reflection. An x-ray of his insides as that invisible dagger sliced through his gut. He needed something that would make him bleed. Something that would remind him of-

"If none of you could catch his scent, then it's clear Kate found some way to mask it," Deaton counselled, cocking a hip up against the edge of the table as he leaned forward. Answering something Parrish had asked that he hadn't heard. "We only have a vague direction to go off of which was already fading by the time Bobby started following it. And she was waiting for him. At this point we might have hope she gets into contact with us. A list of demands perhaps?"

He shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

He'd reached his limit.

He was admitting that right fucking now.

He was fucking done.

Handling this gracefully was a pipe dream by this point. He was being pulled apart by conflicting signals. The desire to scream. Cry. Panic. To do something – anything – as long as it was getting out there and just dealing with it already. He needed this to be over. He needed Chris to be here. Safe.

The knees of his sweat pants were scored with dirt tracks and half-dried red. Looking like a god damned testament to his life choices as he dug his fingers into the edge of the table until the stainless steel started to give under his hands. Too far gone to care that he was leaving finger indentations where no normal person should be able to. Stuck on the way Chris had stretched across the sheets that morning when the alarm rang. Bare chest highlighted to perfection as sunlight filtered through the blinds. Making him smile – dopy and content - into his pillow as he watched from behind half-
lidded eyes.

Chris had long earned the distinction of being his very favorite thing. But it was times like those – those calm, wordless moments where the world was sunlight and dust motes and the scent of them mingling across the sheets - that the definition really hit home.

He couldn't lose that.

Not again.

Not like this.

"Guys, I hate to be the rain cloud on this already super depressing parade, but can we talk about those wolfsbane flash grenades again? Because despite what Lydia said, I don't think we have a choice here. Look, we've been keeping them on the down low for months – since what happened on the Lacrosse field. But this time I'm sure we have all the bugs worked out. Point is, unless you know of a couple more spirit bear *whatevers* within driving distance this right here is all we have to work with. The only things other than Coach that has a hope in hell of destroying those things."

Disgust shuddered through him.

Hating himself just a little bit more for somehow making this about him.

About how he didn't know if he handle it.

About how he was scared.

Scared of what might happen.

Scared of what she'd do.

Scared of what Chris would do if he thought any of them were in danger.

Scared of what *he'd* do.

Scared of-

He wrenched himself off the table and away from the others just in time. Swinging blindly as he hauled back and buried his hand into the closest wall with a cut off yell. Shocking himself back into the moment as the pain hit after the fact. Intimately aware that he'd just broken every bone in his hand and probably more trailing up beyond the wrist if the rebar between his throbbing fingers was any indication.

*Fucking ow.*

This wasn't like him.

Not the aggression or the violence.

And *definitely* not the breathless calm that settled down deep in the aftermath.

He'd never been the kind of person who took his anger out on walls or doors. He'd always handled his problems in other ways. Probably equally destructive if his therapist had anything to say about it, but definitely not involving harm to any household renovations and general structural stability. Only this time he hadn't been able to help it. Like a shaken up can of soda, this moment had been inevitable. He wasn't sure if it was just him reaching the end of his rope or if this was some new facet
of himself that came along with the claws and teeth and everything else.

Still, he didn't regret it.

He figured that was the important part – for better or worse – right there.

Turned out he'd actually punched a hole right through the concrete.

Not so long ago, that would have frightened him.

This time around he just let himself bleed.

His fist retracted slowly, the black of his claws coming back caked in concrete dust and greyish-red. Watching as his skin quickly knit itself back together before he concentrated and shook the claws away. Flexing his hand experimentally as the last few joints popped back into place. Hyper aware that the *chink-chink-chink* of falling concrete chips was the only thing that could be heard during that half minute of dead silence.

Oddly enough he already felt loads better.

Deaton's wall however?

Yeah, not so much.

He didn't realize he'd gone somewhere else in his head until Lydia was suddenly there – *clip-clip-clicking* in her white heels and a blue jean dress that was currently swirling around her knees. Small hands on either side of his face as she gentled him down. Demanding his attention as the remaining surge of aggression filtered out of him like water from a sieve.

*Let it hurt. Let it bleed. Let it go. Deal with it instead. Fix it.*

*It sounded like something Chris would say.*

"We'll find him," she murmured, so childishly certain he almost believed her as Liam let go of a distressed whine somewhere behind them. Covering her hands with his own as the concrete dust still swirling through the air slowly started to settle. "I promise."

He nodded shallowly. Smearing drywall dust across her purple manicure as he squeezed her hands gently. Slowly settling back into somewhere approximating his version of normal as he took a deep breath, then another. Feeling strangely as though that moment had hit the reset button. Like maybe there was something to the whole stereotype of men punching a door in after all.

Stiles, Lydia and Malia nearly jumped a foot when Deaton's cell suddenly rang. Shattering the quiet as only genuine surprise can do. The kind of 'caught off guard' where your heart jumps painfully in your chest and you forget, for a half second, that you aren't capable of spontaneous flight.

Truthfully, even Deaton looked a bit frazzled as he frowned at the screen. Though, to be fair, that might have something to do with the fist-sized hole punched through the *load bearing wall* of his place of business. But hey-

"Doctor Deaton?"

His head shot up as a familiar voice came crackling over the line.

*Bethan?*
"Oh thank goodness, I was trying to get a hold of Bobby but his cellphone doesn't seem to be working," the woman explained as Deaton switched her to speaker phone as everyone clustered around to listen.

"Yes," Deaton remarked crisply, looking over at the shattered screen of his smart phone that was set beside his wallet and a few other pieces of clothing that hadn't survived the crash in one piece. "We have something of a situation here."

"In a spot of bother are we?"

"She took him," he managed hoarsely. Sounding like someone had used his vocal cords as a washtub as he swallowed through the thickness lodged in his throat. "Bethan, Kate took Chris."

"Right to the point then," she answered briskly. Calm and collected despite the minute waver that made its way across the line.

"Do you remember Wren Forijame? The man who contacted me about Deaton's request for information?" she asked, papers shuffling in the background like she was trying to find something in front of her. "The one whose daughter had the sight?"

"Of course," Deaton echoed, holding up a hand for quiet as Stiles opened his mouth to say something.

"Well, I got a rather odd call from him this morning. He left a message. I didn't get it till now and I've been trying to call- I don't know how this all fits in or even if you'll need it but- …oh lord, it all rather makes sense now that you said-"

"What message?" he interrupted, cutting through the rising panic discernable in her voice for the first time since he'd met her. His hands curled into fists at his sides as the line crackled with long-distance static and the sound of the others breathing. He was barely holding on by a thread. And if one of the most unshakable people he knew was about to go postal, he just couldn't.

He couldn't handle that.

Not today.

"She saw a cliff. His daughter started drawing a cliff," Bethan responded, so quick on the mark it was nearly an interruption. "The same one over and over."

A cliff?

"He asked about it when he realized she'd drawn pages and pages of it since the morning. She said she wanted to know what happens next. She said…she wanted to know, and these were her exact words, 'what Bobby will choose.'"

"Can we see it? Did he send you a copy?" Lydia demanded, beating Deaton to the punch as she whipped out her phone and typed busily.

"Yes. Scanning it into an email now," Bethan replied, treating them to the wrenching wheeze of a computer chair being yanked across the room. "Hold on a tick."

"Is this about Chris? Did she say anything about-" he started only to get cut off before he could get anywhere as the line buzzed with static. Eating the first few words of whatever she was trying to say in response.
"Fori didn't say anything about Chris. Whatever this is about she can't see beyond the choice. He said the choices we make for ourselves are the ones that are the most difficult to predict. Basically, she's stalled. Even she can't make it out," Bethan explained as Deaton's email alert chimed.

The man turned the phone so they could all see the crayon drawing of a high, narrow looking cliff overlooking a wide valley ringed on either side by steep mountain ranges. The crowning feature set against miles and miles of deep forest below.

"But Bobby, don't you see?" Whatever is going to happen, it hasn't happened yet," Bethan insisted from across the line. "There's still time."

He looked up, only to find them all looking at him. A strangely honest mixture of determined, hopeful, resigned and painfully young. Not at all prepared for the realization that they would follow him to the end if he let them. That they were all going and there was be no way he could talk them out of it. They were going to fight side by side with him on this because Chris was one of them. Because he was barely keeping a lid on his own crazy. Because he was basically a day-glow advertisement for a PTSD poster. Because he could win. Because Kate needed to be stopped. Because that was who they were and this was what they did.

It was a heady feeling. More to the point, it was a dangerous one. Making him feel uncomfortable and a whole lot like they were putting their faith in the worst person ever. And yet, it was right. Everything about it settled neatly in that instinctive little niche he'd only recently started paying attention to.

And, wow-

It took him until that very moment to realize that in a weird way they were exactly the same. They'd chosen this life the same way he'd started to choose his. To use what he was to make things right – hopefully even better. They were just kids. Kids fighting a war that was played by grown-up rules and had grown-up costs, but they were still here, still trying.

"Those are the Downs Fall cliffs," Derek replied, expression easing between serious and downright murderous as he met his eyes. Strong arms braced on either side of the table as he fixed him with a look. "We can be there before sunrise."

The others were only just starting to react by the time he was up and moving.

He'd already crossed the room and had his hand on the door knob when Derek stopped him.

"I know what you want to do and I don't blame you. But we have to do this right," the wolf cautioned. One hand curled around his shoulder in a negative. Eye brows riding high as if to prove his sincerity.

But he just shook the kid's hand off and turned on his heel.

"She's here to finish it," he snapped, practically bumping chests as they just kind of existed in each other's space for a moment. Neither of them willing to back down until Scott appeared at the wings like back-up. Expression determined, but not in the way he liked.

"Exactly," Derek affirmed. Holding his hands up in front of him like a peace offering. "This was deliberate, planned. Which is why we need a plan."

"We have a plan!" Stiles piped up indignantly. "It involves explosions that you can walk away from without looking at like the protagonists in the action movies. I thought you'd be all over that, Mr.
"Explosions are only going to help us if they're in the right place at the right time. Not many people know those cliffs are right underneath a shallow fissure in the rock. There's a network of small tunnels – old mountain lion dens mostly spanning almost the entire width underneath. If we plan this right, we can end this tonight without most of us even having to set foot on the cliff. If we can get a half dozen of those flash-bangs underneath the cliff-face and around the treeline in front, we can create a kill zone and drive Kate and her Berserkers right off the edge. Maybe even bring down part of it underneath them. But we have to work together. We need you," Derek answered. Ignoring Stiles spluttering in the background in favor of looking right at him as the idea started to take shape in the back of his mind. Actually sounding possible – probable - hell, even a good idea before impatience took the reins again.

"Every moment we aren't out there looking for him is time he doesn't have," he argued, digging his heels in. Feeling like the worst person alive because Chris was out there, counting on them. And they were in here, still fucking talking. Getting the sneaking suspicion he was only making things worse by arguing, but completely unable to stop the cycle once he was in it.

"We don't know if this cliff thingie is even where she's taken Chris! Or even if this is all going to go down tonight! We don't know anything for sure. How can we even begin to make a plan when we don't know where they are or how many? That's a hell of a lot to take on faith, guys."

The others just exchanged looks – bashful, wry and tired.

"Sounds about right," Scott replied with a small smile.

"Besides," Derek continued, eyes flashing blue. "That's what she wants you to think. It's how she operates. She goes after your weakness and makes it hurt. Makes you feel responsible. This isn't about Chris or even us anymore, it's about you. She wants something from you so she took the thing you love the most. She wants to see you choke on it. She wants to see it tear you apart and make you doubt yourself. Trust me, I'd know."

He took a deep breath, weighing everything before he went for the throat. Needing to know for sure before he let himself take responsibility what could possibility be the worst decision he could ever make. Needing to hear it straight from the horse's mouth as he caught Derek's gaze and held it.

"And if she'd taken him?" he demanded, gesturing at Stiles as a muscle in the wolf's jaw clenched. More or less aware that Stiles had tripped mid-pace, mouth fish-tailing unattractively. "If it was Stiles instead of Chris?"

You could have heard a pin drop, it was that quiet.

For the first time in his life, Stilinski was speechless.

Only he didn't even have it in him to gloat.

*Figures.*

"If our positions were reversed, I'd hate you," Derek started slowly, nodding tightly like he'd already thought about it a half-dozen times since breakfast and still wasn't happy with the decision. "But I'd still make the same call."

He slicked his tongue across the front of his teeth.

Forcing the muscles in his neck and shoulders to soften another fraction.
That was good enough for him.

For now.

"Alright, so-" Stiles started awkwardly, clearly at a loss for words as he ran a hand through his hair again. Side-eyeing Derek hopefully as Lydia jumped in to pick up where he left off. Eventually getting pulled back to the task at hand as they bickered over starting points. Clearly feeding off each other's excitement as Deaton handed Lydia his laptop so they could bring up a map of the area.

"Here's the plan, then."

They were less than halfway through when he ran his hands down his face with an anxious sigh. Flattening the unattractive grimace that'd taken up residence the longer the discussions went on. Positive he was going to need a titanium strength stress ball when this was all was over.

Group work was the worst.

Chapter End Notes

Reference:

* Wren Forijame: the man mentioned in previous chapters who contacted Bethan about Deaton's request for information. Known affectionately to Bethan as 'Fori,' they are old family friends. Fori is an authority in old magicks and hails from a long line of seers. While he doesn't have the sight, his daughter inherited the gift.
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He approached the treeline that ringed the cliff carefully, smelling them before he saw them. And while patience was still so not his strong suit, he ultimately chose to approach slowly. Keeping to a walk she could hear, deliberate and paced. It was all about appearing non-threatening. That if she could sense him coming, she would keep believing she was in control.

The whole point was to make this look like a last stand. He was the martyr coming to plead for mercy – talk terms. But he had to work it. He had to play it right for it to be believable. To make her think they weren’t ready. That she was calling the shots. She had to think she had them right where she wanted them. After that, her ego would do the rest.

He’d once been told he couldn't act his way out of a paper bag. Something about a failure to be convincing when pushed out of his comfort zone. Yadda yadda. According to his old high school drama teacher anyway. He hoped for Chris’ sake that the old coot had been exaggerating.

"I think that's far enough," Kate purred salaciously, hands on her hips as he made his way through the trees and into the clearing. She was standing with her back to the cliff edge, ringed by three Berserkers on either side. Leveling up somewhere beyond smug as she preened on his arrival. Tucking back a strand of long blonde hair as her human face provided a stark contrast to the last few times he'd seen her, feline and wild.

The only thing keeping him grounded was the way Chris' scent was only growing stronger with every step he took. Visceral and real as the ache in his chest eased a fraction. Taking a strange sort of comfort in knowing that somehow the man sensed him too.

Chris knew he was close.

The only problem was that he smelled a whole lot of other things too.

"Let's agree to disagree," he retorted easily, despite slowing his pace. Making it look like he was prowling around, inspecting the area, when he was really getting a couple inches closer with every pass.

"Still alive, I see," she remarked, looking him up at down before her gaze flicked off towards the trees. Tone dripping with self-confidence and a faux sort of playfulness he had a feeling had the ability to do a 180 in less than a second flat. "We're going to have to have a talk about that, you know. It's rude to keep secrets."

"I could say the same thing," he returned, watching a muscle in her cheek twitch when he raised a brow. "From what I hear you put 'Day of the Dead' to shame. You know what they say, there's only so many times you can wake up from the dead and still look pretty."

Her smile was animal and all teeth.

"Bobby Finstock, right?" she posed, like she didn't already know. "I was hoping we'd get a chance to talk."

He raised a brow. Remembering the moment before the impact. Remember her skulking in the shadows as he'd shifted back on the street with Lydia behind him. He remembered the fission of pain ripping down his back as she took her claws to him on the lacrosse field. He remembered hisses, taunts and angry sounds and- yes, okay, absolutely none of that was conductive to making civil conversation.
In fact, it was a testament to his new found willpower that he hadn't strangled her already.

"Well, you clearly knew where I lived," he pointed out, back teeth grinding together as he pushed down the urge to crack them in irritation - just like a bear when it felt threatened. "You could've stopped by, gotten my official renovation tour, some coffee and we could have handled this like questionably stable adults."

"Hell, you could have called, knocked, sent a telegram, wafted a couple of smoke signals my way. Anything really," he continued breezily. Salty, passive aggressive and secretly loving it as her goonies shifted restlessly. Exhaling humid breathes through their skullbone masks that echoed like a thousand miniature roars. "Kidnapping boyfriends seems a little old fashioned. Don't you think?"

"I like to think of it as bringing the old ways back," she remarked airily as he glared at her. Hating her for being able to do this protagonist to antagonist thing so effortlessly while he felt like he was barely doggy paddling. Mainlining the petty sarcasm that got him through the majority of the school year like it was a life raft he was trying to keep afloat. "You know what they say about trends. The best stuff always gets recycled."

"Besides," she added, wind kicking up wisps of blond as the air beyond the edge of the cliff reflected dark and without end in the moonlight. "Chris and I were a bit overdue for some family bonding. You know the last time we were within five feet of one another he tried to kill me?"

"Imagine that," he deadpanned. Taking it as a victory when her lips twitched in irritation. An involuntary tell that reflected clear as day.

Bobby Finstock: 1

Crazy Kate: 0.

"Chris has told me a lot about you," she said after a moment. Looking like she wanted to do nothing more but crush his momentary victory under her two inch combat boot heels.

The hairs on his bare arms prickled in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. Suddenly getting a flash – a memory – of little Kate Argent trailing happily behind Chris as they walked to the bus stop during their senior year. He could still picture her bubble gum pink high tops and.

How had it come to this?

How could someone become so warped?

"Oh, don't worry, your secret is safe. If there was one thing my big brother was good at it is keeping his mouth shut," she explained, body language promising far darker things than her tone let on as she leaned casually against the Berserker on her right, running her fingers over the yellowing bone with a distinctly satisfied air before dropping the bomb she'd clearly been holding on for effect. "Even when he was given...incentive to spill."

It wasn't a threat. It was a fact. A crime that had already been committed. And he hated everything about it. His hackles rose. Swallowing the growl that rose up as the urge to show her his teeth and force her to yield grew stronger by the second.

"I used to admire that about him, you know. That stubbornness? It's a family trait. We got it from our father. Shame my brother didn't inherit anything else worthwhile."

The radio sized lump in the pocket of his sweat pants and the faint scent of Chris were the only things keeping him grounded - focused. Forcing him to stay on topic as he strained his senses. Trying
to catch some sign that the others were almost done planting the charges. As it was he could barely sense Parrish, Deaton, Liam, Malia, and Scott closing the gap behind him. Staying out of range until the explosions went off.

*All he had to do was stall for time.*

*He could do this.*

"I've heard a lot about you too," he replied eventually, shrugging flippantly. Trying to think of happy thoughts. "The usual. Carnage. Blood. Murder. Badly thought out evil plots. Do you even have a license to drive an eighteen wheeler?"

She smiled silkily.

The expression would have been almost pretty if there had been an inch of warmth to it.

"In certain South American countries, probably about ten years ago," she admitted. Smoothing a hand down her red leather jacket in a way that on anyone else would have probably been fastidious. But on her it just smoothed the bumps around the congealed gun attached to her waist. All the way to the knives hidden in the sleeves. Showing him all the ways she could be killing him right now.

A year ago he would have been intimidated.

Today? Not so much.

*Oh, how time had flown.*

He wasn't worried about himself.

He was worried about Chris.

Chris was the only thing that mattered.

He hadn't known what he had to lose – *what was worth saving* - before Chris came along.

"Personally I'm surprised you survived the crash at all. But then again, you have a bad habit of doing that, don't you Bobby?" Kate remarked, before waving a hand dismissively. Like that part didn't actually interest her despite the clear tart of excitement that issued as she took him in from the grey of his sweat pants to the too tight wife-beater Deaton had tossed him before they'd piled into the vehicles and burned rubber out of the clinic parking lot.

"You know, when I say I know all about you, I actually do," she purred, cocky and challenging. But not bothering to set any bait. She didn't need to. He was her captive audience after all. "You should know that you were a bit of a conversation piece in our house for a while. You were pretty much the only thing my brother talked about the year we left Beacon Hills. He just couldn't figure you out. I guess he even tried to hate you for a while. Trying to make whatever he was feeling make sense, I guess. After we moved I thought that was the end of it, especially after Dad introduced Victoria and her family. I saw *that* coming a mile away. She was from an old hunting family same us, and both sides pulled the long con making sure they ended up together. But here you are, all those years later. Guess you guys were meant to be. Romantic, huh?"

"Where is Chris anyway?" he broke in, intercepting before she could dig a hole so deep they'd probably never find their way out of it. "The torture basement?"
She laughed, pleasantly pealed like she was talking about the fucking weather. "Big brother was a bit of a handful after he woke up so I had to put him in a time out. I have the boys watching over him now," she remarked, gesturing at the Berserkers flanked around her. "As you can see I'm a bit flush at the moment."

The Berserker on her left was so new he could smell the taint of human fear and regret.

Like at the last moment they'd tried to change their mind.

Terrified screams quickly suffocated under a new skin of yellowing bone.

"But I suppose it's only polite to show you the goods. He's undamaged, I promise. A bit groggy, but he'll heal up just fine in a couple of days. I'll even promise not to kill him for a while," she hummed with the air of bestowing a favor. "Think of it as a show of faith. I have something you want. You have something I want. Simple."

The force behind the snap of her fingers was jarring as she beckoned one of the Berserkers. "Bring my brother and tell the others it's time."

"What could I possibly have that you want, lady?" he snorted derisively, forgetting he was supposed to be making nice as his bullshit-o-meter hit maximum. Internally marveling on how much he'd grown as a person as the woods surrounding them actually did more to calm him than unnerved him like they used to.

"You know what I want!" she snapped, snarling as her eyes flashed yellow. Features twisting to feline before she forced them back. Losing her cool for the first time as he took a half-step back, hoping he looked sufficiently cowed.

'I really don't,' he thought silently.

They'd run through the basics on the drive. Derek had given him a list of the usual suspects. The popular theory was it was going to be the same shit she'd pulled on Derek before. Wanting a quick fix to her little control problem. Maybe with some creature-feature envy thrown into the mix. She wanted what he had, yadda yadda. He'd heard that particular sales pitch more than once. 

Get in line, crazypants.

"So, I imagine Scott and his little friends are sulking in the shadows?" she remarked conversationally as they waited. "Probably with some poorly thought out plan to finally be rid of me?"

"It isn't always about you, you know, he scolded, tone sing-song mocking as he arched an unimpressed brow at her. Hoping he was channeling at least a low level Derek-glare for dramatic effect. "We all have our issues. Personally, I think it's rude you're infringing on my adjustment time. Because frankly, if anyone has the right to get angsty about all this, it's me. This is all your fault, anyway."

A bubble of suppressed glee rose up as her lips thinned into an irritated line.

She liked to dish it out but she sure didn't like when it was served back, piping hot, did she?

"So, what's the deal, Bobby?" she posed, a fraction more aggressive than she'd been up until this point. "You wander in like a sacrificial lamb - a tasty little distraction while they march in with their best shot?"

"More or less," he replied with a shrug. Feigning nonchalance like a boss as his fingers itched to
"Perfect," she chirped, like it was excellent news and he'd just made her fucking day. Sounding like a soccer mom who'd just heard about a mega-sale at Target. Switching tracks on a dime as she—ugh, actually fucking winked at him. "It's high time someone cleans up shop around here. I think I'm going to give this town a bit of a spring cleaning—perhaps we should call it a culling. Beacon Hills is going to need a new alpha, after all."

Something shifted in his awareness when the sound of Chris' voice aired out close by. Making him grin savagely, listening without turning his head, as the man kicked out. Making another voice—angry and deep— rasp through the air with a bitten-off curse. Clearly still fighting despite the lingering chemical stink that hugged the fresh, angry-red track marks etched into the pale of the man's forearms.

*They'd been keeping him drugged.*

*No wonder he hadn't heard anything from Chris until now.*

*He was probably still high as a fuckin' kite!*

"This town is just full of sexual deviants. Alpha this, Omega that. The internet loves that shit you know?" he babbled, just running off at the mouth at this point. Trying to keep the distraction going. Knowing the whole thing was starting to wear thin when she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Whatever it is, it isn't going to work, you know," she told him, tossing back a thin curtain of dirty blond hair as she watched him watch her with a predatory glare. Telling him without words that he was in way over his head. That she was going to crush him. Use him. Then-

"Over confidence is considered to be one of the new deadly sins, you know," he slapped back, turning to look as the Berserker pushed through the trees with Chris in tow. Trailing a mish-mash of men of various ages, all in hunting gear.

He breathed in violence—love—as he found Chris through the mess of moving limbs and aggressive stances. Letting his eyes speak for him as the moment dragged in the best and worst of ways. Chris was beat up and gagged with his hands tied behind his back. His hair was slicked red on the right side, left cheek purpling up with a vicious looking bruise. But other than that he was alright. Better yet, he looked pissed. Blue eyes angry, but not leaving his once. Only looking away when the Berserker forced him to his knees in the dirt.

"Been recruiting, I see," he murmured after a beat, realizing with a start that the people who'd joined them were human. Regular fucking people. Unfuckingbelievable. "What did you tell them? One of us cheated on you? Maybe owes you money?"

"Oh, you mean these guys?" she said with a chuckle, gesturing as they filled the gaps between the Berserkers. "These guys are in it for the glory. They're trophy hunters, Bobby. I told them that after I have what I want, they can have you. The best challenge out there is hunting something that thinks. Something that can hunt you back. It's the ultimate experience. Believe me, I've tried it."

"Charming," he grimaced, Feeling like he'd just been read the sales pitch for a really shady vacation resort in the ass end of Mexico where people's side job included organ harvesting and kidnapping. "See that in a movie? Classic. Very original, Kate."

The hunting posse just stared back at him in a very nasty way.

*Ugh.*
Where did she even find these people anyway?

Christ.

"Tell me, Bobby. Really- I'm curious," she thrummed salaciously. Looking disgustingly smug as she gestured to the group ringed around them, then to him – alone. "You just waltz in here and what? What was the plan? You're outnumbered. There's no need to be wasteful. We can talk about this. Despite what they might have told you, I can be reasonable...if there is enough in it to make it worth my while."

The memory of the Lacrosse field was so visceral all he would have to do was close his eyes and he might as well have been back there. Back to the hazing fog, the mineral singe of expelled shot, the unearthly howls and snarls. It was all there. He carried it with him like a scar. A moment – no, the moment – his entire life had changed.

His teeth sharpened from behind the tight line of his lips.

Reasonable, his ass!

"Well, I kicked your ass the other two times, so I figured I'd go for a strike," he snarked, catching the tell-tale twitch of Chris' lips and the minute shake of his head. Able to guess what the man was thinking as he fought to keep a slightly manic, slightly hysterical grin off his face. Praying to whatever deity was currently listening that Chris was far enough away from the edge.

The radio in his pocket suddenly crackled static, clicking four sharp bursts. Just like they'd planned. That was the signal!

"What was that?" she demanded, head whipping up. Words laced with venomous suspicion as the hunters shifted uneasily. Somehow managing to express more individuality than ever as they peered from him to the treeline with various degrees of suspicion.

But he ignored them.

He wasn't one for speeches. Words were razor sharp trip-ups that could just as easily drown you than raise you up. Truth be told, he'd never really trusted them, especially when they came from him. Along with his inability not to be awkward in any and all social situations, the odds that whatever was coming out were the right words were not exactly in his favor. That was why he stuck with what he knew. His standard "Independence Day" speech at the start of the season. His 'buckle down, its final week you lazy brats' pep talk. Which was why it was kind of mind-blowing that right now, he knew exactly what to say.

"You know, Kate, you were right," he remarked quietly, lifting the radio slowly as the hunters raised their guns. Filling the windy clearing with the click-click of cocking barrels. "Our plan is shit. It's last minute and might not even work - and if it doesn't the next few minutes are going to be really awkward. But you know what? I have a feeling everything is going to work out just fine. You know why? Because if you were meant to win, you would have killed me on that field. But you didn't. And no matter how hard you try, you'll never win. Not against me. Scott. Derek. Chris. Because you're wrong and even the dirt under your feet knows it."

A cleansing hush of wind teased between his fingers like an elemental sigh. Something rock deep and seeped in mineral-carved time. Like an eon-long exhale that'd come from the earth itself, as a familiar surge of adrenaline soaked through him like flood waters on the rise.
"We both had a choice coming into this," he told her, shaking his head. Tiredly zen all of a sudden as he stared between her and Chris. Wondering how things had come down to this as the wind threatened to shift. Feeling a sad smile spread when he realized how fucking sad it all was. "You chose yourself. I chose him. That's the difference. That's the big secret. And it's the point you're never ever going to get."

Kate opened her mouth, canines sharpening into visible points. But he trundled right over the words that never made it out of her mouth. Finding Chris again the man sent him a tight little nod. Giving him the affirmation – the permission – he didn't know he'd been looking for before yelling "now!" into the radio and diving head first into the long grass.

The look on her face when the bombs went off was priceless.
The hunters that didn't go down with the cliff face, he ripped into. Shifting only partway due to the lack of space. Nothing more than a wild tangle of claws and teeth as he leapt out of the grass and slashed his way through. Exploding them from their skins. They reeked of rot and wet mush inside. Like they weren't really there. They were empty, hollowed out of every worthwhile feeling. Each and every one of them on par with the surviving Berserkers that weaved between them. So far removed from their natural parts that the world shuddered with disquiet the longer they breathed.

He was aware of the others flanking him, wielding long burning torches of mountain ash. Advancing steadily as he raked his claws deep into the closest Berserker, slamming another two off the cliff-edge as Kate screeched in anger. Wrecking all kinds of havoc he never knew could feel so cathartic as he carved a hole through their ranks - Scott and Derek fighting close behind him. They forced the last Berserker back towards the crumbling shale by sheer force. Slamming his fists against it's bony chest again and again until it stumbled, swiping out desperately. Still fighting even as it tumbled backwards into the yawning blackness.

He roared into the mist when one of the hunters embedded a load of shot into his back. Feeling it sting for a handful of seconds before he whirled around and grabbed the asshole's rifle by the barrel, ignoring the deafening blast as the man pulled the trigger again – frantic. Clawed hands ripping down the collar of the man's hunting jacket as he picked him up and threw him across the clearing. Taking down the last of the hunters in a gibbering pile that had them scrambling off into the forest, screaming their heads off. Funneling right back down to Deaton and Parrish who knocked them cold and had them in handcuffs quick as anything.

Now he just had to- "Stop!"

He looked up, tasting blood on his tongue. Every bone in his body going rigid when he realized she had Chris by the throat. Holding him up against the cliff-edge as she looked around the clearing frantically. Feline eyes scared and alone as the pack filled in the gaps, turning the tables so that it was her who was surrounded.

The too long silence stretched, then stretched some more.

"It's over, Kate," he told her quietly – gently even.

"It's never over," she hissed, claws tight against the tacky mess of partially congealed blood smeared across Chris' neck. Only getting more agitated when she looked down and realized Chris wasn't even looking at her. He was looking at him like the claws threatening his jugular didn't even matter.

*Chris.*

His eyes shuttered themselves as he breathed him in.

He wanted so much to be able to ask the man's permission.

To know that the man wouldn't blame him.
Was this okay?

After everything was said and done, would they be okay?

Would they-

"I didn't ask to be this!" she said desperately, eyes mad. Somewhere beyond manic, beyond predictable as the world started to feel a bit blurry from where he is standing. Existing somewhere in that weird, in between place of conflicting perspectives. Watching as the woman in front of him fractured in his mind's eye. Shifting to the bright little girl who'd liked her hair in pig tails and secretly wanted to be an actress.

"No, but you earned it through shitty karma," he pointed out, all but tipping off the continental shelf that seemed to exist between reality and sanity. Realizing that he could feel it. All of it. He could feel the pain in Chris' wrists and all the words the gag was keeping back. Worst of all, he could feel her. So far gone she already smelled acrid and partially decomposed. Quagmired in a pit of bone-deep exhaustion that hurt him even though it was second hand. Every part of her hurt. Her skin. Her eyes. She was aching – slurried.

This had to end. That was pity talking, not vengeance. Petty anger and violence weren't inherent to the animal underneath. But oddly enough, the capacity for empathy, even for someone like her, remained the same.

"I just need control," she whispered, more to herself than anything. Muttering under her breath as the wind whipped her hair everywhere. Not seeming to notice Chris struggling against her as the rocks under their feel shifted dangerously.

He went cold.

If she fell, she was going to take Chris with her.

He took an automatic step forward.

She hissed. Yowling low as her knife slithered out of her jacket cuff to play across the vulnerable pale of Chris' throat. Beauty and rage intertwining as his claws sunk into the meat of his palms.

"What do you think would happen if I turned him?" she asked, panting. Cutting a thin little scratch down the curve of Chris' earlobe. Watching the blood well up and slowly start to bleed.

"He would probably be very pissed off," he answered, inanely. Because sometimes sarcasm just wasn't something he could switch off. And honestly, it was probably true.

"If I made him, he would be mine," she murmured, like she was talking to herself again. Making absolutely zero sense and adding another horrifying level to the entire thing that shivered under his skin like someone was walking over his grave. "He'd have to help me. Help me get control. We're family. He would make people spill their secrets. Just like Dad."

"You could have him in your teeth and he would never be yours," he growled. Bleeding honesty out of every pore he had. Feeling saturated in it as a challenging hiss left her lips and the tension ramped up another notch.

He took another step forward. Jerking back automatically when she swiped out with her free hand. So close he could separate the wind parting around her claws. Feeling that thing again, the sensation that squared his shoulders and settled deep as a growl rose up from his throat. Eyes glinting dark and narrow-slitted as she slashed at him again. But rather than be intimidated he took another deliberate
step. Then another. Her claws were laughable against his and he let her know it. Snapping bloodstained teeth as Scott and Derek let go of an answering, vicious sound in the background. Showing her a nightmare of long incisors he could feel cutting into his lips as they grew. Dripping red down his chin as he let go of a challenging huff.

She hissed again, posturing. Baring her teeth as the wind whisked the clouds clear. Bathing them in the light of a sallow crescent moon as he tried to judge the space that remained between them.

*He just needed to get close enough to get Chris away from her.*

*But how?*

"Let him go, Kate," Derek said lowly, just off to his right. The picture of self-restraint as he looked at the person responsible for killing almost his entire family with what looked dangerously like sympathy. Like he was looking at an entirely different version of the girl he'd known as Scott nodded – eyes glowing Alpha-red as Lydia's suddenly went unfocused and distant on the other side of him. "It's not too late to walk away. Just let him go."

He looked up and found the answer unexpectedly in Chris’ eyes.

And oh-

Well, then.

All of a sudden he knew what to do.

*S'elf-sacrifice has never been something my sister has understood," Chris had admitted after a moment. "Even for something she believes in."

It was knee-jerk simple, really. One of those rare times where everything falls neatly into place. Getting to experience it a second time as the words the man said to him in his living room all those months ago brought everything back full circle.

Only Chris had decided he was going to be the one to take the fall.

And that was not happening.

Not now.

*Not ever.*

"Alright," he rasped, throat dry enough it actually made a clicking noise. Able to tell the exact moment her grip on Chris eased in surprise. Looking up at him as Derek and Scott turned the same way, faces frowning.

He didn't blame them.

This wasn't the plan.

But now it had to be.

There was no other option.

"I know what you want. I'll tell you how I did it – I'll show you if you want me to," he lied, words dangerously brittle as the realization proved ground across his skin. Knowing it was the right call even as something in the back of his mind started flat out *yelling*. "But it's going to be me for him,
understand? You let him go and I'll tell you how I did it. You'll get what you need, I promise."

Her expression was a hundred different versions of desperate suspicion. But in the end, desperation won out. Overriding common sense as Chris's face screamed a negative across from him. Pleading for him not to do it as Lydia jerked in place, eyes wide as the blood-shot whites seemed to go on forever.

Kate shoved Chris away, hard. Tossing him to the ground with punishing force as she lunged forward and hooked her claws into his shoulders. Raking them down as he swayed backwards, growling, letting their combined momentum rock them back towards the edge of the cliff.

*Almost.*

*Almost.*

*Just a few more meters.*

"You smell like him," she hissed, whispering in his ear like it was something filthy as he flinched away. Snapping his teeth as her claws dug in another inch. Burning like they had on the field. Threatening to poison him with the same sickness that'd rotted her to the core. "You've made him yours."

He was going to say something, something smart and probably a bit condescending, but instead, he found himself replying in kind. Gripping her by the arms before she could react and sinking his claws deep. World narrowing as she howled and tried to pull away. Eyes bulging comically wide as she realized how close to the edge they were.

He was able to watch her make the last big connection.

Seeing it dawn across her face like nothing in the world had prepared her for it.

Mouth opening, then closing as Chris warbled *his* name and not hers.

"I strip you of the powers nature gave you and return you to what you were," he gritted.

He wasn't sure where the words came from, but they felt right leaving him. Taking his natural place in the order of man and beasts as she thrashed like an animal caught in a trap. Eyes flashing like she knew as the ferocity in her eyes ramped up to match the adrenaline.

He looked over and found Chris again as the man wheezed from where Kate had thrown him. Clutching his ribs and curled in on himself, expression a rictus of self-loathing and desperation as blue eyes locked on his. *Knowing what he was about to do.* Screaming at him without words as he wondered if there was ever a good way to say this kind of sorry.

He had to force himself to look away in the end.

*This ended here.*

*One way or another.*

"What are you?!!" Kate hissed, yellow eyes piercing. Still looking for answers like a plunging fever. Empty and rageful as the others condensed around them, circling. Helping Chris out of the dirt as the realization that they were at end of the line lit up in the back of her angry yellow eyes.

"Right now?" he snarled. The muscles in his neck straining as he sunk his claws as deep as they
could go into her upper arms. Holding them poised on the very edge of the cliff, buffeted by wind howling up from the valley bottom as she yowled and struggled. Sinking her own claws into his chest. Carving him up as the ribbons of red healed before she could finish. Letting her see the futility of it before he caught her by the throat and growled.

"Grouchy," he finished. Jerking them forward and sending them careening over the edge before anyone could say so much as a word. Not realizing until the echoes reached him in mid-fall, that somewhere along the line, Lydia had started screaming.

Chapter End Notes

Reference:

- Lydia is a banshee.
They fell.

*Bobby fell.*

For a long moment that was the only reality there was.

The ghost of Kate's enraged scream lingered unnaturally.

Echoes rebounding in the mist.

A cracked note, like a surprised child.

An hours-late echo.

Bobby was damningly silent.

He wasn't sure which was worse.

All he knew was there was a crater collapsing in his chest.

Hollowing him out with a single swooping jerk that had him clutching at nothing.

Tasting iron-thick as his teeth sunk into the inside of his cheek to keep from screaming.

Bobby was gone.

She was gone.

It was over.

Everything was-

Air was punched back into his lungs without his consent when he registered hands gripping him from behind. Pulling him back. Yelling. Shouting. Confusion. Shock. It was only when Lydia hushed in beside him - filling the air with a thousand fractured scents of teenage girl that'd already faded from his apartment - that he realized he'd crawled to the edge of the cliff. Looking down into the misting dark like he could somehow reach him. Head spinning with vertigo as Bobby's name left his lips in a whisper.

Still, he tried to shake them off. Guttural sounds ripping up from the depths of his throat as he yanked himself away. But they were too strong. Too fast. Too worried about what he'd do if he had room to move and found some way to-

"We'll find him," Derek promised, eyes flashing as the kid gave him something to lean against.

Cutting through everything that threatened to ruin him completely as Derek forced him to look away
from the edge and see the surety in his eyes. "I promise we'll find him."

The first breath he forced himself to hiccup through was agonizing. So was the second and the third. Trying to formulate some sort of response before Scott hunkered down in front of him. Eyes glowing Alpha-red like a promise before they were replaced by warm, familiar brown.

"It's what we do, remember?" Scott reminded, firming his hand around his shoulder. Saying it quietly – delicately - like he wasn't sure he was allowed. The death knell of a fading mystery that'd cycled back to the start without him even realizing it.

*His family's words.*

*His grandfather's words.*

*His father's words.*

*Kate's words.*

*His words.*

*Allison's-*

All the fight drained out of him in a rush. Leaving him pale and shaking. Crushing him with infirmity as he remained where he was, wavering and weak. Legs giving out as the world spun too fast for him to follow. Feeling his stomach hitch, heart hammering madly in his chest like fear. Feeling like he was being torn in two separate directions as the skin pulled tight around his face, pressing like anti-gravity. Like he was caught in a current. *Flying.*

They caught him before he hit the ground, but somehow he still felt the impact.

"You're still here - still with us. So Bobby must be too," Deaton insisted as he examined him. Propped up in a chair at the clinic with a fluid drip and a nervous system so confused the only reason he knew up from down was because of the clock ticking on the wall beside him. Head spinning as he internalized that somewhere along the line he must have blacked out.

Or Bobby had.

Or-

"He is the strongest supernatural force I know of – perhaps even above the Nemeton itself. If anyone could survive that fall it's him."

'You don't know that,' a little voice hissed. The same one that'd told him he was weak. That he had nothing left. That he didn't want to fight anymore after Kate had bent the rebar in his chest and left him for dead in the tunnels. 'You can't know that. Not for sure.'

He reeled in place as the others circled restlessly. Liam, Parrish, Malia, Stiles, Scott, even the Sheriff joining them in staggered increments as he slowly tried to sit up on his own power. Every muscle in his body stiff and aching-sore. Almost like when Bobby had fallen, part of him had fallen too.

*And he had.*

*Bobby had disappeared over the edge the same moment he forgot how to breathe.*

*How to-"*
He blinked into the overhead lights. Trying to find the sun but getting blinded instead. Tongue roiling thick and oily in his mouth as he turned over the words Kate had spat at him in the woods before Bobby found him. Before a sudden curl of warmth had burst to life in his chest. The force of it making Kate falter when it reached his face and morphed into a fiercely knowing grin that was all teeth and nothing in the way of kindness.

"Poor little soldier boy. Whose war are you fighting for now, big brother? You need one, don't you? You always have. You need to be needed. You always needed a cause. I never did. I was stronger, better. Even when we were kids, I always saw the bigger picture. Don't you see?"

The worst part was it was true. Because in all the ways he'd never expected when this had started, somewhere along the line, Bobby had become his new code. He done it again. The same god damned thing he'd done with his family – his wife and daughter. He'd put all his eggs in one basket, thinking that at last he'd found a sure thing. Something unbreakable. Safe. But now-

It took him back to before the rebar. Before Parrish's determined face and the way Kate's cruel laugh lingered in the humid air.

'You want to kill me, Chris?'

'No. But I don't want to save you anymore. I don't know that you're worth saving.'

'Just like when we were kids. Always trying to make me the bad guy.'

'Allison died. She died to save her friends. Who would you die for?'

He'd felt every inch of it when Parrish had found him. Eyes ignited and painfully young while he just hung there in the sewers, wanting it to be over. Because before Bobby, that had been the secret. The final shameful entry in his heart's little black book. That he was done. That before Bobby, he'd just been going through the motions. Doing what people expected from him rather than what he felt.

"I've got nothing left"

After Alison he'd lost his fight.

Just like right now when he-

The open handed slap he took to the face caught him by surprise. Deafening the room as Derek loomed above him. Grounding him. Reeling him back as he tasted the tart of his own blood trickling down from the roof of his mouth. Feeling the punishing churn of anger and rage start to build as he looked up at him. Spitting out a mouthful like a curse as his hands curled into fists at his sides. Spoiling for a fight. Wanting it. Wanting to be numb. Wanting to be too tired – too broken – to feel anymore.

But most of all, wanting Bobby.

"You're a hunter," Derek growled, eyes glowing beta-blue but wreathed with something else. Something more. Something that reflected the same desperate longing he felt whenever he visited those two little graves in the cemetery. Turning it over and over in his mind as he thought about all the things he could have done differently. All the things he'd do right this time around, no matter the cost, if he had a second chance.

Only this time he did.

This time there was a second chance.
"-so hunt."
Outside of the changing of the seasons, time was an abstract concept to most animals. Time to wake. Time to eat. Time to mate. Time to kill. Time to sleep. Time for birth. Time for death. So when he woke up, sprawled and aching across the forest floor, muzzle twitching as the broken canopy wavered above, he reacted in kind.

He wandered aimlessly, detached from his human parts.

Allowing the animal to usher in.

Things were simpler that way.

Maybe not different.

But clean.

There were words. Thoughts. Emotions. Reactions. But they were all distant. Put firmly in their place as other needs - far more raw and honest - took priority. Like the ones that told him he was den-hungry and outside of his home-range. Setting him on edge as he surveyed his new territory and memorized its scent. Scratching his scent into the bark of the trees and the moss-softened corners of rocks and weed-choked gullies as he went. Unable to shake the feeling that something was missing.

Something important.

He scented the air, keen nose rifling out the smell of food. Dexterous claws sinking into the damp earth as he wandered into a nearby clearing and found the source of the strange smell. It wasn't his preferred food. Not the sweet grass, grubs and sour berries he could eat almost without stopping. But it was food.

He used his claws to shed it of its outsides. Ripping into its thin, pale-colored skin as bloody blonde fur wisped and flared like dying wheat in the growing breeze. He used his claws to dig out the choicest bits the foxes hadn't had a chance to snatch for themselves before he tore deep into the soft underbelly and ate his fill.

For a bear, winter was always coming.

One day he became aware of others. Wolves but not wolves and others that shared their scent. Animals that walked upright wearing outer skins like the she-cat. The one who'd tasted like anger and sickness as he'd stripped her down until the sun shone through her ribs and maggots churned in the parts he'd left behind. Cracking the bones against his back teeth for the sweet marrow as the foxes and crows waited their turn.

He was rolling in the long grass - mouthing at the sedge stems and flattening them into a comfortable bed - when they found him. Hesitating as the moist earth under their feet shifted and gave. Molding to their soles as nature kept her promise to support and care for all.

"Call Chris," the older he-wolf barked. "Deaton, Scott and Liam are on the next ridge."

"How?" the cub chirped, breathing hard as he plopped down on a fallen log. "Do you have a magical phone you haven't told me about? Because if you think I've been getting even so much as a single bar in over five days you're sorely-"
"The radio, Stiles," the wolf gritted.

"Ah, right. Okay, my bad."

The cub was a yearling. Annoying and needy. But he sat up regardless. Long claws scratching his belly as he let go of a wide, jaw cracking yawn. Lazily unconcerned as they moved closer. They were not a threat. But not prey either. His ears flickered, picking up the sound of more not-wolves deeper in the forest. It was a struggle to hold onto the slipping thoughts that whispered there was more to it than that. Confusion was not an animal emotion, yet the whispers were familiar.

"Oh- big teeth," the third commented, older and something else entirely. Something that scented like the dark singe of fire, cracking pine cones and the promise of the forest made new.

"Don't get too close, Parrish," another voice added, slightly out of breath as they climbed up a rocky outcropping beside the pond on the other side of the clearing. "We have no idea what state he's in after that fall. There could be no one home for all we know."

"I think it's alright, Sheriff," they replied, coming up to stand beside the wolf and he-cub. Watching him openly as he stared curiously back. Trying to place them. "He's still in there."

"How'd ya' figure that?" the he-cub asked, whining as the wolf half-dragged him down the rest of the ravine. Slumping exaggeratedly across a smooth span of rock worn where the river had raged high many springs ago. "The only reason we even know we have the right bear is that he's literally the biggest thing – minus maybe zoo Elephants - on the entire continent."

"We aren't dead yet," the older wolf returned - deadpan. Making the cub to roll his eyes. Clicking his tongue and shaking his head like he couldn't believe someone could be so moronic.

"Do you even know anything about bears? They're literally the laziest assholes on the planet. They spend all their time bulking up for winter. Expending their energy going after a set of toothpicks like us isn't even on their radar most of the time. Unless you're talking about getting between a sow and her cubs because that's just FUBAR in every possible way, and-"

_There was something niggling in the back of his mind._

_Burrowed deep like worm-addled wood._

_Something-_  

"Uh, hey Coach," the he-cub warbled, hauling a cooler across the uneven ground. Realizing that time had gotten away from him again as the cub set it down by the river-edge. "Great to see you by the way - still ticking and everything. Good job on that and you know- the whole Kate thing. I probably won't even complain next time you make us do suicide lunges. Well, much anyway."

_Animals didn't use words._

_But he understood._

_Not the context, but the meaning._

_It was a slow dawn, but it was there all the same._

_He looked up, watching the others as they milled and condensed. Scenting acrid concern and warm anxious tones that caught in the breeze and scattered like pollen._  _Self-multiplying and familiar._
"So, don't kill me, but I kind of had this idea when we were figuring out how to find you and get you out of here. We all thought it was pretty likely you'd be like this - all out of it and stuff. And I thought- hey, since you like fish we could bring you fish and I'm just going to dump this over here and shut up. And hopefully that will give Chris and Deaton time to get here."

The first name was familiar.

It cut through the haze.

But before he could follow it, the he-cub was talking again.

Nervous in its fur-less skins.

"So, you know, happy feasting and all that. Keep in mind there is absolutely nothing suspicious about this entire thing. Yep. No way," the cub stuttered, catching his full attention when he tipped the cooler and a swarm of writhing, red and silver shapes wisped into the shallows of the stagnant pond.

*Fish.*

This he knew.

This he understood.

He lumbered over to the edge to see the water teaming and alive with rich, fat salmon. Splashing around frantically in the still water as the silvery shapes coiled and collided. Running from his shadow. He spared a look back at the newcomers, curious again. Wondering with a mind he'd almost forgotten before making his way down the bank and into the water.

It wasn't time for fish.

The air was wrong.

The earth wasn't ready.

And yet-

His body was hollow, so he ate. Slapping fish from the shallows as they watched from the river bank. Occasionally pulling himself - dripping and wild-rank - from the water to approach the cubs with small fish to fit their blunt teeth. They touched him. Patting his dripping head. Letting him butt his head against theirs and stick his nose into all their hollows. Watching curiously as they made a fire in a dug-out pit and huddled around it. Filling the air with the smell of singed scales despite never bringing the fleshy meat their lips.

That meant something.

He wasn't sure what, but he knew it did.

The realization didn't come from his animal parts.

It came from somewhere else.

He snorted into the rich, raw meat as he fished out the spine with his dexterous claws.

Eating had never been so complicated.
He was lounging on the riverbank, sated and over-full when others arrived. He-cubs and she-cubs of all sorts. Nosily and loud and quietly earnest as they watched him closely. Clustering close around the first ones. Whispering like the buzz of a thousand sleepy bees.

He scented the air, interested as a new scent joined them.

It was almost overshadowed by the crowd until he caught it on a lilting note.

Inhaling deeply as it's rough sweetness made the skin under his skin itch.

"Did the sedative work?" one of them asked. Smelling of herbs and earthen hardness as he brought out a small kit and approached him slowly.

"Doubt it. I think he just ate himself stupid," Stiles remarked, snapping a willow branch back and forth like a whip. Watching the he-wolf through slitted eyes as he wiped out the cooler with a square of outer skin, similar to what they all wore. Eventually getting up to greet them as the air scented thick with pack and tension.

"Pity, I was hoping the new dose might have had some effect. I laced it with a very rare analgesic from South America," the man hummed thoughtfully, moving until he was a couple meters away before kneeling and unzipping his bag. Taking out a jar so pungent that he sneezed immediately. Letting go of a hoarse moan as he toppled over from where he'd been sunning himself. Startling the she-fox and youngest wolf cub into laughter as he huffed into the dirt. Covering his nose with one massive paw like he could block out the echoes of the scent.

The one who smelled like herbs and earth frowned into his bag.

"Dramatic as always, Mr. Finstock," he remarked crisply.

He clacked his teeth just as pointedly. But didn't back the threat up with anything else. Content to wait as they moved around him like a raven circling a carcass. They were different, but harmless. Familiar. Warm. Complicated.

He huffed.

Perhaps they had more fish?

"How are we going to do this?" a new voice asked, cutting through the baser rhythm he'd been living with since the clearing and the ache in his bones in the best possible way.

His head tipped up.

It was the voice that matched the interesting scent he'd caught earlier.

Something that smelled like salt, bruises and his.

"We got this far on the assumption that the sedative would relax his body chemistry enough for him to shift back naturally," the man with the bag answered. Slowly rising from his seat against the rocks and taking a careful step back as he rolled to his feet and shook his drying fur. Wanting to get closer. Wanting to understand.

"He sustained a serious injury, head trauma. This was his body's natural response to stimulate healing. It isn't uncommon for supernatural creatures to revert like this. The only problem is we know so little that it makes treatment difficult. The fact he survived the fall alone is an entirely different matter I doubt we'll ever get a satisfactory answer for."
The male who'd caught his attention sank down on his haunches as he lumbered forward. Shrugging off his jacket and setting his rifle aside with a deliberate exhale. Blue eyes watchful as the others ringed around them, shifting restlessly.

**Waiting.**

"Now, if we could get him back to the lab, I might be able to figure out how to help him. Or at least check in with Bethan. Without communication it's impossible to know what state he's in. We know in the past he's maintained reasoning and awareness. Lydia was able to explain his state in detail when they were chased by Kate's Berserkers. But with a head injury? The problem is we don't know the level of damage we're dealing with. We could stimulate what we need by administering a light sedative through you, as we did in the spirt walk. But Chris, you must be aware that-

The blue eyed man gave him a searching look, like he was remembering something half forgotten before looking up again. The corners of his mouth curling upwards. It was an expression. *An emotion.** Something that was not animal, but that he understood regardless. It wasn't a snarl or a growl. It was better. *More.* Something that settled deep like a full belly or the first stretch after a long winter holed up in the close-dark of a den.

"We don't need to," the man replied, straightening slowly as he planted his butt in the dirt and chuffed impatiently. Something in him growing strangely restless as a conflicting rush of wants and desires that made very little sense to his animal parts rushed through him.

The man had a name. He'd known it once. Before the ache in his bones and the unsettling twinge that still ricocheted between his eyes whenever he walked for too long without resting. The man had many names and he'd known them all. But it was more than that. Because every single one was *his.* He didn't understand. But he wanted-

"Leave me with him."

The air shifted.

"You sure?" the older one asked. The one with the tan outer skins and the sun-crinkled eyes. Smelling like the younger one standing nervously beside him.

"More sure than anything in my life," the man responded. Not taking his eyes off him as they stared at each other. Sharing a moment in the close space as a storm of fractured emotions - *sensations* - rippled through his mind's eye. Things that should have made no sense to the animal and yet-

"Bethan said I was his anchor. I think it's time I started acting like it."

He remained where he was, sitting upright and curious as the man approached.

"Hey you," the man whispered, moving firmly within reach as his scent condensed. Pleasurable and thick as he let go of an answering churl. Making the man smile as the tang of change – *Spring* - issued suddenly into the air. "You had me worried. We've been looking all over for you."

If you spend enough time in the forest you realize that much like the sky, the forest has moods. It talks without words and changes without warning. Like rain *pat-pat-pattering* across the leaves to a full out downpour, it has its own rules. Its own needs. An interconnectedness within itself that every organic thing alive and dead can sense. And right now, the forest was undeniably - unequivocally - holding its breath.

This feeling was familiar.
It had a name.

"It's time to come home, Bobby," the man murmured, reaching up so that strong fingers could knot themselves in his fur. Gently pulling him down so they were level as he traced a wondering hand underneath his jaw. Following the strong, muscled lines as he shifted back and forth with clear enjoyment. Scratching behind his ears as he pushed his face into the man's chest - determined to breathe him in. Butting against him as the man staggered back momentarily before pushing his weight back to meet him.

And after all that, it turned out to be simple.

Because the moment those soft hands stroked down his muzzle, everything surged back. Awareness returning slowly as he relearned what it meant to be both. To be who he was. To be every one of his parts. Melded. Blended. Whole.

He breathed in as the former and exhaled with his human skin. Crumpling down into the soft earth as Chris went with him. Naked in the reeds as he opened unfocused eyes. Dazed and weak as Chris smoothed back his hair and crooned softly into his skin. Cradling him as reality and conscious thought flowed back along with it. The rhythm of nature momentarily overrun in favor of a nervous system on the verge of collapse.

"Thank you," Chris said, gripping him fiercely. A hot mess of stress lines, exhaustion and old salt track-tears. "Thank you for doing what I couldn't."

They didn't say anything for a long time after that.

Instead, they just held each other and breathed.

Content to soak it in as the others gathered around.

A wreath of warm, familial joy that felt right where it'd settled in the center of his chest.

Luckily for them, as far as they knew, they probably had forever to enjoy it.
Chapter 40

In the end the Sheriff, Parrish and Mrs. McCall - who someone failed to tell him was in on the whole supernatural thing – pulled front page news out of their asses with relative ease. Managing to spin a story involving his wrecked car. Which had been left wedged halfway down a ravine, twisted and blood-stained, with its windshield blown out after he'd come to. Reporting that he'd been in some sort of freak accident – a hit and run. Surmising that he must have hit his head in the crash and wandered off into the woods, disoriented.

Personally, he would have lived to be a fly on the wall when all that scheming went down, because even he had to admit it was a good one. And he'd seen the pictures to prove it. Everyone said it was miracle he even survived the crash, let alone a week in the wilderness. And they weren't exactly wrong either.

He was in the hospital for week and a half. Because apparently almost dying twice in under two days took a lot out of you. Even if you were an indestructible killing machine. It didn't hurt that he'd certainly looked the part when he'd arrived. Even with his super healing, he was bruised from head to foot with micro-fractures galore. Sleeping for four days straight before he woke up for good and started making a nuisance of himself.

Chris never left. Not even when he thought he'd successfully kicked him out for the night to get some rest. Finding him dozing on one of those awful hospital chairs outside his door when he hauled himself out of bed to take a piss. It was nice, in a mildly creepy way.

He got get well cards from the kids by the bag full. Seriously, there were too many. His life was out of control. On top of that, there was a gift card from Natalie for ice cream and a horrendously expensive looking gift basket from Bethan that seemed to feature only salmon related products. He was smug for days. He even salvaged the embarrassingly sappy cards out of the garbage from Greenburg the moment the gang was out of the room in a fit of drug-addled emotion.

Despite being a bit more at peace with himself these days, he still had a reputation to protect.

With Mama McCall's help they managed to bust him out with copious 'Against Physician Recommendation' forms and not a small amount of charm before his next set of x-rays. Deciding that the world wasn't ready to face supernatural healing abilities just yet. Which was probably just as well because even Lydia was stumped on the level of imaginative bullshit they'd have to pull just to explain the basics.

After he'd been released from the hospital – demanding curb-side service home, if only to remind everyone that whining was basically his default mode - all he really wanted to do was crawl into bed and drag Chris with him. Instead, what he got was a house invasion on an apocalyptic scale that gave him flashbacks to the 'Night After,' also known as 'Kate: Part I,' where he'd waged some serious denial warfare – mostly by staring at his dirty carpet.

Oh well, at least he'd vacuumed a few times since then-ish.

Coincidentally that was around the same time Chris was introduced to pack piles by force. There was one near hostage situation involved fists and a quickly sheathed set of claws. But eventually Chris ended up tolerating it under extreme duress. Luckily he had the pictures to prove it thanks to Lydia who was even smarter and sneaker than he gave her credit for. Which was honestly probably the first mistake he was going to pay for when she became supreme overload of the universe or President of the United States. Whatever she got around to doing first.
He had the suspicion Chris didn't mind as much as he let on.

Because in the end, Derek and Scott had been right.

Wolf, bear, human or otherwise, they were pack.

And without getting sappy about it, he didn't exactly hate it either.

Everything, more or less, went back to normal.

Well, the Beacon Hills version of normal anyway.

Meaning there was at least one near apocalypse before the school year let out and he was already tired of being the Earth's bitch when it came to bailing the town out of the sort of trouble no one in their right mind would ever want to start. Things like soul-sucking vampire-vultures and some kid that came to school with an actual gun and really- he still woke up sometimes in a cold sweat thinking he'd missed grabbing the little shit before he did something literally everyone and their dog would regret.

But hey, that was life, he supposed.

The good, the bad, the handsome and the butt fuckin' ugly.

All in all, things were good as they started to settle down.

Normal.

And on the increasingly common occurrence where Chris slipped out of the shower without a towel and wandered around the house like the best Christmas present ever, things were kind of amazing. Like breathing pure oxygen or being stuck on a permanent high. But he supposed that was neither here nor there.

He was easy to please, what else could he say?

They asked Lydia and Stiles to be their Guardians in Beacon Hills and extended the same to Bethan across the pond. Sending the case back to London with Deaton for safe keeping. With Bethan promising to get back into touch with the bank that'd originally delivered it. Stowing it away with special instructions to only be released to the five of them if the need arose. He had a feeling it wouldn't - not for a long time - but then again he'd been wrong before.

Either way, he felt remarkably content about it when he finally got around to checking his email. Seeing the picture she'd sent as a kind of answer to the whole thing. It was her posed next to a dark-haired bean-pole of a kid, with strong shoulders and million watt smile. Looking like he was fresh out of college, with the Dean's Medal on his chest and the stack of textbooks labeled 'Advanced Bio-Chemistry' and 'Zoology' spread across the table beside him.

He'd swallowed the lump in his throat when he'd enlarged it, just to make sure.

The kid had his great grandfather's eyes.

Reggie would have gotten a kick out of that.

Either way the answer was clear. As people said, weirdness was a family business and Bethan seemed determined to keep it that way. He tried not to be pathetically grateful about it, but considering he was still paying for the whole arrow in the chest thing and-
Yeah, they were pathetically grateful.

So, weirdly enough, the world kept on spinning.

Which made sense considering the one thing he'd learned for sure so far was that endings were usually just very well guided beginnings.

Which is what they did.

They started again.

Together.

_Him and Chris._

He started thinking about a lot of things he'd never really cared about before. Adult stuff like 401K's and that four letter word he'd generally avoided up until now. Not to mention the tentative use of the word 'forever' that he was actually getting really invested about lately. Especially when Chris' name was used in the same sentence.

He was nothing if not disgustingly predictable.

"Would she understand?" he asked one night as they were getting ready for bed. "Allison, I mean?" Not entirely sure where the thought came from until it dawned. Leaving him hoarse and suddenly desperate for approval that was both impossible to get and selfish to ask for.

It took Chris a couple of beats to answer. Back knotting up as he sat down on the other side of the bed in a way that made him immediately regret asking. Kicking himself for ever saying that painful little name as the man bent down and slowly toed off his socks. Breathing through it the same way you did a sucker punch or a near miss around a corner sheeted with black ice.

"I think she'd call me a hypocrite, but yeah-" Chris replied, turning around to face him with the ghost of a smile playing on his face. "I think she would have."

It meant more than he thought it would.

And in true dorkish fashion, the adrenaline-infused relief that followed led right into another hormonal blitzkrieg. Snowballing into a surprise marriage proposal between tangled sheets when Chris decided to be insufferably smug about something. Nipping at his ear as the man remained splayed on top of him. Bickering along with him like the bad parts of the past few months had been nothing. It had been so stupid - _so natural_ - that he hadn't even second guessed himself until-

"I have my moments," Chris hummed in response to something he said, threatening tickling fingers as he caught his hand and brought it into the space between their chests. Stealing a sloppy kiss as he ran another down the curve of Chris' shoulders. Never getting tired of the play of muscles there.

_Everything about Chris was on a list of his favourite things._

_But his shoulders?_

_Yeah._

_He was weak for those babies._
"So do I," he retorted, sucking in a fractured breath before- "want to have them together?"

As far as proposals go, it was shit.

But he supposed that was the point.

When everything was said and done, it was them.

It was zero surprise to everybody who knew them, when a few months later they were seen sporting twin gold bands on their bling fingers. For a while it seemed like that was all people were talking about. Small town grape vine on overdrive. He figured someday they'd even make it official. Not with a wedding or anything, they were too old and cranky for that shit. But getting it down on paper? Well, there was something appealing about that.

There was one part they kept for themselves, though.

An inscription he'd engraved on the inside of both bands.

"Live a life to remember."

It was as chintzy as a Christmas-themed romantic-comedy, but he figured it stayed true to the point. Besides, he had a sneaking suspicion that someday those rings were going to make a trip across the pond and into a fifth compartment in Bethan’s briefcase. So maybe there was a reason for that.

The truth was, he wanted to start their next time around on the right foot.

He wanted those rings to be a reminder of this life and all the good that'd come from it.

Something to even out the score.

Depth over distance.

At the end of the day, a good memory was all he really asked.

Still, all that didn't stop him from dwelling on it every once and a while, in the privacy of his own mind. How everything had changed. How his life had changed. How he'd changed. It was crazy when you thought about it. Completely and utterly mental. Worse, he didn't regret a second of it. The good and the bad. He'd take it all any day of the week. He supposed that said something about him. Probably something masochistic and profoundly stupid.

"My life has gotten very strange," he told his ceiling one night a couple months after the cliff and the rings and Chris officially moving in. Growing forests in his bones as a wave of contentment fractured and broke over him in the best way. Unable stop the laugh when Chris just huffed and rolled over. Grumbling his way back to sleep – overwarm but sinfully comfortable as Chris snored into his hair. Lazy and stubbly and perhaps the best part of his forever.

The monsters would always be hungry. But as long as he had Chris he had a feeling he could more than live with that. And if they managed to pull a movie worthy Hail Mary and die with a smile on their faces this time around? Well, all the better.

Didn't seem like too much to ask, after all.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ironic thing about life was that like the seasons, *everything* had a cycle.

Birth and death.

Youth and wisdom.

Love and grief.

New life and the withering rot of advancing age.

It was recognizable no matter if it was in bird or beast, human or insect.

The cycle of life was the true ruler.

The world's only naturally crowned King.

It was a constant that was neither cruel nor kind.

*It simply was.*

So, when the young woman walking through the brush with a walking stick and mud-streaked hikers stumbled across a massive bear laying supine on the forest floor, somehow she didn't question the charge of recognition that rippled through her. Neither did she question it when she found herself hushing forward. Kneeling carefully at it's side as it's barrel chest – now thin and hollowed with age – rose and fell like a set of failing bellows. Breathing labored as it's eyes, milky and partially blind, wracked with the look of a creature who'd fallen ill very suddenly.

She caught her breath when black eyes eventually focused on her face. Wondering where all her fear had gone even as her hands shook in her lap. Trembling with an emotion she didn't understand as the willow wisps above her head bowed low like mourning.

The bear gave out a low call, as if in greeting. Moving its head so that it was cushioned in the soft moss. Looking up at her as the silence bled calm, casting an almost ethereal quality through the hollow that had her shuddering. Green eyes sheened with cresting tears as sadness, acceptance, love and hope gentled through her like water flowing over rock.

But they were not her emotions – her thoughts, her dreams.

*They were his.*

Somehow he was sharing them with her like last rites.

The start of a watery smile hitched in the corners as the faint thread of amusement wove between the individual strands. Like even now, this impossible creature had found something worth laughing about.

*That was all it took.*

*All the world had to give for her to remember.*
"Bear-bear," she whispered. Not understanding why the words needed to be said until they'd left her lips and the years rolled back. Ageless and shared in memory. Helping her recall the squalling cub she'd been, tucked safe in this very hollow. Whimpering for strong arms and a calming scent.

Tears streamed freely as she buried her face into his thick, age-dulled fur. Wanting to remember every inch of it as the massive bear let go of an affectionate huff. Looking up at her for a long moment before shifting with great effort. Reaching out so that it could curl a large, grey-streaked paw around her. Claws catching gently in the long river of red hair that still took hours to lay flat. Allowing her to follow suit as she carded her fingers through his fur and filled the quiet with murmurs and wordless songs. Holding each other until the rise and fall of the bear's great chest slowly gentled to a stop.

She stayed there for a long time, holding vigil to a death she didn't understand. A tremulous observer to the way the world seemed to exhale in chorus as a gentle wind wisped through her hair – bronze-cast in the dying light. Aware on some level that something momentous had taken place as another windless-gust caressed her cheek like a goodbye.

Everything gets a return.

Everything cycles back.

And someday, when she had a son of her own - dark haired and quietly loud. Coming into the world ass first, hollering and named after the man who'd saved her as a child, she would understand that.

The natural order was a metaphor for the way the world breathed.

*For the way it healed.*

And very soon it would be time to start that cycle anew.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Holy shit, guys. I hardly know what to say. It is over. It is finally over. This fic took over a year for me to write in total and was hugely agonized over almost every step of the way. I made a deal with myself when I started that I wouldn't start posting until I was either finished or very close to being finished and I am proud to say I mostly stuck to that. Even when I lost inspiration for months at a time and eventually gravitated back to it, the fact that I had all this work done and not posted drove me to pick it back up again and again. I just wanted to take a moment to thank everyone that came along on this little adventure with me, your support meant the world. Especially onedayyoujustchange, she was my cheerleader and my everything when it came to this fic. Thank you, darling! This was a huge learning experience for me. And I value it quite highly. – I am considering making this into a series. There were a few points in the story where I wanted to examine what Lydia/Parrish were up too, and Derek/Stiles, as well as some more Chris related oneshots, so stay tuned. So, once again, thank you from the bottom of my heart for being with me till the end, you're all stellar!

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