Pack Wars

by miss_aphelion

Summary

Scott liked to call it the Great Pack Divide of 2012.

Derek liked to call Scott an idiot.

(Or the one where Derek kidnaps Stiles to teach Scott a lesson, and ends up learning a few things himself)

Notes

I should really be working on my other series, but I read this prompt and it kind of ate my brain. I figured it was about time I wrote a bit of humor for this fandom, anyway.

WARNING: This story involves a somewhat light-hearted take on the very serious issue of a kidnapping. Stiles is never in any real danger and Derek's intentions are good (if a bit crazy), but Stiles is still being held against his will. So if that's triggery, you may want to skip this one.
The packs fall out after Jackson comes back to life. Stiles blames this mostly on Jackson, because it was their desire to stop him that brought them together, but seriously, who wanted to actually be in a pack with Jackson?

So Scott ends their temporary truce and they call it quits. Somehow, they end up with Isaac in the divorce. Stiles tries to rally for Lydia, but she remains stubbornly neutral, not even joining up with Jackson despite their renewed relationship.

It ends up three (two and half if you figure in that Stiles isn't a werewolf, but Stiles objects to that sort of biased accounting) to four once Erica and Boyd come crawling back (four and half if you count Derek's zombie uncle, but who does?). Not the best odds, really, but Stiles figures it only makes victory all the sweeter—and they almost always win.

The Alpha Pack? Yeah, that was all them, with a little help from Allison. Stiles figures Allison's help is okay though, because that just gives them even odds, even if Erica likes to call it cheating. Stiles was proud of his plan, which was beautiful in its simplicity. Scott and Isaac had corralled the Alpha pack where they wanted them, and Stiles had trapped them within a circle of mountain ash. Then Allison had loaded her crossbow and told them she could either pick them off one by one or they could leave and not come back.

Allison is sort of terrifying, so they understandably took Door #2.

Derek and Co. arrived five minutes later, angry at having missed out on the fun.

And thus the real war was begun.

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In retrospect, going after a Bunyip alone was probably not Stiles' finest moment.

He'd heard about the reports of drowning deaths from his father's police radio, and the circumstances had struck him as strange. He'd pulled up Google and the Bestiary and got to work. When he came across references to the evil water spirit from Aboriginal mythology, it seemed to fit the bill. He doesn't know what his life is that these wild guesses of his are right like 99% of the time.

He had called Scott, of course. Scott had given him some hurried account of being in the middle of something with Isaac and then had hung up. So nothing new there.

But the Bunyip waits for no man. There had been three deaths so far, always four days apart. Tonight was the fourth night since the last drowning, so Stiles had piled into his Jeep with a flashlight and the water goggles his father had bought him for his best-not-remembered try out for the swim team.

Now, as he jerks to the surface of the Preserve's river, struggling for breath, he thinks he probably should have tried to reach Isaac. Isaac wouldn't have hung up on him. Probably.

It's not that Stiles isn't capable, because he totally found the Bunyip. On the first try, even.

The problem with that was, he'd found the Bunyip.

Stiles tries to kick himself loose, but the Bunyip wraps its slippery, fin-like hands around his ankle.
and tugs him back beneath the water. With the moonlight giving the water a strange glow, the goggles provide him with a perfect view. Its strange, dog-like face looks sad, and Stiles feels a moment of pity for it just before the water washes over with red.

The Bunyip's grip loosens and there are suddenly arms around his waist, dragging him up from the water. Stiles gasps for breath, twisting in his captor's grip as he pulls the goggles off in a panic. Then he hears a gruff command, just a short, "stay still," and he relaxes even though he probably shouldn't find Derek's voice reassuring.

"You killed it," Stiles says, after Derek pulls him back on land. He moves the moment Derek releases him, leaning over the water to look down. Derek grabs him and drags him back.

"It's a Bunyip, Stiles. It was going to kill you," he growls.

"Right, I know. He was just sort of cute. He reminded me of my dog when I was a kid, Boba Fett," Stiles says, sighing heavily. "But thanks, I guess. For saving my life."

"This isn't—this isn't a game!" Derek narrows his eyes, and crosses his arms. "Where's the rest of your little pack?"

"Huh?" Stiles asks, glancing up. "Oh, I came alone."

"You came alone," Derek repeats slowly, sounding furious. Stiles doesn't really pay much attention to the tone, because Derek usually sounds furious. "Scott just let you come here by yourself?"

"Scott doesn't let me do anything," Stiles says. He shivers a little as the wind brushes his wet clothes across his skin. "Just who do you think is the one coming up with all the plans? I do whatever I want."

"No," Derek says, stubbornly setting his jaw. Stiles gapes at him for a moment. "What do you mean, no?" he asks.

"You don't go off alone," Derek growls. "That's the whole point of having a pack."

"Really? Well, where are the three musketeers then?" Stiles asks.

"Close enough they'd come if I called," Derek says. "Can you say the same?"

Stiles glares at him, but he can't think of good counter-argument for that. Scott's a lot of things, but the best phone conversationalist, he is not. Stiles has been hung up on more than once. He knows the answer to that question is probably no.

"Look, thanks for your help," Stiles says. "This round goes to you. But I've got to get home, my dad will be expecting me."

"Your dad's out of town for a conference in Napa," Derek says.

"You are such a creeper!" Stiles cries. "How do you even know that?"

"I'm done standing by while Scott screws around," Derek snaps, stalking closer to Stiles. He grabs his arm. "You're coming with me."

"What do you mean, I'm coming with you?" Stiles demands.

"Scott needs to learn how to take care of his pack," Derek says. "I'm going to teach him a lesson."
"How exactly?" he asks. "Because I'm wet and miserable and Scott's not exactly what I'd call a model student."

"I'm kidnapping you," Derek informs him. "For the greater good."

"I'm a little worried that you seem to believe what you're saying right now," Stiles says. "I was just almost drowned, hasn't my night been traumatic enough?"

"Do you promise never to involve yourself in these matters again?" Derek demands seriously.

"I'd like to," Stiles says. "But it would probably be an exercise in futility, since you'll know when I lie."

"Then I'm sorry, but I'm kidnapping you," Derek says, and then he grabs Stiles and throws him over his shoulder.

Stiles squawks in disbelief, angrily slapping Derek's back. "Put me down!" he demands.

"No," Derek says. "Consider this protective custody."

"Scott's going to notice I'm missing eventually," Stiles says, which is perhaps not as a good of an argument as it sounded in his head. He stops struggling with a sigh when Derek tightens his grip.

"This is totally breaking our unspoken non-interference pact."

"Non-interference?" Derek asks incredulously. "You idiots get yourselves involved in our business all the time."

"But not directly! We go behind your backs, that's totally different," Stiles says. "This is a declaration of war. Scott may be easily distracted, but he is loyal to the end! He'll come for me!"

"That's what I'm counting on," Derek says, and then he dumps Stiles unceremoniously into the trunk of the Camaro and locks him in.

"I would have rather spent my night with the Bunyip!" Stiles shouts angrily through the trunk.

Derek laughs as he slides into the driver's seat and takes off down the road, heading straight out of Beacon Hills.
Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the wonderful response! I'm so glad you're enjoying this so far, so I worked to get you this next bit as quickly as possible, even though I should probably not be posting when I'm this tired.

The first time they stop he kicks at the trunk and shouts for help. His only response is laughter. It sounds suspiciously like Erica.

The second time they stop, Stiles doesn't waste his breath. He feels along the floor before he reaches the edge of the carpet, and then he tears it up. He runs his hand along the exposed floor until his hand catches on the trunk release cable. Then he braces himself against the side of the trunk and pulls until it clicks.

"Yes," Stiles shouts, grinning as he crawls from the truck. It's still dark out, he thinks it's probably near midnight by now. He's in some parking lot he doesn't recognize, and with his usual luck (meaning, he can't tell if it's good or bad), there's no one else around. He glances towards the lights and sees a convenience store, which, seriously? Derek is stopping for snacks while he's locked in the trunk.

Stiles considers running for only a moment before climbing into the passenger seat with a sigh. He pulls down the visors and opens the glove box looking for Derek's phone, but he must have taken it with him. Stiles' own phone had suffered the same fate of his last one—he really needs to stop submerging his phones in water.

And also he should probably stop ending up in the water with Derek completely through happenstance. Cause how is that even a thing that happens more than once?

He hears Derek approach, and his frustrated muttering as he notices the state of his trunk. Then he's dropping into the driver's seat and glaring over at him. "Seriously?" he demands.

"My dad's a cop," Stiles says. "Most kids get a fifteen minute lecture on 'stranger danger,' I had a week long seminar on 'what to do if you're abducted by a crazy person.' At the time I thought it was overkill, but seriously, best class ever. Who knew there would be so much practical application?"

Derek just narrows his eyes at him, and Stiles takes advantage of his distraction to grab one of the Gatorades from his hands. "For me?" he says. "You shouldn't have."

"You're going to pay for that," Derek says tightly. "And for the damage to my car."

"Sure thing," Stiles says cheerfully. "Should I go ahead and make the check out care of the Beacon Hills County Jail?"

"You won't involve the police," Derek says, looking smug. "Because you won't want to involve your father."

"My dad's in Napa, remember?" Stiles asks. "And I know lots of other cops. I'm like their mascot."
They love me. You? Not so much. They still have your wanted poster up and everything. Though that's admittedly mostly because Maria thinks you're 'dreamy.'

Derek just rolls his eyes and starts up the car, pulling swiftly back out onto the road. "Why didn't you run?" he demands.

"You're a werewolf," Stiles says, and shrugs. "You probably would have just enjoyed that."

Derek's lips twitch, and he doesn't deny it.

"Anyway, I wouldn't have made it far on foot," Stiles says. "And I figured you'd kill me if I hotwired your car."

"You know how to hotwire a car?" Derek asks.

"Lydia showed me," Stiles says smugly.

"Lydia knows—no, wait, never mind. That isn't actually a surprise," Derek says. He glances over at Stiles with an odd expression. "I was going to let you out, you know. I just wanted to wait until we were out of Beacon Hills."

"What? Where the hell are we? You do know kidnapping is a felony, and crossing state-lines will bring the Feds down on you like the wrath of God, right?" Stiles asks.

"We're twenty miles outside of town," Derek says dryly. "I don't think the Feds will be a problem."

"I still can't believe you're taking this so far," Stiles says, rubbing at his damp clothes as he gets a chill.

Derek glances over at him quickly, and frowns. "I brought some dry clothes for you," he says. "They're in the back. Change before you catch pneumonia."

"You're just worried about your precious interior, aren't you?" Stiles demands.

"Yes," Derek says, tossing him a sharp grin. "So change."

Stiles gives a long suffering sigh, before unlatching his seatbelt and spilling into the back seat. He sits behind Derek, kneeing the back of the driver's seat on purpose more than once. Derek lets out a low growl, but doesn't say anything, and Stiles smirks.

He finds the bag of clothes and dumps it out, before frowning down at them. It's a dark grey Henley and a pair of black jeans, black boxer-briefs and black socks. It's basically a whole lot of black.

"These are your clothes," Stiles says.

"What, you wanted me to break into your place to grab you some things?" Derek demands.

"No, you're right," Stiles says. "Because that would be crossing the line."

Stiles isn't thrilled about this, but he is sort of freezing, so he shimmies out of his own wet jeans and boxers and quickly pulls on Derek's. They're a little big on him, but not so much that it's noticeable. He doesn't think Derek can see him where he's safely situated behind him, but he thinks he catches a flash of red in the rearview mirror.

Stiles throws off his ruined blazer and t-shirt and then drags the Henley over his head. "I feel like I'm gearing up for a heist," he says, looking down at himself in disbelief.
Derek just snorts, and then he's tossing his leather jacket behind him. It smacks Stiles in the chest. "Put that on too," he says.

Stiles gapes at it. "But this is your jacket," he says. "You're always wearing this jacket."

"Just put it on," Derek snaps. "You're still shivering."

"I know you don't have much experience at this," Stiles says, as he pulls the jacket on, "but just for the record you're making for a terrible kidnapper. You're not supposed to make me comfortable. The key is making your hostage uncomfortable. You were off to a solid start with throwing me in the trunk and all, very intimidating. I was even almost scared. Maybe even like, 98% irritated, and 2% scared. But now you're losing ground, bringing me Gatorade—"

"It was my Gatorade," Derek interrupts, but Stiles ignores him.

"And you brought me clothes, even if they are depressing. It's kind of pathetic actually; don't you know how to do this at all? Kidnappers are supposed to keep their victims isolated, and at a disadvantage. It's common to take pieces of clothing from them, especially their shoes, to make it harder for them to run away—"

"Good idea," Derek says. "Give me your shoes."

"What?" Stiles asks, as his brain finally catches up with his mouth and the impromptu crash course in hostage-taking he's been spouting out on automatic. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

"Now, Stiles," Derek says impatiently, holding out a hand.

"Aw, man," Stiles complains, as he grabs the shoes and shoves them irritably at Derek.

"Thank you," Derek says, before promptly rolling down his window and throwing the shoes out.

"Hey!" Stiles cries, spinning to watch as his poor shoes bounce out of the road into the gutter. "I loved those shoes!"

"You should be grateful," Derek says. "I'm leaving breadcrumbs. It's time to see just how good your 'alpha' really is."

"You suck," Stiles tells him, as he crawls back into the front seat, hitting Derek in the side with his knee with probably a bit more intent than can strictly be considered accidental.

"Seatbelt," Derek snaps, the moment he settles in.

Stiles wants to ignore him just to be contrary, but he doesn't actually want to end up back in the trunk, so he puts it on. "So what exactly is the plan here?" he asks. "This isn't one of those, 'let's take a drive' scenarios where I'm never seen again, is it?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Derek snaps. "I'm just taking you out of play."

"Taking me out of play?" Stiles echoes.

"Think of it like a game of Chess," Derek says. "You don't go after the King, he's useless. You take out the Queen, and your enemy's defenses fall apart."

"Are you seriously calling me a Queen?" Stiles asks.
"The Queen is your enemy's most dangerous piece," Derek says, his voice coiled like he's trying not to yell. "It was meant as a compliment. One I'm beginning to regret."

"Why do you keep calling us 'the enemy'?" Stiles asks, using air-quotes for emphasis. "Do you think Scott is your nemesis or something? Have you been planning his downfall? Oh my god!" He bursts out laughing. "Oh, god. This is hilarious. While we've been wasting our nights having Call of Duty marathons, you've been busy plotting world domination."

"Shut up," Derek says tightly, and it only makes Stiles laugh harder, because he's practically blushing.

"You do realize you sound like an insane person, right?" Stiles asks. "You know this is nuts?"

"Erica thought it was a great idea," Derek says.

"That in no way helps your case," Stiles says. "So what, your whole pack is in on this now?"

"Yes," Derek says. "They're going to meet us there."

"Meet us where?" Stiles demands.

"That's not important," Derek says, glancing over at him. "It's nice, don't worry."

"Don't worry, he says," Stiles snaps. "And just how long am I going to be your prisoner?"

"Just until Scott finds you," Derek says. "Or your father comes home from his conference. Whichever comes first."

"My dad doesn't get home for three days," Stiles protests. Derek bites back a grin. "You don't have a lot of faith in Scott, do you?" he asks.

"Of course I do," Stiles says. "No one believes in Scott so much as me. I know him better than anyone. Which means I know his strengths, and his limitations."

"One of his limitations being thinking of someone other than himself," Derek says.

"No, that's not," Stiles starts. "It's not like that. Scott's a good person, he has a good heart. He just… can't see the trees for the forest. Unless one of the trees is named Allison."

"Don't you think you deserve more than that?" Derek asks quietly. "If you were—" He breaks off, setting his jaw and tightening his hands around the steering wheel.

"If I was what?" Stiles asks.

Derek keeps his eyes on the road. "If you were in my pack, nobody would be able to steal you away in the middle of the night. I'd always know where you were."

"Well, I'm not in your pack," Stiles says tiredly, and leans his head against the window. "And Scott will come through in the end. He always does."

"We'll see," Derek says, and for some reason, he sounds almost sad.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Stiles somehow ends up masterminding his own kidnapping. These sorts of things never happened to Scott.

Derek parks in what looks like the middle of nowhere. Stiles had actually been kidding about the whole driving to a remote location where they’d never find his body, but he seriously couldn’t see anything but trees. And not just any trees. This place had thicker, taller trees than even the Preserve, and they looked suspiciously like redwoods.

"Are we in Arnold?" he demands, turning to glare at Derek.

Derek purses his lips, which means that Stiles is right and he doesn't want to acknowledge it.

Stiles groans and leans forward until his forehead hits the dashboard. "Oh my god," he says. "You said twenty miles."

"We were twenty miles away at the time," Derek says, pulling out the ignition key. "Arnold isn't that far. Scott should still be able to find you. Eventually."

"Why are we here?" Stiles demands. "We're not in the State Park are we? You're not dragging me off to some cave, are you? This is so not fair. I am not cut out for roughing it. I have a very selective type of agoraphobia. It sets in any time I'm too far away from a wireless hotspot."

"It's not a cave," Derek says, rolling his eyes as he opens the door. "Out."

Stiles sighs dramatically as he pushes himself out of the car. He looks up and the trees seem to be touching the sky. It makes him dizzy. "I had plans for tonight, you know," Stiles says. "I was going to crawl in bed and mainline the new season of Fringe."

"If I hadn't shown up, you'd be dead," Derek says easily. "Pretty sure this is still better than dead."

"Fair point," Stiles admits.

"Come on," Derek says, grabbing Stiles' arm to tug him along behind him.

"Hey, slow it down! You remember you threw away my shoes, right?" Stiles asks. "Ow. Ow. Ow."

"Do you want me to carry you again?" Derek asks.

"What? No!" Stiles says quickly. "I love walking over rocks and sticks and…whatever the hell that was, in nothing but your creepy borrowed socks. I'm totally fine. Super."

Derek grunts and then nods ahead of them. "We're almost there," he says. "I think you'll make it."

Stiles pulls to a sudden stop as the dark mass in front of them finally coalesces in his mind. It's still hard to make it out completely in the dark, but it's obvious now that it's a cabin. Not like a shanty, either, but one of those modern mansions made to look old-fashioned, built almost entirely out of
"Tell me we're not breaking into this place," Stiles says. "I don't want to have to add breaking and
entering to your growing list of crimes."

"We're not," Derek says gruffly, pulling out his keys and unlocking the door, like this is a perfectly
normal situation. "It was my parent's summer cabin."

"Summer cabin?" Stiles echoes. "This place is bigger than Jackson's house."

Stiles has to bite his tongue to keep himself from demanding to know just how much money Derek
actually has, because as irritated as he is he's not so cruel as to remind Derek of how he'd come into
it.

But it's not as though he can be expected not to comment at all."

"Seriously, you've been squatting in abandoned warehouses and rail cars, and this place is just sitting
here?" Stiles says. "What is wrong with you?"

Derek doesn't answer, he just reaches back to grab Stiles' by the wrist and tug him up the porch
steps, before ushering him inside. Derek hits the lights, and Stiles gapes as he glances around. The
ceilings are overly high and built of lightly colored unvarnished wood. The furniture is all covered in
white sheets, dust mites spinning through the air like glitter, but with a bit of cleaning its obvious the
place would make for a great feature in Better Homes and Gardens.

"So...do you have a PlayStation?" Stiles asks, to break the strange silence that had fallen over them.
Derek looks tense, coiled like a spring, and Stiles hates that he's feeling bad for him. He's the
kidnapped victim here, after all. It's not like he asked to be brought to this house, with all its ghosts.

"No," Derek says, kicking the door shut behind them before giving Stiles a push down the hall. "We
used to come here to get away from the rest of the world. There's not even a television."

"Uh, yeah, that doesn't really work for me," Stiles says. "I will literally go insane without some form
of entertainment. Not that you don't have your moments, I mean, that time you were throwing up
thick black gunk and I almost had to cut off your arm, great fun, honest, but let's face it, most of the
time you're about as expressive as a cardboard cut-out."

"You'll be staying here," Derek says, pushing him into a large bedroom, apparently perfectly content
to ignore everything Stiles says.

Stiles has to admit, it's pretty nice. It's about as big as his living room, with a queen-sized bed in the
center and a huge wooden trunk at the foot of it. There's a dresser on one side and a desk on the
other, and large curtained windows on every wall. There's even a full bath attached, he can see the
bathtub through the doorway.

When Derek had said, 'I'm kidnapping you' this is not where he'd imagined ending up. He thought
they'd just chill out at a Motel 6 for a while until Derek got bored or Stiles managed to slip out the
bathroom window and head for the hills.

As prisons went, this one was both very pretty and highly effective. Even if he still had his shoes,
he'd be lost in the trees surrounding this place in five minutes flat.

"Crap," he sighs.

Derek crosses his arms and leans against the doorway, not quite smiling, though the smugness is
practically rolling off him. He thinks he's clever.

Stiles gives him a tight grin of his own, and prepares to give him a reality check. He'll show him clever. "So, let's hear it," he says. "How's this going to go?"

Derek's smugness dims a little, and he straightens up. "I told you," he says. "You stay here until your father comes back or Scott finds you."

"Really?" Stiles says, laughing a little as he shakes his head. "That's all you've got? That's your entire plan?"

"I don't see any problems with it," Derek says defensively. "Why?"

"Well, uh, let's see. Just for starters, what about my dad? Because he's been calling the house line every night at curfew to make sure I'm there. It's like he doesn't trust me or something," Stiles says. "And my cell phone's had it, so he's not going to be able to reach me that way either. I know you think Scott is off in the clouds and won't even notice I'm gone, but my dad sure as hell will.

"Not to mention you don't seem to have thought of the possibility that Scott might not only notice I'm gone, but that he might tell his on and off again girlfriend of the raven-hair and bow and arrow that I've been kidnapped by your pack. It's not like Scott's never made deals with the Argents before, just saying.

"Not that I approve of your chosen course of action. Or like being thrown in a trunk, that while spacious, still sort of smells of the blood and sweat of the last guy you tossed in there. But if you're going to do this you should do it right, okay? Otherwise my dad is going to come hunt me down, SWATs going to be dropping down from the rafters, and it's just not going to be good for anyone."

Derek stares at him with a strange combination of annoyance and disbelief. "Is that all?" he asks.

"What, that little soliloquy?" Stiles asks. "That is just the beginning, buddy. It's only going to get worse. You know I have ADHD, right? And that I'm supposed to take Adderall for it so I don't go completely off the rails? Here's a spoiler alert: I haven't taken any since yesterday and I don't have any on me. You really didn't think this one through at all, did you?"

Derek just stares at him for a moment, looking kind of horrified at the possibility of Stiles becoming even more Stiles-ish. "I'll send someone to get your pills," he says finally. "Just tell me where they are."

"Yeah, because I really want you and your creepers-in-training going through my stuff," Stiles scoffs, turning to pull the white cover sheet off the bed. The bed is already made up beneath it, with a dark colored quilt of browns and purples and blues, and sheets beneath it that look brand new.

"Stiles," he says exasperatedly, "if you need it, I'll get it for you."

"It's fine," Stiles says. "I'm fine. That's like, the least of your worries, seriously. That's just a minor glitch in this mess of a plan. It's the huge, gaping holes in it that should be concerning you."

"Well, that's not your problem," Derek tells him tiredly. "Okay? The consequences will be down to me."

"That's very noble and all, but no, sorry, that's not how it works. This doesn't just effect you," Stiles says, and then runs a hand down his face. "What time is it?"

"Half past eleven," Derek says. "Why?"
"That's good, that's earlier than I thought," Stiles says, and holds out a hand. "Give me your phone."

Derek just raises an eyebrow at him, and Stiles makes an impatient grabby motion with his hand. "Come on! I'm not going to call Scott," Stiles says. "But unless you liked being a fugitive so much the last time that you thought you'd try it again, then I do need to call my dad."

Derek hands him the phone. "I'll know if you call Scott," he warns.

"Yeah, super hearing, blah blah blah," Stiles says. "I love Scott like a brother, but he would not be my one phone call in a dangerous situation anyway. I've made that mistake one too many times."

Stiles dials his father's number, and drops down to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Who is this?" his father answers gruffly.

"Hey, dad, hi, it's me," Stiles says. "I mean, Stiles. Your son."

"Stiles, where the hell have you been?" the Sheriff snaps. "I was about five minutes from calling the station and having them out looking for you."

"I know, sorry I missed the bed check," Stiles says. "I just…I didn't want to stay there alone, so Scott said I could stay over with him. We were playing some video games and just lost track of time, I guess."

"Why aren't you calling me from your phone?" the Sheriff asks.

"Uh, yeah, about that—" Stiles starts sheepishly.

"Not another one," the Sheriff sighs. "What the hell, kid?"

"Language," Stiles says. "Look, this is Scott's phone, so you can reach me here anytime, okay? Melissa said I could stay until you get back."

"I want to talk to her," he says.

"She isn't here," Stiles says. "She works the night shift, dad, you know that. You can talk to her when you get back if you don't believe me."

His father sighs. "I didn't mean—I just want to make sure you're okay."

"What, you think I'm not worried about you too?" Stiles asks. "You better be staying away from the curly fries."


Stiles hangs up and then glances over at Derek. Derek looks uncomfortable, and he's staring at his feet, like he's sorry he intruded. Stiles sighs. "There you go," he says. "I've gotten pretty good, huh? At lying to him?"

Derek purses his lips, and finally meets his gaze. "Thank you," he says. "For doing that."

"Yeah, well, I didn't do it for you," Stiles says. "You were right that I don't want my dad involved in this. Though I hope you realize I’m going to be grounded for life if I can't convince Melissa to lie for me once this is all over. And there's no guarantee that I can. She's been feeling more and more guilty
about lying to my dad."

"You're doing the right thing," Derek tells him. "He's safer if he doesn't know."

"You have to say that," Stiles says. "He'd drag you to prison if I'd told him the truth."

Derek tilts his head up, his eyes flashing briefly as he turns to the door. He flexes his hands once and then sends a sideways glance back at Stiles. "The others just pulled up," he says. "You should get some sleep."

Stiles just gives a nod and a half-shrug, and waits for Derek to leave.

"Stiles," Derek says pointedly, holding out a hand.

"What?" he asks.

Derek rolls his eyes and steps back towards him. "The phone, Stiles," he says.

Stiles mutters to himself and pulls the phone out of the pocket of the leather jacket, irritably slapping it into Derek's hand. "Fine," he snaps. "Who would I call, anyway, right?"

"Just get some sleep," Derek says, and slips from the room.

Stiles gets to his feet and tries the door, but it won't open. So he pulls Derek's stupid leather jacket off and angrily tosses it to the floor.

"Scott, you had better come," he whispers, and then falls backwards onto the bed.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Boyd takes to being a kidnapper the same way he took to being a werewolf—basically, with no discernible change at all.

Chapter Notes

Many many thanks to my new beta, The Once and Future Thing! Without whom I would probably still be agonizing over this part.

Stiles doesn't so much sleep as just lay there for a couple of hours, evaluating his life choices. He starts the night out by trying to convince himself this is no big thing, and what would he be doing at home anyway? His plan had been to watch Fringe, or possibly some Tenant era Doctor Who—and that would inevitably result in him leaving bizarre, incomprehensible messages on Scott's voicemail demanding to know why he had to die.

Which, you know, had been fine when the most exciting thing to ever happen to them had been the year Comic-Con was held two hours away, but with their lives now the last time he'd done it Scott had taken him literally and had shown up at three in the morning demanding to know who was dead.

Really Derek probably did him a favor, Stiles decides.

And then he's sort of horrified that he's apparently so desensitized to this kind of life that his kidnapping is more like a vacation or a celebrity's trip to rehab than a kidnapping, and he nearly has a panic attack.

He's just moved to sit on the floor, leaning his back against the bed and taking deep, gulping breaths when he hears someone walk in. He glances up and is surprised to see Boyd instead of Derek.

"Here," Boyd says, and holds out a water bottle. "Have a drink with me."

Stiles takes the bottle and Boyd drops down beside him. "Where's your ski mask?" Stiles asks him. "I'm not an idiot, you know. I know it means you're going to kill me when you let me see your faces."

Boyd just rolls his eyes, glancing sideways at him. "Stiles," he says. "You need to calm down. Your heart sounds like it's going haywire."

"Yeah, well, I've been kidnapped," Stiles says. "Abducted. Held hostage. It's all very traumatizing."

"Derek won't let anything happen to you." Boyd glances over at him, pulling one knee up against his chest as he pushes his other leg straight out in front of him. "He's a good man."

"You're his minion, you have to say that," Stiles protests. "Come on, Boyd. You're the sane one. I thought you were supposed to be the voice of reason."
"I think this is something that was going to happen eventually, in one form or another," Boyd says. "Our little war was bound to come to a head. This way, we might just make it out without bloodshed."

"Are you rhyming on purpose?" Stiles asks. "Or is it just superfluous?"

Boyd just raises an eyebrow at him, but doesn't rise to the bait. "You knew this was coming."

"No, not really," Stiles says. "I can honestly say I never imagined Derek tossing me into his trunk and then spiriting me away to his family's secluded cabin in the woods."

"You know what I mean," Boyd says.

"Right, a showdown." Stiles lets his head fall back against the bed. "The epic Derek Vs. Scott battle. Whatever, they can do what they want. I just didn't think I was going to end up the trophy."

Boyd laughs lightly. "Trophy," he says. "Yeah, that's a good way to state it. I wonder if you get how true that is?"

Stiles fiddles with the cap on the bottle, and shrugs. "Look, what does it even matter?" he asks. "Maybe it's best that I just sit it out here while they fight it out. Scott's been wanting to face off with Derek forever and idiot that I am, I've been talking him down from it like this could end some other way."

"I used to want to be like Scott, you know," Boyd says. Stiles huffs out a laugh and turns to look at him. "No, I did. He was like this huge shadow over us all. This shining example of control, of how we should be. Derek talked about Scott's pack all the time, used examples to teach us what to do. Laid out the strategies. And I thought, that's what I want to do."

"Why are you telling me this?" Stiles asks. "Are you trying to get into Scott's pack or something? Because you give me a ride out of here, buddy, and you are in." 

"No," Boyd says wryly. "I'm telling you this, because the man I thought Scott was doesn't exist. I mentioned one day that I wanted to be like him to Erica and she laughed at me. She said he wasn't behind any of that stuff Derek was always going on about, she said it was always you. Scott just leads the charge."

"So really," Stiles says smugly. "You want to be like me."

Boyd laughs. "No," he says. "I want to be the person you make Scott appear to be."

"Well, you may be in luck," Stiles says dryly, and takes a big gulp from the water bottle. "I may be looking to interview for new best friends."

Boyd sighs and shakes his head. "I think we both know that's never going to happen," he says. "It's always going to be you and Scott. Derek doesn't get that yet, but I've watched you guys for years. If Scott sometimes takes you for granted, you know that's only because he can't even imagine a world without you."

"You make us sound like the leads in some sort of Harlequin romance," Stiles says, scrunching up his face in distaste. "And no. Just no."

"You know that's not what I meant," Boyd says. "You guys are like platonic soulmates."

"I tried to explain that to Scott, once," Stiles says. "He wanted to know whether he was supposed to
be Pluto or Mickey in that analogy, and I nearly had to disown him on the spot."

"But you didn't," Boyd says knowingly, giving him a slight grin.

"No," Stiles agrees. "I told him he was Pluto."

Boyd laughs again, and Stiles watches him closely. He doesn't know much about Boyd, not really. He had some dealings with him at school before he was turned, but Boyd never let Stiles lead him into conversation. He always kept things strictly business.

He does know that during all of the increasing stakes of their little pack war, Boyd has always somehow managed to remain above it all and just a bit to the side.

"Why are you doing this?" Stiles asks quietly.

"He's my alpha," Boyd says softly.

"You've left him before," Stiles reminds him.

Boyd stiffens, but his expression doesn't change. "And I learn from my mistakes," he says.

"You know it's not right to keep me here," Stiles says. "Jackson and Erica probably find this whole thing hilarious, but you want to be a good man. You said so yourself."

"Yeah," Boyd says. "I think it's stupid. I told Derek as much."

"And what did he say?" Stiles asks.

"He told me I was going to do it anyway, and he was right," Boyd says. "You know you're not going to be hurt, Stiles. If Derek had been here when you were having your little panic attack earlier he probably would have rushed in to pack you off home himself."

"I'll have to have another one when he gets back then," Stile says, though he doesn't really believe it would work. "Where is he, by the way?"

"Out patrolling," Boyd says.

"Jackson and Erica?" Stiles asks casually.

"Derek sent them somewhere," Boyd says, and gives Stiles a look that means he knows exactly what Stiles is doing.

"So we're alone, then," Stiles says, grinning.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd think I was being propositioned," Boyd says dryly. "Actually, it's probably because I know you so well that I thought that at all."

Stiles rolls his eyes. "You know what I want," he says. "Come on. Help me make a break for it. Just slip me your keys. No one has to know."

"No," Boyd says, and his voice is level, but there's a finality to it that has Stiles' grin slipping. There's no negotiating with Boyd, he's tried before.

"Right, of course," Stiles says. "I just thought—"

"If I thought it would solve anything, I'd let you go, Derek be damned," Boyd interrupts. "But if you
"run, he'll only chase you. He's going to have to realize that he needs to let you go. Just…let him down easy, okay?"

"Let him down easy?" Stiles echoes. "I've been kidnapped! I'm the victim, here. What does that even mean in this sort of context?"

Boyd just shakes his head, as he gets to his feet. "If you haven't figured it out yet, then I can't help you," he says. "Let me know if you need anything else."

Then he's out the door, and Stiles hears him lock it behind him. "You're all whack-jobs," Stiles mutters, before taking another swig from the water bottle, and he knows Boyd can hear him. Stupid werewolves. They even take all the satisfaction away from the need to yell—they'll hear whispers just as well.

* * * * *

Stiles is sleeping on the floor when he hears a door slam. He jerks awake, cursing himself for having let down his guard. He knows from past experience that this is the beginning of Adderall withdrawal. Technically if he was only taking the pills as prescribed there shouldn't be any symptoms besides the return of his default setting of ADHD, but Stiles has been known to take two—or three—times the recommended dose when he needs a little extra focus.

And he'd taken maybe more than he should have the last few days while he was researching the Bunyip. Now he's crashing hard, right in the middle of enemy territory.

"What the hell happened to you?"

Stiles opens his mouth to respond before he realizes that the door to his room is still shut. The voice is traveling, very clearly, out from the vent beside the door.

Stiles snaps his mouth shut and then rests his face up against it.

"McCall is annoyingly strong," Erica says, sounding personally offended.

"I told you not to be seen," Derek snarls, and wow, he sounds pissed. Stiles grins, because Derek pissed always makes him happy. "What does McCall know? Does he know we have Stiles?"

"Well if he didn't, he does now," Jackson says dryly. "He wasn't exactly pleased to find Erica and I going through Stilinski's room."

Stiles narrows his eyes, biting his lip to keep himself from muttering about stupid, nosy sourwolves.

"Were you followed?" Derek demands.

"McCall and Lahey share a two-speed between them, I have a Porsche," Jackson says. "I didn't think that was even in question."

"They might have found Stiles' Jeep where he left it in the preserve," Derek says tightly. "McCall can be resourceful when he puts his mind to it. Do not underestimate him."

"Oh, come on," Erica says. "We all know he's useless without Stiles. Isaac might be able to figure this all out, but Isaac is probably just happy to have Scott to himself."

"He's not useless without Stiles," Derek says, and Stiles glares at the vent, because Scott actually sort of is, thank you very much. They always worked best together. "He's dangerous without Stiles. He
does things like make deals with the Argents when Stiles isn't there to talk him out of it, and that's the last thing we need."

"So then why are we doing this?" Jackson asks.

"Well, he wasn't supposed to know it was us until it was over," Derek snaps. "You weren't supposed to be seen. He might have gone days without figuring out where Stiles was."

"Aw," Erica drawls, following it up with a giggle. "And you didn't want him to. Stiles isn't a puppy, you know. You don't get to keep him."

Stiles hears Derek give a threatening growl, and then footsteps, so he quickly climbs to his feet and throws himself back on the bed. He doesn't bother to glance up when Derek lets himself in.

"What are you doing?" Derek asks quietly.

"Counting the ceiling tiles," Stiles says. "There's a hundred and eighty three, if you're curious."

"The ceiling is wood," Derek tells him, his voice almost concerned.

"Don't take this away from me," Stiles says, sitting up on his elbows. "I need something to occupy my mind."

"This might help," Derek says, and then he tosses something at him.

It lands on his chest with a dull thud, and Stiles glances down. He breaks out into a wide grin when he recognizes his Nintendo DS. "Oh, thank god," he says, kissing it dramatically before clutching it to his heart.

Derek gives a slight smile. "Thought you might want that," he says, before he tosses him something else. "And your pills."

"Okay, this almost makes up for the fact that you totally went through my stuff like a creeper even when I told you not to," Stiles says.

"I just thought you might need them," Derek says, hesitantly. "You were right. I didn't think this through, and I'm sorry. I'm not doing this to punish you."

"Right," Stiles says, setting the pills aside. "You're doing this to punish Scott. I get it."

"No, you don't," Derek says in frustration.

"Okay, you're right, I don't," Stiles says, sitting up and glaring at Derek. "So why don't you explain it to me?"

Derek pulls his gaze away. "Do you need anything?" he asks quietly.

"Seriously?" Stiles demands. "You're just going to—"

"There's nothing to talk about," Derek says gruffly. "It's only going to be a couple days."

"You say 'only' like it's no time at all," Stiles says. "But I could be stuck here three days. That's seventy-two hours of my life I can never get back. That's four thousand, three hundred and twenty minutes, and it's—well, I don't actually know how many seconds it would be, because I'd probably need a calculator for that. But it's a lot!"
"Two hundred fifty-nine thousand and two hundred," Derek says, and then he spins on his heel and marches towards the door. "I'll be here if you need me."

Stiles mouth falls open in disbelief for a moment before he finds his voice again. "I'd rather go back to counting the imaginary ceiling tiles!" he shouts after him.

Stiles glares at the door for a moment before reaching for his pill bottle, because if he's going to make it out of here, it'll be better if he can focus on the same thing for more than three minutes at a time.

He spills a couple of the pills into the palm of his hand and then goes still. He laughs incredulously and bites his lip before they hear, or figure out what they've done.

Because Stiles has repurposed a number of his old prescription bottles, and these capsules aren't the ones filled with Adderall.

They're the ones filled with mountain ash.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Stiles' plans hit a snag of leopard-print Stiletto proportions—and he recalls that while Batman and Catwoman often crossed paths, they rarely got along.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone for the great responses! This started out as kinkmeme crack fic that I was using for stress relief, but it's thanks to all of you that now there are feelings all over the place too.

Thanks again to The Once and Future Thing for the beta.

Stiles doesn't trust himself to make a move yet. His mind is overactive and sluggish by turns, and he knows he's only going to get one chance to get away. Mountain ash barriers are held up by belief, brought to life by a coherent stream of thought, and he's not sure he's capable of that at the moment.

He still doesn't know exactly how it works. Deaton likes to talk in pretty, flowery terms that mean absolutely nothing, like spark, belief, miracles. Basically, he's no help at all, and Stiles hasn't managed to track down any literature about it yet. The only references he's been able to find online refer to Rowan as a protective element against malevolent beings, and Stiles has written this off as useless since it also stops Scott, and he's about as far from malevolent as one can get.

So he's not sure how easy they are to bring down, once built, or if distance is a factor at all. If he gets a few miles away maybe it will crumble, and they'll be right on his tail.

He does know he needs to be smart if this going to work. He's accused Derek of not planning ahead about a hundred times since he got here, and he won't make the same mistake. He's going to wait for opportunity to present itself, and he's going to be ready when it does.

The first thing he does is lock himself in the small bathroom in the room, and empties the pills onto the bath mat. He breaks them open one by one to pour the mountain ash back into the bottle. His hands shake a little and he has to stop for a minute so he doesn't spill everything on the floor, taking a few steadying breaths before starting again.

There's not a lot of it, because Scott had only given him what was left after his little renegade move against Gerard Argent. But if Stiles does this right, he should be able to spread it as far as he needs.

He's just broken the last capsule and is literally sweeping the evidence under the rug when he hears the door start to rattle.

"What are you doing in there?" Erica's voice demands, and he hears her slap her hand impatiently against the door.
He twists the cap back on the bottle and looks at it carefully. He can no longer see the outline of the pills through it, but he can't quite make out the mountain ash either. Still, he won't be able to leave it out in plain sight.

"Stiles," Erica purrs through the door, and he knows she can break in easily. She could probably snap off the door handle in her hand with no trouble at all, so he doesn't have long.

"Just a second," he snaps, and shoves the bottle into his jeans pocket. He leans forward and opens the door. "What?"

Erica slinks forward, one hand traveling up the doorjamb as she runs her eyes over him with a smirk. "Watcha doin', Bambi?" she asks.

Stiles crosses his arms over his chest. "How did I get demoted from Batman to Bambi?" he asks.

Erica laughs brightly, and a little too intensely. "You are just too adorable, really," she says, before wrapping one hand in his Henley to drag him out of the bathroom. "Derek put me in charge of babysitting."

"What?" Stiles demands. He twists out of her grip so he can back up towards the bed. "Where's Derek? Or Boyd? Or Jackson, even?"

"Stiles, I'm hurt." Erica pouts dramatically and places a hand to her heart. "I thought we were friends."

The worst part is, they very nearly were. Somewhere between her braining him with his radiator and him holding her as Derek had broken her arm, they had reached some sort of truce. Then there was the basement, and the Alphas, and suddenly they were back on opposite sides.

"Friends don't let friends get kidnapped," Stiles tells her, and her grin tightens but doesn't slip.

"What were you doing in there anyway?" Erica asks shrewdly, though her voice trails off a little as she sees the outline of the pill bottle in his jeans. He thinks for a minute that she knows, somehow, but her expression actually softens. "Oh, right—well, look, whatever. At least you've got your pills now."

"What?" Stiles asks, wincing when his voice squeaks.

"The pills," Erica repeats dryly. "They are the right ones, aren't they? Derek should have thought to get them right away. But he doesn't get what it's like, to be human. I've been like this for less than a year and sometimes I forget myself."

"Yes," Stiles says quickly. "They were exactly what I needed."

It's not exactly a lie, so there's no telltale give in his heart.

"Good," Erica says, and then tosses her hair back like she's regretting showing concern. "I'd hate to have to deal with you when you aren't being medicated."

Erica reminds him of Lydia sometimes, the way she tries to use masks, but Lydia has a lifetime of practice and pretty much flawless control. Erica's trying to master the art of being Lydia with no background to fall back on, and it's fairly easy to see through the cracks.

And Stiles knows just where to put the pressure to break her mask apart. He doesn't even care that he's tipping his hand.
"What about you?" He turns away from her, pushing the bottle as far down into his pocket as it will go. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine," she says warily.

"Really?" Stiles asks, turning back to face her. "Because I know for a fact that Scott packs quite a punch. I mean, I've watched him take you down enough times. We both know you're no match for him, even with Jackson for back-up."

"Don't worry, we held our own," Erica laughs, but he can tell it's forced. "We brought you your things, didn't we? And it's not like Scott was prepared for us. Pretty sure he was just there raiding your video game cabinet when we found him."

"Scott and I have all the same games," Stiles says easily. "Like, exactly all of the same games, so we can play against each other online. So he was probably there looking for clues."

"Such faith," Erica says. "What makes you think you can count on him?"

"Because, unlike certain others, he's not the type to run the minute things get tough," he says. He knows he's gone too far the second her smile turns vicious. She looks like she had the first few days after she'd been turned—all her anger and power bottled up and nearly boiling over, like a powder keg.

They've never talked about what happened to them. They've never spoken about the electricity that had been a constant flow through her and Boyd, or the way he'd been beaten black and blue. The way he'd been taken for a drive and tossed out onto the street in front of Scott's house, or that she and Boyd had been set free only to start running again.

Ignoring things always seems like such a great idea in theory, but really it never makes it better. It just makes the memory stay in your mind exactly as you left it last.

"Erica," Stiles starts, not sure if he wants to apologize, or just try and get her to leave. She doesn't give him the chance to decide. She reaches out and pushes him back onto the bed, one hand bunched up in his shirt, her razor-sharp nails just shy of breaking through to his skin.

"You don't actually think Scott cares about you, do you?" she asks, laughing that manic little giggle of hers. It reminds him of some sort of cartoon character—Betty Boop, with claws. "Sure, you were alright when you were the only friend he could get, but he's one of us now. He's popular, and you're still the same sad, desperate geek that you've always been."

"I thought you were past the psycho bitch phase," Stiles says, and he hates the catch in his voice, because he knows Erica won't miss it. He can feel his heart going into overdrive, and he pushes himself back further across the bed. Erica just crawls up after him until she's practically straddling his lap.

"Derek's doing this to teach him a lesson, right?" she asks. "But what if it's not the one that you think? What if what he really wants to show Scott is just how very easy it is to do without you?"

Stiles' breath catches again and then Erica is pulling him up against her, curving her head around until she's close enough to whisper in his ear. "What are you going to do, when he doesn't come for you?"

Stiles slips one hand between them, his fingers curling around the top of the prescription bottle. "Get away from me," he warns, and his voice is quiet, but this time it stays steady.
"Is that really what you want?" Erica asks seductively. "Because I bet if you asked really really nicely, we'd take you in."

He's a moment away from twisting the cap off the bottle when Erica is dragged away from him. It happens so quickly he doesn't understand it at first—one moment she's so close he can feel her breath, and the next she's slamming into the opposite wall.

Then there's Derek, from out of nowhere, standing between them.

"Out," Derek roars, and it's his alpha voice, the one that sent a newly turned Isaac from wolf back into terrified sixteen year old in under ten seconds flat. It's no less effective on Erica, who flinches and lets out a sound suspiciously like a whimper, before pushing to her feet and fleeing from the room.

Stiles doesn't even get to have one second to be relieved and Derek is in front of him, dragging him to his feet, glaring at him like this is his fault.

"You were scared of her," Derek says.

"No, I wasn't," Stiles protests immediately. "Not remotely. Not even. And wow, seriously? Way to blame the victim. I practically get mauled by your she-wolf and I don't even get a, 'hey, are you okay?' I don't even—"

"Don't lie to me," Derek snaps. "You were scared of her."

"See, you say that, but polygraphs have at least a 4% margin of error," Stiles says, trying to slip around Derek. "And I'm pretty sure that carries over into werewolves."

"Why would you be scared of her?" Derek asks, backing Stiles up against the wall before he manages to get around him. "You're not even scared of me."

"Yeah, well, you mostly just threaten to hurt me, you're not so great with the follow through," Stiles says. "Except for the time with the steering wheel, but I was kind of pimping you out, so I sort of did deserve it and I—"

"What did she do?" Derek demands. He reaches out and grabs Stiles' jaw, surprisingly gentle, and forces him to meet his eyes. He lets go the moment Stiles returns his gaze. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought it was on your say-so," Stiles shrugs. "I always kind of think of you like the suave reincarnation of Eric Von Zipper from Beach Blanket Bingo, imperiously handing out orders to your Rat Pack. Of course in that scenario I think Scott is Frankie Avalon and I'm Annette Funicello, and that doesn't really bear thinking about."

Derek stares at him blankly. "What?"

"It's a movie from the 1960's," Stiles says, waving a hand dismissively. "It's before your time."

"Stiles," Derek says, with that special tone of frustration he seems to save up just for him. "She was just supposed to distract you."

"Well, she did it brilliantly," Stiles tells him. "I was distracted for about half an hour, laying unconscious in a dumpster. So kudos on your leadership. It's a great gang you've got here. You're quite the shining example for young Scott."

Derek's eyes bleed red for a moment, before he blinks it away. "It won't happen again," he says
"You're not going to, like, kill her, are you?" Stiles asks hesitantly.

Derek rolls his eyes. "No, Stiles, I'm not going to kill her," he says. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I don't know!" Stiles says defensively. "That just seems to be your default plan of action. Is it a problem? Let's kill it! Not that I'm saying it's not effective. I was totally on board with killing Jackson. Best plan ever. But I kind of still like Erica, even though she hates me now."

"She doesn't hate you," Derek says slowly. "She just wants you in our pack."

"Right." Stiles laughs incredulously. "Well, she's got a funny way of showing it."

"I'll talk to her," Derek says, and then he steps away, looking strangely uncomfortable. He glances down at his feet. "Are you hungry? I'll make Erica go get whatever you want."

"Because that will make this all better," Stiles says.

Derek just stares back, unimpressed. "Is there anything that would?" he asks, though it's obviously meant to be rhetorical, and not like he's opening up the floor for suggestions.

But Stiles has never met a rhetorical question he didn't have an answer for.

"Yes!" Stiles says. "Yes, there is something you can do. You can let me the hell out of here. Because this is enough, okay, this has gone far enough."

"There's a pretty good hamburger place a mile up the road," Derek says. Because Derek, conversely, has never had any problems pretending everything that Stiles says is rhetorical. "I think they have curly fries."

"I'm not hungry," Stiles says, and it's mostly true. But only mostly, because actually he's starving, it's just that the thought of food at the moment is sort of horrifying.

"Are you sick?" Derek asks, frowning slightly as he leans closer again.

"Hey! Hey, personal space!" Stiles cries, sidestepping the nosy werewolf. "I'm not sick. I just don't want anything from you, okay? So why don't you just go have one of your utterly pointless scrimmages with your bounders as you're wont to do." Stiles frowns as he reviews his strange choice of vernacular. "And no, I don't know why I sound like a British professor all the sudden, but you should probably just go."

"You need to eat something," Derek says, which might have sounded almost concerned, considerate even, except that the werewolf is glaring at him the entire time like Stiles has somehow insulted him personally. Which, okay, Stiles sort of has, but still.

"Oh my god," Stiles shouts. "I don't want your stupid curly fries, okay? And that's like, sacrilege for me to say that, but it's the truth. So just leave me alone!"

"Fine," Derek snarls, as he heads to the door. "You can starve, then. See if I care." Derek slams the door behind him without looking back once. Stiles follows and lets out a sound of frustration when he hears the lock click.

"I hope you know you sound like you're running lines from The Beauty and the Beast!," Stiles
shouts after him. He presses his eyes shut for a moment and then slams a fist angrily against the locked door, before spinning around and resting back against it, slipping down it until he's sitting on the floor.

He's exhausted and so fed up with all of this. He can feel his heart pick up and works to steady his breathing, not wanting to alert Derek to his distress and risk being forced to face him again.

He can't deal with stupid Derek Hale right now. He's not even sure whether it matters if Scott is looking for him anymore or not. Maybe he's just stalking Allison on Facebook, leaving sad pathetic little messages on her phone. And that's fine. Stiles doesn't care.

He just wants to be left alone, and for one insane moment he considers wasting his chance. He rubs his thumb across the pill bottle and imagines barricading himself in here where none of them could reach him. He could just stay here until it's over, and he wouldn't have to deal with any of this anymore.

He could do it, too. He could totally give up. It would be so easy to do, except that his father has taught him better than that—and Stilinskis don't quit. So Stiles pulls the pill bottle out of his pocket. He's not going to give in, because no matter how much he wants to, he's through being benched.

He's getting out of here.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It's strange that Jackson is the one he's the least afraid of, considering the years of bullying in their pasts, considering the kanima, but it's the truth—because Jackson, he understands, and Stiles has always been far more afraid of the unknown.

Chapter Notes

So I'm not even sure if I can call this just a humor fic anymore. I don't know what happened to my silly little fluff piece, but it has officially been overrun by feelings and drama. Hopefully the humor's still in there, too, though! Thanks to TOAFT for helping me sort this part out, all remaining inconsistencies and/or mistakes are my own.

Stiles' plan begins to come together the minute he hears Derek and Erica shouting at each other through the vent. Divide the ranks—it's a totally classic move, and Stiles had accomplished it without even meaning to.

"I barely touched him," Erica insists. "I didn't think it would do that much damage."

"He's human," Derek yells. "If you knock him out and leave him, he doesn't just get better. You could have killed him."

"I didn't—I wouldn't do that, I swear, I only—" Erica cries.

"Boyd, just get her out of here," Derek snarls. "Now."

Stiles doesn't have the super-hearing, but even he can follow the available auditory clues to figure out what happens next. He hears the frantic shuffle of Boyd ushering Erica out the doors, the thrum of his engine as he roars them out into the road.

"Watch him," Derek snaps, presumably at Jackson. And after a moment, he hears the door slamming again.

Stiles grins and pushes himself to his feet, because then there was one.

Stiles feels energized now that he has a plan in sight, and he haphazardly spills about half the mountain ash into the palm of one hand, before putting the rest back in the bottle and returning it to his pocket.

He knows better than to get overconfident, however. Jackson might be the easiest to manipulate, but Jackson's also the least likely to care enough about him to bother to unlock the door and check on him. Stiles doubts whether Jackson would come check on him even if he started screaming and pounding on the door.
Jackson only does things for Jackson, so the key here is taking advantage of his werewolf powers to drive him completely insane.

He starts out singing *100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall*, but seamlessly switches over to the *The Song that Never Ends* once he reaches about eighty bottles of beer, just to change things up. The fourth time he's doing the chorus he starts shouting loud enough that he's a little surprised he doesn't break the mirror.

All and all, it's only about seven minutes before Jackson is slamming the door open to glare at him.

"Stilinski, I will kill you," he snarls.

"Oh, hey, Jackson," Stiles says pleasantly. "I didn't realize you were here. Did you want to join in? We could have a sing-a-long!"

"No," Jackson says tightly. "And if you don't shut the hell up, I'm going to duct tape your mouth shut."

"Wow, nice use of verbification there," Stiles says.

"What?" Jackson demands.

"You know, using duct tape as a verb—look, whatever, that doesn't matter," Stiles says. "You probably didn't even do it on purpose."

"You think I'm an idiot, don't you?" Jackson asks, stomping into the room.

Stiles doesn't, actually, but that had been exactly what he meant to imply. There was a reason Lydia had dumbed herself down for years—Jackson had an inexplicable inferiority complex about eight hundred miles wide.

Stiles backs away, allowing his heartbeat to ratchet up so Jackson will think he's scared of him. The anxiety isn't actually faked, because everything depends on him getting Jackson corralled into just the right place. He needs to make sure that he and the door are on one side of the barrier he's going to create, with Jackson well contained on the other.

"I didn't say that," Stiles says.

"You know, I may not get a 110% on everything like you and Lydia, but I get straight As too," Jackson snaps. "I'm not stupid."

"Is that supposed to impress me?" Stiles asks. "That you're smart enough to know better doesn't get you as many points as you seem to think." Stiles backs up until he hits the wall, and watches Jackson get closer. "That only means you're an asshole totally by choice and not just another victim of our ever declining educational system, which sort of just makes you even more of an asshole."

"You can't even insult me like a normal person, can you? God, you're so weird," Jackson says, but now he looks almost amused, which Stiles isn't going for at all. He crosses his arms, and doesn't step closer the way Stiles needs him to. "Why don't you just shut up, before I really do go find the duct tape?"

"You always resort to violence. I mean, it's fine being a bully now, you're king of the hill, but this sort of thing never pans out after high school," Stiles tells him, his voice taking on a false sweetness he'd learned from Lydia, so it was sure to get under Jackson's skin. "What about college? Are you really going to keep this up? I guess you could always join a fraternity. Then you'll probably be fine"
for another four years."

"See, right there, Stilinski," Jackson snarls. "You're still trying to hold me to a normal standard. I'm a werewolf, I'm never going to be some past their peak jock you get to reign over at our ten year reunion. I am always going to be this. Always."

"I'm not arguing with you," Stiles says. "I just think it's sad that you're probably right."

Jackson's eyes narrow. "You don't know a thing about me."

"Seriously?" Stiles laughs. "You're going to act like I don't know you? Jackson, we've been going to the same schools since kindergarten. You've been pushing me around almost as long. So yeah, sure, maybe you've got hidden depth, maybe you're just a poor little rich boy and I should pity you. But I never said I was a good person, and I don't want to waste my time on someone like you."

"Then why did you help save me?" Jackson asks, and the question throws Stiles for a moment, because it seems almost sincere.

"For Scott, and for Lydia," Stiles says.

"I don't believe you," Jackson says. "You would have saved me anyway. You would have bitched the whole time, but you would have done it."

Stiles finds himself in the bizarre position of hoping that Jackson is right, but he's not actually sure if that's true. If Scott hadn't convinced him, if Lydia hadn't convinced him, at best Stiles might have stood back to let nature take its course, and at worst he would have helped Derek stop Jackson for good.

"You wouldn't have done it for me," Stiles says, because that much, at least, he knows for certain.

"I probably wouldn't have," Jackson agrees. "But maybe I've changed more than you think. And maybe you're not as useless as I always thought, but you'd still be better off with us. You'd be stronger as part of our pack."

Stiles just watches him for a moment, trying to put himself in Jackson's place. The thing he hates most about Jackson is that he's not as different from him as he'd like to think—they both love the people they love, and to hell with anyone else.

He tries to think what benefit Jackson might get from him joining his pack, and it doesn't take long to arrive at the one thing they have in common—their love of Lydia. Stiles' love of her has leveled out, morphed into something almost mutual, a kind of friendship he's not sure he'd risk now even for a chance of something more.

"You think if I join you, Lydia will follow," Stiles realizes. She's been trying her best not to get involved, but she's been leaning towards Stiles' pack, because of Stiles and Allison. Stiles knows that unless Jackson were in immediate danger, she was far more likely to help him than Jackson. Because Jackson is with Peter, if only tangentially, and Lydia won't help Peter if she can help it.

If Stiles and Jackson were both on the same side, she would probably follow. It wasn't actually all that bad of a plan.

"For some reason, she seems to have gotten attached to you," Jackson says scathingly.

"She is," Stiles agrees. "We get together every Friday now to watch Gossip Girl reruns and talk about boys."
"I honestly can't tell if that's sarcasm or not," Jackson says.

"It's about half and half," Stiles says. "I bet she wouldn't be too happy with you, if she knew you'd helped kidnap me."

"She's not going to find out," Jackson snarls, stalking closer.

"Right," Stiles says, drawing out the word. "She's not going to find my body? Because that's about the only thing that'll keep me from telling her. I made a promise to her that I'd be honest from now on, and I like to keep *my* promises."

"If you think you're going to get Lydia by ratting me out—" Jackson says.

"If you think simply telling her the truth gives me even a chance in hell of accomplishing that," Stiles says, "then I think you're the one with the problems."

"Lydia and I are doing fine," Jackson snaps.

"Oh, come on! We both know that it isn't true," Stiles says. "She doesn't like you being in this pack. She doesn't like you near Peter. She doesn't want anything to do with any of it, and you're stuck because it's not the sort of club you can walk away from, and you'd be even more screwed than you already are if you went omega."

"She understands why I choose to be in this pack," Jackson says.

"Does she?" Stiles asks. "And does she understand why you asked for this in the first place? And dropped her the moment you got it? I realize you had that whole beautiful love conquers all moment, and I got the message, I know I never stood a chance. So you don't have to worry about me, but if you think when you were cured it fixed *everything*, then maybe you really are stupid."

Jackson hasn't noticed the subtle herding, but he's already moved half across the room. Stiles is up against the wall beside the bathroom, and Jackson is standing right in front of it. Stiles isn't heartless, after all, and he's not sure how long Jackson will be trapped. The least he can do is make sure he has all the amenities.

Jackson's temper finally wins out and he makes a move towards Stiles. He doesn't get very far, because Stiles lets the mountain ash spill through his fingers to the floor. Stiles presses his eyes shut and wills the barrier into a curved line, a perfect half-arch around Jackson.

Stiles pulls his eyes open again just in time to see Jackson get knocked backwards into the doorway by the force of the forming barrier.

"What the hell—" Jackson looks up at him in disbelief for a moment before he spots the mountain ash barrier caging him in.

Jackson pushes to his feet and slams up against the barrier instantly, but it holds. Stiles laughs as Jackson leans against the invisible wall. "You know what, Jackson, if the fraternity thing doesn't pan out, you might have a future in miming."

Jackson snarls. "Let me out, right now, Stilinski."

"No," Stiles says simply. "That's not how this is going to go."

Stiles pushes off the wall, circling around the barrier, while being careful to stay well outside of it.
"You're not calling the shots anymore," he says. "It's time for my list of demands."

"You've lost your mind," Jackson says. "Derek's going to murder you."

Stiles is smart enough to worry about what Derek might do to him, but he still has half his mountain ash and he's not actually concerned about any real physical harm. Derek's threats hardly even register with him anymore. He actually sort of finds the whole 'rip out your throat, with my teeth' thing sort of adorable these days.

The whole overbearing caveman routine that had resulted in him getting tossed in a trunk, however, was not so amusing. Stiles will totally trap Derek's werewolf ass in a circle of mountain ash if it comes down to it.

"Let's be quick then, huh?" Stiles says. "Firstly, I'm gonna need the keys to your Porsche."

Jackson stares at him for a moment, before he bursts out laughing. "Yeah, sure," he says. "Why don't you just come in here and get them?"

"Because I'd rather you toss them out here to me," Stiles says.

"And why would I ever do that?" Jackson demands.

"Well, if you don't," Stiles says, grinning widely, "I'm going to put Lydia's ten minute crash course in hot-wiring to the test with your fifty-thousand dollar car."

Jackson goes slightly pale. "You're not serious."

"I'm absolutely serious," Stiles says. "I think I could do it. I mean, it'll be fun to try anyway. Of course, it'll probably cause a lot of damage, whether I get it to work or not, and didn't you say your father was going to make you pay for any future repairs yourself after the 'Troll Incident'? You had to tell him you hit a telephone pole if I recall correctly, and he wasn't exactly pleased."

Jackson glares at him, looking like he'd like to get his hands on him. Stiles isn't so delusional as to think he would be even half this brave without the mountain ash between them, but between them it is, and he's going to take full advantage.

"You are right about one thing, though, Derek will probably be back soon, so I'd rather have the keys," Stiles says. "But that's up to you."

Jackson curses again, glaring at the floor for a moment before dragging the keys out of his pocket and tossing them at Stiles' feet. Stiles leans down to pick them up. "I'm also going to need your wallet and phone," he says casually. "Oh, and your shoes."

"You have got to be kidding me," Jackson says in disbelief.

"If I was kidding, you would know, because it would be funny as hell," Stiles says. "I know this is a rare occasion, but this is actually me being deadly serious. So if you want to ever see your precious car again, you're going to do exactly as I say."

Jackson just glares at him mutinously, so Stiles provides him some further incentive. "Otherwise," he says, drawing the word out dramatically, "it's going to meet an untimely end off the edge of a ravine, a la Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

"You wouldn't," Jackson says.
"I've had a really bad couple of days, and you've been making my life hell for years," Stiles says. "I don't think you really want to test me on this."

Jackson tosses out his wallet and phone, a little harder than necessary, so Stiles scrambles to grab the phone and make sure it hasn't cracked. Jackson then proceeds to angrily toe off his shoes and throw them at him. Stiles has a brief but horrible flashback to their dodge ball years, but manages to keep the shoes from hitting anything vital.

"You're going to pay for this, Stiles, I hope you know that," Jackson says.

"In case you've forgotten, you kidnapped me," Stiles says. "When I did that to you, you had a restraining order filed against me. And we both know that I had way more honorable intentions than you, so you should be grateful this is all I'm doing to you. You're getting off easy."

Stiles tries to force Jackson's shoes on, but he feels like one of the evil step-sisters in Cinderella trying to force on a glass slipper. It just won't fit. "Oh my god," he complains. "Why must you have freakish tiny dancer feet?"

"Hey!" Jackson protests. "I do not."

Stiles gives up on the shoes and stands, pushing Jackson's wallet into his back pocket. "Well, I'd say it's been fun, except it's you," Stiles says. "Your pack should be able to toss food over the barrier, so you won't starve, and also, you have the bathroom right there! So everything you could ever need. Enjoy the rest of your life here."

"Stiles, wait, seriously, think this through," Jackson says, and he sounds like he's actually panicking. "You're going to try and drive my Porsche without even wearing shoes? You barely managed to handle it the last time, you really are going to send it over a ravine—and you're going to be in it when it goes over."

"If I didn't know better I'd say you were concerned," Stiles says.

"I am," Jackson snarls. "Because Derek and Lydia will kill me if I let anything happen to you. Look, just let me out. I'll drive you home myself."

"Yeah, sure. How gullible do you think I am?" Stiles snorts. "The one advantage I have over you is the mountain ash. You're nuts if you think I'll let you out." He reaches over and grabs his Nintendo DS off the bed, because he's not gonna leave a man behind. "And I'm not letting you stall me until Derek gets back, either, but nice try."

"Stiles!" Jackson calls after him, but Stiles doesn't look back again. He heads straight to the front door and pushes outside, surprised to see how bright it is. He checks Jackson's phone, and it says it's only four o'clock. He's obviously lost all sense of time, because he thought it was at least eight or nine.

The sun catches him off guard, and he has to lean back against the door for a moment, pressing his eyes shut even though it doesn't help much. The light burns straight through his eyelids. It's all making him dizzy and light-headed after being locked up in that house so long, but he doesn't have the time to let himself adjust. He pushes off the porch and then carefully makes his way to the Porsche.

He hears Jackson's howl just as he drops into the driver's seat. "Shit, shit," Stiles mutters, his hands shaking as he jams the key into the ignition.

It doesn't matter how far Derek has gone, there's no way he hasn't heard that, and Stiles knows just
how very fast Derek is. He starts up the car and slams on the gas, nearly stalling out as he shifts gears and pulls out onto the road. He can hear Derek's answering howl sound behind him, loud enough it echoes through his bones, but he keeps going.

Stiles reaches over and activates the GPS the moment he's safely on the main road, and a cheery voice greets him. "Please state your destination."

"Beacon Hills," Stiles says.

"Beacon Hills, California. Seventy-five point eight miles from current location," the computer reports. "You are going in the wrong direction. Turn at the next right."

Stiles sees the small, abandoned road to his right and just keeps going. There's no way he's stopping there, it looks like the turn off they took in Rest Stop. His hands are shaking slightly on the wheel and he takes a deep breath, trying to get a hold on himself. This car could spin out at the slightest touch. It's a far cry from his Jeep, which usually requires him to turn the wheel nearly all the way around just to make a forty-five degree turn.

"Recalculating. You are going the wrong direction," the computer announces. "Turn off at the next right."

"Yeah yeah, not now," Stiles snaps, glancing in the rearview, half expecting to see Derek running after him right down the middle of the road.

"Recalculating—"

Stiles slams his hand down on the console, switching the GPS off, because there's no way he's turning around right now. These back roads are narrow, and he doesn't think he has enough space between him and Derek to be able to do it without getting himself caught. There has to be a town center up there somewhere, with a freeway entrance. He's just got to keep moving forward.

Stiles lets the comforting hum of the engine lull him in, and he starts to get the appeal of these types of cars. He would never choose something this flashy over his Jeep, because his loyalty cannot be bought, but it doesn't mean he can't enjoy it while it lasts.

Unfortunately, it doesn't last long. He's just getting his bearings when an entire herd of deer comes rushing out of the tree line and straight in front of him. Stiles jerks at the wheel, and then it's like he's an air hockey puck, effortlessly sliding across the asphalt and straight off the edge of the road, puttering over the dirt and mud for a few feet before the car stalls and slams to a stop.

Stiles flies forward into the steering wheel despite the seat belt, which tries valiantly enough to stop him. He clutches a hand to the belt as he sits back again, gasping because it knocked the wind out of him. He knows he's going to have a bruise across his chest from the seatbelt, and when he glances up into the mirror he can already see the right side of his forehead changing color, spreading out almost to his eye.

"Worst getaway ever," he mutters. He glances back anxiously before trying to get the car started, but it only sputters and then dies again. He doesn't think it's too damaged, but it probably needs a tow. Or, you know, a werewolf to drag it single-handedly back out onto the road.

Neither of which is going to work for him, so he unlocks the seatbelt and stumbles out of the car. He glances down the road and spots a little diner not too far away, with a large, unlit neon sign towering twenty feet in the air proclaiming it as Mike's Place.

Stiles spins back around as another howl echoes through the trees, and that's when he realizes what
sent those deer running out into the road. They sensed the new predator in the woods, and had the
good sense to run. Stiles decides to follow their lead. He swallows tightly and looks back towards the
diner. It isn't so far he can't make it on foot even without shoes, it's just a matter of whether or not he
can make it there before Derek makes it to him.

He decides to walk on the asphalt instead of the dirt, which could be hiding any number of horribly
unhygienic things, like broken glass or used smack syringes, but even with staying on the mostly
smooth road he's still limping by the time he makes it to the diner. He's definitely got blisters on his
feet, which starts him humming *Another Day In Paradise*.

Then he has to make a mental note to stop comparing himself to fictional women, especially down-
on-their-luck transients from Phil Collins' songs and Disney princesses.

He comes to a stop in front of the diner and stares at the 'No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service', sign for
three whole minutes before pulling Derek's too long jeans down over his black socks and deciding its
not too noticeable. He slinks inside and slides into the first open booth, before folding his arms on the
table and dropping his head down on them with a groan.

He just wants to go to sleep for about five years, but he only gets about sixty seconds before there's a
hesitant tap on his shoulder and he jerks up straight. He blinks for a moment until the woman at his
side coalesces, and he can make out the cheery 'Hello, my name is Marge!' tag pinned to her apron.

"You in some kind of trouble, sweetie?" Marge asks softly, which reminds Stiles that he is actually in
a public place, and should probably be putting some effort into acting like a normal person.

"No," Stiles says, and laughs awkwardly. He pulls his hands under the counter so she won't see them
shake. "I'm fine. Really. Totally fine."

"You here alone?" she asks, glancing back towards the windows, obviously doing a quick
assessment of the cars in the lot. Stiles knows exactly how small towns work, having grown up in
one, but this is a tourist hot-spot. He doubts she's going to recognize every single one. "No parents?"

"Nope, just me," Stiles says, clearing his throat because wow, he sounded about thirteen right there.
"I'm on a road trip, checking out a few colleges. Just graduated high school, you know."

"Okay," she says, while eyeing him skeptically, so Stiles is pretty sure he still can't lie convincingly
even to ordinary people. "What can I get you, then?"

"Just a Coke," he tells her.

"Coming right up, hon," she says, still looking suspicious.

Stiles keeps an eye on her as she walks towards the kitchen, because she's pinging all of his good
Samaritan alerts. It usually wouldn't be much of an issue, because generally he likes good
Samaritans, but he's a bruised up sixteen year old without any shoes, and she's got that mothering
look like she wants to bundle him up and make it all better.

He has to get out of here before he draws any more attention to himself, and preferably before Derek
finds him. He suspects this is the much-lauded diner of the 'pretty good' curly fries, so it's not like
he's going to be impossible to find.

He pulls out Jackson's phone, hesitating for a moment before entering that number he knows by heart
and hardly ever dares to dial. He feels the waitress's intense gaze on him as he waits for an answer,
and lets out a breath of relief when the call finally picks up.
"Hey, it's Stiles. I'm stuck in Arnold, at some diner called Mike's Place," he says, swallowing hard. "Can you come pick me up?"

Chapter End Notes

This wasn't where I was planning to leave this part, but it ended up going on and on like Stiles' rendition of the never ending song, and eventually I just had to just pick a point and stop. I'll try to have the next half of this section up within a week or so, but my life has been a bit crazy this last week so I've unfortunately fallen a bit behind.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Derek terrifies Stiles even now, though the reasons why keep changing on him and he's not quite sure he understands them all himself.

Chapter Notes

Where has all the humor gone? It's been overtaken by feels. This chapter is the most serious so far, and I don't know how this story became this long, serious thing when it was supposed to be short and crack, but there you go. I blame you all for your awesome feedback and questions and suggestions that got me plotting.

And many many thanks to TOFT, for pulling through with a last minute beta so I could have this up for the weekend.

"This is Scott, you can uh, go ahead and leave a—oh hey, Allison, wait up!"

Stiles rolls his eyes as Scott's voicemail melodrama plays out, ending with the sound of rustling clothes as he goes chasing after Allison and forgets he's even recording. Scott hasn't been able to figure a way back in to fix the message, and Stiles has been putting off doing it for him because he finds it amusing.

Of course, it's less amusing at the moment than it had been three weeks ago.

Stiles drops Jackson's phone back to the table without bothering to leave a message, and tells himself it's fine. He's already managed to get himself a ride home, so he doesn't need Scott. Not to mention he figured a way out of Derek's creepy cabin all on his own, and really, that's probably better. Maybe Derek's pack will learn not to mess with him because of him, instead of worrying about what Scott may or may not do.

He's really going to have to start carrying mountain ash around with him. The werewolves never seem to know it's there until it's too late, and while Stiles has liked to believe in the past there's no need for him to fight against any of them, it's obviously not the case. He knows he's at a disadvantage, so he needs all the help he can get.

He hears the sound of the bell as the door opens, and all the hairs on the back of his neck lift up. He turns slowly to look behind him and Derek comes walking in like he's just stepped out of a Calvin Klein ad—he's wearing dark brown aviator sunglasses that don't quite hide the spark of red when their eyes meet.

Stiles sighs and slouches back in the seat, returning his attention to his straw wrapper. Derek slides into the booth across from him, and clasps his hands on the table. Stiles can tell from the fake, wide smile, that's really more a baring of his teeth, that he isn't pleased.
"Check mate," Stiles says in greeting, and raises his Coke to him. 

Derek raises an eyebrow. "How do you figure?" he asks, leaning across the table. "You think anyone could stop me if I reached over to drag you out of here?"

"I think I could stop you," Stiles says, and sucks down a large sip of soda. "If you so much as make a move to touch me, I'll trap you in this booth indefinitely with the last of my mountain ash."

Derek glares at him, but relaxes in his seat. "Where the hell did you even get your hands on mountain ash?" he demands.

"You brought it to me," Stiles says. "It was in the pill bottle."

"It was—" Derek's expression goes stern. "If that was in the bottle, then when was the last time you took your Adderall?"

Stiles shrugs. "It doesn't matter," he says. "It's a little late for you to be worrying about that now, anyway, don't you think?"

"I've been worrying about it since you mentioned it," Derek hisses, moving to lean across the table, just a little closer than Stiles is strictly comfortable with. If Derek gets hold of him, he's not sure whether or not he can use the mountain ash to break them apart. "It's why I sent Erica and Jackson to get your pills in the first place. I didn't realize you'd have decoys stashed around your room, but I guess I should have."

"Yeah, actually, you probably should have," Stiles agrees. "I told you it wasn't a good idea for you to go through my things. Never know what you might find."

"Speaking of things I've found," Derek says dryly, pushing back again. "I found Jackson's Porsche stalled out on the side of the road. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"He's just lucky I didn't push it over a cliff," Stiles tells him.

"You're lucky you didn't go over a cliff. You shouldn't have been driving," Derek says, and though his tone remains restrained, Stiles' doesn't miss another flash of red in his eyes.

"Yeah, well, you shouldn't have put me in your trunk," Stiles says.

Derek's jaw sets, and Stiles watches him warily, thinking it's weird that Derek never fidgets. He always stays so still, until the moment he has something to do, and then he moves faster than he can follow.

"You're going to let Jackson out," Derek says, after a moment. He doesn't apologize about the trunk —Stiles knows better than to have expected him to.

"Oh, you're asking for favors now?" he asks.

"Did I sound like I was asking?" Derek growls, but he backs off when the waitress wanders over, giving Stiles another Coke, even though his is still more than half full.

She eyes Derek suspiciously and then leans close to Stiles. "Honey, is this guy bothering you?" she asks, real quiet like Derek won't hear. Judging from the smirk, Derek does. Of course.

"Yes," Stiles says, just to see the sudden widening of Derek's eyes. "But he's family, so I guess I need to put up with him."
The waitress still looks wary, but she laughs. "Okay then," she says. "You let me know if you need anything else."

"Family?" Derek says dryly.

"You're my cousin, remember, Miguel?" Stiles asks. "Or would you rather I slipped her a note on my napkin that says 'I've been kidnapped, please send help'? Because I could do that. I've been told I have quite the flair for the dramatic."

"Don't worry, help may already be on its way," Derek says, and slaps his phone on the table before sliding it across to Stiles. "Your father has called about ten times in the last hour. The messages range from 'hey, kid, just checking in' to 'if I find out you haven't been staying with Scott you're grounded for life.'"

"That's just great. Thanks for this," Stiles says, picking up Derek's phone in frustration and dialing his father's number. The phone rings but no one picks up, and Stiles swallows down a spike of panic drastic enough that Derek tenses. Scott may not answer his phone about eighty-nine percent of this time, but his father always did.

He slides the phone back to Derek after an internal pep talk to convince himself that his father isn't in some sort of trouble. He has nothing to worry about, because his father is fine. The most likely reason that he wouldn't answer is if he'd left the conference to come home early by plane.

"Well, it looks like 'grounded for life' is gonna be the winner," Stiles says. "Which is pretty ironic, since he never grounded me for any of the crazy stuff I did that was actually my fault."

"Then maybe this is exactly what you need," Derek says. "Let's go."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Stiles says. "I thought that was clear with the whole, 'I'll trap you here indefinitely' threat. I thought that was pretty badass of me, but I can try again, if it didn't get through."

"Jackson is still trapped," Derek says, and Stiles can tell he's fighting to keep his voice calm. "And we need to get you home before your father puts out the Amber Alert."

"I was actually hoping to use this opportunity to conduct a little experiment," Stiles says. "I'm curious if he'll still be trapped if I go all the way back to Beacon Hills. I mean, is it a proximity thing? Or is it like a switch? Once it's turned to on, it stays on till it's turned off again? I, for one, would like to know."

"His parents are going to notice he's missing," Derek snaps. "And with you missing too, they're probably going to draw the wrong conclusions considering what happened last time."

"Yes, but last time Jackson was a mind-controlled lizard creature by night, and a douchenozzle Lacrosse co-captain by day," Stiles says. "This time he's your good little soldier, and you're not going to let him say a thing against me, because I could say a hell of a lot worse about you."

"Fine," Derek says tightly. "So leave him there. I'll bring down the wall to get Jackson out, whatever. But I'm taking you home. So let's go."

"I think being an alpha has gone to your head," Stiles says. "It's like you think if you say things like they're commands, everyone's just going to do what you want. But I'm not your beta, Derek. You can tell me what to do as much and as often as you like, it's not going to change anything."

"I'm not letting you drive like this," Derek snarls, reaching out and snagging Stiles' wrist. He does it
so quick that Stiles doesn't have time to set up the barrier.

"Let go of me," he says, and his voice is strangely calm.

"I'll let you go when you start being reasonable," Derek says.

"Me? Be reasonable?" Stiles asks, barking out a laugh. The waitress's head snaps towards them, looking concerned again, so Stiles bites his lip to try and rein himself in. "Right. So I'm just supposed to trust you?"

"Whatever else you think of me," Derek says. "You know I wouldn't hurt you."

"You really think you've never hurt me?" Stiles asks, and he's the one leaning across the table now, forcing Derek to meet his eyes. Derek lets go of his wrist like he's been burned. "I understand you feel a responsibility here, or something, but I don't need a ride home. Plan B is already well into effect. You can leave with a clear conscience, because I don't need your help."

Stiles pulls Jackson's keys from his pocket and tosses them at Derek, who snatches them easily out of the air. "There," he says. "No more joyriding in Jackson's Porsche for me, does that make you happy? Can you leave now?"

"You sure that's what you want me to do? Because that waitress over there is calling the cops," Derek says, looking calmer now, like he thinks he's won the upper hand. "She thinks you're even younger than you are and she thinks I'm some kind of predator."

"Really?" Stiles asks wryly. "And what other erroneous conclusions has she arrived at? Thinks I've been kidnapped, maybe?"

"Stiles, I didn't really—" Derek begins.

"You didn't really what?" Stiles cuts him off coldly.

"You know I was always going to let you go," Derek says. "This was just an exercise, a little training mission."

"That would have required my consent," Stiles says, slamming some bills on the table before slipping casually out of the booth. He leaves the waitress a forty-dollar tip, because it's Jackson's money and he figures she deserves it more. He sees her turn to watch him, looking like she wants to stop him, so he quickly pushes out the door.

Derek follows out right on his heels.

"How far do you think you're going to get?" Derek demands. "The cops are going to be here soon, what are you going to tell them when they get here? You don't have any ID, you don't even have any shoes, how are you going to explain—"

"Maybe I'll say I was kidnapped by Derek Hale," Stiles says, as he pushes his way along the street back in the direction of Jackson's Porsche. He stops once they make it out of the diner parking lot and spins around. "You know I'm screwed if I don't, if I keep lying for you. You get that, right? My dad already knows something's up; he's no doubt already on his way back home. If I'm lucky, I'll beat him there, but I know better than to count on my luck. So thanks a lot, Derek. Once again I'm the collateral damage in one of your little wars."

Derek stops a few feet from him, looking uncomfortable, and angry about being uncomfortable. "I never asked you to lie for me."
"Of course you did," Stiles laughs. "You've been asking me to lie for you since we met! And I get it, I do, I know we don't have any other choice. But it shouldn't be this hard, and I'm not sure I can do it anymore."

"Then stop," Derek says. "We can tell your father if that's what you want. You can tell him I took you, tell him what I am. It's always been your choice."

"You'd love that, wouldn't you?" Stiles demands, stomping towards him. "Because you don't know what to do with yourself if you don't have something to fight against. But I'm not making my father a part of this, just so you can be entertained."

"Stiles," Derek growls. "That's not what I meant. What do you want from me? First you're angry because you think I want you to lie, and then you're angry when I tell you to tell the truth."

Derek steps forward and Stiles twists the cap off the bottle in his pocket and tips it until it spills along the ground—the ash arranges itself around him, springing up just as Derek's hand would have grabbed him. Derek jerks back in surprise, and Stiles' heart picks up as he fights to keep the barrier up.

"Stop," Stiles says.

"Like I have a choice," Derek mutters.

"Not very fun, is it?" Stiles asks, stumbling back a step. He takes the ash with him. It's like his own personal force-shield. Like something out of Star Trek. But this doesn't feel the way it had with Jackson, he doesn't feel that same confidence, and he doesn't really feel safer at all.

He turns around and starts walking, skirting the edges of the trees and keeping an eye out for any cars on the road. They must be at the outer edge of Arnold, because it's mostly deserted and he can't see any of the casual tourists that would come to visit the park or the town. But he's right out in the open if Derek wasn't bluffing about the waitress calling the cops, and that's the absolute last thing that he needs.

He hears the sound of Derek pacing after him, making strange, low sounds that are almost growls every time he comes up against the barrier that Stiles is dragging along behind him. "It's going to be bad enough if I get picked up by the cops, you should probably get out of here," Stiles says, when Derek's broken common sense doesn't kick in enough to send him running off.

"We should both get out of here," Derek agrees. "I think I can get the Porsche started. Just let me—"

"No," Stiles says.

"Your feet are bleeding, Stiles," Derek snarls, like Stiles' weakness actually offends him or something. "You have to stop this. This isn't what I wanted."

"Then what was?" Stiles shouts, spinning around in frustration. "What's the point of this? Because you were right, okay? Scott's not coming for me, just like he didn't come when I was getting the crap kicked out of me by Allison's grandpa, just like he didn't come when I called him from the pool—"

"I don't—" Derek starts, and it's weird, to see him at a loss for words. He doesn't say much, but what little he does say is almost always concise and deliberate.

"You just…you really have absolutely no idea what you're doing, do you?" Stiles asks, and he doesn't know why, but that makes him angrier than anything. Maybe because he knows whatever else Derek is doing, he's trying, and Stiles doesn't want to feel sympathy for him right now. "And
"you want to teach Scott to be a good leader? Gives whole new meaning to the expression those that can't do, teach."

"Stiles," Derek starts.

"You know why Gerard took me? I was a message, that's all. He didn't care about me one way or another. He only cared what it would do to Scott," Stiles says. "So you know, the venue was a hell of a lot nicer and at least you didn't beat me up, but the concept is the same."

"Don't you dare compare me to him," Derek snarls.

"Then grow up!" Stiles shouts. "If you have a problem with Scott, go to Scott! Because I'm starting to regret having anything to do with either of you."

"This has never been about Scott!" Derek yells back. "This has always been about you!"

Stiles freezes like he's been struck. "What?" he whispers.

"You almost got yourself killed," Derek snarls. "And it's not the first time."

"So this was to teach me a lesson?" Stiles demands incredulously. "What, that if I do something stupid you're going to lock me up like Rapunzel in your secluded mansion?"

"Yes…no….that's not," Derek breaks off in frustration. "You chose Scott. I get it, and that's fine. It's your choice. But if you're going to be in his pack, then he needs to make sure he's watching your back. And he's not, Stiles. You know he's not."

"It's not…it's not like I chose Scott," Stiles says. "There wasn't ever a choice. It's just, I sort of end up with him by default. That's just how it's always been."

"It doesn't have to be how it always is," Derek says, stepping closer. Stiles can almost see the mountain ash barrier ripple as he presses against it, but it doesn't throw Derek off the way it had Jackson.

Stiles swallows hard and steps back, wondering if he's doing this—if he's letting Derek do this to him, letting him push his way in. He tries to hold the line firm but Derek's looking at him the way no one else ever has, like he matters, like he's someone's Allison.

Stiles feels the moment his mind gives way to Derek's resistance, the barrier he'd built pushing back from him like a wave so that Derek can sink into the space where it had been. Derek's lips capture his, gentler than the werewolf's ever been with him, and the whole thing feels like its happening in slow motion—if it had ever occurred to him to imagine what kissing Derek would be like, this wouldn't have been it. Derek's hands clasp around his hips to jerk him closer, pulling him off balance until he has to wrap his own hands in Derek's shirt to keep himself on his feet.

He moans as Derek pulls back, tugging lightly on his lower lip with his teeth, and Stiles doesn't know what he should be doing. He doesn't know if he should be kissing him back, or pushing him away, or running as fast as he possibly can.

Well, that's not true. He knows he should be running, but then, he never runs when he should.

"What the hell was that?" he gasps, most of his weight still balanced against Derek. The way Derek's holding him tilted towards him, he doesn't have any choice but to hold onto him.

He doesn't get an answer, because suddenly there is a furry blur in a blue striped hoodie slamming
into Derek from the side. Stiles stumbles back up against the tree as Derek and Scott go tumbling one over the other into the trees, Derek morphing mid-way so that when he ends up pinning Scott down he’s nearly fully changed.

"Stop it!" Stiles shouts, pushing off the tree to try and get between them.

Scott doesn’t listen. He snarls and somehow manages to flip Derek off him. Any other time, Stiles would have been impressed. Now he’s just panicking, and he searches for the threads of his mountain ash barrier so he can separate them, but he’d let it all scatter to the wind at Derek’s kiss. He can’t find any trace of it now.

He slips and falls to one hand as he moves along the uneven ground, before getting back to his feet and throwing himself in front of Derek just before Scott can rush him again. “Scott, stop!” he shouts.

Scott goes still, but he doesn’t shift back. His amber eyes look back at him like they had the first few times Scott had turned, furious and feral, burning bright gold. "Why are you defending him?" Scott demands angrily. "I found Jackson where you left him. He told me what they did to you."

"They were just screwing with us, I'm fine," Stiles says, not moving from between them. "Let's just let it go, okay?"

"Let it go?" Scott asks incredulously. "No, Stiles. This has gone on long enough, and Derek's gone too far this time. He can't just take you."

"He can't," Stiles agrees. "And he won't do it again. Will you, Derek?" Derek snarls behind him, obviously not having bothered to shift back himself. Stiles doesn't dare look behind him. "So, there you go. All sorted."

"Why are you—?" Scott begins, frowning with such concentration that he seemingly shifts human again without meaning to. "I've been worried sick, Stiles, and you're what—you're with Derek, now?" he demands. "Did you plan this? Stiles? Did you—?"

Scott looks like he honestly believes it might be a possibility. Stiles tries not to take it personally, because Scott had walked in on a kiss—and if Stiles doesn't know what that kiss means, then Scott definitely doesn't. He tries to understand how that sort of thing might be misconstrued.

But he's stressed to his limit and his mind is in twenty places at once one moment and not really there at all the next, and his feet ache, his bones ache, and he's wide awake but more tired than he's been since that one week he decided to see how long he could go without sleep.

So Scott accusing him of conspiring with Derek behind his back is sort of the last straw.

"How can you ask me that?" he asks. "Because between the two of us, I'm not the one known for going off and making plans of my own. So long as you answer your damn phone, I always, always tell you everything, and drag you along."

"How could I forget?" Scott demands, his eyes flashing amber once more. "If it hadn't been for you dragging me along then—"

Scott breaks off before he can finish the accusation, going almost deathly pale as he realizes what he’s said. Stiles wonders if it’s the sound of his heart stuttering that makes Scott stop, but they both know he hasn't stopped in time.

"Then none of this would have happened," Stiles finishes quietly, and the words steal his breath. He stumbles a step away as he tries to pull in air, but it all just keeps rushing back out, because he has no
defense against the truth. He feels sick suddenly, and so exhausted he can barely stand. He starts to lose his balance and Derek reaches out for him, but Scott stops him, stepping between them with a snarl.

All this time, Stiles has been convinced that he knew where he really stood. He could listen to Erica say that Scott would be better off without him and it didn't even register, because Boyd was the one he'd believed. They were supposed to be inseparable, even when they were apart. There was no Scott without Stiles. No Stiles without Scott.

Except now he wonders if maybe he's been wrong all along. Maybe the real lesson to all of this was how very little he belonged, whether that was what Derek had set out to teach them or not.

He hears the roar of a car on the road behind them, and turns around, worried it might be the police. It's a midnight blue BMW Z4 instead, leaving a trail of burnt rubber as it spins to a sudden stop right along the edge of the road.

The passenger door presses open, and there's Lydia Martin, looking resplendent as she leans across the interior with one hand on the door handle and the other on the wheel. "Get your ass in the car, Stilinski," she says.

"Stiles," Scott says in confusion, looking bewildered and hurt, and Stiles has to fight against all of his instincts not to answer—not to explain, not to help, not to make things better. It's what he's always done before.

Derek says nothing at all; he simply turns and disappears into the shadows between the trees. But somehow that's even worse.

"Stiles," Lydia says, her voice cutting through his thoughts. He turns to look at her, and she arches an eyebrow in question. Stiles stumbles towards her, collapsing into the seat and pulling the door shut. He doesn't look back towards Scott, or turn to try and spot Derek's retreating back. He just pushes down the door lock and leans back.

Lydia huffs and slams the car into drive, pulling them back out onto the road. "You want to tell me what the hell is going on?" she asks, all false-sweetness. "Because I saw Jackson's Porsche abandoned on the side of the road. Is that something I should worry about?"

"Jackson's fine," Stiles says. "I just kind of stole his car and left him trapped by some mountain ash."

"I'm going to need a bit more than that," Lydia says, her voice so laced through with cold that Stiles fights back a shiver.

"Derek and his pack kidnapped me," Stiles says.

"He kidnapped you?" Lydia asks, and her voice is just as cold, but this time Stiles doesn't think it's directed at him. "Of all the idiotic—when did this happen?"

"It's fine, I'm fine," Stiles says. "Look, I'll show you how to get to the cabin. I'll let Jackson out."

"Hmm, no," Lydia says primly, and her eyes don't waver from the road. "Let him stew for a bit. That's what he gets for not telling me he'd kidnapped you. I can always drive back and let him out later, if I feel like it."

"Well, can you give him this, if you do?" Stiles asks, and tosses the wallet on the console between them.
Lydia glances at it for a moment before her lips quirk. "How did you manage to pry that from Jackson?"

"I threatened the love of his life," Stiles says.

"You threatened me?" Lydia demands.

"His Porsche," Stiles says, and he tries to put his usual bravado in his tone, but he doesn't think he manages it—because Lydia doesn't rise to the bait.

"That would do it," she says, jerking them around a tight curve while going around fifty miles an hour.

"I probably should have asked this when I called for the ride," Stiles says, bracing himself on the car door. "But do you even have a license?"

"Nope," Lydia says, though she's shifting gears like a pro as she takes them around another sharp turn. "But daddy gave me this for my sixteenth birthday anyway, so I thought I might as well put it to good use."

Stiles laughs, feeling all the stress seep out of him at last. He knows he's not in the clear yet, but for the first time since he was thrown in that trunk he feels like he can breathe.

"Thank you, for coming," he says. "I wasn't sure if you would."

"I'd say, 'any time,'" Lydia says dryly, "but with the trouble you seem to get into, I'm not sure I want to make that sort of commitment."

"Sorry," he says, and gives a choked off laugh. He leans his head up against the window and closes his eyes for a moment, because except for Derek, Lydia is the last person he wants to see him cry. "There was just no one else."

Lydia glances over at him, before turning back to watch the road. She presses her foot harder on the gas, and the trees out the window spin by fast enough that they look like they've been painted with watercolor.

"Any time," she says, and it sounds like a declaration.
"Seriously? That's all you're going to tell me?" Lydia snaps. "I had plans today, you know. They involved new shoes."

Stiles winces at her tone, but he knew this was coming. Lydia had allowed him almost ten minutes of silence before she was practically twitching with concern. Her concern then made her angry, because she didn't like being concerned. Stiles doesn't mind the anger though—he likes Lydia's unique approach to the heart-to-heart, because he doesn't think he could handle kindness at the moment.

"I'm guessing you won't let it rest if I tell you I don't want to talk about it?" Stiles asks.

"No, but I would have to call Guinness," Lydia says. "Because you not wanting to talk has got to be some kind of record."

"I just don't understand what the hell happened," Stiles says after a moment, biting on the nail of his thumb as he stares out the passenger window. "I mean it started out almost as a joke, right? Like it was just another escalation in our little prank war."

"Kidnapping isn't a prank," Lydia says. "No one bought that as your lame excuse for locking up Jackson in a prisoner transport, and I'm not buying it now."

"But that's just my point," Stiles says ardently, pulling his eyes away from the road to look at Lydia. "When Scott and I did that, there was a real reason behind it. Derek's reasons though, they just—they don't make any sense."

"And what reasons are those?" Lydia asks.

Stiles slouches in the seat, briefly closing his eyes as he gathers his thoughts. "He said he was doing it to teach Scott a lesson, then he told me he did it to protect me, then he acted like those were the same thing, and then he kissed me."
Lydia slams abruptly on the brakes. Stiles gets held back by the seatbelt as the force pulls him forward and back, and he glances at the side mirror, grateful to see there's no one behind them. "Lydia!" he cries.

"And then he what?" Lydia demands, and it's her dangerous tone, the one she uses when a teacher tries to question one of her essays, or Jackson tries to cancel a date.

"He said he was trying to protect me?" Stiles tries, hoping she'll leave it at that.

She doesn't.

"That bastard actually had the nerve—oh, I'll kill him," she snarls. "Of all the times to finally man up and admit it, he does it after this?"

"What?" Stiles asks, frowning as Lydia slams them back into drive. He grabs onto the door handle as she works out her aggression on the road. "Finally admit what?"

"Admit he's crushing on you like a fourteen year old girl. Or, you know, like you used to on me," Lydia says, like this isn't some sort of revelation, like it's old news.

"What?" Stiles demands again.

"Haven't you ever noticed that he seeks you out?" Lydia asks. "Like, more than Scott? Who's supposed to be his 'brother' now and everything?"

"Yeah, but only because Scott won't give him the time of day. And also probably because he likes to slam me into stuff, and berate me, and treat me like some stupid kid," Stiles says. "Whatever you think you know, Lydia, you're way off base."

"Oh, darling, I'm not," Lydia says. "His techniques would be better suited to a cave man, but he's obviously been pining after you for months now. And it's not that I entirely disapprove, so long as we table the whole kidnapping situation, because he is gorgeous. But he's also kind of a stalker and his only living relative is a serial killer."

"I don't think it's like that, I mean, you've seen him, right? And you've seen me. So yeah," Stiles says. "I think he just wants me in his pack."

Lydia purses her lips. "Your self-esteem needs work. This is probably partly my fault, since I've spent the last six years believing you were just some loser."

"Great pep talk," Stiles says.

"I was wrong, okay?" Lydia says. "And I don't admit that often. Or ever."

Stiles gaped at her. "What are you even saying?"

"Anyone would be lucky to have you," she explains. "Except me. I still don't want you. Just so we're clear."

"Yeah, I've got it." Stiles rolls his eyes. "Don't worry, I'm so over you."

"Anyway, the point is, Derek's feelings here aren't in question. Yours are. What do you want?" she demands.

Stiles knows that he owes her a real answer, that he owes one to himself—but he doesn't have one. He presses his eyes shut. "I just want to sleep," he says.
Lydia nods, letting them go back to their not so uncomfortable silence until she pulls to a stop in front of his house. Stiles heart skips when he sees his father's cruiser in the driveway, but Lydia just impatiently tosses her hair, oblivious to his impending doom.

He sighs and forces himself out of the car. He walks around and then Lydia reaches out the driver's side window and snags his wrist, gently tugging him back.

"I want you to promise me something," she says, turning her eyes on him like gorgeous, deadly lasers. "Just…stay away from them, from all of them, until you figure out what it is that you want."

"I don't think that's going to be an issue," Stiles says. "I'm pretty sure my dad is going to put me on house arrest."

Lydia smirks. "Good," she says, and then speeds off in her BMW like she's some kind of James Bond.

Stiles sighs and starts for the door, limping slightly because of the blisters on his feet. He doesn't make it more than a few steps before the door is slamming open and his father is storming down the steps, looking angrier than Stiles has ever seen him.

"God damn it, Stiles," he says hoarsely, before dragging Stiles into his arms. Stiles lets himself fall against him, taking comfort in one of his father's amazing hugs, even though his father's tone promises it's not going to be as easy as that. "Thank god you're okay. Do you have any idea how worried I've been?"

John pulls back just enough to get a good look at Stiles, and instead of reassuring him, he just starts looking more and more worried. "Who did this to you?"

"No one," Stiles says quickly. "I've just had a run of bad luck. I'm fine, dad, really. How did you even get here so fast?"

John is only half listening as he gently grips Stiles' chin to turn his eye to the light. His expression is turning steelier all the time. "It's only an hour flight from Napa," he says gruffly. "I managed to get on a flight last minute the second time you didn't answer my call."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Stiles says. "See, I was—"

"No one," Stiles says quickly. "I've just had a run of bad luck. I'm fine, dad, really. How did you even get here so fast?"

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"Yeah, sorry about that," Stiles says. "See, I was—"

"Let's get you inside," his father interrupts, still looking sort of thunderous, and Stiles suspects he knows he'd been about to lie.

His father doesn't wait for a response as he bundles him off into the house and sits Stiles down on the couch, before dropping down to sit on the edge of the coffee table right across from him. His father's expression is set and hard-edged, the sort of game face he usually only bothers to use on suspects.

Stiles swallows hard and tries to hold his gaze. "So, how was the trip?" he asks.

"Don't," his father says, and his utterly calm voice worries Stiles more than anything else. "Before I ask you again about what happened, I want to tell you what I know so far to avoid any confusion. We'll start with a call I received this morning from one of my deputies. They found your Jeep abandoned in the Preserve, and it looked like it had been there for awhile. So I tried to call you at the number you gave me for Scott's cell, but for some reason it kept sending me to Derek Hale's voicemail. Then I tried Melissa, and you can imagine my surprise when she told me she hadn't seen you for days."

Stiles spreads his hands over his knees and takes in a shaky breath, trying to keep his shaking to a
minimum as his mind scrambles for some excuse. The Jeep is his pride and joy and his father knows it—he never would have left it out there like some mini-hostel for whatever wildlife might stumble upon it.

Not unless he didn't have a choice.

The best lies, Stiles knows, come from the truth, but he can't say he was kidnapped without leading his father on some vengeance-fueled man-hunt for whatever non-existent kidnappers his imagination can create. He won't let his dad be the one to suffer for this, and he won't waste the Sheriff's Department's time. But he can't betray Derek's secrets, even now.

"And don't you even think of lying to me," John says, his tone sharp enough that Stiles' winces, "because this time you're caught, kid. You're covered with bruises, you're shaking, you've got no shoes, and those are not your clothes. I want to know what the hell's going on with you, right now. No more lies."

No more lies, Stiles thinks, and it's such a horrifying thought that suddenly he can't get any air. The truth shouldn't be this terrifying—he's sixteen, he shouldn't have to carry this alone. He shouldn't have to lie so much it's become his baseline. His lies used to be a joke between his dad and him, they used to laugh about them because Stiles always gave himself away. His father always knew the truth, whether he lied or not, so it never really mattered before this.

"I can't," he whispers, because he can't tell him the truth, but he knows he can't lie anymore either. There's no story he can spin to make this make sense. "I can't tell you, okay? It's for the best this way, you have to trust me, because you don't know—and you wouldn't believe me, anyway." Stiles forces himself to his feet, grabbing the back of the couch as he sways a bit, and starts to pace so he doesn't face his father's gaze. "Even I wouldn't believe me. Well, okay, I probably would. But I'm not a good example for this sort of thing. Scott didn't even believe me and he's the one that—"

"The one that what, Stiles?" Hands grip his shoulders to spin him around, and Stiles stumbles back. He hadn't even heard his father stand. His father's expressionless Sheriff face is gone, his eyes now looking wide and concerned, and that's somehow much harder to face.

Stiles can feel his whole world narrowing in. It's like all of his carefully constructed lies and half-truths and even his own self-delusions are unraveling all at once. He's been trying so hard to keep everything separate, neatly labeled and dealt with as needed, but his father's figuring it out anyway. It's only a matter of time, he's always known that. Once his father gets on a trail, he doesn't let up.

"Do you want to take the red pill or the blue pill?" Stiles asks him quietly, and then his legs are giving out and his father is shouting his name as he holds him up and pushes him back towards the couch.

"Stiles, look at me," John says firmly. He holds Stiles face as he examines his eyes. "When did you last take your Adderall?"

"I don't know," Stiles says, dropping his head down between his legs as he sucks in deep breaths of air. "What day is it?"

His father disappears for a moment and then returns as if by magic, holding a glass of water and his pills. "Take them," he says gently.

Stiles obediently takes the pills, drowning them with nearly the full glass of water before he's finally brave enough to meet his father's eyes. "Dad," he starts.
"It's okay," John says. "Well, it isn't, but you're getting a stay, at least for now. Your health is more important. Come on, get up. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"But I'm fine," Stiles protests at once.

"You can barely stand," John says tightly. "The damage I can see is bad enough, but I'm not sure I can trust you any more to tell me if something even worse were wrong."

"It's just the Adderall, you know that, I've forgotten to take it before," Stiles says. "I just want to get some sleep, please don't make me go."

John stares him down for a moment, and then glances away with a shake of his head. "I'm calling Melissa then," he says. "She'll check you over, and if she says you need to go to the hospital, you're going, no arguments. Got it?"

Stiles does not want to see Melissa for reasons too numerous to list, but he nods, because he knows his father is at his limit. His dad has always been a man of action—when something's wrong, he wants to barrel in and fix it. He doesn't understand the subtle art of letting problems work themselves out on their own, or avoiding them until they go away.

His father calls Melissa and then sits down in his armchair and stares at him. Stiles shifts uncomfortably under his gaze, because he's looking at him like he doesn't know him. Stiles wonders if maybe he doesn't, any more. He can't remember the last time they actually talked. If his father isn't on his way to stop some disaster, then Stiles' is off on his way to deal with his own.

He's almost relieved when Melissa comes rushing in through the doors, even though she brings lots of issues of her own. She's wearing her scrubs and looks exhausted and anxious as she drops down in front of him, and Stiles tries not to think about Scott, tries not to wonder if she blames him too.

"Stiles," she says, reaching out for his arm, "sweetie, are you okay?"

He jerks away without meaning to, and Melissa sighs. Their relationship never quite recovered from his mother's death—he'd been so lost, and so sad, that every act of kindness from her had hurt. So she had changed the rules of their interactions to appease him, shoving him playfully instead of pulling him in for a hug, rolling her eyes at his antics instead of sitting him down to ask him what was really wrong.

Their relationship thrived on her exasperation and his Eddie Haskell impression, but beneath all that fond antagonism, there was a solid foundation. They could pretend as much as they liked, but there was no changing the fact that they spent almost as much time together as she did with Scott, or that he can't even remember a time when he didn't know her.

"I'm fine," Stiles insists. "Adderall withdrawal."

"Uh huh," she says dryly. "We've been there before, it's never been this bad. When was the last time you ate? Slept?" She probably knows more about asthma and ADHD than anyone else at the hospital, having to deal with him and Scott so much. Even with everything going on Stiles' lets himself get drawn in to her easy, professional tone, because this at least is familiar.

"I slept last night," Stiles says. "I had a Coke."

"Jesus," his father mutters, as he paces behind him. Stiles winces, but doesn't respond.

Melissa hands him a protein bar. "Eat this," she says. "What happened to your feet?"
"I lost my shoes," Stiles tells her, as he reluctantly takes a bite of the bar.

"You lost your shoes," Melissa repeats dryly, and that's the Melissa that he knows. "You know, Stiles, I almost believe that coming from you."

John snorts. "I wouldn't, if I were you," he says bitterly.

Melissa glances up at John in surprise, her gaze flickering from him back to Stiles. "John," she says casually. "I forgot the gauze. Could you check the upstairs bathroom? I think I left some here at my last house call."

John lets out a breath and nods, before dragging himself up the stairs.

"Okay, so spill," Melissa says, the moment he's out of sight. "Are you really okay, and do I need to be worried about Scott?"

"No, I'm sure he's fine," Stiles assures her. "He's probably home by now."

Melissa nods, frowning a little. "And why isn't he with you?" she asks.

Stiles knows she doesn't mean anything by it—a year ago, hell, a couple of months ago, it would have been a perfectly valid question that would require some outlandish explanation, like a freak bicycle accident or divine intervention. Because nothing else would have kept Scott away.

"I don't think we're friends anymore," he tells her, after a moment. "But hey, at least you don't have to worry about me coming in through the window now, or stealing your food, or—"

"Don't be ridiculous, Stiles, you'll never not be Scott's friend," Melissa interrupts, grabbing his feet with less care than Stiles felt was warranted, and then applying disinfectant without so much as a warning.

"Ow, hey!" Stiles shouts.

"Don't like it? Wear shoes next time," Melissa tells him. "And while you're at it, why don't you tell me what actually happened?"

It's stated casually, but Stiles knows it's anything but. Stiles' experience with parents has consisted of his fuzzy, perfect memories of his mother, who in retrospect, had never done a single thing wrong, and his father, who always let Stiles be himself, who never put restrictions on him if he didn't absolutely have to, and rarely enforced them even then.

Stiles found Melissa's strict and straightforward approach to parenting absolutely terrifying, and he knew she wasn't actually asking. She was making a statement of what she expected Stiles to do.

"Derek decided to practice his hostage taking skills out on me," Stiles says reluctantly. "I give him a D plus, and he only gets the plus for effort, because it took me like hardly any time at all to escape. But then I spun out in Jackson's Porsche."

Melissa looks up sharply at that, gently reaching up to run a hand across the bruise on his forehead. She grips his chin and turns his head towards the light, watching his eyes carefully before nodding and letting him go. "A week," she says softly.

"What?" Stiles asks.

"That's how long you have," Melissa says.
Stiles' eyes widened. "What? To \textit{live}?

Melissa rolls her eyes. "That's how long you have to tell your father the truth, or I'm going to do it for you," she explains. "This is not happening again under my watch."

Stiles feels his heart catch and stutter, and he shakes his head. "No, you can't do that," he says.

"I'd want him to tell me, if our places were reversed," Melissa says. "I needed to know about Scott. Your father needs to know about you."

"You don't understand, you don't see what danger that would put him in. It's different for him than you," Stiles says. "He'd try to fight them, and he can't. He can't know, please, you have to see that —"

"He's the Sheriff, and more importantly, he's your father," she says, in that gentle voice that Stiles hates, because he doesn't know how to fight against it. "It isn't your job to protect him. You have to tell him, or I will."


"You have a week," Melissa reminds him. "I know this isn't easy for you, Stiles. But it's for the best."

"I can't find the gauze," John says, as he comes down the steps to rejoin them. "You want me to go pick some up? What do you need?"

"Oh, would you look at that?" Melissa says, riffling through her shoulder bag. "It's right here."

Melissa wraps the soles of Stiles' feet carefully with the gauze, while his father watches from a few feet away. Stiles watches her work rather than face him, admiring the efficient way she ties the bandages down.

"It's gonna sting for a bit, but it's all superficial," Melissa tells them, before looking seriously at Stiles. "You'll need the bandages for a few days, just keep them changed. I'll come back and check on you oh, in, what do you say, a week?"


"Stiles," John says reproachfully.

"It's fine, blame the withdrawal," Melissa says, ruffling a hand over Stiles' shaved head as she stands. "Best thing for him is sleep, but I'd keep a close watch on him anyway."

She stops beside John on her way back. "Don't be too hard on him," she whispers. "His heart is in the right place."

John laughs tiredly. "This would be easy, if I didn't already know that," he says.

Melissa nods with a sigh, and drags her bag back over her shoulder. "Call me if you need anything," she says. "I can be right here."

"Thank you," John tells her, before walking her out.

Stiles rests his head in his hands as he waits for his father to come back. He sees his father's boots appear in his line of vision and braces himself. He's faced off with crazed Alpha werewolves, he can handle his father. Probably.
He figures he owes his father this, anyway. His father lets him get away with a lot, but everyone has a breaking point. It's just Stiles' bad luck that his father reaches his the one time Stiles is not at fault.

"Okay," he says. "Let me have it."

His father just sighs and holds out a hand, reaching out to drag Stiles to his feet. "Oh, I plan to," he says. "Just not right now. You heard Melissa, you need sleep. Come on."

His father keeps a tight grip on his arm all the way up the stairs, and then pulls him in for another hug when they reach his door. Stiles closes his eyes and lets himself lean against him for a moment.

"Get some sleep," John says, placing a kiss on Stiles' temple before letting him go. "But this isn't over, Stiles. I think it goes without saying that you're grounded."

Stiles sighs and leans back against his door. "How long?" he asks warily.

"I haven't decided yet," John says, as he starts towards his own room. "Let's just say 'indefinitely.'"

Stiles groans as he pushes open the door, kicking it shut behind him and then falling down on his bed. He'd like to just sleep forever, so he doesn't have to face his father, or Derek, or Sc—

"You have any of that gauze left?"

Stiles shoots up straight, eyes going wide as Scott moves out from the corner of the room, the low light from his window highlighting his torn and bloodied shirt. "What—?"

Scott stops in front of him, looking sheepish. He plays with the torn flap that used to be the shoulder of his hoodie, and on the skin beneath it there is a gaping red wound. He won't meet Stiles' eyes.

"How long have you been here?" Stiles asks quietly.

"Awhile," Scott says. "Sorry about my mom. I'll talk to her. I'll change her mind."

"Derek did that to you," Stiles says in disbelief, as he looks over the wound, because it's the only explanation that makes sense. Scott would have healed instantly from anything but an alpha's mark.

"Yeah," Scott says. "I kinda followed him after you left. He wasn't real happy with me."

"You're an idiot," Stiles tells him. "Is Derek alright?"

"Seriously? You—" Scott demands, before breaking off and glancing away. "He's fine. He doesn't have a scratch on him."

Stiles tosses the gauze at Scott, and he catches it easily. "Do it yourself," he says.

"Stiles—"

"No," Stiles says.

"If you'd only let me explain," Scott starts. "I don't blame you. I don't. I never wanted you to think that. I could have said no, I could have stayed home, I—"

"Don't do this," Stiles says. "This isn't fair."

"What isn't?" Scott asks.
"This!" Stiles hisses. "You coming here, like this, because you knew I couldn't still be mad at you if you were hurt, you knew I'd forgive you and we'd be right back where we started—"

"That's not what I'm doing!" Scott protests. "Stiles, you know me. You know I don't plan things that well."

"This isn't just about you," Stiles says. "Okay? It's not."

"I know that, but it's a little about me. And you have to forgive me," Scott insists. "You always forgive me."

Stiles just shakes his head, running a hand across his hair, and it feels a little like ripping out his own heart, but he knows he has to do this. Lydia is right—because Lydia is always right—and he can't continue on this way. His entire life has been consumed by werewolves, to the point he's not even sure who he is without them anymore.

"But it's not that easy this time, is it?" Scott asks sadly.

"You'll always be my best friend," Stiles tells him quietly. "No one will ever get me the way you do, no one else would bother to try. And no one else knows how to properly look after you. And that's—I don't want that to change, but it sort of has. And that's okay, I guess, I'm just—I should just—"

"Stiles—"

"No, look, we're not twelve years old anymore," Stiles says. "The world doesn't just consist of school and our living rooms and Playstation. We're growing up, and we're growing apart, and we're not the same people we were."

"Please, don't do this—"

"So you will always be my friend," Stiles says. "But I can't be in your pack right now."

Scott's pleading expression goes shuttered. "Because you're going to be in Derek's."

"God, is that all you care about?" Stiles demands, shouting as much as he can with a whisper. "Get it through your head, this is about *me*, this is about what I need for once. It's not about you, or Derek, or any of you. Lydia had the right idea all along."

"What does that mean?" Scott asks.

"It means I'm going neutral, consider me Switzerland," Stiles says. "Until you guys learn to work together, you'll all be working without me."

"What exactly are you saying?" Scott asks urgently, moving closer. "That if I was in trouble, you wouldn't come?"

Stiles tries not to laugh at how disbelieving Scott sounds, like that's the craziest thing he's ever heard. He doesn't seem to get that he's been doing that to Stiles since the start. "I probably still would," he admits. "And if Derek needed me, I'd go to him too, and nothing will ever change. So I'm asking you to leave me out of it. Just for now."

"But what about us?" Scott asks quietly. "What does that mean for us?"

"It means I need you not to call me for awhile," Stiles says. "It shouldn't be too hard for you. You usually manage it without trying."
"Stiles—" Scott pleads.

"Don't," Stiles says. "Don't make me forgive you right now, because you know I will, just like always, and I can't—I just need you to leave, okay? Please."

"Okay," Scott says dejectedly. "Okay, I'll go. But I want you to call me if you need anything. I promise I'll pick up. I promise, Stiles."

Scott disappears out the window, and Stiles falls to sit on his bed. He feels like he's been torn in half, and he almost calls Scott back. He almost sweeps this under the rug with everything else because the most important thing has always been holding onto Scott's friendship at any cost. Stiles has done so much just to keep them functioning, trying to keep up appearances, pretending like nothing has changed.

The truth is everything has changed. He tries to imagine how things would go if he'd met Scott now instead of when they were five years old, if they'd met like this, and he can't.

He doesn't think the people they are now would ever have been friends.
Chapter 9

I can't believe it's been two months since I updated! I'm so sorry you guys, I pretty much have no excuse this time. Just heatwaves and writer's block, but the wondrous Once and Future Thing has got me back on track—this one is for you!

Stiles isn't quite awake as the buzzing hum of his cell phone seeps into his awareness. He lets one hand drop down by his bed, scrambling blindly for his phone and then answers it without ever opening his eyes.

"Hgh?" he says.

"Such lovely phone etiquette," Lydia says primly. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Ugh," Stiles responds, flipping over onto his back and putting one hand over his eyes.

"Good," Lydia says cheerfully. "I just wanted to tell you I went back to Arnold, and Jackson's been taken care of. You don't have to worry about him, he's not going to make any more trouble."

"Why do you sound like my hit woman?" Stiles demands drowsily.

Lydia just laughs brightly and then hangs up on him. Stiles decides she will never stop being terrifying. He drops his phone on his nightstand, and that's when he remembers that his cell phone had met its untimely end at the bottom of the Beacon Hills Preserve reservoir.

Stiles shoots straight up, eyes going wide as he wakes up completely. He looks at the phone and then drops down over the side of his bed, to find his clothes from the night before laundered and neatly folded in a pile on his floor.

Derek had been here. In his room. While he was sleeping.

"God," Stiles moans, dropping his head against the mattress, caught between being flattered and disturbed. "He can't even apologize without asking for a restraining order."

It didn't help that Derek had to have enlisted Peter to clone his phone, since Derek and technology got along about as well as Derek did with anything else. He can just imagine Peter cackling evilly as he reads over his text messages and checks out his browser history.

"Why is this my life?" Stiles mutters, reaching out half-heartedly to grab his phone. He hears footsteps start up down the hall and pushes forward, wrapping his hand around the phone and then stuffing it down the waistband of his sweatpants. He pulls his shirt down to cover it just as his father pushes open the door and Stiles lets out a sigh of relief.

He's just gotten his phone back—he doesn't need his father confiscating it quite yet.

"Dad," Stiles greets, rubbing a hand across one eye and trying to play up the whole 'not awake' angle. "What time is it?"
"It's noon," his father says, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorway. He's staring him down like he's a suspect, and Stiles swallows hard. His father hardly ever looks at him like that, not for real.

The only other time he can remember him looking like that was the whole 'Jackson incident.' Stiles had promised himself he would never disappoint his father like that again.

"Dad, look—"

"Nope," John interrupts. "I'm running this show. No more Mr. Nice Dad for you."

Stiles groans. "Dad, no, please tell me you did not just say that," he whines. "That's horrible. That's —"

"The absolute truth," he interrupts. "I'm done letting you get away with whatever you want, Stiles. It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to me. You need boundaries."

"But I'm no good with boundaries, you know that," Stiles protests. "That's why our current system works so well."

"You mean the one where I tell you what you're allowed to do and you do whatever you want anyway?" John demands.

"Yes, that, exactly," Stiles agrees. "It's worked for years."

"You're not helping your case here, kiddo," he said, as he moved into the room and headed straight for the computer.

Stiles' eyes widened and he practically fell out of bed trying to beat him to it. "What are you doing?"

John shakes the mouse with more force than necessary to wake the computer up, and then points at it. "Unlock it," he says, when the password prompt comes up.

"Why?" Stiles asks.

"Why do you think?" John asks. "I want to know what you've been up to, and since when you do happen to be home, which lately, isn't often, you're on this thing. So unlock it, or I'll just take the whole thing."

"Okay, okay," Stiles says, leaning over to input his password. He tries to think if there's anything incriminating he left laying around, and lets out a sigh of relief when he sees that no chat windows had been left open with hard to explain messages like 'so, full moon last night, hope you had fun and didn't kill anyone."

Stiles watches his father closely as he browses through the easy to reach files that he's left cluttering up his desktop. The one thing Stiles had going for him is the sheer overload of information. Most of it is schoolwork, research papers or theories. One file is a fifteen page research paper on the use of animal characteristics in certain comic book characters, that had never actually been assigned.

But then his father finds the folder that Stiles' had amused himself by labeling 'light reading.' He feels his heart stutter for a moment as his father opens up his pdf version of the Bestiary. He tries to scramble for some kind of explanation, but his father just snorts and then closes it out.

"Stiles, only you would have obscure books written in Latin in a folder marked 'light reading,'" he
says, before running a hand through his hair in frustration.

"I'm sorry if I've disappointed you," Stiles says. "I know you were probably expecting to find lots of porn and my anti-establishment treatise."

"I didn't know what the hell to expect," John says, before getting up and moving to his closet. He pulls open the door and then starts moving and tossing aside Stiles' shoes, looking for who knows what.

"Seriously? Is this really necessary?" Stiles demands. Really his father should know him better—he doesn't just leave stuff where anyone could find it. He'd been taught better than that, and this would be insulting if it didn't hurt so much. "Maybe you'd like some blood and urine samples while you're at it?"

"Well, now that you mention it," John snaps, as he slams the closet shut.

"I was joking, Dad," Stiles says quietly. "That was a joke. You don't really think—"

"Let's just say I haven't ruled it out," he says tiredly. He looks over at Stiles. "If you want to keep lying to me, then this is how it's going to be."

"But I'm going to tell you," Stiles insists. "I am. I'm just still figuring out the best way to do it."

"It's not that hard, Stiles," John snaps. "You just say the words. You used to tell me everything."

"This is different," Stiles says. "I just need some time, okay? I promise that whatever you think this is, it's not. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Well, you'll have plenty of time if that's what you want," John says, smiling grimly. "Consider yourself on house arrest."

Stiles winces. "Yeah, I'd figured," he says.

"I was going to take your laptop, too," John says, "but since you mostly seem to be writing college level term papers for fun, I'll let you keep it."

"You're the best father ever, you know that right?" Stiles asks.

"Just don't make me regret it," John says. "I'd set the parental controls but you're the one I usually have do that sort of thing, so. No video games. No Ula."


"I want you to just stay in your room until you're ready to talk to me. Except for meals. You can come down to eat," he says, before nodding sharply and turning towards the door. "And don't you even think about sneaking out—I'm trusting you here, even though I'm not sure I should."

Stiles only nods, because he can't quite bring himself to make a promise. He wants to but he doesn't want to risk breaking it. His dad just sighs and slips out into the hall. Stiles falls against the door as he closes it, turning around and sliding to sit on the floor.

He presses the palms of his hands against his eyes as he tries to keep it together. It hasn't really hit him until just now how close he is to completely destroying his relationship with his father.

He doesn't know what he's supposed to do. He can't very well wander down there and say, 'okay, here it is. Werewolves! Yep. So...can I have the keys to my Jeep back so I can continue the good
fight against the more malicious of the supernatural forces?"

He doesn't see it going over well, and it's not like he can just give Scott a call to come and be Exhibit A. Derek is an even worse idea, because his father would almost definitely shoot him on sight. He could call Melissa, since she's the one blackmailing him into this in the first place, but he can't justify pushing this off on her. He knows Melissa and his father are friends, and this could break them. He's screwed up enough for his father as it is.

He bites his lip as he realizes he's out of loopholes, that he's finally going to have to tell his father the truth.

He can't help but still try to bargain with himself—trying to find some way to leave Derek out of it. Stiles knows his father wouldn't ever harm Scott, but Derek? If he finds out what really happened, his dad might go after him.

He doesn't think Derek would hurt his father, either, but he's seen what he's like when he's cornered.

"Crap," Stiles says, letting his head fall back against the door. There's no way this is ending well for anyone.

* * * * *

Stiles spends the majority of his afternoon on his bed feeling sorry for himself. He goes through any number of scenarios for how to present this to his father, but for the life of him he can't pin down how his father might react. The werewolves, he's sure his father could handle. His father likes puzzles, so this would just be a missing piece for him to snap into place to understand the last couple of years. He'd probably be relieved to have an answer.

He just doesn't know how his father is going to react to his involvement. Stiles knows he has it easy most of the time, that some people have accused his father of letting him run wild—but the truth is that his father has always trusted him. Maybe not to stay out of mischief, but at least to do the right thing. Stiles always did his homework without being asked, he always went to class, and he kept the kitchen stocked with more than just frozen pizza.

Stiles likes to think he's mostly well-behaved, but he isn't entirely sure of the choices he's been making lately. He thinks back to that phantom of his father he'd seen at Lydia's birthday, and his accusations ring in his ears. Would his father be angry, or proud? Would he send him away, or lock him up, or possibly worst of all...just give up on him, once and for all?

"Stiles," his father shouts, tapping on the door once before swinging it open. He leans in the door way and looks Stiles over with some concern. "You've got a visitor. You up for that?"

Stiles shoots up on the bed. "What?" he says. "Who?"

"Allison," his father says, and his tone is deceptively mild. Stiles can tell he's curious—he doesn't know if it's good or not, that his father doesn't bother to ask.

"I thought I was under house arrest," Stiles says quietly.

"Even inmates are allowed visitors. You have fifteen minutes," John says, and pauses for a moment, before glancing at Stiles with his usual expression of fond exasperation. "No touching."

"You're hilarious," Stiles deadpans, even though he's ridiculously grateful for the teasing.
Allison slips in after his dad heads back down the stairs, looking quiet and uncertain. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"Why are you here?" Stiles interrupts, trying to reign in his panic that something's happened to Scott. It isn't his job to worry about Scott right now—it's Allison's, and he can't think what would bring her here. "What's happened?"

She falters for a moment, before sighing and meeting his eyes. "Scott wanted to check on you," she says. "But he didn't think you would want to talk to him."

"Probably because I told him I didn't want to talk to him," Stiles says warily, not sure whether or he should be relieved. A supernatural crisis might actually be easier to handle than this.

"Right—" Allison agrees. "But he was worried about you, and honestly, Stiles, so am I. He told me what happened."

"What exactly did he tell you?" Stiles asks.

"That Derek kidnapped you," Allison says.

"Did you tell your father?" Stiles demands, his heart stuttering a bit at the thought of Chris Argent hunting Derek. He's not actually sure that Derek would come out on top, and he knows there wouldn't be any winners either way.

"I didn't," Allison says quickly. "I promise I didn't. At least, not yet." She meets his eyes calmly. "But all you have to do is say the word, and we'll take care of it."

"You've got to be kidding me," Stiles whispers, his tone tinged with disbelief. He's seen Allison refuse to dissect a frog in biology, and he's never quite been able to reconcile that the same person could ruthlessly cut down their classmates. "I can't believe Scott tried to bring you into this. It's the last thing we need. I've got everything handled."

"He hurt you, Stiles—" Allison says gently. "We had a kind of truce, but this could definitely break it. We'd be well within our rights to—"

"To what?" he interrupts. "Slice him in half with your broad-sword?"

"My father and I prefer the katana," Allison corrects absently.

"Well then," Stiles says, waving his arm widely. "By all means!"

"I'm not suggesting we kill Derek," she insists, sounding defensive. "If you'd just listen—"

"I don't want Derek hurt, okay?" Stiles says. "If you think you're going to get my blessing, you're way off base. And if you want to go all warrior princess again, you're going to have to go through me first."

Allison glares at him, her eyes sparkling dangerously. Stiles hates that he's letting his fight with Scott ruin his relationship with Allison too, but he can't really see a way around it. Allison, with Scott, was an amazing ally, funny and sweet and smart. Allison, without Scott, on the other hand, was not the sort of person Stiles really wanted to be around.

"That's not what I'm talking about," Allison says. "We wouldn't hurt him, just force him to move on. He doesn't belong here anymore."
"That's not for you to decide," Stiles says. "You have to promise you won't tell your father, or anyone else. They wouldn't understand."

"I don't understand," Allison says, her voice level and strangely professional. He thinks she might actually do well in law enforcement, if she's as good with a gun as that bow and arrow. "Scott doesn't understand, either, because none of this makes sense. You don't have to let him get away with it—"

"I didn't," Stiles says. "I took care of it, okay? I can handle Derek."

"You might think that, but what if this is just the start?" she asks. "You know he's been different since he became an alpha. You might not be able to stop him, if he takes things too far."

"None of you get it, do you?" Stiles asks. "Derek is screwed up, but he's trying his best. He's doing everything wrong but you know, not much has gone right for him either, so I'm gonna cut him a bit of slack."

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into—" Allison insists.

"I do, probably better than you, because you haven't exactly had the best teachers to show you what werewolves are like," Stiles snaps. "Why are you even here? Because of Scott? Or because you want an excuse to go after Derek?"


"Look, I'm not trying to be an asshole here," Stiles said. "But we haven't ever been friends, and considering that Scott and I aren't exactly on speaking terms at the moment, it doesn't make any sense at all to start now."

"That isn't fair," Allison says shakily. "Stiles, that's not fair. We are friends. You know that."

"If we were friends then you wouldn't say anything," Stiles says. "If we were friends you would be more worried about me than what Derek might do next."

"I'm worried about both," Allison says. "Because whenever you get hurt, it's always because of Derek."

"Or because of your family," Stiles corrects. "Let's not forget that, because I know I never will. I didn't press charges against your grandfather when he kidnapped me, and you didn't have a problem with me lying about what happened then."

Allison's eyes snap up like she's been slapped, and Stiles regrets his words at once. She recovers before he can try to take them back, and stalks forward. "No, I didn't," she agrees, her voice practically vibrating through him it's so tightly restrained. "But then he didn't exactly get away with it."

"No, I guess he didn't," Stiles agrees quietly. "But the difference is that Derek never hurt me."

"It worries me that you seem to believe that," Allison says. "But I'll keep your secret for now. He does something like this again, and I can't make that promise."

"It won't happen again," Stiles says quickly. "I'll make sure of it."

Allison nods and then spins around, rushing out without another word. His father appears in the doorway the moment she's gone, and Stiles really hopes his eavesdropping had been unsuccessful.
"Want to explain that?" he asks, nodding back towards Allison's hasty retreat.

"She was here on Scott's behalf," Stiles says bitterly. "Scott and I aren't really talking at the moment."

He sees the moment his father latches onto that bit of information, the detective in him filing it away to fit it somehow in with whatever happened to him. "That's not like you two," he says mildly. "Want to talk about it?"

"I wouldn't know what to say," Stiles says quietly.

"That's not like you, either," John says.

Stiles just shrugs, and his father leaves him alone again with a sigh. Stiles knows it isn't fair to take his anger at Scott out on Allison, but she's never exactly been innocent in all of this. He just doesn't know what it means that of all the people he could blame for this situation, he's blaming Derek less than the rest of them.
I kept to my schedule this time!!! Now, if only the muses will hold out till the end.

Day Two of his house arrest starts out pretty much the same as Day One. Stiles draws tally marks with chalk on the wall above his bed, right where he's sure his dad can see them. His father glances at them and snorts, but doesn't comment, and Stiles feels his breath catch when he closes the door again behind him.

Stiles has never been very good at being alone. His father patrols the halls and paces around downstairs like a prison guard, but he doesn't actually talk to Stiles at all. He's just patiently sitting Stiles out, waiting for him to talk first. Stiles always breaks first.

Which is why it's such a surprise when he doesn't.

His father opens his door without knocking, which is a new habit Stiles plans to break him of when this is all over. He's wearing his uniform and looking worried.

"I got called to the station," he says reluctantly. "It's important, or I'd put it off."

One point five days, Stiles thinks, because it has to be a record. He doesn't think his father has taken that much time off since Stiles got him fired, which he figures doesn't count. "Okay," Stiles says. "I understand."

His father winces and breaks eye contact, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. Stiles knows his father's tells and tenses, because that one means he's about to say something he's not going to like.

"What?" Stiles asks. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"No, no, nothing like that," John says. "Just, Melissa is downstairs. She's going to hang out here for awhile."

Stiles blinks at him for a moment, wondering why in the world Melissa would come here to hang out. At first he thinks his father might be trying to tell him they were on a date, except a date wouldn't make much sense if his father isn't even here, so—

"Oh my god, you got me a babysitter?" Stiles shouts. "You got Melissa to baby-sit me? You can't be serious. Dad, I'm sixteen, you can't—"

"I can, actually," he interrupts, and Stiles can see whatever hesitation his father had before washed away by a spike of anger. "I'm sorry if you don't like it, but I can't trust you here alone. You've proven that."

"I can't believe this," Stiles says. "I said I would stay here."

"You actually never did," his father points out. "I'll only be gone a couple of hours, and then we'll talk. Okay? We're going to work this out, kiddo, you've just got to trust me."
"Yeah," Stiles says thickly. "I do trust you. The problem is that you don't trust me."

His father looks away. "I guess I don't," he agrees. "But can you blame me?"

Stiles wants to, but he can't. He's given no reason for his father to trust him, not after all the lies he's told. Not after all the trouble he's caused. The surprising thing is that it took his father this long to snap.

"Just be careful," Stiles says quietly. "And no fast food."

His father gives a faint smile and nods. Stiles fights to steady his breathing as he leaves, but he can feel the room closing in. He's brought back out of it when hands reach out and grab his shoulders. He looks up and sees Melissa watching him in concern.

"Breathe, Stiles," she says gently.

Stiles chokes out a laugh, and then rests his head in his hands, leveling out his breathing until the black at the edges of his vision recedes back. Before this week he hadn't had a panic attack in years, but now it's like he needs to learn to break the habit all over again. "I guess it's a good thing you were here, after all."

"Yeah," she says wryly. "So does this house arrest mean that you've told him, or that you haven't? Though I'm guessing he wouldn't be letting you out of his sight if he knew the truth."

"I'm going to tell him soon," Stiles says quickly. "You said I had a week."

Melissa nods. "So I did," she agrees. "But I didn't think you'd use the whole thing. He needs to know, Stiles. This isn't doing any good for anyone, least of all you."

"I know, I just don't know how," Stiles says. He looks over at Melissa. "What was it like, when you found out?"

"Terrifying," Melissa says gently. "I thought I was in a dream. A nightmare. But then I realized that Scott's still Scott, whatever else he is, and that was all that mattered to me."

"And the rest of it?" Stiles asks.

"You mean the general madness of living in Beacon Hills? How do I cope?" Melissa asks, and Stiles nods. "Honestly, Stiles, not very well. I'm not like you, I'm not as strong. Some days I just want to bury my head in the sand. I want to protect Scott, but I know I can't. And it scares the hell out of me."

"You're one of the strongest people I know," Stiles says. "It's okay to not want to be involved. I wish that my father would react the same way, but I have a feeling that's not gonna happen."

Melissa laughs. "Yeah, good luck with that," she says, before shaking her head. "You know, I said I can't protect Scott. I know that, and I accept it, even though I plan to try anyway. But you can still get out of this, Stiles. You don't have to be involved."

"Yes I do," Stiles says. "I...I don't know how to explain it, but I feel like I was meant for this. Scott always wanted things to go back to how they were, and I always felt so guilty, because I never did."

Melissa just nods. "Yeah, you always have liked trouble," she says wryly. "So I guess that makes sense. She gets up from the bed and starts towards the door. "What do you say we go downstairs, and I'll make us some hot chocolate? Then you can explain to me why Scott is moping around the
house even worse than he did his first break up with Allison."

Stiles winces. "How about just the hot chocolate?" he asks.

"Nice try," Melissa says, heading out of his room with a muffled laugh.

Stiles moves to follow her when he hears the faint vibration of his phone. He pauses and glances out
the door to make sure the coast is clear before pulling it out from the bottom of his laundry basket.
He has thirty-five new text messages, but he doesn't bother to look past the newest one.

_Urgent. Come to the office._: Deaton.

Stiles frowns, wondering what the vet could want. He considers calling him and letting him know he
can't make it, but then he remembers this might be his last opportunity to get reinforcements. If his
father doesn't take the news well, it might be nice to have some safety measures already in place. He
could ring the house with mountain ash and grab an emergency stock of wolfsbane just in case.

Stiles hovers for a moment beside his bed before gathering his resolve, and quickly throwing on
jeans and sneakers. As he pulls on his hoodie, he heads over to his desk to write Melissa a note. He
keeps it fairly simple in case anyone not in the know should see it: _Had a question about a canine.
Went to the Vet._

He knows she won't be happy with him, but she can't really give him away without giving herself
away too. It isn't fair of him, but if he's learned anything these last few years, it's how to not play fair.

He tries not to think about his dad, and consoles himself with the fact that he never actually did make
him a promise to stay put. His father just doesn't understand that Stiles has responsibilities that lay
outside the realm of normal sixteen-year-old boys—and until he finds a way to explain, he's going to
have to continue to circumvent.

Stiles opens his window and crawls out on the ledge. He's never actually snuck out through his
window before. He's always just had to wait until his father leaves for work, and then head out the
back door, so he's not quite prepared for the jarring landing when he drops down. It's not as easy as
Derek makes it look.

He curses and glances through the downstairs window, catching a glimpse of Melissa in the kitchen.
He sneaks around the back of the house and drags his rusted old bike around to the front. It looks
like it belongs in a garbage dump, but it still works. He casts a last rueful glance at his Jeep, and then
hops on and starts towards Deaton's.

He doesn't make it very far before he feels his phone buzzing in his pocket. He skids to a stop with a
sigh, and pulls it out. Melissa's photo appears on the screen, and he considers ignoring it.

Then he remembers that Melissa could be rather scary, and he'd probably made a mistake telling her
where he'd be. "Hey," he answers warily.

"Get your ass back here right now, Stiles," Melissa snaps.

"I can't," Stiles says. "I have to do something, you know, lupine related. This might be my last
chance before my father books me a padded room."

"I can't keep covering for you," Melissa says tiredly. "Not just because I hate lying to John, but
because you're going to get yourself hurt, and I'm not going to forgive myself for that. I'm not going
to forgive myself for letting you stay involved this."
"I'm the one that involved you," Stiles says. "You and Scott both."

"Oh, honey, that's not how it happened," Melissa says gently.

"I have to keep my father safe," Stiles insists, his voice suddenly stronger. "Please. I have to do this."

She goes quiet for a moment and then he hears her muffled cursing. "Fine, I can give you an hour. Any longer than that, and I'm calling your father. And Stiles, I'll tell him everything."

"Thank you," Stiles says, pressing his eyes shut. "I owe you big."

"You owe me so big," Melissa agrees. "But as long as you make it back in time we'll call it even."

Stiles lets out a breath of relief, that lasts about as long as it takes to realize his bike chain has snapped. He climbs off the bike and glares at for a moment before leaning down to try and survey the damage.

"You don't have much luck with getaway vehicles, do you?"

Stiles spins around at the voice, wincing as he hears the bike crash to the ground behind him. Lydia laughs at him from the driver's seat of her BMW, leaning out the window with her chin rested on her arms.

"This is getting familiar," she continues, before smirking over at him. "Come on, I'll give you a ride."

Stiles watches her smug expression warily. "Stop looking at me like I'm your damsel in distress," Stiles tells her. "Because I'm not."

"All evidence to the contrary," Lydia says. "Stiles, just get in the car. You can come back for your bike…or whatever that thing is, later."

Stiles swallows his pride and climbs into the passenger seat, because he knows he'll never make it in time on foot. "What are you even doing here?" he asks. "Are you stalking me?"

"I find it disturbing that you seem excited about the possibility," Lydia says. "But no, that honor continues to belong solely to a certain brooding wolf. I was only coming to make sure you were alright. Allison told me how you went all Carrie on her."

"I did not!" Stiles protests.

"Hmm," Lydia says, non-committal, as she pulls out into the road. "Where can I drop you?"

"The vet clinic," Stiles says.

"Did your father let you off already?" Lydia asks curiously. "I know you hit the cool-dad jackpot, but this is ridiculous."

"No," Stiles admits. "But Deaton said he needed to see me, and I figured it couldn't hurt to stock up on supplies. I need to put some protections around the house. I can't just have the various wolves of Beacon Hills using my window like their personal doggy door."

"It does seem like a handy little trick," Lydia says thoughtfully. "Maybe I can pick some up for the next time I want Jackson to watch a Nicholas Sparks film."

"I'm not sure I want to contribute to that sort of torture, even on Jackson," Stiles says. "But it might be good for you to have some protections too, just in case. You never know."
"Protection is key," Lydia agrees. "The questions is what are you trying to protect—your virtue, or your life?"

"Oh, look," Stiles says, desperately grabbing for the car door as she parks in front of Deaton's. "We're here!"

"Stiles!" Lydia shouts, quickly following after him.

Stiles ignores her as he pushes into the vet's office and heads straight to the back. "Deaton!" he calls. He hears Lydia enter in a huff behind him, but she satisfies herself with just glaring at him instead of yelling.

Deaton appears as if from out of the air, and stares over at Stiles calmly. "Hello," he says.

"Hello?" Stiles echoes in disbelief. "You said it was urgent. I came, at great personal risk of being grounded for the rest of my life, and that's all you have to say?"

"Hello, Stiles," Deaton says, and looks at him with that strange expression that Stiles figures might have been a smile on anyone else. He nods towards a book sitting on the examination table. "I got the book you asked for. You acted like it was important."

"The book—oh, on the bunyips?" Stiles asks. "That's already been taken care of."

Deaton frowns. "You said it was theoretical," he chides.

"And it was," Stiles agrees. "Right up until Derek slit its throat and dragged me up out of the water."

Deaton lets out a sigh, looking pained. "Tell me you didn't go after it on your own," he says. "You should have at least waited for the book, and asked my advice. Do you have any idea how lucky you are Derek was able to kill it? They almost always travel in pairs. You might have both been killed."

Stiles reaches out and grabs the book, running his eyes over it for a moment before resting it under his arm. He doesn't respond to Deaton. He'd thought about asking the vet for advice, of course, but he'd been pretty sure Deaton's advice would have been to stay out of it.

"I can't believe you! You did, didn't you? You went after it alone!" Lydia says, before scoffing and looking away. "You deserved to be kidnapped."

"What is Ms. Martin doing here, if I might ask?" Deaton looks over at her with the wariest expression Stiles has ever seen on him.

"I thought you might get us set up with some protections," Stiles says. "You know, a little mountain ash, a bit of wolfsbane, and, ah…anything else that magically repels certain supernatural creatures?"

Lydia had moved to the cabinet and picked up a small bottle of mountain ash. "It doesn't look like much," she says.

"It isn't, it's what is put into it that has the true power," Deaton says. "Though I'm afraid it will do you no good."

Stiles glances over at him. "What do you mean?" he demands. "I've seen it work. I kept Jackson locked up from like thirty miles away."

"In your hands, it can be a very powerful force," Deaton agrees. "Lydia, however, is a special case. For the same reason that Peter's bite and the kanima's poison did not effect her, the mountain ash will
He looks over at Lydia. "You, my dear, are immune to magic."

"You mean I don't have to carry around your little jar of dirt, after all?" Lydia asks, returning the bottle to the shelf before fastidiously dusting off her hands. "Good to know. Stiles, let's go."

"I'd like a moment with Stiles, if you don't mind," Deaton says.

Lydia looks at him like she's turning the dials on a microscope, before glancing at Stiles. "I'll be at the car," she says. "You have five minutes, or I'm leaving without you."

Lydia leaves in a glorious huff of heels and red hair, and Stiles turns curiously back to Deaton. "What's going on?" he asks.

"Scott told me what happened," Deaton says.

"Really," Stiles says levelly. "Honestly, I'm surprised he hasn't posted it on Facebook."

"He wanted me to look at his injuries," Deaton says wryly. "I wouldn't do so until he told me how he got them. He didn't want to tell me."

Stiles bites his lip, his hands twitching nervously at his sides. "He was fine, though, right?" he asks nonchalantly.

"He was," Deaton agrees.

"So, are you going to tell me to write Derek off too?" Stiles demands. "Maybe call up Chris Argent and give the go ahead?"

"Of course not," Deaton says. "I think Derek needs your help, and this was his roundabout way of asking for it."

Stiles barks out a laugh. "Yeah, you could call it roundabout," Stiles agrees. "He has my number. He coulda just sent a text."

"Stiles," Deaton begins.

"Save it, okay?" Stiles interrupts. "Derek doesn't need my help. None of them do. I need to just stay out of that world. I don't belong in it."

"You say you don't belong, but that's not the trouble," Deaton tells him. "The trouble is that you belong to all of them at once—Scott, Derek, your father. It's left your loyalties divided."

"But I chose Scott, right from the beginning," Stiles protests. "I've been with him through this every step of the way, and I've completely lost my father's trust because of it—"

"In action, yes, you have sided with Scott," Deaton agrees. "But you have sympathy with the other pack, you understand them and their motivations in ways that Scott can't. You also bring the human perspective, more specifically because of who your father is, the cop and criminal mindset. You worry about the consequences and repercussions that they all imagine themselves above."

Deaton pulls a large bottle of mountain ash from the cabinet and places it in a paper bag, before reaching for a bottle of press dried wolfsbane. "You need to understand your place in this, before you're going to be any good to anyone," he explains, turning back to face him as he folds the bag closed.

"I'm starting to think I don't have one," Stiles says softly.
"You considered yourself part of Scott's pack, did you not?" Deaton asks.

"Yes," Stiles agrees.

"And you would help Scott sabotage Derek's plans so he could do things his way?" Deaton asks gently.

"Yes," Stiles agrees with a wince. "But in our defense, Derek's plans tend to suck, so they probably would have failed even without our interference."

"Even so," Deaton says. "The point is, look at all you've accomplished, and all while you've been at odds. Imagine if you could all work together."

"I don't think my imagination is that good," Stiles says dryly.

"Neither pack is going to reach its full potential alone, so you're going to have to find a way," Deaton says firmly. "You have to bring them all together—you're the only one that can."

Stiles turns away, closing his eyes for a moment as he tries to get a grip on his frustration. "Why does it have to be me?" he demands. "Because I'm not special. I'm not one of them, so why should this all be down to me? How is that fair?"

"I never said it was fair," Deaton says.

Stiles says nothing, though part of him wants to scream and rage at the unfairness of it all. He wants to explain that he's trying to get out, not further in. But he's always sort of expected there was no real escaping from this. Not for him.

"Whether or not you choose to do it, however," Deaton says kindly, as he hands over the bag of supplies, "is entirely up to you."

Chapter End Notes

I just want to thank all of you for your support and kudos and feedback! You guys are amazing, and I promise the reveal will actually be happening. This story is just ending up so much longer than I planned that the road to get there just keeps on goin'. ;-)
Hi guys! This part is a little shorter than usual, but I didn't want to keep you waiting any longer. I'm trying to keep pushing through till the end! There will probably be three or four more chapters after this (and why do I have the feeling I've said that before? ;-)

Stiles takes six minutes to make it back to the parking lot, and he's worried for a moment that he'll be walking home. Lydia is still there waiting, but she gives him a narrow-eyed glare as he gets in the car. "Want to tell me what that was about?" she demands.

"Deaton wants me to start peace talks or something," he says, and lets his head fall forward onto the dashboard.

"Hey, watch it," Lydia says, swatting at him until he sits back. "Your stupid thick skull might damage something."

"What do I do?" Stiles whines.

"We could let Allison kill Derek," Lydia says sweetly. "Problem solved."

"As much as I would love to blame Derek for all of my problems, I can't," Stiles says, slouching down in the seat and wraps his arms around the book and bag Deaton had given him. He glances over at the clock on the radio. "Can we go? I have to get back before my dad."

Lydia nods and pulls out into the street. "You're going to have to tell him, you know," she says.

"So I've been told," Stiles says. "Any ideas how I should go about it?"

"Try this: Dad, you've seen Twilight, right?" Lydia says, deepening her voice. "Well, I'm like Bella Swan, because you're totally Charlie, and Derek Hale is like Edward Cullen except he's the werewolf. Jacob doesn't really enter in to it except for the werewolf thing. But don't worry, no one's a vampire!"

"I'm not Bella Swan!" Stiles protests, slouching further. "Way to kick me when I'm down."

"I'm sorry," Lydia says. "But the comparison was a little hard to avoid. I've been sitting on that for months."

"I hate you," Stiles tells her.

Lydia laughs. "Did you want me to drop you off to get your travesty of a bike?" she asks.

"I don't have time," Stiles says. "If I don't beat my dad home I'm a dead man."

"Your father wouldn't kill you," Lydia reassures him.

"But Melissa McCall would," Stiles says.

"Understood," Lydia says quickly, stepping down on the gas. "Let's get you home."
Stiles leg twitches the rest of the drive. He absentmindedly flips through the book that Deaton had gotten for him, reading about the preferred killing grounds and mating habits of bunyips. Lydia lets him get away with it, probably taking pity on him because of the mess his life has become.

But the moment they come to a stop in front of his house, she reaches out and grabs his arm before he can leave. "You don't owe them anything," she says. "Especially not Scott. You know that, right?"

"Yeah," Stiles says. "I know that."

"Stiles, look at me," Lydia says firmly. "You don't."

"I know," Stiles says again.

"Okay," Lydia says, and lets him go. "But you can tell Derek that if he tries something like that again he won't have to worry about the Argents. I'll kill him myself."

"That might actually be the better threat," Stiles says with a grin.

Lydia leans forward and kisses him quickly on the cheek. "Just be careful," she says. "It's different for us."

"Because we're human," Stiles sighs.

"No, because we're smarter than the rest of those losers put together," Lydia says. "Now get out before you're grounded for life."

Stiles laughs and pushes out of the car. Lydia goes flying off around the corner, and just barely disappears from sight before his father pulls onto the street from the opposite direction. He dives to hide behind the side of his house before his father can see him.

He makes his way carefully around the house, listening out for the cruiser, and doesn't notice anyone coming up behind him until he's already been grabbed. He yelps, but when he spins around he sees that it's only Melissa.

Well, maybe only Melissa isn't the best way to describe it. Because she definitely doesn't look happy with him.

"Stiles, get inside," she hisses, as she starts pushing him towards the back door. She steers him towards the stairs the moment she closes the door behind them. "Your father called, he'll be here any minute. I told him you were sleeping."

"He's on the street," Stiles agrees. "I thought he'd take longer. He never comes back that quick from a call."


"Has anyone ever told you that you're scary?" Stiles asks.

"Scott. All the time," she says. "Now, Stiles."

"I'm going!" Stiles says, as he runs up the steps.

"But we will be talking about this later!" Melissa calls, keeping her voice soft when she hears the key in the door.
He hears Melissa's muffled voice as she greets his father just as he gently closes the bedroom door behind him. He throws off his hoodie and pushes off his shoes, then collapses on his bed and hopes that this is the last time he has to do something like this.

The door opens just a moment later, and then his father is clearing his throat. Stiles pushes himself up. "Hey," he says warily.

His father's expression is stony as he stares Stiles down, and nothing of the reassurance that had been there when he left seems to have survived his trip. "I need to see you downstairs," he says simply, then turns around and leaves.

Stiles' heart stops for a moment, because that does not sound good. He quickly follows his father down the stairs, worrying for a moment that maybe he's been caught, but Melissa is gone and he's pretty sure his dad wouldn't have let her off that easy. "So…" he starts hesitantly, coming to stand by his father at the kitchen table. "What's going on?"

"Sit," he says shortly.

Stiles drops into the chair. "Okay," he says quietly. "I'm sitting."

His father runs a hand down his face. "You're so independent that sometimes I forget you're still just a kid," he says, before looking away. "Your mother would be so disappointed in me."

"Dad?" he says nervously.

"Concerned citizens with their smart phone cameras, they're changing the way the world works," he says, and slides a photo across the table. "That looks a lot like you and Derek Hale, don't you think?"

Stiles holds back a wince as he takes in the photo. It's a grainy picture of him and Derek sitting in the booth at the Arnold diner. Stiles bites his lip, but it's still built in as his first response to try and cover this up, and he knows the picture isn't good enough to actually identify Derek.

"That was just some random trucker," Stiles says, glancing up. "He offered me candy and I told him I wasn't born yesterday."

His father's expression doesn't change as he pulls out another photo and slides it to him. "You want to try that again?"

"Crap," Stiles says. Derek is his usual unmistakable self in the second photo, looking like a werewolf James Dean with his sunglasses and his smirk.

"Local PD recognized Hale from the wanted posters awhile back," his father says. "Sent these to me to check if they should be worried he's hanging out with some beat-up underage kid."

"Dad—" Stiles starts.

"And come to find, who is the kid, but you. Bruised up and three towns left of where you should have been." His father watches him closely as he speaks, and Stiles tries and fails to hold his gaze. He thinks, just tell him. Say: Yeah, I know, but hey, it's okay, because he's a werewolf! He opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

"I need you to tell me what's going on here, kiddo," John says tiredly. "Because it almost looks to me like it's some sort of date."
Stiles would laugh at the ridiculousness of that except in hindsight he's not sure how off the mark it really is. He still remembers the feel of Derek's lips against his, his fingers burning against his skin as he tugged him closer.

"Stiles?" his father says sharply, and Stiles' eyes shoot back up to his. "That's not exactly the protest I was expecting."

"I'm not dating Derek," Stiles says quickly.

"Then you want to explain what's going on there?" he asks. "What the hell you were doing all the way in Arnold, without your meds, hanging out with Hale?"

"I don't know how to answer that," Stiles says.

"You could try the truth," his dad says.

"It's not that simple," Stiles says. "This…none of this will make sense without context."

"Then give me some context, Stiles," he snaps. "Because if you don't start giving me some answers, I'm going to go to him. And I won't be as nice about it."

"I…uh, just got into some trouble, so I called Derek and he came to pick me up," Stiles says.

"What kind of trouble?" he demands. "And why would you call Derek? Why wouldn't you call me?"

"Derek isn't who you think he is," Stiles says. "He's never hurt anyone. Or at least, no one who didn't deserve it."

John lets out an incredulous laugh. "That's not as reassuring as you seem to think," he says.

"I know," Stiles winces. "I'm sorry. I'm not doing this very well, but I still don't know how to tell you. I have this feeling like if I tell you then nothing is ever going to be the same."

"You're scarin' the hell out of me here," John says. "Has he hurt you?"

"No, he was trying to protect me, in his own, crazy, Derek way," Stiles says, before resting his head in his hands. "This would be so much easier with visual aids."

His only warning before his father is grabbing at his arm is a strange intake of breath. Then his dad is gently dragging his arm across the table and pushing back his sleeve. His wrist is ringed faintly with purple. He remembers Derek grabbing him in the diner—he hadn't been overly rough, but he had super-human werewolf strength and Stiles bruised like a peach.

"Dad," Stiles says quickly, "this isn't—"

"No, I've seen enough," John snaps, letting him go. He pushes out from the table and starts for the door. Stiles notes anxiously that he's still wearing his gun.

"Stop, I'll talk," Stiles promises, nearly tripping over his feet as he jumps up to follow him. His father tears out the door, and Stiles just barely slips through before it slams back into him. "Please! Just look at me!"

His father pauses and turns around, his expression unchanging as he waits.

"Derek's a werewolf," Stiles blurs. "And Scott too. Also Isaac, Erica, Boyd and Jackson. But
Jackson was more scaly than furry at first which is why Scott and I locked him in your prison transport." Stiles sucks in a deep breath. "See? There's a perfectly reasonable explanation for everything!"

He waits for the reaction, feeling something like relief that at least now it's out. He's done it. His dad knows.

Except the only reaction he gets is another glare from his father before he turns around and keeps heading towards the car.

"Didn't you hear me?" Stiles demands, before pushing ahead of him and throwing himself in front of the cruisers' door. "I know that's like the super-edited cliff notes version, but if we can just sit down, I'll tell you everything!"

John grabs Stiles by the shoulders, and gently but firmly moves him out of the way. "You know, those kind of explanations were sort of cute when the worst thing I had to worry about was you staying up all night playing video games," he says tightly. "But did you really expect it to work with something like this?"

Stiles stares back at him in disbelief as he realizes his father doesn't believe him. His father just thinks this is like the times he used to blame his messy room on house gremlins. He knew his dad wouldn't accept it easily, but he hadn't thought he'd discount it this completely before even hearing him out. At the very least he'd expected concerned inquiries and an interrogation about whether or not he was on drugs.

It's obviously his own fault for being such a smart ass 95% of the time.

John gets into the driver's seat and slams the door, before rolling the window down and looking at back at him. "Get back in the house," he says, before reversing out of the driveway fast enough that he would have given someone else a ticket for it.

Stiles takes a few steps after him, but he's already gone, well on his way to the Hale estate. Stiles drags his cellphone out in panic, and tries to call Derek. He curses when the call goes straight to voicemail. Derek is a lot of things, but he doesn't ignore phone calls and usually remembers to keep it charged. Unlike Scott, he wanted to make sure his pack could reach him.

As if enough hasn't gone wrong already, now he has to worry about this too. He tries Boyd next, and he answers on the second ring.

"Yeah?" he answers.

"Boyd! Thank god," Stiles says. "I've got to talk to Derek."

"I don't know where he is," Boyd says after a moment. "Maybe try his cell."

"I did," Stiles says. "And what do you mean you don't know where he is? You always know where he is. Isn't that some sort of freaky pack side-effect?"

"He wanted to be alone, after what happened," Boyd tells him. "None of us have seen him since the night we came back. I figured if he'd talked to anyone it would have been you."

Stiles swallows hard. "You'd know if he was in trouble right?" he asks.

"It's not like we have a built in alert system," Boyd says dryly. "Derek…maybe sort of does, when it's us, but it doesn't work nearly so well the other way around. Stiles, what's going on?"
Stiles stops himself before blurting out what happened. He doesn't need his father facing off with a whole pack of werewolves instead of just one. One is bad enough, and Derek can take care of himself.

Which is why Derek is totally fine somewhere, brooding like usual. He probably just lost his phone, or his charger.

"Nothing," Stiles says. "It's nothing."

He hangs up before Boyd can call him on that and races back up to his room. He puts his sneakers back on and grabs his hoodie, before starting back for his door. He pauses before he leaves, glancing back at where he'd dropped his loot from Deaton. Even after everything he doesn't like the idea of using mountain ash or wolfsbane against Derek, but he grabs it up anyway. He knows he'd do lots of thing he doesn't really want to if that's what it takes to keep his father safe.

He heads back outside and comes to a stop on his porch, looking across at his Jeep sitting there on the side of the road, in all its glory.

His father had locked the keys in his safe and he'd been changing the combination daily because he knows just what kind of son he has. Stiles thinks he actually has a decent shot of breaking in, but he doesn't have the time.

It's time to trust in the Lydia.

Stiles hops up into his Jeep and then pushes the seat back, leaning forward to rip some of his precious Jeep's insides out. "I'm so sorry about this," he whispers to her anxiously, as he tries to remember Lydia's instructions. Newer cars are much harder to hotwire, but luckily his Jeep is older than he is. "I'll put you all back together, I promise. Or, you know, pay someone else to do it."

He gets the Jeep started within ten minutes, and doesn't waste another second after that. His father has a fifteen-minute head start on him as it is.

And that means he's already there.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I know I said I wasn't going to take this long again! I have to admit it's been a struggle to try and get back to this story after so long, but I decided I finally need to stop toying with it and just get it posted.

I want to thank everyone that has been leaving reviews, because your beautiful, thoughtful feedback is what keeps me working at this crazy story. It's ended up so different than I expected, and that's mostly because of all the ideas you have all given me. You guys are all amazing!

His sneakers sink into the ground when he steps out of the Jeep. Stiles catches his balance by grabbing onto the car door, and frowns down at the wet mud beneath his feet. It hasn't rained in over a month and the Hale estate isn't exactly equipped with sprinklers. The knot in his stomach twists a little tighter as he realizes something has definitely gone wrong.

There is a flash of light in the corner of his eye, and he sees his father's cruiser parked nearer to the house. The cruiser door is still open and the lights are on, though he'd left off the siren. Stiles gently pushes his door shut and starts towards the house, cautious not to slip on the wet path.

He can just make out Derek's front door in the coming dark, and that's when he sees where the water is coming from. It's slipping out from underneath the front door and rolling down the steps like a homemade waterfall. He doesn't know how long it's been flooded, but it's been long enough that the water has built up around the foundations like some sort of moat.

"Dad?" he calls. "Derek?" There's no answer, but he can see light glancing off the windows from the inside, so there's someone there. He reaches up and grabs the door before dragging it open.

Water rushes out from the house, soaking him up to his knees before it spreads out and washes over the dirt. "Dad?" Stiles calls.

He doesn't know how even water has become ominous. A couple of years ago, the worst he might think of this is that it's faulty plumbing, or a load of laundry gone horrible wrong.

Nothing's that simple anymore, and all he can think is: Bunyips like water.

He thinks he remembers reading that they have a talent for creating swamps out of barren, dry places. Stiles curses himself for not thinking to bring Deaton's book, as he hauls himself up the last step.

There's only a thin, one inch layer of water spread out across the floors when he enters the house. It's slipping out through the rotten wood panels of the floor, and it's not high enough yet to get too far past it. Still, he can hear rushing water coming from somewhere, so he doesn't know how long he has.

It's dark inside even though there's still a bit of sun slipping through the trees. It doesn't help him much, because the way it lays down thin lines of light through the openings in the roof only makes it harder to make everything out.
He heads towards the only remaining staircase in the house, and water is dripping lazily step to step. He fumbles to grab his phone and activate his flashlight app, but before he can take another step someone grabs him from behind. He goes still as he tries to find a way out of the hold, but stops the moment he sees hand wrapped around his waist.

"Dad, thank god!" he shouts, as he tries to disentangle himself. "We've got to get out of here. Like five minutes ago."

"I couldn't agree more," his dad snarls.

Stiles swallows tightly. "Right, good," he says. "You want to loosen up your hold? Maybe? Dad?"

His father has been slowly dragging them towards the door, and before he knows it he's rearranged his hold to grab Stiles' upper arm and force him down the porch steps.

"Did you see something?" Stiles demands. "I think I know what it is. Derek's probably in trouble, but we need to get you out of here first. I'll call the others, okay?"

Stiles barely raises his phone and his father is snatching it from his hands. "God damn it," his father mutters. "This is what's going to happen, Stiles. You are going to wait here, in the car. I'm going to find Derek and straighten some things out. Then we're going home, where you will be grounded for life."

"What?" Stiles protests. "No, wait, dad, you can't go back in there. Don't you think any of this is a little weird? It's not even raining, but it's freaking soaked here and—"

Stiles gets unceremoniously pushed into the back of his father's cruiser before he can finish his rant. He opens his mouth to protest again and his father holds up his hand.

"Stop it, Stiles," he says. "Don't move from this car, do you understand?"

"Just take me home," Stiles tries, reaching out to try and grab his dad's sleeve. "Okay? We can talk, I promise. Just give me my phone back and we'll—"

His father's expression goes shuttered at the mention of his phone, like he thinks Stiles is playing him just to get it back. Stiles swallows hard, but he can't really blame his father for misreading this whole thing. Stiles is good at this, after all—and he's the one that's been conditioning his father for years to overlook the truth.

"You have to know that something isn't right here, dad," Stiles tries. "Please. I need you to believe me."

"Yeah, it's weird. I'm pretty sure the water main burst behind the house. It's unlikely Derek's still around, but if he's still here I'm going to find him, you don't have to worry about that. And you're going to stay in the car," his father says.

"Dad!" Stiles tries again. "You don't understand, okay, just—"

"Stay," his father demands again, and then pushes the door shut.

Stiles yelps at the slam and then tugs at the handle, but it has already automatically locked. He tries the other one just in case and then slams a hand at the grate separating the backseat from the front in frustration. He can barely make out his father's figure as he disappears back into the house, because it's getting darker by the second and there's something unnatural about that, too.
Stiles closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. There's a way out of this, because there's always a way. He's got no phone, no weapons, and his father is walking into who knows what.

It's manageable, totally. He's fine.

He hears a strange, slow creak and the car starts to tilt, which is totally unfair—he's gone and jinxed himself without even saying anything out loud. Stiles catches himself on the door, bracing himself with one hand wrapped on the grate and the other pressed against the back window. He glances out the windows at every side, but he can't see a thing.

The car makes another slow groan and jerks again. Stiles frowns at the front through the grate and he can see the nose of the car hasn't gone much higher.

Which means the back of the car is heading down—he's sinking into the mud.

"Not good," he mutters. Sinkholes aren't exactly unheard of in coastal California, but when he runs the statistics through the back of his mind the end result he arrives at is unlikely. "Dad!"

He tries the handle again as he shouts, but he knows it's not doing any good. There's another jarring drop and the car is starting to tilt up now. He has to push against the back seat to keep himself upright.

He tries to think of what he has: some mountain ash, some wolf's bane, and the clothes on his back. He needs something more than that—he's not freaking MacGyver.

He takes another deep breath and then braces himself against the seat again. He tries to get as much leverage as he can, so he can kick the window out. He's just about to do it when something makes him stop. He ignores another drop and crawls towards the side window.

There's a handprint there—a three-fingered hand print.

On the bright side his dad is safe inside. On the downside, that's because the Bunyip is out here with him.

What had Deaton said? They usually travel in pairs—but not just pairs, Stiles realizes, remembering the passages he'd skimmed when Lydia had driven him home. Mates. The Bunyips mated for life and always stayed together.

Derek had only killed one of them.

The car jerks violently and Stiles' head crashes against the metal grate. He blearily lifts himself but can't make out any shapes at first. Even once his vision clears, he realizes the back window is pitch black. It's half buried in the mud. He pushes himself up slowly, but it's hard to catch his balance. His dad's cruiser must be almost vertical by now.

Stiles leans up against the side window, and he can see the mud right outside of it, but it's not covered yet.

He knows he's out of options. He'll probably regret this, but he hasn't got so much pride he's going to let himself get buried alive to save face. So he drags air into his lungs and then shouts out Derek's name.

"Derek!" Stiles shouts again. "I know you're out there, okay? And I know you can hear me, cause you have the freakish werewolf hearing. I need help, okay? And you said if I was pack, you would always be there to help. So let's just consider this a trial run."
Stiles barely finishes his proposal and the opposite side-window is bursting apart. He closes his eyes and uses his arms to cover his face, but it's over in a second. He lets out a laugh that's half relieved and half hysterical when he sees Derek looking in at him instead of some slobbering bunyip.

"I really didn't expect that to work," Stiles says in awe.

"Stiles," Derek growls, before holding out a hand. Stiles pushes forward and grabs it, and Derek uses the grip to drag him straight out of the car. He comes falling out on top of Derek just as the car creaks and sinks almost to its headlights.

Stiles starts to push himself off Derek and freezes when he sees Derek's expression tighten in pain. He looks the man over quickly, his eyes narrowing in on a dark patch leaking through his white t-shirt.

"What happened?" he demands, as he pushes Derek's jacket out of the way. He chokes back a gasp when he sees the damage.

"Don't worry about it," Derek says. He pushes himself to his feet, dragging Stiles up haphazardly beside him.

"You've got a hole in your stomach," Stiles protests.

"I said don't worry about it," Derek snarls.

"Don't worry about it? I can see your ribs!" he shouts back.

"I'm fine, I have this under control." Derek glares at him. "You need to get in your Jeep and go home."

"My dad's still in there, I'm not going anywhere," Stiles says. He steps slowly away from Derek. He doesn't like the look of that wound but one problem at a time. He knows Derek has bounced back from worse than this.

"I'll get him out, Stiles," Derek insists.

Stiles snorts. "You can barely stand," he says. "I'm just going to grab him, and then you're going to help me tell him the truth as we get you to Deaton, cause you're not looking good at all. Like, seriously. I think you're getting even paler and oh my god, it's right behind me, isn't it? It's totally behind me."

Stiles freezes, caught immobile by the uncharacteristic anxiety on Derek's face.

"Worse," Derek says roughly. "Your father is."

Stiles swallows hard, not sure what it means that he might actually have preferred the bunyip. That was territory he knew, that was something he could fight. He turns slowly to see his father has his gun raised, his eyes fierce and determined.

His gun is aimed just perfectly to bypass Stiles and hit Derek—Derek with his eyes still flashing a bit red, and nails a little too long from dragging him from the car. He can see his father taking in all of the pieces and putting them back together to get the wrong picture. Derek as something not quite human, squad car tail up in the mud, Stiles right in the middle.

"Stiles, come to me," John says, and his voice is steady and calm. His dad always gets calm in situations like this. He's seen his father talk someone off a ledge once, calm as anything, like they
were having a discussion over lunch.

His friends would probably laugh, but Stiles knows he inherited that calm. The more out of control the things around him, the more in control he becomes. It's like everything else slows down, like he's watching something from the outside.

So Stiles is taking in all the pieces too; his father, with the gun, Derek, with his claws—and the bunyip, crawling straight up out of the ground. It's going to be between them in seconds. He drags the bottle of mountain ash out of his pocket, unscrewing the lid and then stepping forward. Derek has spotted the bunyip of course, and reaches out to try and pull him back, but his father doesn't even know what a bunyip is, and all he can see is Derek trying to stop him.

"Dad," he starts, when he sees his father tensing over the gun. "It's okay. I just need you not to move, okay? Don't—"

The bunyip rises up on its hind legs, dragging itself out from the mud. It had been burrowed underneath, pulling the car down to its lair from below. He can see his father's intake of breath as he moves his gun from Derek to the bunyip, but he's too smart to start firing blindly.

"Hey there, Boba Fett," Stiles says quietly, disentangling himself from Derek's grip to step closer.

"Stiles, stop," his father says tightly. "Don't move a step."

It's hard to ignore his father when he uses that tone, but he does it. He ignores Derek's warning growl, too, because Derek caught the last bunyip by surprise and he wasn't injured then. He doesn't stand a chance against it now, and his father's gun might as well be a sling-shot for all the good it would probably do against this thing at full strength.

At first the bunyip doesn't even glance at his father, and it's all the confirmation Stiles needs to know its here for revenge. It probably followed their scents, but doesn't know which one killed its mate. But then his father moves, slowly trying to reach Stiles, and it draws the bunyip's attention.

He knows then that he's out of time, and he lets the mountain ash escape out into the air. It flows out in front of him this time without ever hitting the ground, washing forward in a wave to wrap around the bunyip like a net. Stiles has his hand suspended in the air, directing it like a composer, and the bunyip is screaming before he even realizes what he's done.

The mountain ash has closed in around it, wrapped around the bunyip like a python before bursting apart and sending the creature flying twenty feet back.

It lands in a heap, its skin blackened and twitching and Stiles feels sick as the smell of burnt flesh reaches them. "Oh god," he mutters, and starts forward without thinking. His father rushes forward, grabbing him and forcing him behind him.

"What the hell is that thing?" John demands, glancing warily over at Derek.

Derek walks towards it, kneeling beside it with a frown. He looks over at Stiles for a moment before looking back at the creature. "It's a bunyip," he says simply. He looks back towards them. "It's still alive."

"I didn't mean to do that," Stiles says, trying to slip past his father. His father latches onto his arm with an iron tight grip before he can make it any closer. "I was only going to trap it, I don't—"

He doesn't understand what could have happened, at first. Except that he still remembers the way Derek pushed his way through his barrier, and the way it threw Jackson harmlessly back—his state
of mind, he realizes. The power of the ash, the effect it had, it was all based around his state of mind. It was powered by intent.

And when it had moved towards his father, he had been desperate and terrified. He'd nearly ripped the thing apart without even meaning to.

The creature lets out a horrifying, distressed cry, its strange brown doe eyes blinking up at them all in confusion.

"Dad—" he whispers, his voice breaking as he looks at his father. It's been a long time since he's expected his father to appear and make things better. It's been a long time since he's thought he needed that, but he needs it now.

John lets go of Stiles' arm and steps over the bunyip. Then he lifts his gun and fires, putting it out of its misery with one clean shot to the head.
Okay, so I've failed at all my timelines by a ridiculous amount once again. I think this is the slowest I've ever written a story, but it's also one of the longest! So I can't promise when this will be finished, but I can promise it will be finished (sudden death and natural disasters not withstanding). I'm invested in this one, and all the feels, and I shall never surrender!

Stiles lets out a shaky breath as the bunyip finally stills, his father's bullet driven straight between its eyes. Stiles knows there wasn't any choice in stopping it, but it's not as satisfying as it's been in the past to come out on top. He knows there haven't been any real winners for quite awhile.

He almost wishes the bunyip would crumble to ash and disappear, but it just lies there, bloodied and blackened. It looks a little like a beached seal, except for its strange, dog-like face.

The water sloshing around the edges of the house is draining into the ground though, like it's being sucked back wherever it came from. The mud starts to crack in thin spider-web patterns as it dries out unnaturally fast.

He pulls his eyes away from the destruction when he sees Derek getting back on his feet from the corner of his eyes. He starts to step closer and his father quickly moves around the bunyip, placing himself firmly between Stiles and Derek.

"Werewolves, huh?" he asks warily, watching Derek carefully and looking for any trace of what he had seen before. Derek's eyes have cleared, his claws retracted—now he just looks pale and drawn, and too weak to be a threat. "That was the truth?"

"Yes," Stiles answers, even though it's Derek his father is glaring at. "I know I should have told you, god, so long ago—but it's not exactly the easiest thing to bring into a conversation. I mean, I've looked for an opening! I promise I have. Like, hey, when we were watching Teen Wolf and I said Scott reminded me of Michael J. Fox. If you'd said, yeah, he kind of does, I coulda said, boy, you don't even know how much, but you said you couldn't see it, so I just—"

"Stiles," his father interrupts.

"Right, we don't need to talk about this right now," Stiles says. "First things first. We need to get Derek to Deaton."

John glances back at Stiles incredulously. "You want to take your boyfriend to the vet?"

"What?" Stiles asks, his jaw dropping. "What, no, you're still on that? It was either illicit boyfriend or werewolf, it was never both!"

John narrows his eyes but looks back at Derek. "You're hurt?"

"The bunyip caught me off guard earlier," Derek says reluctantly. "I got knocked out in the woods behind the house. I only woke up when I heard Stiles calling for me."
"Show him the thing," Stiles says, waving his hand imperiously towards Derek's shirt. They didn't have time to waste going through all of the details of the night—he knew they needed to get Derek patched up now.

"It looks worse than it is," Derek warns, as he carefully moves his shirt aside. The Sheriff finally holsters his gun when he sees the wounds. One rib is almost fully visible and another has cracked and nearly pushed through his skin. Even if Derek can heal from this on his own, if he doesn't get everything back where it's supposed to be he's never going to heal right.

"Stiles, get him in the Jeep," John says, going into cop mode once more. Stiles is just glad to see that Derek has been re-filed in his father's brain as 'victim,' for the moment at least.

He steps forward and carefully moves against Derek's uninjured side, pulling his arm over his shoulders to help him towards the Jeep. "You want me to call any of your pack?" Stiles asks quietly, hoping not to draw his father's attention.

Derek's eyes are following John's every move. "I think that would just make things worse," he says. "He's handling things better than I thought he would."

"That's probably mostly because the bunyip got to you first," Stiles admits.

"Stiles, what the hell?" John yells back at them. "Did you hotwire this car? Where did you even—nevermind, just get in the back, both of you."

"Maybe you can just drop me off with Deaton," Derek says warily.

"You're not getting out of this that easily," Stiles insists. "You got me into this mess, you're going to help me explain it. You owe me that much at least."

Stiles gets Derek into the back seat and then runs around to the other side, climbing in behind his father. "I need my phone," he tells him. "I'll tell Deaton to meet us at the office."

His father tosses it back to him without a word, and then uses the loose wires to get the Jeep started again. Stiles wisely does not make a snide comment about how easily his father picks up where he left off in order to get the Jeep started.

Stiles dials Deaton's number as he nervously watches Derek slump in his seat. "Deaton!" he says as soon as the call picks up. "Derek's hurt, like really bad. Angry-bunyip-mate-on-a-revenge-trip sort of bad. We need you—what, yes, we're on our way. See you soon."

He hangs up the call, and catches his father's eye in the rear view mirror. "He's already there," he says. "He says he'll be ready for us."

Stiles probably would have been a lot more worried about the coming repercussions of his father's rather dramatic introduction to the supernatural, but Derek was turning a rather alarming shade of white and the blood was starting to crawl upwards along his shirt. Situational triage calls for making sure Derek doesn't bleed out before worrying about his father's new outlook on life.

"Derek, what do I do?" Stiles asks. "Just—what can I—"

"I'll be fine," Derek says, eyes pressed closed. "It takes a lot to kill me."

Stiles knows that's true, but he can't stop the anxious, sick feeling in his stomach. He doesn't even acknowledge his father when they stop in front of Deaton's, he just runs around the Jeep and helps pull Derek out.
Deaton's already at the door, and he rushes forward to Derek's other side. They get him inside and lay him out on the table, but Derek is fading fast. He whimpers something illegible and presses his eyes shut, steeling himself against the pain. He knows it's only going to get worse before it gets better.

"Stiles, I'm gonna need you to hold him down," Deaton says, as he pulls on a pair of surgical gloves.

Stiles nods, moving behind Derek's head. He reaches down and presses his hands down on Derek's shoulders, while Derek's hands wrap around the edges of the table. "Do it," Derek says.

Deaton doesn't hesitate. He reaches straight into the wound, and presses Derek's ribs back into place. Derek screams and arches upwards, but he doesn't fight against Stiles' hold. Stiles knows he wouldn't have been able to do much if Derek had.


He knows this isn't quite the same as having a panic attack, but he still knows what it's like having your own body taken out of your control. Derek just nods, choking out a gasp.

"Just a little more," Deaton promises, as he works to set the cracked rib. This time Derek's scream stops almost before it begins, and he finally goes limp. Stiles closes his eyes, grateful he's unconscious as Deaton finishes up.

"He'll be fine," Deaton assures him. "He just needs to sleep it off. A few days, and he'll be good as new."

Stiles shakes his head jerkily, wanting so much to believe that. He takes a deep breath of his own. Then he looks up, and that's when he sees his father is watching him. He's standing in the doorway with his hands hanging at his sides like he doesn't know what else to do with them, and he's looking at Stiles like he's a complete stranger.

Stiles realizes then that he's been so stupid, so insanely naïve, to think this would solve what was wrong between them. His relationship with his father had been in trouble long before Scott got bitten in those woods, he doesn't know how he thought the truth could do anything but make it worse.

"Dad," Stiles starts, moving around the table to his father. His father steps back into the lobby, and Stiles pulls the door softly shut behind them.

"You've done this all before," John says stiffly.

Stiles has come a long way from the first time he'd been in this office with Derek, holding a bone saw and trying to keep himself from throwing up. He probably looked like an old pro by now, and after hiding this part of himself from his father for so long, he knows it has to be a shock. Stiles used to be a goof, he knows. He used to run around and spew pop culture and trip over his own feet—and he still does, but it isn't instinctual anymore. He has to work at being that person these days, because he's been becoming someone else for awhile now.

"How long?" his father demands. "How many times—?"

"Dad—" Stiles says desperately, just trying to make that look in his father's eyes disappear.

"Last time I looked you were just my fun, too smart kid, and the worst trouble you ever got into was getting caught out in the woods after curfew."

Stiles swallows, wonders if his father has somehow pinpointed that as the moment it all changed.
"That was almost a year ago," he says, and his father flinches before looking away.

"It's like I don't even know you anymore," his father says thickly.

Stiles wants to ask, 'well, whose fault is that?' but he keeps it to himself. He's been putting on a show for his father for a long time now, and he has no one to blame but himself that his father has believed it.

"I'm still me," Stiles says, because he is. He's still in here. He's just getting a bit more buried, with each body he's watched get buried.

His father's expression turns to stone, and he nods sharply, like he's come to some decision. "This ends now," he says. "Do you hear me, Stiles? I don't want you near any of them—"

Stiles hears the words, but they don't quite register. "What?"

"I can't let this happen again," John says. "I won't have you putting yourself at risk like this."

"I didn't ask to get involved this," Stiles says. "I really didn't, but it happened, and you don't come back from it. I am at risk. You're at risk. We're all at risk. The minute you realize what's really out there, the world turns about a hundred times more dangerous, but you can't just ignore it—"

"You will," John says.

Stiles jaw clenches. "I thought maybe we could start to work together, but if you don't want to, that's fine. I'll just go back to working around you."

"I lost your mother," John snarls. "I will not risk losing you!"

"Then let's make a deal," Stiles says, looking up at his father defiantly. "I'll stop risking my life when you stop risking yours, because I lost her too. And now I have to watch you go off to work every day, and I have to wonder, every single time, if this is the day I lose you too."

"Stiles—" John says, and he sounds pained. Stiles first reaction is to take it back, to make this better, but he knows this fight has been a long time coming and the words just keep dragging themselves right up out of his throat.

"I've been taking care of myself since she died!" he shouts. "And I've been managing just fine."

"Not from where I stand," John says. "I'm your father, so you're going to listen to me whether you like it or not. You're not going to be involved in this anymore, and you're going to stay away from Derek Hale and the rest of them. We'll work something out with Scott, but the rest of them are off-limits. Is that understood?"

"No," Stiles says.

His father goes very still, looking a little like he's been slapped. Stiles sucks in a panicked breath. He thinks back but can't actually ever remember saying no to his father before. His modus operandi has always been to agree and find a loophole later, never to resist outright.

But maybe that's been part of the problem all along, and maybe he's only ever made things worse by playing this little game of theirs. This make-believe world where everything is fine and it doesn't matter that his mother is dead, where he's only ever had one real friend and it doesn't matter he's just lost him, where his father will disappear into his job for days at a time, and it doesn't matter—
"Stiles," the Sheriff says again, but this time it sounds like a concession. It takes Stiles a moment to realize what has caused his change in tone.

Somewhere in those last moments Stiles' eyes have filled with tears, and it's obviously reached his father in a way none of his words have. The last time he'd cried in front of him, he'd been ten years old and his mother had just died with his hand still held in hers.

"You don't get to have it both ways," Stiles says, and his voice breaks. "I love you, but you don't get to leave me alone all this time, make me learn to care of myself, then come back and try to change me. Because guess what? You're too late, and this is who I am. This is who you taught me to be! So I'm not going to give up, and I'm not going to stop. Not for anything. Not even for you."

"I've never left you alone," John protests. "I've been right here, the whole time, you're just so damn self-sufficient you've never needed my help!"

"Of course I needed your help!" Stiles cries. "And I know, okay, I know you would have done anything for me. I know I could have come to you for anything. But you were so sad and I didn't want to add to it just cause there were bullies at school, or because I got sick—they were stupid things, I could handle them. And then suddenly the things I couldn't tell you weren't so stupid anymore, but I still couldn't tell you because it could get you hurt, could even get you killed, and what was I supposed to do then?"

"I do this job for you," John says. "To keep you safe. To keep this town safe."

"And why do you think I do what I do?" Stiles asks quietly.

"It's not the same," John snaps. "You're not even seventeen."

"I've grown up a lot. I'm not the same—maybe you were right, to say you don't know me anymore, because sometimes I don't know myself. But I'm not like just any other sixteen year old, dad. I've seen things I can't even—" Stiles breaks off. He knows if he says too much about the things he's seen, it will only make this worse. He wants to explain he's been dragged down into the Argent's basement and beaten up by his geriatric principal, while his friends were being tortured right beside him, so really there wasn't much he couldn't handle anymore.

But even Stiles can't find a way to spin that story into a positive.

"You're right," John says, and Stiles glances back at him in surprise. "I know you're right. You're— you're pretty much the best kid I know, and that's why I never worried about leaving you alone so much. I just need you to be safe."

Stiles gets that, he does. He's just like his father, after all. He worries constantly, and he runs the take-out menus through the shredder whenever he finds them, and switches out all the bacon for tempeh, so it's not like the controlling overprotective thing is some sort of unknown. But his father's brand of overprotective has always been a little more laid back than Stiles' admittedly more manic approach.

"We're not in Kansas anymore, kiddo, I get it. I'm trying my best here." He runs his hand down his face, wincing and not meeting Stiles' eyes. "So, new plan, okay? We do this together, alright? Because I refuse to believe I'm too late."

The Sheriff looks at him in that way he has, like he's using his parental kryptonite. It's the look he used to give Stiles when he was having a panic attack, and his father told him to breathe. He's never been able to say no to that look, it would bring him out of the panic every single time.

"You say you won't give up? Where do you think you got that from?" John asks. "Stilinskis don't
quit, and I'm never giving up on you, either. I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe. The rules have changed, so get used to it—because my back up plan is to pack us both up and get us the hell out of this god-forsaken town."

"You love this town," Stiles whispers.

"I love you more," he says, and then drags him into a hug. Stiles latches onto him as he holds back a sob. "But don't think you're getting out of being grounded. Because you're not. Possibly ever."

"Sounds fair," Stiles says as he leans back against him, and for once just lets his father take the weight.

* * * * *

Stiles is leaning against his father's shoulder, half-asleep, in Deaton's cheap plastic waiting room chairs when Derek finally wakes up. Derek wakes up in typical Derek fashion—he just bolts straight up, eyes wide and flashing briefly red, ready to fight. Ready to run.

Stiles pushes up from the chair, nearly sending him and his father both to the floor before catching his balance and scrambling over to the table. "Hey, hey, it's okay," he says quickly, and Derek's eyes clear the moment they land on his.

Derek glances down at his chest briefly, then looks back up in apparent unconcern. Stiles supposes this is no big deal in Derek-land.

"So you've had your ribcage torn halfway outside of your skin? Take a little nap, wake up all better."

"You okay?" Stiles asks anyway.

Derek's eyes are moving over Stiles like miniature spotlights, checking him for damage. "Am I okay?" he asks. "You—"

"He's okay. You're okay. We're all okay," the Sheriff says, suddenly standing beside them.

Derek's jaw tightens like he doesn't know how anyone snuck up on him. Stiles figures Derek should cut himself some slack, but then Stiles doesn't live in Derek-land. He's still freaking out about the whole ribcage torn out of his body thing.

"Sheriff," Derek says politely, smiling hesitantly. Stiles has to hold in a snort, because Derek just can't pull off harmless. It's kind of hilarious, really, because Stiles knows he actually sort of is. It's just, you can't shake the kind of reputation he's built around himself and his looks aren't doing him any favors in that regard. He looks like every bad boy stereotype in existence, all wrapped up in one secretly furry package.

"Derek Hale," his dad replies dryly. "So. Werewolf."

"Yeah," Derek agrees hopefully, like he believes that might actually be the end of this.

"Dad, Derek needs to sleep," Stiles interrupts, trying to spare him. "Healing takes a lot of out werewolves. We should probably just take him home so he can rest."

"Just a few questions first," his dad says, his voice deceptively mild. His father almost never loses his temper, it's why he's so good at his job.

"It's fine, Stiles," Derek says, glancing carefully at Stiles before looking back at John. "What do you want to know?"
"How?" John asks quietly, sounding a little lost.

Stiles really hates to hear that tone from his father, like his whole world is falling apart. Stiles still remembers when he realized all of this was real, but Stiles wasn't like most people. He'd been thrilled, insatiably curious, and almost suicidal in his interest.

His father was far more practical, and he would be lining this new worldview up against all his old unsolved cases, against all those bodies he'd never found a reason for.

So Stiles does what he always does when things are getting too serious for him to cope. "He was born that way," he says quickly, choking back a hysterical giggle. "Sort of like Lady GaGa, but less weird."

"Stiles," his father and Derek snap at once.

Derek sighs and turns to look at his father. "It is true, though."

"Of course it is," Stiles says. "Lady GaGa is super weird."

Derek frowns and reaches out to grabs his wrist, his thumb gently pressing against his pulse, and Stiles swallows hard. He didn't notice before, but his heart is beating hummingbird fast, and Derek's touch somehow seems to slow it down.

Then he sees his father's eyes narrow where they're touching, and Derek abruptly lets him go.

He knows they need to just come clean about everything, but Stiles can't seem to get out of deflection mode. It's like he's stuck on automatic, and his instinct is to minimize the damage, to play this down to nothing. Which is sort of hard to manage, considering his father's introduction to this world was a huge, murderous bunyip, that Stiles had destroyed with a handful of ash and the power of his mind.

"I'll answer any questions you have," Derek says, his voice solemn and serious, and god, Stiles forgets this about Derek. He's stupidly noble underneath all his empty threats of violence.

Stiles eyes go wide and he quickly shakes his head in warning: because yes, his dad needs to know about the supernatural. His dad does not need to know about Derek Hale sticking him in the trunk of his car and driving him out into his cabin in the woods.

John pauses for a moment, glancing at Stiles suspiciously before turning his gaze back to Derek. "Are you sleeping with my son?"

Stiles eyes go wide. "What? Oh my god! Dad, no—what—why—werewolves, and this is what you're fixated on?"

His father ignores him completely, his eyes focused solely on Derek.

Derek swallows, and there's a guilty little flicker in his eyes before he steels himself against it. "No, sir," he says.

Sir, Stiles thinks incredulously, and it sort of breaks his heart. Derek, to his little group of friends, is supposed to be this big, independent grown-up, but sit him down in front of the Sheriff and it's painfully obvious just how young he still is. He has the worst suspicion that Derek had been like Scott once, all trusting and innocent and bright.

The Sheriff watches Derek for a beat. Stiles knows his father doesn't need the freaky werewolf
hearing to be some crazy sort of human lie detector himself. "Good," he says finally. "Then I think
Stiles is right, we should get you home so you can rest. Where do you live?"

"Uh, I—" Derek glances at Stiles helplessly, because it's sort of hard to give out your address to the
town Sheriff when you live in an abandoned rail station.

"Please tell me you weren't staying at the estate," his father says softly, and this is why he's the best
dad ever. He's just had his world turned upside down but he doesn't see a monster sitting there in
front of him, he sees Derek Hale, the boy whose whole family died and left him without a home.

"I've been staying with a…friend," Derek says, because apparently Derek is a worse liar than even
Scott, if that's possible. "You don't have to drive me. I'm fine—"

"He should come home with us," Stiles says, because apparently his brain has been hijacked by
some other, crazy Stiles. "To sleep I mean! You know. On the couch. Not in my room, on the floor
or something. Cause that would be weird. But it wouldn't really be weird, cause why would it be
weird? Just two buddies, hanging out, recovering from a bunyip mauling. Probably happens all the
time. Scott and I have done it, loads of times. Only our maulings were more schoolyard bully related
than supernatural creatures bent on bloody revenge, but you know, same difference." Stiles laughs a
little, but forces himself to stop when he realizes that's probably just making it worse.

"Right," his father says, apparently unfazed. He looks strangely reassured, if anything, by Stiles'
insane ramblings. Stiles doesn't know whether or not he should be offended by that. John turns back
to Derek. "Apparently you're staying with us."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Derek says quickly.

"And I don't think you've really been staying with a 'friend,'" his dad says, and he uses air-quotes—
seriously, air-quotes—and Stiles watches as Derek looks at his father with something approaching
horror, like he's finally realizing Stiles' personality had to come from somewhere.

"Deaton already ran out on you," Stiles says helpfully. "He said something about bunyip fangs being
medicinal, and set off with a pair of pliers. He looked way too excited about it, if you ask me. I don't
think you want to be left here alone with him."

Derek looks like he's trying to gauge if he's serious, and turns to look at John. The Sheriff just nods
in agreement, his face scrunched up in distaste. "Yeah, that sort of did actually happen," he says.
"And super healing or not, we can't just leave you here alone."

His dad doesn't exactly look happy about it, but Stiles knows his sense of duty won't let him turn
away from this. He knows his dad would put his safety above everything else, cause Stiles is the
same way, but now that the danger is gone and they're all starting to calm down he's taking in the
bigger picture. He's probably still rewriting history with its new, supernatural spin, and Derek's story
was already horrible enough in the edited newsprint friendly version.

"It's a pretty nice couch," his dad says.

"Okay," Derek says slowly. "Maybe just for a couple hours."

It sounds like a compromise, a hesitant truce, and Stiles feels like he can breathe again for the first
time since his father learned the truth.
Chapter 14

Derek Hale is pretty much all muscle, so dragging him into the house when he keeps dropping off to sleep like a lycanthropic narcoleptic is easier in theory than practice. Stiles is trying to hold him up as his father unlocks the door, and also ignore all his father's judgmental side glances, like the way Derek is leaning on him in his unconsciousness is inappropriate in some way.

He supposes he should be flattered his father is so convinced he could land someone like Derek. Except his father kind of always thinks Stiles is amazing—when he doesn't think he's infuriating, that is—because that's sort of his job.

"Here, I've got him," his father says, pulling Derek up by his other side to get him inside. They manage to get him into the living room and drop him on the couch, and Derek just sleeps through it. It sends prickles of unease through Stiles, because the only other occasions Derek has been this out of it have been rather unpleasant.

"He doesn't look good," Stiles says in concern. "Usually I have to slap him awake when he's this far gone. Deaton seemed pretty sure he was fine though. Apparently bunyip fangs are antibacterial fangs instead of poisonous, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense but is still a nice change of pace, I guess. Although, to be fair, there have been studies on the antibacterial properties of snake venom, so maybe it's like that. Maybe it's—"

Stiles breaks off when he sees his father is frowning over at him, and realizes he probably should not be talking so much about poisons and his familiarity with them. He tries to think of something nice and reassuring to say like don't worry, it was really only Jackson that was poisonous, when his dad reaches out and gently runs his hand across his forehead. "You've got a bruise," he says in concern.

"Dad, I really think we need to talk about your priorities," Stiles sighs.

"Head injuries are serious," John says, his jaw tightening stubbornly. "I'm calling Melissa."

"It's fine, I promise. It'll heal," Stiles assures him. For some reason, that just makes his dad look even more anxious about it.

"You don't...I mean, you don't heal on your own too?" he asks quietly.

"That's kind of how people work, dad. It just takes a little longer when it's me," he says. "So if you're asking if I am of the werewolfian persuasion, the answer is no. I can just do a little magic now and then, I'm totally the normal one! It's not like Harry Potter sort of magic, so you know, don't stress or anything. It's really more like Practical Magic, the one with Sandra Bullock? Like that. Just like, little bits of magic, sometimes."

"Bits of magic, only sometimes," the Sheriff sighs. "Like the magic dust you used to take out the
"Yeah, that was mountain ash," Stiles says. "It's mostly offensive, it's supposed to be a barrier to keep out werewolves and other supernatural beings." He winces, trying not to remember the way that burning circle of mountain ash had lit him up from the inside, his fear and worry fueling its fire. "That whole burning thing was actually a first."

"I want you to go get some rest," John decides. "You're going to need it, because tomorrow, you're telling me everything. And I do mean everything."

"I need to stay with Derek," Stiles protests instantly, and then wishes he could take it back. His dad doesn't look angry though, and this time he's keeping his suspicions to himself. "He'll be fine," he says gently. "Go sleep."

"We can't just leave him down here like some stray, give him a glass of water and a corner to lie in and hope for the best—" Stiles says. "I told Deaton I would watch him."

"First of all, it's a couch," John corrects. "Secondly, I'm barely holding it together here, and I just really need you to go upstairs and go to bed."

"That doesn't even make any sense," Stiles says.

"I'm not getting any sleep tonight anyway, kiddo," he says. "I'll watch him. You, on the other hand, look like you're about to drop."

"So do you!" Stiles protests, even as his father starts pushing him towards the stairs. "You just don't trust me down here alone with him, do you? I told you, dad, there's nothing going on—"

"Bed," he interrupts sharply. "Now."

Stiles goes mostly because his dad really does look like he's barely holding it together, and apparently sending him off to bed like a six year old is going to give him the ego boost he needs to get through the night. Stiles can't say he's not exhausted, anyway, so he zombie-walks to his bedroom and then collapses on his bed to try and sleep. He doesn't even worry about those pesky sleep traditions like removing one's shoes. Unlike his father, Stiles is good with priorities.

It's a testament to how tired he is that he actually does manage to sleep for awhile, but it isn't long before he wakes to something at his window. It probably says something about his life that when he first hears the sound of someone crawling inside his room, he doesn't even freak out and just tries to go back to sleep. Somewhere in his sleep-addled mind, he's thinking to himself, *Oh, it's just Derek, he'll probably wake me up if it's important.*

Then he remembers that Derek is sleeping the sleep of the nearly dead on the couch downstairs.

He opens his mouth to shout, and a hand slams down over it, mascara framed amber eyes flashing at him in the dark. Erica lowers herself over him, but unlike the vicious aura of the she-wolf she'd been radiating last time she'd done this, this time he can just make out her frown and the concern in her now dimming eyes.

"Why is our alpha asleep on your couch, smelling of pain and blood?" she demands.

Stiles narrows his eyes at her and she slowly removes her hand, raising an eyebrow as she does like she's daring him to scream. She should know better than to dare him, but his father is armed and a bit trigger-happy, and he doesn't actually want her to get shot.
"Boyd said you didn't have a built in alert system," he complains, as he reaches over to turn on his bedside lamp.

"He also told us about your little phone call," she says, as she pushes off him and drops to sit on the edge of the bed. "You're our alert system, idiot."

"He's fine, he's just sleeping off a bunyip attack," Stiles assures her. "Can you please go away?"

"Another one?" she asks, frowning in concern, and ignoring Stiles' request for her to leave. "I knew we shouldn't have left that moron alone."

"You call your alpha a moron?" Stiles asks in amusement. Erica scares the hell out of him, but that's probably just what Derek needs. Someone sharp enough and brave enough to do as she's told when she needs to, and do what she needs to even when she's told not to.

"Going after a bunyip alone? After he told you not to? Yes, that earns him the title," she sneers.

"He didn't actually go after it, it went after him. It was turning the Hale house into a miracle grow swamp, it was a whole thing," he explains, waving a hand dismissively. "But Deaton patched him up, and he's fine. You don't have to worry."

"We may not come with alarms, but the worry is definitely built in," she says, looking uncomfortable.

"Hey, he's okay, really." Stiles assures her. "I'm worried too, but he's already all…closed up, where he…wasn't…and now he's just sleeping it off."

"That was the worst pep talk ever," Erica says resentfully.

"I know, I'm sorry," Stiles says. "It was pretty horrifying. I have nothing good to say about it."

"Okay, I definitely need to see him," she insists.

"That's not a good idea right now," Stiles says.

"No, you don't understand," Erica says, sounding suddenly desperate. "I need to. This isn't like—I mean, it's the wolf. It's pack. And I need to see him to make sure that he's alright." Then Erica's eyes start watering, tears just building up around the edges even as she refuses to let them fall, and Stiles has absolutely no idea what to do. Stiles has never been particularly useful around crying people.

He's only ever been good at making them laugh.

"Hey, it's okay," he says, and awkwardly puts a hand on her arm. Her breath hitches as she holds in a sob, but her eyes are clearer when she looks back over at him.

"You don't know what it's like," she says. "At first, I thought I was invincible, like I was so above the rest of you. Then slowly, I started to realize that I'd also lost something I wasn't even going to get back. It's leveled out a bit now, and I'm doing better, but I'm not whole on my own anymore. I'm not a whole person by myself, only when I'm with them. That's what I learned when I tried to run away. That's what the Argents taught me."

"Do you regret it?" Stiles asks quietly. "Getting the bite?"

Her gaze turns wary, but for once her default reaction doesn't seem to be set to 'attack.' "You know it's not that simple," she says. "When you do something, something that changes your whole life,
then to regret it—it doesn't just take away all the bad that's happened since, it takes it all away."

"Wisdom à la It's a Wonderful Life, I'm impressed," Stiles says, but it doesn't distract her.

She locks her gaze back on him, deadly serious. "Stiles, I need to see him."

"No can do, Catwoman," Stiles says. "My dad is downstairs and armed, and while he'd never purposely shoot a kid, he's had a little wake up call in regards to the werewolf population, so you know, he might if he thinks he needs to and knows you'll heal from it."

"You told your dad?" she hisses, reaching out to grab his shirt, twisting her hand in the material until she has a good enough grip to drag him closer. "You told him about me?"

"You're the least of his concerns, let me assure you," Stiles says dryly. "You're not even a blip on his newly installed werewolf radar."

Erica frowns, but lets him go. "Perfect," she says. "You can't help but screw things up, can you?"

Stiles pushes away from her, moving until his back hits the wall. "If you idiots hadn't kidnapped me, none of this would have happened," he reminds her. "Seriously, Erica—what did I ever do to you?"

"You really have no idea, do you?" she demands, looking at him almost accusingly, except for the way she can't manage to hold his gaze. When Erica is angry there isn't anything she can't do, so it can't be that. "You really are oblivious. I've always liked you, Stiles. Trouble is I used to like you too much. I wasn't kidding about the crush."

"Huh?" he asks. He looks at her in shock. He's not that oblivious, so he'd picked up on the flirting, of course he had. He's just never trusted that it's genuine.

"I was half in love with you for a long time," she admits. "Not as bad as you had it for Lydia, admittedly, but I thought we were going to end up together. I had a five year plan."

"I had one of those. I had to upgrade mine to ten years," Stiles says, and swallows uneasily.

"Yeah, I didn't renew my subscription, I'm not as persistent as you are," she says wryly. "I gave up on you awhile ago, but then you were suddenly everywhere, back in my life. I think I just kept secretly wanting you to save me again."

"Again?" Stiles asks. "I haven't—"

"You don't even remember," she says, and laughs lightly. "Of course you don't, it wasn't anything to you."

"Erica, I'm sorry, I really don't know what you're talking about," he says.

"We were in second grade, and Simon Masters was picking on me. You came out of nowhere, and you just annihilated him, right in front of everyone, like it was nothing." Erica gives a sad little grin. "Somehow you found out he'd been held back in kindergarten, and you announced it to the whole class, along with your suspicions that his fondness for eating Elmer's Glue was the reason behind it. Of course, then he punched you out, but everyone still knew you'd won the fight."

"Yeah," Stiles winces. "That sort of thing used to happen a lot."

"Jackson used to call you the Kamikaze Kid," she says, her tone strangely fond.

"Jackson's been known to turn into a mind controlled lizard creature," he reminds her. "Jackson's not
allowed to say anything about anyone else ever again."

Erica shrugs, looking away like she's starting to regret saying any of this. But Stiles knows he can't let her hide from this again, because they won't get anywhere if he does. He's never thought he's been anywhere close to being anyone's Lydia, but if he was, then he wants to handle it as well as she did.

Or at least, he doesn't want to completely screw them up forever. Or get hit in the head with another car part, if he's being honest.

"But why—" Stiles starts haltingly. "If I defended you, then why do you hate me so much?"

Her mask of indifference slips away, and for a moment she looks like the Erica he remembers before all this. She looks vulnerable and fragile, even though he's always known she has a spine made out of steel.

"Because after you did it, you just walked away," she says.

"Erica, I'm—" Stiles starts.

"It's not your fault," Erica interrupts. "I wasn't your responsibility. You had Scott. But I just—it was like every fairytale fantasy come to life, you rushing to my rescue. And it took me years to realize you'd have done it for anyone, that it didn't have anything to do with me at all."

"I'm sorry," he says, anyway. "If I defended you now, it would be because it's you." Stiles waits until she looks back over at him. "It would. I don't have Scott's hero complex. I only ever try to save the people I like."

"You still like me?" she asks hesitantly. "After everything?"

"What can I say?" Stiles says. "I'm inexplicably drawn to terrifying people."

Erica laughs at him, but because she's got about all the social grace of a St. Bernard, she forgets her strength yet again when she playfully tries to shove him. He slams against the headboard, and his elbow knocks into the night table, sending his alarm clock loudly crashing to the ground. "Crap," Stiles says, eyes going wide. "Erica, you've got to—"

His door is slamming open before he can even get the rest of his warning out. His father is holding his pistol pointed towards the ground and he doesn't even look out of breath. Stiles wonders for a moment if maybe he's been camped outside his room like some kind of security guard.

His dad keeps his gun pointed safely at the floor thankfully, but he looks more than a little annoyed. Like maybe 75% annoyed, and 25% resigned. Stiles is slowly wearing him down.

"What the hell is going on here?" he demands.

"It's not what you think!" Stiles says at once, pushing himself back up.

"Really?" his dad asks. "Because it looks to me like you have a werewolf in your bed."

"Okay, it's a little what you think," Stiles allows.

"We just came to check on Derek," Erica assures his dad, and suddenly she looks harmless, holding her manicured and very human looking hands up. His dad practically falls all over himself to put the gun away.
While he's glad his dad won't be shooting her, Stiles is a bit more concerned about something else. "We?" he echoes. "What do you mean we?"

"She means us," Boyd says, as he slips in through the window with almost impossible grace, considering how solidly he's built. Jackson lands on his feet behind him, having dropped through the window without even touching the sides—and it's all net, Stiles thinks incredulously, what even is my life.

"Oh my god, you creepers!" he shouts, before he turns angrily on Erica. "Have they been here the whole time?"

"You kinda get used to having no privacy," she shrugs.

"Not me! I am very used to my privacy!" Stiles cries.

"Chill out, Stilinski," Jackson sneers. "I have better things to do than eavesdrop on you."

"We were watching Derek sleep through the window downstairs," Boyd admits.

"Of course you were," Stiles says. "You all need a better role model."

His father lets out a huge sigh, and there it is, Stiles thinks triumphantly. He's got him down to 40% irritated, 60% resigned.


Erica doesn't have to be told twice. She's up from the bed and halfway down the stairs towards Derek before Stiles can even scramble to his feet. His father follows her out, but before Stiles can make it out the door Jackson is in front of him, one arm casually laid across the only way out.

"Stilinski, we should talk," Jackson says.

Stiles swallows hard, and tries not to remember the sound of Jackson's howl when he'd left him trapped by the mountain ash. "Uh, did you happen to notice my dad is armed?" he asks. "Like, if you kill me, he'll probably not take it well. Just saying."

"Don't look so worried, Lydia said I'm not allowed to touch you," Jackson says, his voice deceptively pleasant. Then he flashes a picture perfect grin that chills Stiles to the bone. "But she shouldn't have worried. Far as I'm concerned, we're even."

Stiles half closes his eyes, waiting for whatever's to come. And then he replays what Jackson said through his mind, and his eyes fly back open. "Wait…what?"

"You kidnapped me," Jackson says. "I kidnapped you. We're even."

Then he turns and heads out the door, conversation over, apparently. Stiles leans out after him. "I kidnapped you for truth and justice, for the good of us all!" he protests. "You kidnapped me because you're an asshole."

"Don't press your luck, Stilinski," Jackson says easily, and just keeps heading down the stairs.

Stiles just stands there glaring after him, until Boyd gently moves him out of the way so he can get by.

"Stiles," Boyd says, and then he heads down the stairs. Boyd doesn't apologize, but then he's Boyd.
So Stiles hadn't really expected him to, and wasn't entirely convinced there was any reason why he should.

"Stupid werewolves," he mutters, before starting down the stairs. He winces a little as the small cuts on his feet get tugged a bit. He figures the adrenaline has kept him from feeling any pain until now, but maybe sleeping in his shoes was not the best idea after all.

Derek is doing a mostly passable impression of someone standing when he finally comes into the living room, but the illusion is mostly broken by the fact that Erica is single-handedly holding him up. "What's happened?" Derek demands, and his eyes shoot straight to Stiles. "Are you alright?"

Erica snorts. "Sure, worry about him," she says. "You're just about to keel over, but by all means, let's all check on Stilinski."

"Hey, we had a moment," Stiles reminds her. "I thought you would be nice now."

"This is my nice now," Erica tells him, and flashes him a grin as she spins herself and Derek around, pulling him back towards the couch.

"These three," his dad explains, "just came through my son's bedroom window."

Derek glares up at Erica as she drops him on the couch. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'll have a talk with them."

Gonna give them some pointers? Stiles wonders, and then snorts loudly at his own internal joke. His father gives him a sharp look, and Derek glares at him like he knows exactly what he's thinking, which he probably does.

"No need," his dad says. "From now on Stiles will be putting a mountain ash line across his window. All the windows. So I guess you'll all have to go back to using doors."

Stiles' mouth drops open, and he gets ready to protest, but his dad has already moved on.

"And you three, you can't stay here," he says. "It's one in the morning, you need to go home. I don't want to have to call your parents."

"Call their parents?" Stiles echoes. That's a threat they haven't faced in quite awhile. Running for your lives sort of put these things into a different perspective. "Dad, we can't involve more civilians!"

"You're a civilian, Stiles," John says, giving his son a look of long-suffering. "You are the definition of a civilian."

"Agree to disagree," Stiles decides. "The point is, the more people that know, the more danger we're all in. There'll be mass panic! Werewolf witch hunts! Literal witch hunts! I could be burned at the stake!"

"He's right," Derek says, glancing up at John. "Not everyone is going to take it as well you have. We have to be careful."

"My parents would probably ship me off to London," Jackson says.

"Was that a werewolf joke?" Stiles asks.

Jackson looks up at him in annoyance. "What? No, you idiot, we have relatives in London."

"My parents would kick me out," Boyd says with a shrug. "But you don't have to worry, they think
I'm staying the night at Jackson's."
"Yeah, and I'm staying the night at Danny's," Jackson says.
"Mine think I'm staying over with Miranda," Erica chimes in.
"Who's Miranda?" Stiles asks curiously.
"I made her up," she says, her tone entirely indifferent. "I don't really have any friends that are girls."
"Christ," John says, running a hand down his face. "Fine. You can stay, just tonight. I can't be harboring teenage runaways."
"They're not technically runaways," Stiles says. "Or at least, not anymore. Erica and Boyd sort of were, but it's too much to hope Jackson would go running off, really, so you're probably safe there."
Derek leans back into the couch and Erica presses up against his side. Boyd drops down next to her, and Jackson lowers himself to the floor to lean back against Erica.
"You're just...you're just all going to stay here? Together? It's a nice couch, but it's not a big couch," his dad says hesitantly. He looks to Stiles for help, which is probably a mistake.
"It's a puppy pile," Stiles explains.
"It is not a puppy pile," Derek snaps, even as Erica curls up against him. His dad eyes them suspiciously, looking like he wants to separate them.
"O-kay, Sourwolf," Stiles says. "Except that it is."
"Contact helps the healing process," Derek says grumpily, like he doesn't want to admit to the weakness. His father relaxes slightly, and nods like he's come to a decision.
"Come on, Stiles," he says, pushing him back towards the stairs. "Let's leave them to it."
His father follows him into his room, and then shuts the door behind them like that's going to give them privacy. Stiles doesn't bother to tell him that Scott could hear Allison's heartbeat from nearly a mile away, so there's really no point pretending the werewolves downstairs won't hear every word they say. He can let his father hold onto at least some of his illusions.
"I'm not going to regret this, am I?" his dad asks, "they're not going to do anything weird, are they?"
Stiles drops down onto his bed. "They're werewolves. It's pretty much all weird all the time, but they're not going to have an orgy or something, if that's what you're worried about."
His father gives him a dark look. "It is now," he says, throwing a suspicious look back towards the door. "I meant, you know, howling at the moon, killing things."
"Oh," Stiles says. "No, probably not. It's not even a full moon. Come on, dad, keep up."
Stiles gently tugs off his shoes. His feet still throb a bit, but he's glad to see no blood has leaked through his socks or the bandages. No blood = tomorrow's problem. He drops down onto the bed, and then frowns as he sees his dad grab his desk chair and roll it up against the wall. He pushes himself up. "Dad? What are you doing?"
"I'm sleeping here," his dad says.
"You can't sleep here," Stiles tells him. "And in a desk chair? What about your back? Are you insane?"

"My back is fine," he says. "And apparently my son's bedroom has turned into Grand Werewolf Station. In the morning I'll nail the window shut, but for now I think I'll sleep better where the action is."

"What?" he asks. "Please tell me you're not serious!"

"Three teenagers just came strolling through your second story window like it was a revolving door," his dad says, as he makes himself comfortable in the chair. "So yes, Stiles. I'm serious."

"Oh my god," Stiles says, putting his head in his hands. "You're going to go completely Chris Argent on me, aren't you?"

His father just leans back and crosses his legs up on Stiles' desk. "If I'm catching that reference correctly, you mean overprotective father?" he asks, and Stiles nods reluctantly. John looks at him with something almost like pity. "Kid, I run this town. Chris Argent's got nothing on me."
Thank you all so much for the wonderful feedback! I really hope everyone is going to enjoy this to the end, but based on a couple comments I did want to add a bit of a disclaimer. This story was always going to be end game Sterek, despite the kidnapping that started it all off. Honestly, I think Derek's probably done worse things in canon, so I don't see Stiles holding a grudge forever over this. I know a few people reading this haven't quite forgiven Derek though, so just fair warning. It's probably going to take a lot more chapters though (Three, four? Eight?). I might need to add a tag for slow build.

The story is also end game pack. I love all the characters, so pretty much everyone is going to have a part to play in this, and muses willing, happy endings all around. This is kind of still my happy place fix it fic where no one dies, and everyone learns to work together, despite all the angst sneaking into it.

Stiles somehow manages to get to sleep, even with his father snoring like a lawnmower with a broken connection rod. He still wakes up way too early, his alarm clock mocking him with it's shiny demon-red 5:43, and he just can't go back to sleep. His feet are aching and his mouth is practically stuck together it's so dry. He's also still wearing his jeans, and the way he'd twisted in his sleep, he can feel where the button has practically embedded itself in his skin.

So he pushes himself up and snags a pair of track pants off the floor, before grabbing the leftover gauze from Melissa's visit.

"What's wrong?" his father asks, his voice rough with sleep. Stiles knows if there'd been a threat here his father would have been up with his gun aimed in about three seconds flat, but Stiles is just friendly white noise in his father's world. He used to sneak into his parents room when he was little, jumping on his dad's stomach yelling for him to wake up. His mom would just laugh as his father would try to convince them he was awake, right before turning over and going straight back to sleep.

Stiles swallows hard, because the memory hurts. He hates that he can't even think of his mother without this pain deep down in his chest. He knows she never would have wanted that.

"Stiles?" his dad asks, sounding more awake.

"I'm just going to the bathroom. I'm okay. Go back to sleep," Stiles says softly, before carefully slipping out the door. His father doesn't follow him, which is encouraging. The prison guard vibe had been getting a bit hard to shake.

He makes it to the bathroom and closes the door behind him, before shrugging out of his wrinkled jeans and changing into the track pants. He leans under the sink to drink some water straight from the faucet, and then collapsed to sit on the closed lid of the toilet. He drags off his socks to examine his sore feet, and winces as he starts to unwrap the bandages. He's still trying to unpeel the last bits of gauze when he hears the door open.

"Dad, I said I'm fine—" he starts, before cutting himself off as he sees Derek standing in the doorway.
He looks worlds better than he had the night before, and he's wearing one of his father's 'Beacon Hills Sheriff's Dept' shirts. Stiles has to hold in a bubble of hysterical laughter, and bite his tongue not to advise Derek to hold onto that for his next mug shot. Cause, irony.

"I could smell your blood," Derek says, like the creeper that he is. He looks concerned, so he must be listening to Stiles' heart again. Even Stiles can hear it, the way it's trying to beat straight out his chest. He just feels this panic building up for no reason at all, because he should be relieved. His father knows. He knows, and it's going to be okay now. They're all going to be okay now.

Stiles doesn't really see him move, but Derek is suddenly kneeling in front of him. He reaches out and captures Stiles' wrists, tugging him a little until Stiles finally meets his eyes. Stiles can feel the panic lesson a bit at the touch, just like Derek had done at Deaton's. He doesn't know what it means, that Derek has this power over him.

"What's wrong?" Derek demands, and it's such a Derek way to ask it. It's not that Stiles can't see the concern, which is practically fighting to break free from Derek's secretly expressive eyes, but the tone. Like it's a command. Like he's stuck speaking in his Alpha voice all the time.

"Why is it you can't ever ask me something without sounding like you already know the answer, and that it's my fault?" Stiles asks.

Derek's eyes widen a bit and he lets go off his wrists, pushing away to sit on the tile floor. He leans back against the cupboards, one leg pulled against his chest and the other out along the floor. Stiles supposes it's meant to make him look non-threatening, but Stiles has seen him rip out someone's throat.

Well, it was only Peter. But still.

"I know none of this is your fault, Stiles," Derek says.

Stiles looks back at his feet, stretching his right foot a bit to test it and wincing as it pulls at the cuts. It's sort of like having paper cuts on the sole of his foot. It hurts way more than it looks like it should.

"I'm sorry," Derek says suddenly, and Stiles nearly falls off the toilet. Derek reaches out, lightening fast, and latches onto his forearm to keep him balanced.

"I think I must be sleep-deprived," Stiles says. "Because it sounded like you just said you were sorry."

"I've apologized to you before," Derek says, his eyes narrowing.

"Yeah, but I don't think you've ever actually meant it," Stiles says.

"I never wanted you to get hurt," Derek says tightly. He sounds like he's the one in pain. "I was just trying to protect you."

"I know," Stiles says.

"What?" Derek asks in surprise. "Stiles—"

"Do you really think I'd let you get away with it, if I didn't know you'd meant well in your own creepy-were way?" Stiles asks. "But just because I understand, and I'm sort of glad that you're not dead via an angry bunyip, that doesn't mean I've forgiven you."

"I'm not sure you should," Derek says.
Stiles sort of wants to hit him. Could he be any more perfectly tragic? It's like he practically walked off the cover of some harlequin romance. He's the quintessential tragic hero: all brooding eyebrows and perfectly muscled chest, all full of soul-crushing guilt and regret.

How is he supposed to add to that? Even if he's got every right, how is he—

"Stiles," Derek says gently. "It's okay. I understand. You don't owe me anything."

"I don't know about that. You did save me from a bunyip, not just once, but twice," Stiles allows. "So there's that."

"Yeah," Derek says. "But you still got hurt."

"You were hurt worse," Stiles reminds him, his eyes going to Derek's chest. He knows underneath his father's old shirt Derek's skin is unmarked by now, with not even a scar left behind, but the image of that wound is going to stay with him for a long time.

"It's different," Derek says.

Stiles smiles sadly. "Yeah. I don't think it's as different as you think."

Derek just reaches out and pulls one of Stiles' feet into his lap. Stiles starts to protest, before wincing as Derek gently tugs the last of the gauze loose. He immediately cradles Stiles' foot with the palm of his hand pressed up against the sole, and then he starts to siphon out the pain. Stiles lets out a little startled gasp as he watches the black lines pulse through Derek's veins.

He swallows hard, blinking as the sting of pain settles and nearly disappears. He watches Derek's brow furrow and starts to pull away, but Derek won't let him go. "Does it hurt?" Stiles asks. "When you do that?"

"No," Derek says.

"I think you're a liar." Stiles narrows his eyes, watching Derek's expression carefully.

"It doesn't hurt me as much as it hurts you," he admits. "I can handle it, Stiles."

Stiles sighs, but doesn't pull away again. He leans forward in fascination instead, reaching out to trace the blackened veins as they trail upwards along Derek's arm. "It's like you can actually harness pain," he says. "I mean, it's not a thing, pain. It's all in your head. It's just a wired in survival instinct, that little wake-up call that hey, you probably shouldn't be doing this if it feels this bad."

"And do you ever listen to it?" Derek asks dryly. "Just curious."

Stiles magnanimously decides to ignore him. "It's incredible, really. You take it, something that doesn't even really exist outside of the mind, and you make it into something physical. Something that can be taken away, or expelled. It's just weird, is all. It shouldn't be possible, but I don't think a single one of us has ever questioned it. I think we all take it for granted sometimes."

"Take what for granted?" Derek asks, as he releases Stiles' foot and reaches out to grab the other one.

"Magic," Stiles says simply. He winces a little when Derek rips off the remaining gauze on his other foot, but Derek's taking the pain from him almost before it registers. "Scott's wanted out of this since the moment he got bit, and he just can't see it. He can't see the magic. He doesn't see the good."
"After all that's happened," Derek says quietly, "how do you?"

"I didn't know my mom was dying for a long time, you know," Stiles says. "She never let it show. She just, she just wanted every single day to mean something. Even at the end—even when she couldn't even sit up by herself, she could still laugh." Stiles glances down to meet Derek's eyes. "She never gave up, not for anything, not even when she knew it was a fight she couldn't win. And she made me promise that I wouldn't, either."

"She sounds like you," he says softly.

"Yeah," Stiles says. "My dad gives me this look sometimes, like all he can see is her. I get my sarcasm from him though. That's a Stilinski trait, through and through."

"Yeah, I noticed," Derek says wryly.

"Speaking of my dad," Stiles says. "He really doesn't need to find us like this. He's suspicious enough as it is."

"You're hurt, and it's because of me. I'll risk it." Derek looks up then, something in his eyes Stiles can't quite translate. Derek reaches out and grabs the gauze to re-bandage his feet, and he's scarily efficient at it for someone that doesn't usually have wounds long enough to worry about covering them.

"Why are you doing this?" Stiles asks.

"I told you—" Derek starts.

"I know what you told me," he says. "But why are you doing this?"

"It's my fault you were hurt," Derek says again. "That's all, Stiles."

"Then why did you kiss me?" Stiles asks suddenly. That was not what he'd meant to say, but the question has been spinning around the back of his mind since the moment it happened. Stiles has never been all that great filtering himself, so he supposes it was only a matter of time before he blurted it out. He guesses he's just lucky his subconscious waited until they were alone to take over his mouth.

Derek freezes, his hands stilling just as they tuck in the last edge of the gauze. "I'm sorry," he says, and that's two heartfelt apologies from Derek Hale in the space of ten minutes. Stiles wonders if he's just broken some kind of record. Derek pushes his foot away, gently setting it down. "I shouldn't have done that."

"No, you don't get to do that," Stiles snaps. "That's not an answer. I deserve an answer, Derek."

"You're the one with all the answers, remember?" Derek asks, and he's finally looking at him now, but Stiles sort of wishes he wasn't. He can't tell if what he's seeing is anger or pain. "So you tell me."

*He's crushing on you like a fourteen year old girl,* Lydia had said. Except Lydia tends to oversimplify anything to do with human emotion—she doesn't like things she can't explain.

Is Derek actually *crushing* on him? And what the hell is he supposed to do about it, if he is?

He's never thought of Derek that way, not seriously, and not because he's not attracted to him. It's not like Stiles has a problem lusting after the unattainable—Lydia, anyone?—but Derek is different. Derek isn't just gorgeous and out of his league, he's this huge, unknowable thing.
Lydia may never have given him the time of day before this all happened, but Stiles has known her to her core since they were eight years old. Stiles needs that, that kind of deeper than skin connection, and Derek has given him very little to work with.

He's only ever had these glimpses of what's beneath the surface, and he's been drawn to them, there's no denying that, but Derek always shuts him out before he can fall too deep.

"You like me," Stiles says finally. It sounds strange but he's suddenly absolutely certain that it's true—he goes back over all of his previous interactions with Derek and everything seems different, knowing this. Every action seems to have a different meaning.

"Yeah, Stiles, I like you," Derek agrees, but still manages to make it sound like an insult. Stiles doesn't know what's wrong with him that he finds that comforting.

"And you want me in your pack," Stiles continues.

"Yes," Derek agrees.

"To get to Scott," Stiles finishes.

Derek heaves a sigh, and glances up in disappointment. "And you were doing so well."

"You've been trying to get Scott on your side since the start, don't pretend like you haven't," Stiles says.

"Yes, but that was because we were the only two betas in Beacon Hills at the time. I have a pack now. If Scott wants to keep pretending he's fine on his own, that's his business. I do want him in my pack, I always have," Derek says. "But if I had to choose between the two of you, I'd choose you every single time."

"That would be a pretty bad trade. See, Scott's the heart," Stiles explains. "He's an idiot, but he's the heart. He's the one you need, if you had any sense at all. I'd worry for the world if it was just left to the two of us."

"I thought you were angry at Scott," Derek says. "And still you're defending him."

"Heroes rarely make for good friends," Stiles says with a shrug. "They're too worried about everyone else to be properly worried about the people that should matter the most."

"He manages somehow, when it comes to Allison," Derek says, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

Stiles glares at him. "Thanks for that. As if I needed the reminder of just where I fall on the importance scale according to Scott McCall."

"I think you do," Derek snaps, grabbing Stiles' arm to turn back and look at him. "Because you deserve better than that, but you just keep letting him get away with it."

"Not anymore," Stiles says. "I broke up with him. Called it quits. Gave him the 'it's not me, it's you' speech and sent him packing."

Derek's sucks in a startled breath, looking at Stiles' like he's just been slapped. "What?" he asks in disbelief.

"Yeah, mission accomplished," Stiles says. "That's what you wanted to happen, right? That was the point of your little exercise?"
"Stiles, no," Derek says, and something in his voice makes him sound so broken that Stiles has to look away. "I wanted him to finally realize what he had." Derek tugs a little on Stiles' arm, forcing him to meet his eyes again. "You know the first thing my parents taught us? Don't tell humans the truth, because they can't handle it. I did it anyway. I told Kate. It was all the confirmation she needed to kill them all."

"Derek—" Stiles starts, his heart stuttering for a second in sick, soul-deep sympathy.

"I wasn't as lucky as Scott, because he got you," Derek says. "He never even had to tell you what he was, you're the one that told him. And you never cared, and it never changed anything. You never thought, how do I stop him. You only ever thought, how do I save him. And I don't think you even realize how rare that is. How rare you are."

"Lydia knows, and she never—" Stiles starts.

"It's not the same," Derek says. "It's not like it was with you. You've never been scared of me."

"Well," Stiles drawls.

"You've never been scared of what I am," Derek corrects. "And I needed that. It made me careless with you, and I don't know how to fix it. I don't know the right thing to do here, Stiles. I don't know if I should leave you alone, or drag you even further in."

Stiles doesn't know how to fix it either. He doesn't know if he can survive getting further in, but he's never done all that well alone. "Maybe there's no right thing," Stiles says.

Derek looks up then, pulling himself to his knees with a strangely determined look in his eyes. "When you called for me last night—you said it would be a trial run. For my pack," he says seriously. "Did you mean that?"

"I—" Stiles breaks off. Honestly he would help any of Derek's pack, but he still doesn't feel like he's part of it. Erica and him have a long way to go before their relationship starts to heal, and he's not sure Jackson is even worth the effort. Boyd is great, but Boyd will never really understand him—they'll never stay up all night playing video games, or laughing at years of inside jokes. "I don't know. I just know we can't go on like we are."

Stiles looks back over at Derek and doesn't say 'because this is tearing me apart,' but he seems to read it in his expression anyway. "Lydia says, I mean, she thinks I need to take a step back."

Derek watches him with that calculating predator gaze of his, and then he nods sharply. "Maybe you should."

"I think last night proved it's sort of outside my capabilities not to be involved," Stiles says. "Lydia's good at being neutral. Lydia's the Queen of 'Above-It-All', but I sort of have to know everything. All the time. It's a sickness."

"You always take care of everyone," Derek says. "Maybe it's time you take care of yourself." He gets to his feet, his expression shutting down, morphing into that familiar steely-eyed gaze he'd been wearing when they first met. "We'll be gone before your father wakes up."

"What?" Stiles asks. "No, you don't have to leave, that's not—"

"You need to figure out what you want, Stiles," Derek says, not unkindly. "Come find me, when you do."
Derek disappears out the door before Stiles can even get his balance, because stupid werewolves and their stupid animal grace are always leaving Stiles behind. Some of the pain in his feet is coming back as Derek's werewolf mojo wears off, and he has to catch himself on the sink to try and relieve the pressure when he first stands. "Derek," he calls, quietly so his father won't hear him, but he knows Derek still will.

He pushes himself out the door, stumbling towards the stairs and down before rushing into the living room. He takes in a labored breath, about to speak, but they're already gone.

"Stiles? Hey, what's going on?" His father comes out of the bedroom, and starts down the stairs.

"They went home," Stiles says quietly, and he hates himself a little for the tremor in voice. He shouldn't feel abandoned, because that doesn't make any sense.

"Come on then." His dad puts a hand on his shoulders and starts leading him towards the kitchen. "Let's get some breakfast, and then you can tell me what you and Scott were really doing in the woods, that night we found Laura Hale."

He follows his dad into the kitchen and pulls his Adderall from the cupboard. Because he can't even think at the moment, so there's no way he's getting through today without it. And if his father notices he takes twice his dose, well, he doesn't mention it.

His dad has always been good at picking his battles—it's not really a lesson Stiles has been able to learn. He's still fighting every single time.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

WARNING: I think that like 95% of this chapter is just Stiles dialogue. It's pretty much an unreliable-Stiles narrated recap of the first two seasons, but I didn't want to do the whole 'fade-to-black-and-now-the-Sheriff-knows-all thing I usually do, because I always wonder how much would Stiles actually tell? How would the Sheriff react? Somehow that conversation ended up being nearly 5K. I should probably be a little concerned how often I can hear Stiles talking in my head.

The Adderal starts to kick in after they finish breakfast. Stiles can feel it sharpening his thoughts even as he morosely follows his father up the stairs to his room. His father, who is carrying an old coffee can full of nails and his trusty old hammer, like something out of a 1990s sitcom.

"Seriously?" he asks. "Seriously? We're actually doing this?"

"This isn't punishment, Stiles," his father promises, as he pushes into Stiles' room and heads straight to the window.

"You don't think this is overkill?" Stiles demands.

His father gives him a look. "The normal reaction being to befriend the creatures of the night and invite them in."

"Okay," Stiles allows. "So maybe with my life, this is the sane reaction, but dad!"

"Your friends can use the front door like normal people. Or better yet, just call you, since their preferred time to visit seems to be well after curfew," John says.

"But they're not normal!" he yells.

His dad pulls the window about half up and then frowns at it. "You got anymore of that mountain ash?" he asks.

"A little, but, dad—" Stiles starts.

"Get it," John says. "We'll need to get more of it later. Lots more."

"It doesn't exactly grow on trees!" Stiles protests, before pausing with a frown. "Well, okay, it actually literally does grow on trees, because it's not actual ash so much as shavings from a Rowan tree, or Mountain Ash tree, as it's colloquially known. Interesting history, the Rowan. It's indigenous to the Himalayas, did you know that? And randomly, there's a legend in England that the Devil used a Mountain Ash to hang his mother. Who even was the Devil's mother and since when did he hang her?"

"Stiles!" his dad tries to interrupt.

"Anyway, it's a bit rare, so probably expensive. I mean, Rowans have been naturalized in the US, but I don't know if this has to come from like 'special' ones or what, cause getting information from
Deaton is sort of like trying to hold a conversation with a Magic 8 Ball." Stiles winces a little at the thought of going back to Deaton's. "And he just gave me a whole supply, so I don't think he's going to want to hand over a bunch more just because I decided to use it all to try and vaporize a bunyip."

"Stiles." His father stares him down, and Stiles forces himself to still.

"Yes, father?" he asks innocently.

"Just put the mountain ash across the window, please," he says.

Stiles heaves a sigh and then grabs his last bit of emergency mountain ash from where he'd stashed it in his desk. He tosses it at the widow, and he sees his dad opening his mouth, ready to yell at him for being careless, right before he realizes what's happening—the mountain ash rushes towards the window and sticks down like its magnetized, in a perfect, seamless line.

"That's a bit…different," his dad says, before gently reaching up and dragging the window down to seal the line. He seems to recover from the supernatural display quickly, however, as he immediately reaches for a nail to drive through the wooden windowpane.

"What if there's a fire?" Stiles demands.

"You have my permission to break the window, in case of fire," his dad says generously.

Stiles sighs and falls backwards onto his bed. "I've been fine, you know," he says. "I've been handling it fine. I've even kept my grades up! Honor Roll, and everything."

"Yes, and that's very impressive," his dad says, as he puts in a third nail and then steps away. "But I'm not going to let you continue to risk your life just because you can multitask."

With his humiliating task of nailing his son's window shut finished, John drops the can of nails and the hammer on the desk, and sits down in the chair across from Stiles. "So. Start talking."

"Alright, but fair warning, we probably should have gotten drunk for this," Stiles says, ignoring his father's narrow-eyed glare. He drags himself up, and stands up on his bed, reaching out to pull out the pushpins from a poster against the back wall. He spins it around and then pushes them back in, hopping off the bed so his dad can see it.

It's his timeline: there are newspaper clippings and photos, copies of police reports and hand written theories. "In case you need some actual evidence. Some of it you may recognize," Stiles says, motioning towards the wall with a shrug. He knows his father won't take every single thing his says completely at his word.

Stiles can't really blame him. He may be done with the lying outright, but he can admit if only to himself that he isn't exactly above a little lying by omission. There are still plenty of things he doesn't ever want his father to know.

"Okay. So the beginning," Stiles says. "Scott and I went to find Laura Hale's body in the woods, as you know, and Scott was there, which you also know. What you don't know is what happened to him, after we left."

He takes a deep breath, and then drops down to sit on the edge of the bed. "That's sort of when he was bitten by an Alpha werewolf," he says in a rush.

"Jesus," his dad says, running a hand down his face. "That could have been you, or both of you!"
"No one plans for werewolves, dad!" Stiles protests.

"No, you just thought there was a murderer." His father glares at him, and Stiles can't really argue that.

"Well, there was that," he admits. "But what murderer returns to the scene of the crime? Am I right? That's a total movie myth."

His dad pinches the bridge of his nose like he's trying to hold off a migraine. "What happened then?"

"I figured out he was turning into a werewolf, and we started to train Scott so he wouldn't kill anyone," Stiles says. "Derek tried to help, but he kinda just crept around a lot and said things like you are my brother now, Scott, so we mostly avoided him where we could. You might find this hard to believe, but Derek's interpersonal skills have improved by leaps and bounds this last year."

Stiles runs a hand a through his hair. "Then we went to the morgue so Scott could get Laura Hale's scent—"

"I'm sorry, you did what?" John breaks in tightly.

"Right," Stiles says. "I probably should have asked for immunity before starting my full confession, huh? Do I need a lawyer? Because that's like...that's not even that bad compared to some of the stuff we've done since. We're still just in misdemeanor territory at the moment."

"Christ, kid," John says. "Look, you have immunity from legal persecution, but I still reserve the right to ground you for the rest of your life."

Stiles watches him carefully for a moment, before nodding. He's been grounded for the rest of his life about five times already, and so far it's never lasted longer than three weeks. "Deal," he says. "So, ah, where were we?"

"You were breaking into the morgue," his dad says disapprovingly.

"Oh, right! Scott needed the scent to find the other half of the body, which we did, as you know, buried in Derek's backyard," Stiles says. "What you don't know is the first thing we found was half of a wolf. Some kinda tradition, I guess. A werewolf burial rite. I had to pull up all Derek's wolfsbane charms before Laura reverted back to human. I feel sort of bad now about desecrating his sister's grave, but at the time we really thought Derek had killed her. We thought he was the Alpha, that's why we called you about the body."

"Wait a second—that means you crawled into the back of my cruiser to confront what you thought was a murderous Alpha werewolf?" his dad demands.

"Let's not dwell on insignificant details," Stiles says quickly. "Bigger picture, dad."

"Stiles," his dad says, "I really don't know whether to be proud of you or terrified for you."

"Proud is good," Stiles says. "I'd go with proud."

"Just, keep going," he says, waving a hand at him even as his expression clearly shows just how little he wants to know any more.

"Right, um, so then Kate Argent came into town," Stiles says. "Argent being the French word for Silver and all, turns out they're all werewolf hunters. Surprise!"
"Not actually such a huge surprise," John says. "That one I sort of get. I thought maybe Chris Argent was running guns illegally on the side or a CIA spy, so werewolf hunter works."

"Yeah, well, Chris was the least of our problems. His sister was the psycho. She shot Derek with wolfsbane, and I had to take him to the vet's. He wanted me to cut off his arm, and I was pretty much just trying not to pass out. Luckily Scott came through with another wolfsbane bullet, because apparently while wolfsbane is fatal on its own, light it on fire and stick it in the wound and it's like it never happened. Magic. Go figure."

His father is starting to look overwhelmed, so Stiles takes pity on him. "Here," he says, grabbing a little stapled packet off his night table and thrusting it at him. "I made a tip sheet. It's got the most useful stuff on there, like types of wolfsbane and their different uses."

"Thank you," John says dryly. "It's just what I've always wanted."

"Great." Stiles beams at him, choosing to ignore the sarcasm. "Don't worry, there won't be a test."

His father glares up at him and Stiles smile slips. He clears his throat. "O-kay," he says. "I guess next was, well, the attack at the school."

His father looks up sharply at that, his attention drawn away from Stiles' tip sheet. "Right," he says. "What the hell really happened that night?"

"Um, yeah. Wasn't really our finest moment, to be honest," Stiles says. "Basically we met Derek at the school, and he had Deaton all tied up in his back seat—"

"I'm sorry, did you say that he had Deaton tied up in the back seat?" he demands. "When Derek was exonerated, I figured that was all done by Kate. You're telling me—"

"Hey, he was just a little tied up…just enough so that he couldn't get away?" Stiles tries. "I mean, Derek thought Deaton was the Alpha at the time, so he had his reasons. And Deaton was kinda asking for it, with his mysterious, I know all but I'm not telling you anything sort of air, so you know, I don't blame Derek for being suspicious."

"But Deaton's not an Alpha, right? He's just a guy?" John asks.

"Not really sure what Deaton is," Stiles says. "But I'm pretty sure he is fully licensed as a veterinarian."

"Well, then we have nothing to worry about," his father says, but his expression mostly says what the hell, kid?

"It's besides the point, anyway. I'm like 79% sure Deaton is on our side, so we should be good. Back then though, I was pretty sure he wasn't. Because Deaton disappeared right before Derek got clawed. I mean, it was really, really bad. I was pretty sure he was dead. And that Deaton did it." Stiles frowns. "I was actually wrong a lot that night."

"You thought Derek was dead," the Sheriff realizes. "That's why you and Scott blamed it on him?"

"We could hardly explain it was actually an Alpha werewolf, trying to tempt Scott into killing all his friends so he gets blood-thirsty enough to join him in his quest for revenge," Stiles says. "I was all for not saying anything, but I got vetoed and they made me call you. So we needed a scapegoat and Scott's never been all that brilliant at coming up with something on the spot."

"They made you call me," his father echoes, his voice strangely toneless.
"Yeah, I tried to explain why it was a bad idea—" Stiles starts.

"Stiles, why would it be a bad idea to call the police, while you were being terrorized by a murderer?" John shouts.

Stiles meets his father's eyes unflinchingly, his stubbornness shining straight through his own. "I don't know, maybe because watching you get torn apart by a psychotic Alpha has never really been all that high on my to-do list."

"Yeah, well, finding my kid after he has is certainly not on mine," John snaps. "You do not ever hesitate to call me. Not ever. Do you understand me? From now on, I am the first call you make."

"Okay," Stiles says. "But just for the record, I would have still understood you even if you'd used contractions. Contractions aren't the enemy, dad, we've been over this, actually they—"

"Stop trying to distract me," John says, twirling an accusing finger to point at his son. "Get back to talking. I want to know who this Alpha was."

"I'm getting to that," Stiles promises. "That's the twist! You have to live through the suspense."

"It was Peter Hale, right?" his dad asks.

Stiles mouth drops open. "How did you—"

"Well, he was the only other Hale alive, and if he was a werewolf then it stands to reason he recovered from his catatonia instead of just disappearing off the face of the earth," he says, and shrugs. "This is sort of my job, kiddo."

"Fine, yes, it was Peter. Way to spoil the surprise ending," Stiles says. "And that guy—I mean, I thought Derek was a creeper, but Peter is like the original creeper. He's the OC. He tried to date Scott's mom! I had to rear-end them."

"The car accident?" John asks in disbelief. "I grounded you for two weeks for that."

"Yeah, don't feel bad about that," Stiles reassures him, waving a hand dismissively. "I didn't stay home during most of that anyway."

"Of course you didn't." John drops his head into his hands with a sigh. Stiles takes this as a good sign, as he's obviously given up on tallying up his offenses to be used against him later. His dad finally collects himself and pushes back against the chair. "Okay. I'll let that slide, let's just pretend like you haven't ignored me every single time I've ever grounded you. What happened to Lydia? That was Peter?"

"Yeah, he bit her," Stiles says. "Only Lydia, perfect strawberry goddess that she is, was immune to his creepy werewolf self. So she's good. Still not sure she's ever been human, but she's not a she-wolf. Probably for the best."

"And where were you during all this?" John asks.

"I was there for all that," Stiles says, tapping one hand nervously against his leg as he fights the urge to pace. He can still see Lydia falling, and he knew it wouldn't matter how fast he ran, he knew he'd never catch her before she hit the ground. "I wanted to stay with her, but Peter needed me to help him find Derek. He let me call Jackson so he could come get her, but that was it. I didn't want to leave her there, I just didn't have a choice. He took me to some garage, made me track Derek through Scott's phone and then left me stranded."
"Son of a bitch," John snaps, looking away. "There I was accusing you of running off, and you'd been abducted by some psychopath?"

"It's not your fault, you didn't know," Stiles says. "It was my decision not to tell you."

"It was the wrong one," his dad snaps.

Stiles swallows hard. "Yeah, I know," he says. "But I'd probably do it all again." He meets his dad's eyes. "Because what would you have done, if you had known?"

"I would have gone after him!" he shouts.

"Exactly, and you wouldn't have stood a chance, dad," Stiles says. "Because you can't just march in there with your badge and your gun and demand surrender, Peter would have torn you apart."

"But you kids handled it just fine?" he demands.

"Derek and Scott are werewolves," Stiles says. "Chris and Allison Argent were armed to the teeth. And, well, Jackson and I brought Molotov cocktails."

"Molotov cocktails—" he echoes in disbelief. "Where did you even—"

"We made them with supplies from the school," Stiles says. "I got the recipe from Lydia."

"I'm starting to get all sorts of concerned here, Stiles," his dad says.

"It's not like I have a Molotov cocktail habit," Stiles says quickly. "That was a one time deal. I mean, for me. Lydia made one when we were trapped in the school, but it was a dud anyway because Jackson's either an idiot or was deliberately trying to get Scott killed. I've never been able to figure out his motivations to my satisfaction."

Stiles finally allows himself to pace a little, walking to his now useless window before spinning on his heel. "Anyway, Peter had already killed Kate by the time I arrived, he was hardly an innocent. Well. Okay, to be fair, that can't really be held against him. Kate deserved a lot worse than she got, because burning the Hales alive? You totally got that part right. Still, Peter's not exactly all sorts of better."

"You killed him?" John asks, looking like he didn't want to know the answer.

"Sort of?" Stiles says softly. "It was kind of a group effort. Derek killed him in the end, he ripped out his throat. Not with his teeth, just for the record. Then he went all I'm the Alpha now, and bit Jackson because he's an idiot. I mean, seriously. Boyd, Erica and even Isaac I get, but Jackson—"

"Stiles—" his dad sighs.

"You don't understand yet just how big of a mistake that was, because Jackson didn't become a werewolf, not at first," Stiles says. "He became a Kanima. Which is basically a giant lizard person thing, with a creepy-ass prehensile tail and clear goop stuff that'll paralyze you for hours. Jackson's the one that killed most of the people this last year."

"Jackson did?" his dad looks horrified. He gets to his feet anxiously. "I thought that was Matt? If Jackson—"

"He didn't know he was doing it," Stiles says quickly. "Matt was the one controlling him. Trust me, you got that one right where it counts, too."

"We were trying to stop him killing someone else," Stiles says. "If I'd remembered what a repressed asshole he was and hadn't signed the text with 'love you,' I think we might have even gotten away with it."

"But he's not a Kanima anymore?" John asks to be sure. "He's what, just a regular werewolf now?" He winces. "Regular. Werewolf. I think that's an oxymoron."

"He's actually probably about as regular as they get," Stiles says. "I mean, I think this is as good as we can hope for, cause Jackson. At least he's not killing people anymore. Which is good, because I don't exactly like the guy but I didn't really want to kill him."

"Why are you talking about killing him like that was an option?" his dad demands.

"Because it was just about the only one I thought we had," Stiles says. "Kidnapping him didn't really work. He wouldn't listen to us. And once he turned, there wasn't any stopping him. You saw what happened at the station. There was a good reason why I thought we might have to."

He can see the moment his father gets it: four officers dead that might have lived, and suddenly it's not so clear-cut anymore. Could his father have sacrificed Jackson to save them? Could he? He's still not sure.

"You should not be dealing with this," John says tightly. "I can't even deal with this."

"It's actually a lot easier to deal with if you know Jackson," Stiles says. "Because he's an asshole and that made the idea of killing him a lot easier to accept. But Scott's all, no, Stiles, let's save everyone, and all the puppies, and then the world! And you know I've never been all that great at saying no to Scott."

"Stiles," he snaps. "This isn't a joke."

"Right. I know that," Stiles says. "It's just that's how I have to think of it, or else I'd probably need to be on some sort of medication. You know. Additional medications."

"What really happened that night at the station?" John asks, obviously trying to steel himself for what's next.

"Do you want to take a break?" Stiles asks gently. "You look a little like you're about to hyperventilate."

"Stop stalling," his dad says.

"I'm not stalling," Stiles protests, holding his hands up in mock surrender. "Look, you were there for the rest of it. You just didn't know about the psychotic lizard that Matt had on a leash, everything else happened pretty much the way you think. Matt had Jackson knock out me and Derek, shot Scott, Peter Hale came back from the dead, Gerard killed Matt and stole Jackson, Scott made another stupid deal with an Argent, Gerard started melting like the witch from Wizard of Oz—and, yeah, no idea what the hell happened to that guy, to be honest. That's all second-hand. Anyway, Lydia cured Jackson with the power of their love, and that's about it. Except you know, we got invaded by an 'Alpha pack.' But they were total posers. Allison scared them off with her crossbow."

His father stares at him for a moment. "Come again?"

Stiles sighs but gets back to his feet, motioning towards his wall of bizarre events. "It's all on the
"timeline, dad, keep up," he says.

John drops back into the chair. "Peter Hale—Peter Hale that murdered all those people and Derek killed, he came back from the dead?"

"Yeah," Stiles says. "He's not a zombie or anything though, if that's what you're worried about. He's actually mellowed a bit since coming back from the dead. These days you have to worry more about him shredding your ego than your throat."

"Stiles—how did he—I don't understand," he says. "So he wasn't really dead?"

"No, he was pretty dead," Stiles snorts. "We buried him under the Hale house."

"You buried him..." his dad says, looking sort of horrified.

"Hey, no, it was fine," Stiles assures him. "He was completely dead at the time we buried him, I promise."

"Not actually the worst part of that, Stiles," he says. "Oh god. How did I miss all this?"

"Mostly because I was running interference," Stiles says. "Don't blame yourself."

"Do I need to arrest Peter?" he asks, looking up at his son seriously. "Or anyone else?"

"I don't see Peter going easy, and it's not like we can pin anything on him anyway. Long term catatonia is a pretty good alibi, all things considered," Stiles says. "They also have his medical files, which clearly detail injuries no one could recover from, so I think we'd be hard-pressed to even prove he is Peter Hale, and not just some long lost twin or creepy look-alike."

Stiles shrugs. "Trust me, I've thought this all through. So much. Anyway, he seems to be mostly harmless now, and I think Derek likes having family around. Even if it is Peter. And all the other people that did bad things weren't so skilled as to bring themselves back to life, so not much need for arresting at the moment, really."

"Right," his father says blankly. "I've been completely useless in this fight, haven't I?"

"No, dad, never. Kate and Matt were both the real bad guys, and you figured that out despite everything working against you," Stiles assures him quickly. "And hey, if you can find Gerard Argent, you could totally arrest him!"

"For what?" his dad demands.

Stiles pauses for a moment, belatedly realizing he'd skipped the gory details in that section of the tale. "Uh, for torture and kidnap of minors?" he says, but it's phrased like a question, and his dad narrows his eyes. "Erica and Boyd." Stiles swallows hard. "I'm sure they'd testify. And also me. But more for the kidnap than the torture, cause I didn't have it as bad as them."

"You weren't taken by the other team." His father's expression goes thunderous and Stiles instantly wants to take it back. Most of this stuff is so far outside of the realm of what his father's used to that he isn't quite processing how horrifying it really is. Kidnap and torture are things he's regrettably already familiar with in this world.

"I mean, it's fine, I was fine," Stiles says quickly. "But Boyd and Erica, it wasn't good. It was so screwed up. So yeah. Arrest him, definitely."
"Stop saying you're fine," his dad snaps, and Stiles flinches, which just makes it worse. "What am I supposed to do here, Stiles? How am I supposed to help you?"

"I don't—" Stiles breaks off, catching himself before he can say he's fine again. "You don't have to do anything."

John looks at Stiles seriously. "You're done keeping things from me," he demands. "I don't want anything like this happening again. I don't want you cutting me out of your life like this."


"That's exactly what you did," his dad says. "You shut me out, kiddo. I want you to promise that you're not going to do it again."

"I won't," he says quietly. "Dad, I promise. I promise I won't."

"Okay, good," John says. "So why don't you tell me about what happened last week?"

Stiles goes very still. "What?"

"Did you think I'd just forgotten about your little trip to Arnold with Derek Hale?" he asks.

"Well, I was sort of hoping, yeah." Stiles looks at his father expectantly, but eventually wilts under his obstinate stare. "Yeah, okay. After you left for the conference, I figured out the recent drowning deaths were probably related to a bunyip. So I went to the Preserve to track it down."

"Alone?" John demands.

"It's not like I thought I would find it!" Stiles protests. "It was purely information retrieval. But then I saw something underneath the water, so I might have gone to the edge. And I might have put my head under the water with those really cool goggles you bought me because I wanted to test them out. And also maybe a little because I wanted to see if that something I was seeing was a catfish, or, you know, a bunyip."

"Tell me you didn't," his dad says, his resigned tone making the question pretty much rhetorical.

"Well, I can tell you it wasn't a catfish," Stiles says, his voice falsely bright. "Derek showed up in the nick of time. I was just a bit banged up, but he didn't want me driving home and he knew you were out of town, so he took me and his pack to his summer house in Arnold to recover. No illicit romantic getaways, I promise, and you have to believe me, because Jackson was there. Nothing kills romance faster than Jackson Whittemore."

Stiles goes what he's just said in his mind. "Not that there was a possibility for romance, Jackson or not." He nods then, looking over at his father, and feeling rather pleased with himself. Not a single lie in that, not really.

"Alright, so say I believe all this—" his dad starts.

"Dad, the timeline!" Stiles says, motioning towards the poster. "It's all there! I have evidence—"

"Yes, but allow me my skepticism," John says. "Considering how much I've been lied to, I think I'm owed it."

"Fair point," Stiles allows.

"So, say I believe all this," he says. "What's the current situation?"
"Huh?" Stiles asks.

"Well, Jackson was a murderous lizard and now he's just a regular run of the mill werewolf, whatever that means. Argents are hunters trying to kill Scott and Derek, but you all hang out with Allison, Deaton is—whatever the hell Deaton is, and you said Isaac was a werewolf too? But you haven't mentioned him at all."

"Yeah," Stiles says. "Isaac's not really a personal favorite. I tend to forget about him."

"Stiles," John says disapprovingly.

"What!" he demands. "What do you want me to say? He's a curly-haired menace, dad, and he stole my best friend!"

"And that—" his dad continues, pointing at him. "What is going on with you and Scott?"

"Okay fine, you want a run down on the pack dynamics? Here we go," Stiles says quickly. "Derek's the Alpha, and he made Jackson, Erica, Isaac and Boyd. Scott didn't much like the idea of being in Derek's pack, so he made his own."

"So Scott's an Alpha too?" John asks.

"No, Scott's a Beta with delusions-of-Alpha," Stiles says. "But I mean, if we're competing for Worst Alpha in Beacon Hills it's kind of a toss up. At least Scott has me, so he's sort of got the edge. Unfortunately, we also have Isaac. He left Derek to join us, like the fickle scarf wielding werewolf that he is."

"Alright, I'm just going to ignore the fact that you obviously have some deep-seated issues with Isaac Lahey and move on," John says. "What about Allison?"

"Allison went a little nuts for awhile and used a couple of our classmates for target practice. Not once, but twice," Stiles says, holding up two fingers for further clarification. "But apparently she's doing much better now, so Scott's trying to get her to date him again."

He watches as his dad tries to process this, and put it into some form that makes sense. "So wait… that means you're all on the same side now, right?"

"In theory," Stiles says. "Mostly we work against each other for the same cause."

"And you're in Scott's pack, not Derek's?" he asks.

"I'm sort of not in a pack at the moment, more like pack adjacent," Stiles says. "We're a bit…on a break."

"You're still not telling me something," John says, pointing accusingly at his son.

Stiles opens his mouth, not quite sure what he's planning to say, when he hears the doorbell ringing. "Saved by the bell!" he shouts in relief, before jumping towards his door.

"Stiles, hey!" John calls after him. "We're not finished here!"

Stiles ignores him, hopping down the last few steps and nearly colliding with the door. He pulls it open, breathless from his rush down the stairs, and comes face-to-face with Scott McCall's famous puppy dog eyes.

"Hi, Stiles," Scott says, grinning hesitantly.
Stiles slams the door in his stupidly hopeful face.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So, the Scott and Stiles feels kind of got all over this chapter. In my outline for Chapter 17, this is only about the first half, but it just kept getting longer so I thought this would be an okay place to stop. I'm really starting to worry this story might end up something like 100K, since I seem to be averaging about 5,000 words per conversation and the ending keeps getting stretched further and further out.

Thank you so much to everyone that has reviewed! I can't believe you guys are still reading this thing considering how long it's taking me to get it done. I know I'm the worst, but I am trying to stay focused this time and not get distracted by my millions of other shiny story ideas.

Stiles stares at the slammed door, his breath hitching a little as he takes a step back. He honestly doesn't know if it's anger or panic that's creeping up on him, and when he hears Scott say his name pitifully from the other side of the door, it's all he can do not to throw it open again. Then his dad appears behind him, and reaches past him to do it for him.

"Scott, it's good to see you," he says, the traitor. "Please come in."

Scott wanders in a little like he's heading to his execution, and Stiles hasn't seen him look this unsure of himself since he really learned to control his powers. "Is this a bad time?" he asks awkwardly, and even as angry as Stiles still is, the question seems wrong coming from Scott. This has always been at least half his house, too.

"No, it's fine," his dad assures him.

"It's really not," Stiles says.

"Stiles," John says disapprovingly. "I asked Scott to come."

Stiles' eyes dart to his father in panic. "What?" he asks. "Why?"

"I know Derek and his...pack are your friends, but I don't know them. I know Scott, and I trust him," his dad says. "And Scott can't lie nearly as well as you."

Stiles has to fight down a sharp flare of resentment. His father has always joked that he trusts Scott more than Stiles—Stiles isn't actually sure this has ever been a joke—and he's never thought it was particularly fair. He must know that nearly all the secrets they've ever had they've shared.

Stiles has just gotten better at hiding them, is all. Stiles can come up with lies these days that will get believed, whereas Scott still isn't really the best at thinking of something on the spot. Is that even trust, anyway? Is it trust if the only thing you can trust is whether or not you're able to spot the lies?

"I think you're underestimating how good he's getting at it," Stiles says. "He's even kept things from me."
Scott lowers his eyes, but Stiles doesn't miss the flash of hurt. "Mr. Stilinski, I—"

"Hey, it's okay," his dad says. "You doing alright, kid?"

Scott nods even though it's obvious he's not. His eyes look shadowed and Stiles swallows hard, because who even knew werewolves could get dark circles? How much sleep has he been missing for that to even be possible?

His dad must see it too, because he just pulls Scott straight into one of his patented Stilinski hugs. Stiles wants to hold onto his resentment, but Scott just looks so wrecked. This is why Stiles hadn't wanted to see him. He can't ever hold his ground against Scott, he folds like a house of cards every single time.

"Does your mom know?" John asks softly. Scott doesn't let go of the hug, just nods against his dad's chest. "Okay. Alright, good. She should."

Stiles watches them helplessly, and he doesn't know what he should do. They'd made a pact when they were younger to share their parents, but it hadn't actually lasted more than a week. Stiles has always been a little possessive of his father, but he wishes now he'd been a bit more willing to share. Scott had been willing to share his mom, because Scott would give you the shirt off his back if he thought you needed it more than he did. It was Stiles that hadn't ever been able to let Melissa get too close, even though the whole pact had been his idea to begin with.

"Alright, come on," his dad says, ushering Scott towards the living room. "Let's all sit down and talk."

"Haven't we talked enough?" Stiles asks hopefully, as he follows them to the living room. "I've talked so much I think I'm losing my voice. I might actually be in pain right now, like, throat-strain. Voice-strain. It's a thing. Singers get it. Do you even understand the level of verbosity I must have reached for this to occur, considering how much I already speak on a regular day to no ill-effect?"

"And yet you're still using dozens of words where 'my throat hurts' would have sufficed," his father says wryly. "I think you're fine."

"What's going on?" Scott asks anxiously. He sits down on the couch and keeps shooting Stiles glances like he wants Stiles to sign him some sort of code so he knows what he's supposed to say.

"I told him," Stiles says after a moment, because his dad is obviously not going to give them time alone to get their stories straight. "I told him everything."

Scott seems to deflate then, watching John guardedly. His dad hasn't been shying away from Scott at all, but he still looks wary and worried and just a little bit devastated—sort of like Melissa, once she came to terms but still wasn't sure how to act. "Yeah," Scott says. "I thought so."

"It's okay, Scott," his dad says. "Stiles and I have been talking through everything. I understand why you've both done what you have, even if I don't approve of it all. I just want to compare notes. Make sure we're all on the same page."

"You're fact-checking me?" Stiles demands. "With Scott?"

His dad ignores him, sitting down across from Scott. "Can you tell me what happened when Gerard took my son?"

"Scott wasn't even there, he doesn't know anything," Stiles says quickly.
"I wasn't," Scott agrees. "Boyd and Erica won't really talk about it, and Stiles says he was only there for a few minutes."

"He was missing for hours," John counters.

"I don't—" Scott looks at Stiles.

"Don't look at him," his dad says, moving back into Scott's line of sight. "Look at me. I just want to know what you know."

"I really don't know anything," Scott says, and he looks sort of embarrassed about it. "We didn't ever really talk about it."

"You didn't talk about it," John echoes, and he looks confused now. His dad's always been able to tell when Scott's lying, and he's not, so it's throwing off everything he thought he knew. Last he checked, Stiles told Scott everything, so he gets why his dad wasn't expecting that response.

"He punched me a few times," Stiles says quietly. "That's all. Then he let me go, and I came home. End of story."

"What about Boyd and Erica?" his father asks, glancing back at him.

"I called Chris Argent," Stiles says. "He's sort of the sane Argent. Or, the saner Argent, anyway. I knew he wouldn't let his father torture a couple of high-schoolers in his basement. He let them go."

His father nods, before glancing back at Scott. "And Gerard? Stiles told me he doesn't know what happened to him, do you?"

"You're trying to track him down," Stiles realizes, breaking in before Scott can respond. "Dad, I know what I said, but Gerard's dead. He's gotta be—Scott, he's gotta be dead, right?"

"Uh," Scott says, glancing between them. "I don't know? I think so? He sort of disappeared."

His dad nods, looking frustrated. Stiles knows he's trying to be gentle with Scott, which, whatever, it's not like he was all that gentle with him, but he gets it. Scott isn't his son, and they haven't talked much for a couple of years now. There weren't really sleepovers anymore the way they'd had before —nowadays they tend to spend the night at the house with the parent on the nightshift, instead of being shuffled off to the house with the one at home so they'll be supervised.

Thinking back he can't remember the last time his father and Scott had an actual conversation.

Becoming teenagers had changed them all before werewolves even entered into it.

"And what made him melt like the witch of the west?" his dad asks.

Scott frowns. "Um…what?"

"Stiles' idea of an explanation," his dad says, waving dismissively. Stiles glares at the back of his head.

"Oh!" Scott says, grinning over at Stiles. Stiles turns his glare on Scott instead, and his smile slips away. "Yeah, I could see that, I guess. He wasn't actually melting, but black goo started coming out of everywhere. It was pretty horrible."

"What happened to him?" John asks.
"I switched out his pills for pills filled with mountain ash," Scott says easily. "Deaton helped me refill them, he was taking them for weeks so they'd built up pretty well in his system."

"You and Deaton," his father repeats slowly, and Stiles can practically imagine Deaton getting mentally added to his father's list of coming interrogations. "Just to be clear—Alan Deaton helped a sixteen-year-old boy arrange to kill someone."

"Kind of, but he was already dying," Scott says. "And we weren't killing him, exactly. Well, we were, but only if we were right. Only if he wanted to be turned, and that would probably kill him anyway and it wouldn't have been good for anyone if it hadn't." Scott looks up then, meeting his father's eyes, some of that new confidence of his shining back through. "He threatened my mom, and Stiles. I didn't have a choice."

"You could have told me," Stiles interrupts softly. "That was a choice."

"I was trying to keep you out of it," Scott says, giving a worried frown. "I never thought Gerard would go after you, Stiles, I swear—"

Stiles snorts loudly, glancing away to look at the stairs. "Right," he says. "Keeping me in the dark to protect me, stroke of genius there, buddy."

His father clears his throat. "Yeah," he says. "Don't know anyone else that's tried something like that."

"Alright, I walked into that one," Stiles says with a wince. "This round to you."

John returns his attention back to Scott. "And what about what happened in Arnold?" he asks.

Stiles narrows his eyes as he realizes that his father has obviously pinpointed the two weakest parts of his story—and instead of interrogating him further about it and giving Stiles a chance to talk his way out, he'd sought Scott for a second opinion.

It's a good strategy, and Stiles isn't sure how to keep Scott from saying too much without his dad noticing the cues and returning his full attention to him. He's entrapped them pretty completely, and it's times like this that Stiles wonders how he was ever able to keep anything from his father at all.

"What about it?" Scott asks helpfully, at the same time Stiles insists, "He wasn't even there."

"Really," his dad asks dryly. "Derek said you were there."

"He said that?" Scott asks, the gullible idiot, and Stiles drops his head in resignation. "Yeah, I mean, I was there for a bit. I wasn't there for most of it."

"For most of what?" his father asks.

"Objection!" Stiles shouts, stepping forward to try and draw his attention. "Calls for speculation!"

"Overruled," his father says easily, keeping his eyes on Scott.

Scott has a deer-in-the-headlights kind of expression, but Stiles is too busy trying to figure out how to keep him quiet to appreciate the irony. "The cabin?" Scott says hesitantly—now he's obviously
trying to figure out how much his father knows, but he's nowhere near as good at it. That's not even a question.

"Yes? What about the cabin?" John asks.

"They were there," Scott says, obviously happy the cabin hasn't come as a surprise. "At the cabin."

"Derek and Stiles, you mean," his father asks for clarification. "Is that where they started their relationship?"

Stiles eyes widen in horror, and he stumbles forward, waving his hands to try and call Scott off—but Scott is watching his father, his face flooding with relief because he thinks he already knows. "I guess so," he agrees. "I'm pretty sure it was their first kiss."

Stiles actually feels his heart stop. He sees his father's shoulders tense like he hadn't actually expected to get confirmation, and Stiles' breathing stutters and nearly halts so sharply that Scott's eyes shoot to him in concern.

Which is about when he realizes what he's done.

"And you didn't know that," Scott says, his expression turning desperate. He leans towards Stiles. "You said you told him everything!"

"That's because he was standing right here and I told him that I told him everything," Stiles shouts. "Learn to read between the lines!"

"Stiles!" his dad yells, as he angrily gets to his feet and turns to face him.

Stiles clamps his mouth shut and crosses his arms, refusing to look at either of them.

"It's not Stiles' fault," Scott says quickly. "I mean, I don't think Stiles wanted him to!" He flinches at the thunderous expression that appears on John's face. "I mean, no, I didn't mean it like that—I don't mean anything. I don't know anything."

"Oh my god, Scott," Stiles moans, putting his head in his hands. "Please stop helping!"

His dad gets up and steps towards him, pulling his hands down. "Did he force you?" he asks, his voice way too calm for him to be anything other than furious.

"No, dad, no," Stiles says quickly. "He didn't, I promise. I wanted to kiss him. If I hadn't, I could have thrown his werewolf ass back twenty feet with mountain ash. But that's all it was, just a kiss! Kisses are not illegal. In Europe, they kiss like three times just to say hello!"

"So you're admitting to it finally?" John asks.

Stiles' mind is working overtime trying to come up with some damage control—as awkward as this is, he knows that of the two secrets Scott could have spilled, this might actually be the better one. His father was already pretty much convinced he and Derek were in the midst of some sort of secret love affair anyway, so if anything the confirmation might actually ease his mind. The Sheriff, like Stiles, can always handle a situation better if he's aware of the facts.

"I haven't been lying about this," Stiles insists. His father scoffs and Stiles shakes his head. "No, I haven't. Scott's right, it was our first kiss, and our only kiss, and that's all there is. We aren't in a relationship, we haven't been sneaking out on dates. Haven't really had the time, to be honest, even had we wanted to. The rest of the pack really was with us at the cabin."
"I saw Jackson at the cabin," Scott says quickly, still trying to help. "Stiles wouldn't lie about this."

"That's so ridiculous I don't even know how to respond," his dad says.

Stiles flinches, but he knows he probably deserves that.

"This changes things, you know that, right?" John asks, turning back to his son. "I'm not saying you can't see him, but I don't want you alone with him. Either the rest of the pack is there or I'm there or you're in a public place. Hey, Stiles, are you listening to me?"

"Yes, I'm just really, really confused," Stiles says. "Are you actually giving me permission to date Derek Hale?"

"No," his dad says, his face scrunching briefly in displeasure. "I'm just not forbidding it, because I have a rough idea how that would end for us both, and it's not pretty. But you have to be honest with me, that's what I want in return. You stay honest with me, and I don't have to load my .45 up with wolfsbane bullets. We have a deal?"

"Deal," Stiles says quickly. "But what if me being honest is what makes you want to go get the wolfsbane bullets?"

"Then it's not something you should have been doing in the first place, so don't do it, and we won't have any problems," his dad says.

Stiles considers this. It's sort of a 'damned if he does, damned if he doesn't' type of trap since he's pretty much incapable of staying out of trouble. He's not actually sure what he's getting out of the deal considering he's not actually dating Derek, whatever his father believes, but he knows his dad might just go ahead and go the route of total non-contact if he doesn't take it.

"Okay," he finally says.

"Okay," John echoes. "Now you two—" he points his finger between them. "You fix this, whatever this is." He points directly back at Stiles. "And we will be talking more about this later, you can count on that. But right now I need a drink."

Stiles opens his mouth to protest, and his father shakes his head. "Aht! Not a word, Stiles."

Stiles shuts his mouth. Then his father starts to walk away, and he can't help himself. "Okay, but you know the rule, dad!" he shouts after him. "Two-fingers from the top!"

His father just waves him off dismissively before disappearing into his office. Stiles turns to glare at Scott like this is his fault, which he has decided it is.

"Thanks for that," he says. "That's just wonderful. He handled it fine when I told him that I helped try to burn Peter Hale alive and that Jackson could, for a brief time, turn into a man sized psycho-lizard, but you just come strolling in and have to tell him you caught me making out with Derek Hale! You've broken him!"

"Maybe it's cumulative?" Scott suggests warily.

"Oh, what, did you invest in a word of the day calendar?" Stiles snaps, his voice tinged with just a bit of disdain.

Scott's expression closes off, his jaw tightening, and Stiles regrets it as soon as he says it. He knows Scott isn't stupid, he was one of the first people to realize just how not stupid Scott is, but there's
always still been that divide between them. The fact that Stiles can finish an essay in the seven
minute passing period and still get an A, while Scott has to work on his for a month just to manage a
C.

But his intelligence is the only advantage Stiles has left in this relationship, and when his survival
instinct kicks in he can't seem to stop himself from using it.

"I'm sorry," Scott says tightly. "I had no idea that's why he asked me over, I thought maybe he was
just worried about you, or you needed back up to prove all this was real. Stiles. Stiles, will you
please just look at me? This isn't my fault." Scott's voice sounds shaky but resolved, the way Scott
always gets when he knows he's right even when everyone is telling him he's wrong.

"No, it's mine, remember?" Stiles says.

"It's Derek's," Scott snaps. "He started this when he took you—"

"Derek," Stiles laughs. "Why am I not surprised you want to put this all on him?"

"Maybe because that's usually where it belongs," Scott says.

"I'm so sick of playing the part of the rope in your little game of tug-of-
war," he says.

"He started it," Scott insists.


"No you don't," Scott says shakily, his eyes turning glassy like he's holding in tears. "Stiles, no you
don't."

"I'm sick of you both using me to hurt each other. I don't get how it even started, but I want it to stop.
So let's just forget about that, for a minute, okay?" Stiles asks. "Let's forget about packs and
werewolf prerogatives and just this once, try to remember that we used to be best friends."

"Used to be?" Scott asks brokenly. "Stiles, we never stopped."

"We have," Stiles says. "I get it, okay, I do. I was dealing with it, and it was fine. I understood."

"You understood what?" Scott demands. "Because I don't understand. I don't know where this is
coming from all the sudden—"

"It's not all the sudden," Stiles says. "You've been hanging out with Isaac all summer. When was the
last time you even called me, Scott, really? Why don't you check your phone. Cause I can't
remember."

Scott looks startled for a moment before his eyes widen as he realizes Stiles is right. It's not that they
haven't talked—it's that every time they've talked, Stiles has called him. Stiles has shown up at his
house. They used to be equal partners, but Stiles has been carrying this friendship alone for months
now.

"I know I'm not an easy person," Stiles says, hating the way his voice seems to tremble. "I know
that. But it's never mattered before, not to you. We always faced everything together. Now you go
off and make plans without me and leave me behind and you never answer when I call anymore,
you're never there when I need you anymore, because you're always off saving someone else.
"And maybe that's where you should be, maybe that's where you need to be, but I'm selfish, Scott, you know that." Stiles purses his lips. "I just want my best friend back."

"You never lost me," Scott insists.

"Yes I have!" Stiles shouts. "I put a lot into our friendship, you know. You haven't exactly been a picnic yourself all these years. I'm not even talking about the fact that you became a freakin' werewolf and tried to kill me! You remember in third grade when you were convinced that Ms. Brown needed cheering up, so we hid under the table in the back when everyone left for recess and then painted a mural behind her desk—I was grounded for ages. I was eight!"

"The mural was your idea, though," Scott protests weakly. "I suggested cupcakes."

"Irrelevant!" Stiles cries. "Oh, and how about in fifth grade, when you inexplicably just 'forgot' that we had to write a ten-page book report until the day before it was due, and I had to sneak out and come over to help you write it at twelve at night. And then the forty-nine other times that's happened since!"

"Stiles—" Scott starts, getting up from the couch. He steps closer hesitantly, but Stiles just lets out a broken, strange laugh, and steps further back.

"And Allison. Oh my god, with the Allison. I get it, dude! You're in love! But have a little decorum, will you? I mean, do you really have to be so completely love-struck that you sound like you're reciting Justin Bieber lyrics all the time? Haven't you ever heard of the expression: don't kiss and tell? Seriously? I do not need to know all of that!"

Scott watches him in concern, stepping closer again with a hand half-raised before he lowers it with a frown. "Stiles, you need to calm down, okay?"

Stiles knows Scott's listening to his frantic, traitorous heart. He doesn't care. This isn't a coming panic attack, Stiles is in control for once. He's going to see this through, and he doesn't care anymore what it costs him.

"Then there's the time I was drowning, trying to hold Derek up out of the water, and you hung up on me," he says. "Do you remember that one? That was fun. What about the time I got grabbed on the Lacrosse field? I got dragged down into the Argent's basement and used as a punching bag while Boyd and Erica got tortured about three feet to my left, and where were you again? That's right! You were off trying to save Jackson."

"Stiles, please—" Scott says, and that's what finally gets through to him. Stiles looks over at him, and Scott has this expression like he's bleeding out. Scott has always worn his heart on his sleeve, always tried to help out everyone. It's always been Stiles' job to protect him, but he supposes they've both failed in their roles, this last year. They never really did recover from the power shift Scott becoming a werewolf had caused—it turned Scott into the protector, and where the hell did that leave Stiles?

Stiles used to protect Scott from playground bullies with the power of his sarcasm alone and he always used to carry an extra inhaler in his backpack just in case, and Scott didn't need that anymore. He didn't need him anymore, so he was leaving him behind.

"You want to know the worst part?" Stiles asks, as he falls back against the wall. "I know it's because you're a good person. I know it's because you're just trying to save everyone. But I'm not a good person, okay? You're the hero, not me. And if it had been you in danger, I wouldn't have cared about anyone else. I'd have just cared about you."
"You think I wouldn't choose to save you first?" Scott asks.

"You don't!" Stiles says. "Even at the start, when you first turned, you could control yourself around Allison, but not around me—and you'd known her what, all of five minutes?"

Stiles glances away then, letting himself slide down the wall until he hits the floor. Scott watches his controlled fall warily.

"Do you feel better now?" Scott asks, his voice coiling strangely around the words, tense like a spring.

"Yes, actually," Stiles says stubbornly, still refusing to meet his eyes. "You're free to leave."

"Oh, I don't think so. If you're done, then it's my turn," Scott says, kneeling down in front of him.

"Yes, I've screwed up, but so have you. Don't you dare act like I don't care about you. You know I'd never hurt you if I could help it, and if I almost went after you those first full moons, that's only because you wouldn't leave me, so you were the only one that was there. I'm sorry about trying to hurt you. I would have hurt Allison too, if Derek hadn't stopped me. It wasn't me, I didn't have any control."

Stiles knows that's true, and he knows it's never been fair to hold it against him. "I know," he allows. "I know that. I'm sorry."

"And what happened in the pool," Scott says shakily. "You think I haven't gone over that night a million times in my head, thinking of what could have happened if I hadn't made it there in time? If you'd died, and the last time I'd talked to you, you'd been asking me for help and I didn't even realize it? I thought it was just a phone call, just like any other phone call we'd ever had, and I was busy, and I didn't think. I will never forgive myself for that, okay? I won't."

Scott lets out a shuddering breath. "And I did try to look for you, Stiles, I will always look for you. Isaac and I were ready to go after your trail, but Derek needed our help. We had to get Jackson secure first, or no one would have been safe, but I was always going to come for you. But then your dad texted me he'd found you, and I knew you were safe."

Stiles keeps his eyes on the floor. This isn't anything he hasn't figured out for himself, and rationally he even knows that Scott made the right choice. It doesn't actually make him being the afterthought hurt any less.

"And then you wouldn't, you just wouldn't talk about it, so I thought maybe you just needed some space," Scott says. "Then this whole thing happened—I find Jackson and Erica searching your room, laughing about how Derek had carried you off. I was kind of terrified, because I thought maybe, maybe he took you to turn you, or maybe they'd hurt you, on accident or on purpose even, and were trying to cover it up."

Stiles does look up then, his eyes widening as he realizes what Scott had thought. He doesn't know what he'd expected, but even with all their warring with Derek's pack there's never really been any actual casualties on either side. They didn't hurt each other, at least not the ones that couldn't heal. It hadn't actually occurred to him that Scott would be worried Derek would do something like force the bite on him—Stiles has just always known, instinctively, that's something Derek wouldn't ever do.

"He would never—" he protests.

"Don't act like they wouldn't hurt you," Scott snaps. "Because they would. They have. So maybe I didn't react well, but that's because I hadn't slept since I found out you were missing. That's because
I'd been tracking you on foot for most of the day, and when I found you, you were kissing Derek! I didn't—what was I supposed to make of that?"

"Well, I don't know. I did expect you not to assume it was some diabolical plot designed by Derek and I to lure you to Arnold just so you could watch us suck face," Stiles says wryly.

"I know, I'm sorry," Scott says. "I was just confused, and really worried. Stiles, you have to know, there's no scenario in which you aren't my best friend. You are the most brilliant, loyal, funniest person I know and I know that I've never quite deserved you. I know I just got lucky and that if anyone else ever took the time to really get to know how amazing you are, I'd lose you."

Stiles raises an eyebrow in disbelief. "Scott—"

"No," Scott cuts in. "Let me finish. You have to know I'd fight for you, okay? I don't care if you're in my pack or Derek's pack or no pack. Because you're not just my best friend, Stiles, you're my brother."

"Did you rehearse that?" Stiles asks, and he tries to sound casual, but his voice splinters and cracks. Scott pretends that he doesn't notice, and that's when Stiles remembers why he loves him so damn much.

"In front of the mirror a lot," Scott says sheepishly, before tugging up the sleeve on his hoodie to reveal a mess of smeared ink. "And I wrote some of it on my arm, but that didn't work so well."

Stiles huffs out a laugh, before burying his head in his arms. "I was wrong," he says. "You haven't changed at all."

Scott turns and falls to sit down beside Stiles, pushing back against him until they're shoulder to shoulder. "You know, even if you told me not to go with you that night, I'd still have gone with you," he says. "Because you were going, so where else would I be?"

Stiles presses his eyes shut, allowing himself to lean into Scott, his head falling on his shoulder. The contact seems to steady him, slow his heart back to its usual pace, just the same as Derek's fingers trailing across his wrist.

"You'll always have me. We're always going to have each other," Scott assures him. "I know things have been crazy, but I thought we were good. I thought you were okay, because any time I ask, you tell me you're okay."

Stiles hasn't been anything but okay since his mother died. It's the ingrained response, the one that finally got him out of therapy and kept his father from looking at him like he was about to shatter. It's the response he learned to give after he'd talked himself out of a panic attack alone, or came home from school to find another empty bottle of Jack Daniels in the kitchen trash that hadn't been there the day before.

"I'm not okay," Stiles admits.

Because Stiles hasn't been okay since his mother died.
His father finds them leaning against each other about an hour later, and just stares down at them with resigned fondness. Stiles can't tell how much he's had to drink, because his father has never been any particular sort of drunk: he doesn't get happy, and he doesn't get mad. He just gets quiet, but he gets that way without the whiskey sometimes too.

John kneels down in front of them. "Alright, come on, kids, up off the floor," he says, holding out his hands to drag them both to their feet. "Why don't we call Melissa, see if she wants to come over for dinner? Sound good?"

"I'm starving," Scott admits, as he takes John's hand and gracefully lifts to his feet. Stiles does the same minus the grace, and then falls to rest back against the wall again.

"Yeah, sounds like a plan," Stiles agrees, as he wanders past them to the kitchen. He grabs his Adderall and drops one of the pills into his hand, before swallowing it dry.

"You know you're not supposed to take that this late in the afternoon," his dad says mildly. "You won't sleep."

"I forgot earlier," he says with a shrug.

His dad leans in the doorway to the kitchen, watching him carefully. Stiles can hear Scott shuffling awkwardly around in the living room, and is uncomfortably aware of the fact his friend can hear every word.

"Stiles," John says, running a hand down his face. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Stiles asks in disbelief. He turns to face his dad fully, caught off guard by the sincerity of an apology he can't trace back to the source.

"I didn't handle the news about you and Derek Hale very well," his dad admits.

"I guess," Stiles says. "It is a little weird that you handled werewolves better. What's with that?"

"You told me about the werewolves. Well, eventually. I think that's the issue," his dad says. "It worries me that you would tell me how you made Molotov Cocktails and then used them on someone, before you'd tell me you'd kissed a guy. Is it because he's a guy? Because that's the one part of this that doesn't bother me, you know that, right?"

"I know. I figured that would be more the age difference and the criminal record," Stiles says. "And also, you know, werewolf:"
"It's not wholly insignificant, Stiles," John says wryly. "It's just...the holes in your story, I'm starting to suspect they're all Derek-shaped. You're protecting him. It makes me wonder how serious this thing between you is."

"He's not the bad guy, dad," Stiles promises.

"I don't think that's actually the outstanding recommendation to his character that you think it is," John says wryly.

Scott appears in the kitchen behind him, out of nowhere, smiling overly bright. "I called my mom," he says. "She says she'll come over as soon as her shift is over, probably about half an hour."

Stiles looks over at him gratefully. Scott's always been good at diffusing a situation with both his actual obliviousness and his faux-obliviousness. Though Stiles' isn't sure how much longer Scott will be able to pull his innocent act with his dad, now that he's aware of werewolves and will probably clue into their super-hearing soon enough.

John straightens. "Good," he says. "It's been a long time since we've done anything, just the four of us." He looks over at Scott and Stiles with worry. "You two work things out?"

"Yeah," Stiles says. "I mean, things are still different, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing."

"No," his father agrees, though he looks reluctant. "Sometimes I wish we could go back to the way things were, though."

"We'd go too far," Stiles says.

Scott steps closer and throws his arm over Stiles' shoulders, trying to get the attention back on him. "Why don't we just go play some video games until my mom gets here?" he asks lightly.

"You guys haven't done that for awhile," John says, looking relieved.

"Yeah, that sounds like fun," Stiles says, and he knows he's already doing it again—putting on the 'normal' act for his dad, but after so many years of conditioning he's not exactly sure how he's supposed to stop.

He follows Scott up the stairs to his room, and then falls backwards on his bed. Scott collapses half over him, using one of his legs like a neck pillow. It's weird how normal it feels, even though they haven't done this for years.

"I can't believe your dad actually nailed your window shut," Scott says, as he runs his eyes over the window in disbelief.

"I know," Stiles says sadly. "Good thing you're one of the few werewolves that still remembers how to use a door."

Scott laughs lightly, before tilting his head to the side to look at Stiles. "So, I'm guessing we're not actually going to play a game?"

Stiles sighs and shakes his head. "Do you really want to?"

"Nah," Scott says, with a shake of his head. "You just looked like you needed a distraction."

"Yeah, well, thanks for coming to my rescue," Stiles says. The statement is unintentionally full of subtext, and Stiles sighs when he sees Scott stiffen. "I mean it."
"Stiles," Scott starts seriously. "You know I—"

"You're not going to give me another undying declaration of your love, are you?" Stiles breaks in, tossing him a half-hearted smirk. "Seriously. Does Allison know how you feel about me?"

"She might be my Leia," Scott tells him earnestly, "but you're my Luke."

"You finally watched Star Wars?" Stiles asks excitedly, his eyes lighting up as he sits back up on the bed.

Scott nods solemnly. "I've had a lot of time to think, these last couple of days. I know you're always asking me to watch it, so I rented them! I watched them both, all the way to the end!"

Stiles sighs heavily, and falls back on the bed. "Scott, there's three. Well, technically six. But…no, there's three. And I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you're so Luke it's not even funny. If anyone's Han Solo, it's me."

"If I'm Luke, I'm pretty sure that makes you Leia," Scott says. "Because we're family right?"

"Why am I always the girl?" Stiles demands.

"When have you ever been the girl?" Scott asks, scrunching his face up.

"It was a whole thing, never mind," he says.

"Look, I only thought you should be Leia because she's the smart, sarcastic one, right? And deceptively badass," Scott explains.

"Well, that is all true," Stiles agrees. "It's better than a Disney princess, I guess. Except Disney is planning to buy out George Lucas and Leia is a princess, so—"

"Stop overanalyzing," Scott says. "Who is Han, do you think? I feel like someone should be Han."

"I bet you want him to be Isaac," Stiles says resentfully.

"Aren't Leia and Han sort of doin' it by the end?" Scott asks with a frown.

"Oh my god," Stiles shouts. "No! Just no. Isaac is not Han."

"Maybe Derek's Han?" Scott ventures hesitantly.

"More like Chewbacca," Stiles snorts. "And you can't stand Derek, remember?"

"I don't…I don't hate him, Stiles," Scott says. "I just don't trust him."

"Or me," Stiles says.

"I trust you with my life," Scott says earnestly. "I just…maybe don't always trust you with your own."

Stiles nods. He can't really be mad about that—he doesn't trust Scott with his own, all the time. He doesn't trust Scott to make it through History class without him, some days.

"Did you really think I was working against you with Derek?" he asks.

"No…I just didn't know what to think, to be honest, Stiles," Scott says. "Isaac and I were following
your trail. He knew Derek had a place out in Arnold, remembered him mentioning it. We split up and I found your shoes on the highway—"

"Dude!" Stiles interrupts, pushing up on his elbows. "You found my shoes? Do you have them?"

"Sorry, ah, no?" Scott answers, like it's a question. "I was a little preoccupied at the time, wondering why you weren't in them. I left them there."

Stiles frowns. "I loved those shoes."

"Make Derek buy you new shoes," Scott says.

"I would," Stiles says. "But thanks to you, my father's probably plotting ways to kill him at this very moment. I even gave him a wolfsbane tip sheet, didn't really think that one through."

"He won't, you know. At least, not without reason," he says. "He meant what he said. His heart didn't stutter once." Scott swallows hard. "But…what about you?"

Stiles looks up sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Well, is that even what you want?" he asks. "A relationship with Derek?"

"Why do you say that like I'm considering contracting some kind of terminal disease?" Stiles asks, and he pulls his legs up against his chest, causing Scott to fall off him and hit the mattress.

Scott sighs, turning his head to watch him as he pushes himself up. "It's just…it's weird, Stiles. You guys don't even get along. You barely talk. Well, he barely talks."

"We can't all be the textbook teenage romance that you are, Scott. Sometimes life is messy. Sometimes you end up with something you didn't plan for."

"So you do want a relationship with him."

"I don't know," Stiles finally says. "I think he needs me."

"Stiles," Scott starts hesitantly. "I know how you are, okay? I know that when you get attached, you start working at 110%. You try and take care of us all, and that's great. I love the way you are. But —"

"But what?" he demands.

"But before you jump into this the way you do everything else, maybe you need to be able to give me a better answer than 'I don't know' when I ask if this is what you want," Scott say firmly. "Don't just do this because you like to be needed."

"Low blow," Stiles snaps, pushing himself up and half falling off the bed before managing to stay on his feet. Scott lets out a small sound of protest as Stiles' almost takes him with him. "I don't need to be needed."

"You know what's crazy?" Scott raises an eyebrow. "Your heart stayed steady. I guess that means the one you're lying to this time is yourself."

Stiles glares at him. "I've just barely forgiven you, you know. You're still on probation," he says. "Are you sure you want to get into this with me now?"

Scott holds up his hands in surrender. "I'm just worried," he says. "So is my mom, by the way. She
really wants to talk to you, but she wasn't sure how to approach the situation now that your dad knows. She knows he's going to be angry with her for keeping the secret so long."

"Oh my god, your mom," Stiles whispers in horror. "I told her what Derek did! I told her about crashing the Porsche! If she tells my dad—" He braces the palms of his hands against his temples as he tries to think. "It's just one last lie, is that so much to ask? He can't know. He would freak completely out. And if he ever finds out that Derek threw me in his trunk—"

"You crashed a Porsche? And wait, Derek did what?" Scott demands, his voice echoing strangely with the low-level hum of a growl.

"Oh don't you start," Stiles snaps. "Erica beamed me with a carburetor and threw me in a dumpster, and it never bothered you. You just want any excuse you can find to be pissed at Derek."

"Erica did what?" Scott asks angrily, the growl still there. "Stiles, what the hell? What else have they done to you I don't know about?"

"I told you about that," Stiles insists.

"Are you talking about the time we were trying to stop Boyd getting turned? Because what I remember is you saying that Erica stopped you and disabled your Jeep," Scott snaps. "You never said how she stopped you."

"Yeah, well, you never asked," Stiles reminds him. "Seriously, what am I going to do? She's going to be here soon."

"My mom won't sell you out," Scott says decisively. "She's really worried about you, Stiles. Like, seriously worried. She's been mad at me, because she thinks I did something to upset you."

Stiles raises an eyebrow at him, and Scott flushes. "Okay, so I sort of did upset you," Scott says. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to."

"Yeah, yeah," Stiles says, biting his lip. It wasn't like him to have told Melissa so much in the first place, but he'd been in the midst of Adderall withdrawal and about two-steps from a panic attack. He'd needed to talk to someone.

"She's here," Scott informs him, and a moment later Stiles can hear the sound of the car pulling up.

"Crap," Stiles says. "Okay. I need to get her alone."

Scott winces. "Uh, Stiles, I'm not going to help you get my mom alone," he says. "I've seen your single moms t-shirt."

Stiles rolls his eyes. "I just need to get our story straight," he says. "Melissa will hold up under interrogation a lot better than you, but that's only if she doesn't want to tell him."

Stiles hears the front door and pushes out of his room, starting down the stairs with Scott right on his heels. He sees Melissa standing awkwardly in the entryway, not really meeting his father's eyes.

He's trying to figure out a way to get her alone or enter a plea for her silence with some kind of intricate hand single when Melissa looks straight at his father and speaks.

"I thought I'd go pick something up for us, maybe some hamburgers?" she says, overly casual. "Stiles can come with me."
"He's grounded," John says quickly. "We can order something in."

"I promise not to let him out of the car," she says easily.

They're staring each other down like it's some kind of freaky, parental battle of wills. Scott keeps looking from one to the other like he's trying to track the moves in a tennis match. Stiles knows his father is awesome, and no one to mess with, but honestly his money's on Melissa.

Finally, his father looks away. "I expect curly fries out of this."

"You've got it," Melissa says gratefully.

"Now just hold on. I did not sign off on this," Stiles protests, despite this being exactly the sort of opportunity he'd been trying to orchestrate himself. His father's health comes first. "Curly fries are on the no-fly list! Melissa, I expect better of you. You're a nurse!"

"One time won't hurt," she says, as she spins towards the door. "Shoes this time, please, Stiles."

Stiles looks down at his cotton-sock covered feet and sighs, turning towards the stairs. He rushes into his room and pushes on his shoes, grabbing his hoodie off the back of his desk chair. He can hear everyone talking faintly downstairs, and it's one of the few times he wishes for some werewolf powers of his own.

He heads back down the stairs and everyone stops talking to turn to look at him. Melissa smiles strangely. "We'll be right back," she says, reaching out to give Stiles a gentle push towards the door.

"I'll just stay here, then, I guess?" Scott asks in confusion.

"Okay, sweetie," Melissa says easily, before pulling the door shut behind them.

"I don't know whether or not I should be terrified right now," Stiles says, as Melissa ushers him towards the car.

"We need to talk," she says, pointing at him with narrowed eyes as Stiles moves around to the passenger side door.

"Terrified it is," Stiles says, but nevertheless gets into the car.

Melissa gets in beside him and starts the car, pulling out into the road like they really are just on their way to pick up burgers. For a moment Stiles thinks he's going to have to find some way to break the awkward silence himself despite her earlier insistence that they need to talk. He lets out a sigh of relief when she finally glances towards him and breaks the silence on her own.

"You and Scott seemed okay," she says hesitantly. "He's been moping around for days like—well, like he's just lost his best friend." She frowns a little, before glancing at him quickly. "Do I want to know what he did? Because I'll be honest with you, kiddo. I didn't think anything would ever be able to tear the two of you apart."

"It wasn't any one thing, and it wasn't all him," Stiles says. "It was more like…osmosis. And we're fine now. Well, mostly fine." He turns to look at her. "What about you and my dad?"

"We're going to have to work at it a bit, I think," Melissa says. "He called earlier and we spoke briefly. I can't say he was thrilled with me. Or any of us. I don't really blame him. If he knew about Scott all this time and didn't tell me…" she trails off. "Well, let's just say I might not be so forgiving."
"But we made you keep the secret," Stiles protests.

"You kids don't tell me what to do, remember?" she asks. "I'm the parent."

"You're not my mom," he says, like the response is programmed in.

Melissa goes very still. It's the thing that's always been between them, that knowledge of what they aren't, but they've never actually said out loud. It's not like there's ever really been a need to, they both know it's true. It isn't something either of them ever forgets.

"Stiles," Melissa says. "Call me whatever you want, but I'm something."

"Of course you are," Stiles says, his voice rough. "You're Melissa."

"Okay," Melissa nods then, like she realizes how much that really means to him. "But I'm still the adult, alright? I'm responsible for you when you're with me, whether you like it or not."

"You're not—"

"I am," she cuts in. "Your father has entrusted you to me quite a lot over the years, Stiles. And until this whole thing with the werewolves and the lying and—I thought I did okay, okay? I thought—but I need to know something, and I need you to tell me the truth." She sucks in a deep heavy breath, and refuses to look at him again. "Are you sleeping with Derek Hale?"

Stiles' eyes widen. "Why does everyone suddenly think I've got game?" he cries.

"Scott told me he saw you kissing," Melissa insists.

"Right," Stiles says. "I'm starting to suspect his internal monologue is voiced by Kristen Bell. Look, Scott doesn't know what he's talking about, okay?"

"Stiles, please. Don't lie to me. Not about this," Melissa says, and she sounds strange, sort of desperate instead of her usual tough love tone of voice. "Because it's one thing to lie about the fact that my son's a werewolf, but if I've been telling your father you're sleeping safely at my house while that man has been hurting you, I'll never forgive myself."

Melissa lets out a hurt, broken sound almost like a sob and pulls suddenly off to the side of the road. She puts the car into park with a shaking hand, and Stiles watches her in horror when he realizes she's crying.

"What are you—" he starts, swallowing hard. "Please don't cry. You know I can't handle it when girls cry. Or guys, for that matter. Babies are alright I guess, but only because that's sort of all they do. I can't handle this, though, okay, so I need you to stop."

"I'm not crying," Melissa insists, but it's in-between suspiciously hitched breaths, which kind of harms her credibility.

"Right," Stiles says. "So we're just going to pretend you're leaking then?" Melissa turns to glare at him and Stiles holds his hands out in surrender. "Okay, okay! I'm sure people spring leaks all the time, it's fine."

"I've just...I've been going about this whole thing all wrong," she says, taking a deep breath to compose herself. "I've let you and Scott both put yourselves in danger time and time again."

"No you haven't," Stiles says. "The danger comes to us, there was never any other choice but to face
"And Derek?" Melissa asks. "Did you have a choice there?"

"We're not sleeping together!" Stiles protests at once. "So, one: there's no relationship, okay? There is no me and Derek. And two: even if there was, he wouldn't be hurting me. Derek's not like that."

"Oh, sure," Melissa says, laughing harshly. "I know a thing or two about falling for the bad boy, Stiles."

"Oh. My. God. Can we please not bond over boys?" Stiles asks. "Please, can we not?"

"Scott has already told me all about Derek Hale," Melissa continues. "I know he bit those other kids."

Stiles sighs. Derek's past sounds shady enough without being told through Scott's rather biased point of view. "Look, I'm not gonna say he wasn't acting a bit like a skeevy drug pusher, culling out the weak," he says. "But there's another way to look at it that Scott just can't see. Isaac was getting the crap beaten out of him by his father every night, and no one else was doing anything about it. Erica was about to get herself killed, she was so desperate to fit in. Boyd was just...fading. He didn't have anyone. He couldn't connect. Derek saved them."

"And what about you?" she demands. "You told me he was practicing his hostage taking skills out on you, what does that even mean, Stiles? I didn't think—I mean, until Scott told me about the kiss, I figured it was, I don't know, mostly harmless, at least in comparison to what our lives are, but now I'm kind of freaking out."

"He'd just saved my life, and he wasn't so thrilled with me risking it in the first place. He called it protective custody," Stiles says, glancing over at her. "I know that Scott can't see it, but he's not a bad guy. He's really not. He's broken, but he's trying so hard not to be. I just don't think he deserves to be hurt anymore, that's all. I think he's been hurt enough."

"Alright, I know this speech," Melissa says. "I gave my mother this speech when I was nineteen and pregnant."

"I can't actually get pregnant, and I seriously doubt Mr. McCall was going around biting teenagers," Stiles says. "So I'm fairly certain our speeches aren't as similar as you seem to think."

"Oh touché," Melissa rolls her eyes in his direction. Stiles has always wondered how Scott has managed to remain so sarcasm free when he has to put up with the two of them. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, kiddo."

"I can promise you, I don't. I'm still virgo intacto, okay? I was out grazing with a whole herd of unicorns just the other day, that's how much of a virgin I still am. Are we satisfied?" Stiles asks.

"I wish Scott could still see unicorns," Melissa sighs.

"Based on the things I've heard, I'm pretty sure unicorns would run screaming away from Scott," Stiles says.

"I do not need to know that, Stiles," she says firmly.

"You don't have to worry about me, you know," Stiles says. "If that's what this is about."

"I will always worry about you," Melissa says quietly. "Do you remember when we first met? You
and Scott had just started the first grade, and it was right when he started getting those horrible asthma attacks. I sent him with a doctor's note not to let him outside during recess." Melissa shakes her head, glancing over at Stiles with fondness. "Third day of school, I come to pick him up and this three-foot nothing little doe-eyed kid comes marching up to me, and hands me a signed petition to 'Free Scott.'"

Melissa laughs lightly, even though she still has unshed tears in her eyes. "You'd gotten the whole class to sign the thing, all of it in purple crayon."

"Jackson actually abstained," Stiles reminds her. "He said his father always told him not to sign anything without a lawyer present."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" she asks. She takes a shaky breath, nervously tapping one hand against the steering wheel. "I never did ask what made you do it."

"He kept pressing his face to the window to watch us when we all went out to play," Stiles says, and shrugs. "You know Scott and his huge sad eyes. I couldn't enjoy myself while he was sitting there staring at us like Beacon Hill's answer to Tiny Tim. Something had to be done."

"It wasn't the petition that did it, you know," she says softly. "Do you remember what you said to me?"

Stiles looks out the passenger side window and shrugs. "It was a long time ago," he says.

"You promised me that you wouldn't let Scott get hurt, that you had an extra inhaler just in case and you'd been researching asthma so you could recognize the signs of an attack. You actually had a checklist," she says, choking on a laugh. "You promised to look after him, and you always have."

She laughs in that fond, exasperated way she always uses when she's thinking of him and Scott. "You know I've never even had to help him with his homework? I didn't even have to teach him to drive, because you'd already done that out in the Preserve when you were both fourteen—" her voice takes on a sharp edge and Stiles winces.

"Still not over that, huh?" he asks.

"I will never be over that, Stiles, you could have both been killed," she says, before shaking her head and looking away. "I swear, sometimes I feel like we're sharing custody."

"I feel like that all the time," Stiles says with a sigh. He rolls his head along the seat until he's facing her. "What's this really about? Why the trip down memory lane?"

"All these years I've never questioned it," she says softly. "I've just let you do it, since that first day you steamrolled me into letting Scott have recess again, and I've never thought to wonder who's been taking care of you."

Melissa turns to look at him sadly. "We all put too much on you, I know that. John at least had no idea how much you were really dealing with, but I've got no excuse. God, he's never going to forgive me, is he?"

"He won't blame you," Stiles says.

"Maybe. But then, he still doesn't know everything, does he?" she asks.

"No, and please, you can't tell him," Stiles says earnestly. "He's already dealing with so much, I just—I don't think he can handle it, okay? Maybe someday, but for now, he doesn't need to know. I
know there's this whole philosophy that the truth is the end all be all of healthy relationships or what not, but sometimes it just hurts. Sometimes it doesn't help anyone at all. So if you just—"

"I won't tell him," Melissa says.

"I know, and I hate to even ask but I just—wait, what?" Stiles asks, turning to her with wide eyes. "Did you say you wouldn't tell him?"

"I don't think John's ever going to completely forgive me as it, and maybe he shouldn't, because I know he wouldn't approve of what I'm about to say. But I know you, Stiles. I know you'd swear on a stack of Bibles to tell him everything and then turn around and lie your ass off the minute you think that's what you have to do to protect him. So I want you to come to me, instead. If you can't go to him, then come to me." She looks at him. "I want you to know you can trust me, okay?"

"I do trust you," Stiles says, but his voice lacks a certain conviction and Melissa's eyes skitter away because she hears it too.

"You can, Stiles. You can come to me with anything," she says. "Even if you just need condoms, or lubricant—"

"Oh my god! I know what anything means!" Stiles cries, covering his face with his hands. "Please stop."

"I just…" Melissa trails off. "I know I'm the one that backed you into a corner over this in the first place, I just truly believe he had a right to know about the danger you're in. But we can't tell our parents everything, I know that, and god knows there are things Scott has done I don't ever want to know about." Melissa looks over at him. "But you can talk to me, okay? You can trust me."

"Well, I should hope so. We did raise Scott together," Stiles says wryly.

Melissa laughs brightly, all trace of tears gone. Scott gets that from her, Stiles realizes. The way they can switch from sad to happy on a dime, just letting the pain wash right off and moving on.

Stiles has never been able to do that, no matter how good he's gotten at pretending that he can.

"So you really won't say anything?" he asks, just to be sure.

"I won't say anything," she promises. "But so help me, Stiles, if Derek hurts you he won't just have to deal with the Sheriff, you understand me?" Melissa turns her eyes forward and pulls back out into the road. "He'll also have to deal with me."
Thank you again for all the feedback and support! Please never worry about being critical, because this story touches on a lot of touchy issues, so it's expected that the reviews are going to end up a bit polarized. I'm just sorry that I know I won't be able to give you all what you want, so I'm just trying to stay focused on my outline and finish the story the way I have it planned. Hopefully it will not disappoint too many of you!

Also, I promise there is more Sterek to come, but this is ultimately a pack fic with an extremely heavy emphasis on Stiles, so there are a lot of other characters I would like to touch on as well (more Lydia to come! And Peter, dun dun dun…)

Having dinner just the four of them is nice, and almost normal. Stiles steals his dad's curly fries faster than he can eat them, and his dad lets him. Scott and Melissa laugh with each other easier than he's seen from them in awhile, and after they eat, Scott and Stiles actually do go up to play a video game so Melissa and John can talk alone.

Of course, Stiles capitalizes on Scott's super-hearing, because what else is he good for if not to spy on their parents?

"But what are they saying?" Stiles demands, for about the seventieth time.

Scott just shrugs, and viciously uses his distraction to try and beat him in combat for once. Stiles actually isn't even sure what this game they're supposed to be playing is, but he keeps up the pretense by pushing buttons. "Scott," he whines.

Scott heaves a sigh. "They're saying what a good kid you are," he says, his tone long-suffering, "and how grown up, and how stupid—"

"Hey!" Stiles cries. "One of those does not belong!"

"—you are for someone so smart," Scott continues, undeterred.

"Marginally better," Stiles huffs. "Carry on."

"And that my mom kept the secret because she was terrified for me, and she's sorry, and he's sorry, and they're both sorry, and now they're going to have some cookies because he managed to get them past you and hide them in the safe in his office—"

"I knew it," Stiles snarls, starting to get to his feet. "I knew he had to be getting cookies from somewhere!"

Scott grabs him and tugs him back down. "You can't let them know I was listening!" he reminds him.

Stiles narrows his eyes. "Something will have to be done about this stash of cookies," he says, deadly serious. "But I suppose I can bide my time."
"You scare me sometimes, you know that?" Scott asks, before twirling back towards the screen as the death sound rang out from the game. "Did you just kill me? How did you—you're not even paying attention!"

Stiles looks down at the remote in his hands and shrugs. He reaches up to nervously bite at a nail. "What are they saying now?" he asks.

"I thought you said my mom wasn't going to say anything?" Scott asks. "Why are you so worked up?"

"She's not going to say anything about Derek," Stiles explains. "We've done plenty of other things I would rather my dad didn't know about."

Scott frowns as he realizes that, yes, that's pretty true. Then he shrugs and goes back to the game, because Scott's threshold for thinking ahead only spans for about three minutes before shutting down.

"I just…I don't want them fighting because of me, either," Stiles says with a sigh. "I've caused enough damage the last few days."

"He's sharing his cookies with her," Scott says, glancing over at him. "I think they'll be alright."

"That's true," Stiles agrees, because Scott's logic in this case might be at the kindergarten-level, but it makes sense. "And the more cookies Melissa eats, the less there is for him!" He grins, before it slips away guiltily. "Oh. Sorry. I know she's your mom."

Scott gives him a look like he's a lunatic. It's a look that Stiles is regrettably used to.

"It's okay, Stiles," he says, turning away with a roll of his eyes. "I'm not as strict as you are. My mom is allowed to have cookies."

Scott refuses to eavesdrop for him anymore, claiming that he can't hear them in his dad's office. Stiles is pretty sure he's lying through his teeth since he can hear Allison's heartbeat from a mile away, but Scott's all-consuming love of all things Allison is not to be discounted as a mitigating factor, and Stiles can't actually prove he can hear them.

Melissa comes to grab Scott soon anyway, and Stiles walks them to the door with his dad. Then it's just him and his dad again, and Stiles really wants to bring up the cookies but knows this probably isn't the time.

"Are you and Melissa okay?" he asks, instead.

"I'm not happy with any of this, but I can't blame her," he sighs. "If it was you—well, I'm not sure I'd have trusted anyone, either. Maybe not even her."

Stiles nods, then takes a deep breath. "And what about us?" he asks hesitantly. "Are we okay?"

"I'm gonna be honest here, kiddo," John sighs. "What I really want to do is just keep you locked up somewhere so you'll be safe, but you apparently know how to hotwire cars, and I don't like my chances of success."

"I've only done it once," Stiles protests lamely. "It's not like I'm planning to make a career of it. In any case, it wouldn't be a very smart long-term plan. Cars are becoming more and more anti-theft proficient as they make the wiring all but inaccessible and put safety measures on the steering column, so really the whole technique is becoming obsolete, or at least too complicated for me to
"Not really the issue here," his dad breaks in. "I'm a cop, Stiles. I don't need you to give me a rundown on hot-wiring."

"Right," Stiles says. "I forgot, you know how to do it too."

"This isn't about me," his dad says quickly, which has Stiles wondering for a moment if maybe his dad's knowledge of hot-wiring isn't from his job, after all. "This is about you, and what we're going to do about this."

"I thought you decided," Stiles sighs. "Grounded for life, remember?"

"Yeah, but I figure I owe you at least the possibility of parole," he says, and runs a hand through his hair. "Look, kid. I don't know what else to do here, so I'm gonna do the one thing that's always worked." He frowns over at Stiles. "I'm gonna guilt the hell out of you."

"Dad," Stiles says, his eyes widening. "What—?"

"If I tried to force you, you'd find a way around it," John says. "I know you well enough to know that. So this is me asking, Stiles. This is me pleading. Because this last year, it hasn't been easy for me, either. I nearly lost my job, and the only reason I got it back is we lost half our force. I've just… I've felt like I was losing you too, and now that I know what was really going on—I need to know you're safe."

"What do you want me to do?" Stiles asks. His tone is tinged with desperation, because he's pretty sure he'd do anything his father asks of him right now. Stiles has always been a sucker for a guilt-trip, but his dad almost never resorts to using one.

"I want two weeks," John says. "Two weeks of you not running off doing whatever the hell you want, two weeks for me to try and get a handle on this. Two weeks, Stiles. That's all I'm asking for. I don't think it's much."

"Two weeks of not getting into trouble," Stiles says, letting out a relieved breath. "I think even I can manage that."

"You realize you've just jinxed us," his dad says.

"Uh, if it makes you feel better, I don't think jinxes are a real thing," Stiles says. "At least not unless the fae are involved."

"Please tell me you're kidding," John says.

Stiles pats his dad consolingly on the shoulder. "Night, dad," he says cheerfully, before starting quickly up the stairs to his room.

* * * * *

Stiles wakes up the next morning feeling more like himself than he has in ages. He grabs a graphic tee that proudly states: ALWAYS BE YOURSELF! UNLESS YOU CAN BE BATMAN – THEN ALWAYS BE BATMAN.

Erica had bought it for him before their Argent torture experience, as a thank you for helping her when she was having her seizure. He's always loved it, and now that they're mostly back on speaking terms again he's decided he can rescue it from where he had tossed it angrily beneath his
He throws on jeans and converse to go with it, and then goes flying down the stairs, full of energy and a little nervous about the fact that he's still grounded. He knows he'll probably be bouncing off the walls very soon, but even that doesn't bother him too much, because at least it feels like things are getting back to normal. Bouncing off the walls is his baseline, honestly.

He slides to a stop in the kitchen to grab his Adderall, downs his regular dose, and then freezes. Because Chris Argent is sitting at the kitchen table, sipping a mug of coffee. He smiles serenely, and Stiles backs away slowly until he's out of the kitchen, and then turns and almost runs into his dad.

"Dad," he says urgently. "Dad, Chris Argent is in our kitchen."

"Yes, son, I know," John says.

"I feel you should be more concerned about this," he says.

Chris clears his throat behind him, and Stiles turns around to face him with a wide, fake, grin. "Well, if it isn't Marilyn Munster," Stiles says.

His father gives him a look like he'd slap him upside the head if he wasn't still a bit bruised up, but the way Chris's grin slips makes it worth it.

"Stiles," he greets warily.

"I asked Chris over," John explains.

"If this is to further verify my story," Stiles says, "I feel I should warn you that Chris pretty much lies about everything all the time. It's sort of his whole life, lying about stuff. Hey, I'm new in town, see I sell these guns, what's that you say? Why no, I don't use them myself to hunt down unsuspecting werewolves for sport—"

John reaches over and puts his hand over Stiles mouth, cutting him off, and smiles apologetically at Chris. "Sorry about him," he says.

"I'm starting to get used to it," Chris says, nonchalantly.

"Really?" John asks. "Going on sixteen years, I'm still not used to it."

Stiles pulls his dad's hand away, and returns his attention to Chris. "Why are you here?" he demands.

"Stiles," his dad sighs. "I know I taught you manners at some point."

"I can only hold onto so much information, dad," he says. "I discard what's not relevant."

Chris grins slowly. It's a nice smile, objectively. If Stiles saw him on the street, he'd think, *that looks like a nice guy.* But he knows exactly what Chris is capable of, he knows everything that's going on beneath that carefully structured surface, and it adds menace to pretty much anything he does. He probably mows the lawn menacingly.

"I'm here to help," Chris says.

Case and point: pleasantly spoken offer of help = menacing.

Stiles is suddenly struck with the horrifying thought that Allison has gone back on her word and he
knows, but his dad is the one that invited him. If Chris knew what Derek had done, surely he would have acted before now?

"He's going to help me teach you to shoot," his dad explains.

Stiles is relieved this isn't about Derek for all of thirty seconds, before he starts freaking out. "Wait, what? Shoot? Shoot what?" he demands.

"A gun, Stiles," his dad says patiently.

"You're going to trust me with a gun?" Stiles asks incredulously. "Perhaps you don't recall the ill-fated Nerf Gun Battle of 2009. I almost lost an eye. I like my eyes, dad. I have it on pretty good authority that they're one of my best features."

"You need to have a way to defend yourself," he says.

"I have a way to defend myself! I hide behind Scott," Stiles says. "And sometimes Derek, but he mostly just yells at me to run and then ends up hurt because he's distracted. Worst werewolf shield ever, to be perfectly honest."

"Why is it that every time you try and reassure me, I end up even more concerned?" John asks, as he reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"I don't know," Stiles says. "I think I'm pretty awesome at being reassuring."

"Chris knows a lot more about this than me," his dad says. "I think we need to take advantage of that, and he's willing to help."

"But I don't want to be a hunter," Stiles says at once. "I couldn't hunt anything. I couldn't even hunt little rabbits. Especially not little rabbits. But also not deer. I cried during Bambi. Well, Scott cried hard enough for us both. It was traumatizing."

"Stiles—" his dad starts.

"I have a point!" Stiles cries. "I'm definitely not upgrading to wanting to hunt werewolves, thank you very much."

"How about learning to defend yourself against werewolves that would like to kill you?" Chris asks pleasantly, like he's asking about the weather. Isn't it nice out today? Hope you don't have to kill anyone.

"I've been managing okay so far," Stiles snaps.

"Stiles, there are things we need to know," his dad says. "This stuff that's out there—well, from the sound of it, not all werewolves are as laid back as Scott. We need to know what we can do to stop them, if we have to. If you won't stay out of this, then you need to know how to stay safe."

He knows that his dad has a point too, and it's not like Stiles likes being the least badass of all his friends, he just figures he makes up for it with all his brilliant deductions and charm.

"But I'm like the wise-cracking side-kick," Stiles explains. "I mostly just hang around on the sidelines and tell people what to do in a highly sarcastic but ultimately endearing manner."

"I don't recall you being very far to the side when we took down Peter Hale," Chris says wryly.

Stiles spins to glare at him, grateful that he at least told his father the truth about that particular little
"I probably just looked really cool that night in comparison to Jackson," he explains. "Jackson, pre-werewolf, was about as courageous as the Cowardly Lion, so I can see why you're confused."

"He's going to take us to some training area he has set up in the Preserve," his dad says, obviously ignoring Stiles' outrage, because he's has a built-in filter when it comes to his son's babbling.

"Dad, the Preserve is preserved, that's why they call it the Preserve. There are no weapons training grounds in the preserve, and if he's using it as one that's against the law. Hey! You wanted to arrest someone—" Stiles motions wildly at Chris. "He's practically gift-wrapped!"

"How many times have you trespassed in the Preserve, Stiles?" his dad asks.

"I don't know, only like forty, fifty times, tops," Stiles says. "What's your point?"

His dad just raises an eyebrow, and that's how he ends up buckled up in the back of Chris's Suburban, for what would have been the most awkward car ride of his life if Melissa hadn't had them all beat from the night before.

"Allison is there waiting for us," Chris explains, as he pulls out into the street. "She's setting up a few targets. We'll take you through the types of ammunition that work best against the supernatural. You'll need some standard wolfsbane rounds, at the least."

"Allison is going to be there?" Stiles asks warily, not sure if this makes the whole thing better, or worse.

"Yes, she's the one that uses the area the most," Chris says, with the kind of tone that means he thinks he's above target practice.

Stiles frowns and taps his fingers against the cell phone in his pocket. He wants to call Scott, since Scott would want to know any Allison related information immediately, but his dad hadn't actually officially returned it. He'd just sort of forgot to take it away again, and Stiles hasn't reminded him about it. He's not convinced his dad would buy that as a valid excuse, so it's probably best he doesn't know he has it back.

He leans back into the seat and glances out the window, glad to see they're at least approaching the Preserve from the opposite side of the Hale Estate. He wouldn't put it past the Argents to have been using the land right along the property line, but he's glad he's wrong.

Of course, right now his father has the Hale Estate condemned for public safety, so chances are that Derek's not there. It had kind of been a necessary evil when John had to call a tow to pull his cruiser straight up out of the ground.

He guesses that means Derek's sitting in his little rail car alone, brooding, probably in the dark like some kind of supervillain.

He purses his lips as he tries to push away his frustrated worry, and he doesn't even notice they're at the Preserve until Chris pulls to an abrupt stop.

"We can walk from here," Chris says, and slips from the car.

He gets out with his dad and they follow him deeper into the trees. Allison is already there, her bow held up as she lets an arrow fly. She has her hair braided down her back and tight black jeans, like she's dressed in tribute to Katniss Everdeen.

Stiles doesn't say this out loud only because he's promised Scott on multiple occasions that he'd play
nice with her, and also because her dad brought new meaning to the term 'armed and dangerous.'

Allison smiles hesitantly at him, lowering her bow. "Hi, Stiles," she says, all hopeful and sweet.

Sometimes Stiles wonders if Allison actually has two separate personalities, or if she's just a little like the Hulk. Mild mannered Dr. Banner for 89% of the time, but piss her off—

"Stop looking at me like that," she says quietly.

"Sorry," he says awkwardly. He doesn't try to brush it off or make excuses, because they both know exactly what he sees these days when he looks at her.

His dad gives him a curious look. Stiles supposes his edited and somewhat snarky version of Allison's breakdown hasn't really done it justice, because he seems to be buying her innocent act. Even Stiles believes it, sometimes. That's sort of the problem.

Chris clears his throat. "You bring the guns?" he asks her.

"They're over there," Allison says, tilting her head behind her. "I set up the targets, too. Only ten feet, to start."

Stiles has a feeling from her tone that 'ten feet' is the target practice equivalent of bowling with bumpers, but he's not going to protest. He doesn't even want to be here, and he can feel unease tugging at his skin. It's not that Stiles is against violence exactly, or that he has any particular moral objections to guns. He understands exactly how needed they occasionally are, and he's nothing but grateful that his father has that sort of protection when he goes out on patrol.

It's just not for *him*. Stiles has always wanted to be a detective, but more Sherlock Holmes than Steve McGarrett. He's never really been able to picture himself carrying a gun.

His father heads towards the targets and Stiles reluctantly trails after him, glad to put some distance between him and Allison, if nothing else. "Wow," Stiles says. "That's a lot of guns. You have permits for all these, Chris?" He looks at his dad. "Don't you want to see the permits for all these, dad? Aren't you concerned at all that a resident of your town has enough weaponry to single-handedly put an end to the zombie apocalypse?"

"Guns don't kill zombies," Chris tells him, completely straight-faced, and Stiles honestly cannot tell if he's serious or not.

"And I'm off-duty," his dad adds with a shrug.

Stiles snorts. "And you wonder where my flexible morals come from," he says. "I learn by example, dad."

His dad picks up some kind of pistol, maybe a Glock, cocks it and then fires off at the target. He fires five times and they all hit the center ring. He turns to look at Stiles. "Okay, follow that example, kiddo," he says.

"Right," Stiles says, looking at the guns. "Do I just grab one or—"

Chris gives him this look like he'd like to roll his eyes, but he's too mature for that sort of thing, and kneels down to grab a small handgun. He holds it out to him. "Start with this. It's loaded with standard rounds, but I have some wolfsbane bullets that fit that model if you like it."

Stiles didn't like it, but at least this one didn't look like it belonged in a Michael Bay film. He moves
to stand in front of the target, and carefully aims the gun. He winces at the recoil when he pulls the trigger, but he hits the target, if just barely.

"Okay, that's okay," his dad says. "Just, here, raise your hands a little. Set your feet apart, you need to balance or the recoil will throw you."

Stiles sighs and tries again, but this time the shot buries itself in the bark of the tree, right above where the target is pinned. Chris wanders back to Allison, obviously unwilling to stay and watch his abysmal failure. Stiles doesn't blame him.

"Stiles, it's okay," John says. "It's your first time with a gun, you can't—wait, it is your first time with a gun, right?"

"Yes, dad," Stiles assures him. "There was this one time with a grenade launcher, but I don't think that counts."

"Stiles—" his dad says in horror.

"Joking!" Stiles cries, turning to look at him. "I thought you'd know that was a joke."

"All your friends are werewolves," John says. "Let's just cool it with the sarcasm for awhile, until I get a handle on that, what do you say?"

"Sorry," Stiles mutters, turning back towards the target. He takes a deep breath and tries to follow his dad's instructions, but when he fires he only manages to hit the outermost ring.

They work at it for maybe a half hour, trying out a few different guns, but Stiles' aim doesn't get much better. He learns about firing pins and how to turn on the safety, and how the bullet exits basically off the force of an internal explosion—he absorbs the information like a sponge, but the physicality, the actual act of firing the gun, doesn't seem to improve. The object still feels foreign in his hands, and the closest he gets to the center of the target is the third ring.

"That's better," his dad says, but he sounds off. He's getting, well, not frustrated, exactly, but concerned.

"Well, guess I can't be great at everything, huh?" Stiles says awkwardly. "I don't really like guns anyway. Seems like they're asking for trouble. Did you know that you're something like 4 times more likely to be shot if you own a gun?"

"You just need practice," John assures him.

Stiles holds in a frustrated sigh. "I don't want to practice, I don't—"

"Hey, hey," his dad breaks in. "It's alright, okay? You don't have to master it, you don't even have to be any good at it. I just want you familiar with it, alright? I want you to be able to handle yourself around guns, because you're going to need to, with everything going on."

Stiles nods, because his dad is right. He should at least know the basics. "Yeah, okay," he says.

"You know," his dad says, his voice strangely wistful, "your mom couldn't shoot, either. I took her to the firing range on one of our first dates, trying to impress her. She nearly shot me in the foot."

"What?" Stiles asks, giving a startled laugh. "You never told me that."

"She made me promise not to tell anyone," John says, with a flicker of a fond smile. "But you
weren’t born at the time, and I have a feeling she wouldn’t mind me telling you.”

"We never talk about her," Stiles says.

"I know," John sighs.

"Don't you think we should?" he asks hesitantly.

His father goes very still, and Stiles breath catches, blinking back sudden, inconvenient tears. Ever since her death any mention of his mother has become a weapon, and he can't speak of her without tearing his father apart.

John just reaches out, catching his hands and pulling them back into place, lifting his grip on the gun. "Try it now," he says, his voice catching strangely.

Stiles is just about to pull the trigger when he sees a flash of blonde hair through the trees. His shot goes wild, just barely hitting the outer half-inch of the target and his dad sighs heavily behind him.

"Christ, kid," his dad says. "I practically aimed that one for you."

"I just don't have a handle on the recoil yet," Stiles says quickly. "Obviously sitting on the bench watching other guys play Lacrosse hasn't been the awesome strength training I thought it would be."

"Why don't we take a break," his dad says, pulling the gun quickly from his hands. Which, whatever. If his father doesn't even trust him to hold a gun without constant supervision, this whole thing seems counter-productive.

Stiles glances up and sees the flash of color again—then there's Erica, out of nowhere, leaning up against a tree about twenty feet away. She holds a finger to her lips and winks, before disappearing straight back into the trees.

"Yeah, a break sounds good," Stiles says. "I'm just gonna walk a bit, get some air, if that's okay?"

His dad nods, then glances up with a frown. "Just stay in sight."

Stiles fights down a flush of embarrassment, glad that Allison is too busy aerating a tree to overhear. He marches off in the opposite direction of his dad, Chris and Allison.

"Erica," he whispers angrily, sure she can hear him. "What the hell are you doing? Erica!"

There's no response, and he furtively pulls his cellphone from his pocket, turning so no one can see it. He considers calling Erica, but then he bypasses that in favor of going straight to the source.

"What's wrong?" Derek demands, the second he picks up the call.

"You're spying on me now?" Stiles asks.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Okay, here's a little tip—when you need covert surveillance, don't send Erica," Stiles says. "She's a drama queen and a half, and it's a little hard to miss all the bouncing blond curls as she giggles between the trees. It's like she's auditioning for the werewolf reproduction of *The Sound of Music*, or something."

There’s dead silence on the other end of the line, and Stiles figures Derek's probably regretting his entire pack. Stiles can't really blame him.
"I didn't send Erica," Derek says.

"You know, just cause I can't hear your heartbeat, doesn't mean I don't know when you lie," Stiles says. "You have a tell. You always go with the straight out denial a la Bill Clinton, and you get this weird little jaw twitch, like you're steeling yourself against the injustice of what you're about to do. It's actually sort of refreshing, but mostly it's just sad."

"You can't even see me, Stiles," Derek says.

"I can hear it in your voice," Stiles replies instantly. "Misdirection, Derek. You have to use _misdirection._"

"Why do you keep trying to teach me how to do bad things better?" Derek asks.

It's a valid question, and Stiles sputters for a minute because he has no idea how to answer that. By all rights he never should have helped Derek turn his ridiculous kidnapping plan into something passable in the first place, and he certainly shouldn't be schooling him in how to better deceive him.

"Your truly astounding level of pathetic inspires sympathy," he finally says. "I can't help myself."

"Stiles," Derek growls, "I need you to listen to me, okay? You're not safe. The Argents aren't safe. They can't be trusted."

"So you are spying," Stiles says, vindicated. "I'm with my dad, Derek."

"He doesn't know what they've done," Derek says. "Don't even pretend like you gave him the whole story."

"I gave him a fairly accurate variation thereof," Stiles defends himself. "It was rather detailed, actually. I may have distracted him with a few outlandish asides and left out a couple key plot points, but really, how do you even explain getting trapped in a pool for two hours holding your werewolf ass afloat? Or the fact that I not only snuck out to a Rave but also sort of locked myself in a room with a half-turned Jackson to see if we could 'commune' with a kanima?"

"You just did explain it," Derek says dryly. "To me."

"Yeah, but you were there," Stiles says. "And you really kind of had to be there."

"You still want to protect him. I get it, Stiles," Derek says. "I understand, I do. But he wants to protect you too, and he's still not working with all the facts. So that makes it my job to make sure you're safe."

"I told him what was relevant," Stiles says.

"Did you tell him everything Chris Argent has done? That he threatened Scott? Did you tell him everything about your friend Allison?" he demands. "Because I'm pretty sure they'd be arrested right now, if you had."

"They came around in the end," Stiles says half-heartedly.

"That remains to be seen," Derek says, with a certain level of cryptic usually only managed by the eldest Hale.

"He just wants me to be able to defend myself," Stiles assures him.

"Against me?" Derek asks.
"No," Stiles says, drawing the word out. "This may surprise you, but not all werewolves are as cuddly as you are."

"I'm just trying to do what's right here," Derek says, and he sounds growly and frustrated, and Stiles shouldn't enjoy that tone of voice as much as he does.

"Okay, fine. So how about the next time you want to know what I'm doing, you ask me," Stiles says. "Revolutionary concept, I know, but it's so crazy it just might work."

"I said I'd give you space," Derek says.

"Yes, yes you did, but having me spied on by your little beta troop is not space!" Stiles shouts. "I guess that's not really something you're known for though, is it?"

"It is, actually," Derek says. "Just not when it comes to you."

Then Derek hangs up on him, and Stiles' mouth drops open at the nerve of him. "Stupid Sourwolf," he mutters.

He spins around and nearly crashes straight into his dad. His dad is apparently awesome at covert surveillance. He could probably teach Erica a thing or two.

"Stiles," he says warily. "I see you've got your phone. I'd been meaning to ask where that even came from, since you told me yours was destroyed. Or was that another lie?"

"No, it really was," Stiles insists. "It was in my pocket when I was in the reservoir with the bunyip."

John raises an eyebrow, questioning him without even having to speak.

"Derek got me a new one," Stiles explains quickly. Belatedly, he realizes this isn't the situation-saver it had seemed to be in his head.

"Derek bought you a new phone," his father repeats.

"Don't give me that look," Stiles says. "He's not my sugar daddy. He was just being nice."

"Derek Hale was being nice," John says.

"Is there an echo?" Stiles asks, and his father's eyes narrow. Stiles swallows hard. He should probably tone down the smartass remarks until his father is a little more acclimated to the new law of the land. "I mean, yes, that's correct."

His dad heaves a sigh. "You're gonna turn me grey, kid, you know that, right?"

"Statistically, Caucasians tend to go grey much earlier than the rest of the population, and considering your age you're actually a bit ahead of the game," Stiles says. "I'm not sure you can blame that on me."

For a minute his dad looks suitably distracted, running a hand through his hair with a pleased expression that he's apparently beating out statistics, but then his eyes go back to the phone in Stiles' hands again and he frowns.

"Are you going to take it from me?" Stiles asks.

His father watches him speculatively. "Do you want me to?"
Stiles stares back at him just as carefully, sensing the standoff, and uncertain if this is some kind of trap. "No?"

"We have an agreement, Stiles," John says. "You said I'd get two weeks, and I trust you to keep to it, so you can have the phone. Saves me having to get you a new one, anyway. I'll have to send Derek Hale a thank you card."

Stiles tries to imagine Derek's expression if he got a thank you card from his dad, and he honestly can't.

"You just need to give me his address," his dad says casually, and there's the ulterior motive.

"He has a PO Box," Stiles says, which is a total lie, and breaking his no lie rule, but honestly he doesn't even know the actual address to Derek's creepy lair anyway, and he seriously doubts it's on the local postal service's route.

"Oh, good, Stiles, there you are!" Allison says brightly, rushing up to him, and Stiles changes his mind. He loves Allison. She has the best timing ever.

She has her quiver thrown over her shoulder and a bow in her hands, and she waves for him to follow her. "I want you to try this out."

"Don't you remember the time with the crossbow?" Stiles asks her.

"What time with the crossbow?" his dad asks suspiciously.

"Coming, Allison," Stiles says quickly, before rushing to her side. His dad lets him make his escape, probably because he's at his limit for new information for the day.

Allison holds out the bow to him when he gets close enough, and he takes it from her. He used to want to be Robin Hood even before he wanted to be Sherlock Holmes, so he does like bows. He just doesn't like his chances of actually being able to use it with any level of competence.

He starts to move closer to the target and Allison holds him back. "Try it here," she says. "We're close enough for what I want to test."

"For you maybe," Stiles says, but takes the arrow when she hands it to him. He tries to arrange it the way he's seen her do it, but he must be doing it wrong because she can't resist trying to correct him.

He jerks away from her touch on instinct, and she stumbles back a step, looking hurt. "Sorry," he mutters.

"You have to let me help," she says quietly. "I need you to trust me."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but coming from you that's asking a lot," Stiles says.

"I know," Allison says. "But I need you to do it anyway."

Stiles holds in a deep breath and nods, and Allison steps closer again. She lifts his arms, arranging his fingers and tugging one arm back by the wrist. "I need you to look at the target," she tells him, "and imagine the arrow hitting dead center."

"Positive visualization? That's your solution?" Stiles asks dryly, as she steps away. He tries to hold his stance. "Isn't that a little new age for the deadly huntress?"

"Just picture it, and let it go," she says again.
Stiles presses his eyes shut for a minute, steeling himself, imagining the arrow hitting the target, and then he opens them and lets the arrow fly. It goes bursting off the string, crashing through the air and hitting the target dead center. Stiles watches in disbelief, a grin blossoming on his face as he turns to look at her.

"Did you see that?" he asks. "That was awesome! I am obviously secretly a badass. The bow and arrow is definitely my weapon!"

He looks back at Allison again, and is surprised to see she isn't celebrating with him. She's staring at him in disbelief, her eyes impossibly wide.

"What?" Stiles asks, feeling unsettled.

"Your form was all wrong," she explains quietly. "The way you were standing was unbalanced and you had the bow tilted too low, it shouldn't have made it to the target at all, nevermind the bull's-eye."

"Are you accusing me of cheating?" Stiles demands. "At archery?"

"Sort of. Yes," she says, and then she pulls out a second arrow and stares at it with a frown. "I thought maybe it might help a little, but I didn't realize—"

"Allison, what are you talking about?" he asks. "It's probably just beginner's luck, but I didn't cheat."

"Not on purpose," Allison says quickly. "But these arrows, they're filled with mountain ash. And, Stiles, I've heard what you can do with mountain ash."

Stiles turns his attention to the arrow in her hand. Mountain ash. He could command it to go wherever he wanted, so that made a crazy sort of sense. If it was trapped inside the arrowhead, it would pull the arrow with it. Allison's positive visualization method takes on a whole new meaning.

He takes the arrow from her, and turns back towards the target. He's aware of Chris and his father hovering behind them now, watching. He takes the arrow and lightly tosses it freehand towards the target. It steadies itself mid-air, and slams straight into the bull's-eye with a lot more force than it should have had—splitting the first arrow straight in half.

"Huh," Stiles says. "Okay. So maybe I was cheating a little."

"We'll take a whole case of those," his father says to Chris.
Sorry I'm a bit late this week! I actually did have this finished yesterday, but I was a bit gunshy to post. I'm unaccountably nervous about this one and have been tinkering with it non-stop, but it's sort of needed if the story is going where it's supposed to, so I finally bit the bullet and hit post. But anyway, I apologize in advance for all the snark. Cause the Stiles in my head pretty much never stops talking. I will probably need to worry about that, eventually.

When they get home, his dad insists the arrows stay in his office by the gun safe, though he doesn't lock them up in case Stiles ever needs to get them quickly. Stiles supposes it's a good compromise, and if he's being honest with himself, had he kept them in his room he'd only have ended up making them dance around like the mops from *Fantasia*, so it's probably all for the best.

"Think we ought to buy you a bow?" his dad asks, frowning at the box of arrows.

"That would be totally cool, but Allison says my form basically sucks, and it would probably just be a waste of time for me to try and shoot it when I can just toss it instead," Stiles shrugs. "Oh! There's a thought. Do you think we could find some mountain ash Ninja Stars? I wonder if I could have them made custom."

His dad just shakes his head and walks out of the office.

"What? Dad. Dad, I'm serious!" Stiles insists, following him out.

"How about instead of Ninja Stars, we order some pizza?" he asks.

"You had curly fries and a burger last night," Stiles reminds him. "It's like you want to have a heart attack."

"I got all of three curly fries, Stiles, before you shoved the rest of them in your mouth," John says. "We can get the vegetarian, I guess, if that makes you feel better."

"Thin crust, not deep dish, and you have a deal," Stiles says.

"Fine," his dad sighs, though he's clearly not happy about it. "I'll call it in. You want breadsticks?"

"So you can steal them and eat them all yourself?" Stiles asks. "I think not. *Mountain Mike's* has salads. Get two. No dressing though. You can use a little olive oil if you really have to."

"You do remember I'm the dad, right?" John asks.

"Yes, and as the dad, you should approve of salad," Stiles reminds him.

"Fair enough," he sighs, knowing when he's beaten. He heads towards the kitchen to order and Stiles turns to start up the stairs.

His feet have all but healed since Derek pulled his werewolf voodoo on them, but after running
around in the woods they're a little sore. He wants to just push his shoes off and relax and have pizza and—

"Oh my god!" Stiles cries, as he's dragged into his room and then pushed back into the door with enough force it clicks closed behind him.

Derek glares back at him, his hands fisting in his shirt. His eyes aren't quite red, but he's angry enough about something that Stiles can see what looks like molten lava through the cracks of color in his irises.

"Ow. Okay. Hi," Stiles says. "So I guess we're just entirely giving up on the idea of space now?"

"I was all for giving you space when I thought you were going to step back from all of this," Derek snaps. "Hunting in the woods with Chris Argent—that's not stepping back, Stiles. That's moving in the complete wrong direction."

"What, you think hanging out with the Argents was my idea of a good time? I didn't exactly have a choice!" Stiles says. "My dad wanted me to learn to shoot, and he knows regular bullets aren't going to do much good against our varied creatures of the night, so he asked Chris for help."

"Why don't you just tell me exactly what happened?" Derek demands, which is ridiculous, because Derek already knows, and Stiles knows that Derek already knows, because Erica, little creep-ette that she is, was watching his every move.

"Are we really going to do this?" Stiles asks.

"You wanted me to ask, right?" he snaps. "So this is me asking. What have you been up to today, Stiles?"

"I feel like this is some sort of trap, so I plead the fifth," Stiles says. "How did you even get in here anyway? My window is nailed shut."

"I picked the lock on the back door," he says. "And waited here for you."

"Okay, you know that's creepy, right?" Stiles says. "There's this quiz in Cosmo I think you need to take. You might be a stalker if…"

"Don't try to distract me," Derek says, before faltering for a second and getting distracted anyway. "Why are you even reading Cosmo?"

"It was Lydia's, and I was bored," Stiles says. "That is not the point here!"

"You're right," Derek agrees. "The point is that I don't want you going near the Argents again. Make something up for your dad, if you have to. Tell him Chris threatened you—"

"Wouldn't actually have to make that up," Stiles interrupts.

"What," Derek says, his eyes sharpening. The manic, reddish gleam seems to disappear as they focus completely on him—somehow, it's even more unnerving.

"Don't tell me you thought you had the monopoly on tossing me into walls?" Stiles asks. "You were not my first, Derek Hale, and I doubt you shall be my last."

"What did he say to you?" Derek demands.

"How am I supposed to remember that? That was months ago," Stiles says. "If I kept a list of threats
I've received he wouldn't even make the top ten. You'd be number thirty-five. Cause come on. *With my teeth. You're not fooling anyone."

"Do not underestimate him, Stiles," Derek snaps. "He's a hunter, what he lets you see is just a part he's learned to play. He can't be trusted."

"Yeah, I know. Do you think you could, maybe, I don't know, let me go?" Stiles asks. Derek lets him go abruptly, like maybe he'd forgotten he even still had him pinned. He steps back and Stiles pushes off the door. "You want to let me know what this is all really about? Because I thought we were making progress. I thought we were past the wall slamming stage."

"You know what this is about, Stiles," Derek snaps angrily.

Stiles frowns, because he really doesn't. "Uh, no? I thought we pretty much got this worked out when we talked earlier."

"That was before you went and started using magic," Derek snarls.

"You mean the arrow thing?" he asks. Derek raises his eyebrow in a sort of 'yeah, duh,' manner that he might find hilarious under better circumstances. Like, there are just pages and pages of *Mean Girls* jokes to be made about Derek Hale. Next time he watches he'll have to take notes. "Alright, look, it's not like I knew that I was basically a Mountain Ash Jedi. And isn't this a good thing anyway? For me to have a way to defend myself? It's never bothered you this much when I've used mountain ash before."

"You have no idea, do you? God damn it, Stiles," he snaps.

"What? What's the big deal? So I can move arrows with my mind," Stiles asks. "It's not as if I'm going to use them on you!"

"I'm not worried that you *can* do it," Derek says, softening slightly. He runs a hand through his hair in irritation and it's so out of character that it sets Stiles on edge. Derek might yell and get tense, but he rarely ever loses his cool. "I'm worried that Argent *knows* you can do it."

"You think I'm going to be conscripted into the Hunter Army?" Stiles asks incredulously. "Is that what this is about?"

"You think this is a joke, but that's *exactly* what I'm worried about," Derek says. "People with your talents are rare, and when Hunters find out about them they find a way to get their help whether they're willing or not."

"I find Chris as terrifying as all hell, okay, but he's a good person somewhere way deep down, and he doesn't hurt kids," Stiles insists. "He threatens us, but he doesn't hurt us."

"He may keep his own hands fairly clean in that regard, but he has a history of trusting the wrong people," Derek says, before frowning as he turns to scan the room, suddenly distracted. "Why has Scott been here?"

"Is that your freaky werewolf senses or are you having me watched when I'm at home, too?" Stiles asks bitterly.

"I can smell that he was here," Derek says, his attention focusing back on Stiles. "I thought you weren't talking."

"We're trying," Stiles says. "Why do you care if I'm hanging out with Scott again? I thought you said
"I care because he's made deals with the Argents before, and he went behind both our backs to do it," Derek says. "I don't like you in the middle of this again. One of these times he's going to get you really hurt."

"Scott can't even spell malicious. His only problem is inattention," Stiles says. "He would never deliberately let me get hurt."

"Are you sure of that?" Derek demands.

"Absolutely," Stiles says.

"Okay. So he wouldn't do it deliberately, but that's a rather telling distinction. We both know he wouldn't put you first, would he? If it comes down to what Allison wants and you?" Derek stalks closer again as he asks, and Stiles has to fight not to step right back up against the door.

"Jesus, you and Scott!" Stiles says in frustration. "I'm so sick of this. You're like two dogs with a bone. And I didn't even mean to make that a pun, it's just the best way to describe my life right now."

"It wasn't a pun," Derek says flatly. "Because I'm not actually a dog."

"You're going to argue semantics? Really? With me?" Stiles snaps.

"Stiles, I'm not—" Derek breaks off in frustration, his nostrils flaring briefly before he gets himself under control. "I'm not trying to drive a wedge between you and Scott. I'm actually trying to help you avoid something coming between you later. So don't get involved with the Argents, and this won't be an issue."

"I can handle the Argents, okay? I don't like them, and I don't trust them," Stiles says. "But you need to trust me, at least enough to know that I'm not going to get all starry-eyed the minute Chris Argent shows me some false kindness. I'm not Scott."

"I do trust you," Derek says.

"I know you don't, but—" Stiles falters as he rewords Derek's words. "Wait, you—oh, okay, that's nice?" He bites his lip for a moment in confusion. "Then what is this even about?"

"You don't know what hunters are really like," Derek insists. "You don't know what people like them are capable of. What if something happens, and Chris needs your help? What if Allison is in danger and your talent for mountain ash could save her? Do you think he'd hesitate?"

"If it was her life on the line, I'd help whether he asked or not," Stiles says. "I don't trust them, but that doesn't mean I want them dead. And their methods might be different, but really they want the same thing as us—"

"You'd choose hunters over us?" Derek demands.

"You just don't get it, do you?" Stiles asks. "We're all in this together! And if we want to actually make this work, then we have to start acting like it."

"I will never work with them," Derek snarls, stepping back towards Stiles, close enough they're almost touching. His eyes flare red and Stiles sucks in a startled breath, before ducking around him. He spins to walk backwards towards his desk, holding out a hand to keep Derek back. "Look, you
"I need to cool it with the alpha eyes, okay?" he asks, not exactly scared so much as unnerved. He usually has a pretty good handle on what will set Derek off—mostly because he has a bad habit of doing it intentionally—but he can't shake the feeling there's something going on here he doesn't understand.

"I'm completely under control," Derek says, and though his eyes stay red, his tone is too even for that to be anything but the truth. "You're the problem, Stiles. You can't keep playing this from all sides. I know you'd try to protect us against the Argents, but that doesn't mean they won't use you. Argents are good at that, and they don't care how old you are."

"Why do I get the feeling we're no longer talking about me?" Stiles asks quietly.

Derek glares at him, his jaw tightening. "I'm not going to pretend I'm unbiased when it comes to the Argent family," he says. "But it doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"I never said you were!" Stiles asks. "Haven't you even noticed yet that I've been agreeing with you?"

"I've noticed you haven't promised to do as you're told," he snaps.

"Well, if that's what you're waiting for, you might as well settle in. Cause that's just never going to happen," Stiles snorts.

Derek narrows his eyes and stalks closer, and instead of going around to the other side of the desk like a rational person, Stiles just keeps heading backwards until he's pretty much sitting on it and then sort of tries to crab walk over it towards the other side. Derek catches him beneath his knees and tugs him back to the edge of the desk before he makes it very far, and then steps up between his legs to hold him in place.

"Um…this is awkward," Stiles says. He shifts a little, leaning towards the side, but awkward or not it's efficient. There's no way for him to escape Derek's hold gracefully. Which isn't to say he doesn't have options—Stiles and grace have never been all that well acquainted, anyway.

"Stiles," he growls.

"It's really kind of cute how you think saying my name in various different ways is a form of communication," Stiles says. "But actually, it's not. I don't speak werewolf. I can't actually pick up nuance in the timbre of your voice."

"I want you to stay away from them," Derek says.

"You expected me to get that from my name?" Stiles asks incredulously.

"Stiles," Derek snaps.

"And now you're doing it again. We literally just talked about this," Stiles says patiently. "I'm not even asking for complete sentences, just three, four words strung together—"


"Impressive," Stiles says. "But now we're running into the problem of repetition."

Derek ducks his head in frustration, breathing deeply through his nose. "Stiles, I swear to God." He presses his eyes shut just as they start to shine a deeper shade of red, and then opens them when they're clear again. "You want to talk about communication problems? I can barely say anything and
you've got some smart remark—"

"That's because sarcasm is my superpower," Stiles interrupts. "You've got fangs, I've got my sparkling wit."

Derek just looks at him, and this time no words are necessary.

"Okay, I see your point," Stiles acknowledges.

"You are going to stay away from them," he says, over-enunciating each word.

"No," Stiles says.

"It wasn't actually a question," Derek says dangerously.

"I'm not agreeing to anything until you tell me what this is really about. You're still hiding something," Stiles insists. "Chris and Allison aren't enough of a threat for you to be this worried."

Derek opens his mouth to say something, before closing it with a frown. He looks up in concern.

"Someone's coming," he says.

He pushes away from Stiles so abruptly that Stiles feels himself unbalance. He's about to tumble backwards straight off the desk when Derek reaches out and catches his arm, tugging him forward to stop his fall with so much force that he ends up crashing into Derek instead.

Derek's still holding his arm with the one hand, and the other goes automatically around his waist to keep him steady. Stiles collapses against him with a surprised exhale, looking up at his eyes just in time to see them widen as they stare past him towards the opening door.

Stiles' heart stops, because his dad is going to kill him. This is it, his life is over. He promised two-weeks and couldn't even make it twenty-four hours. Parole denied, indefinitely. Visitation revoked. No furloughs granted.

Stiles turns around slowly, preparing himself, and is surprised to see a beautiful vision of strawberry blonde goodness instead of his father with his favorite .45. He blinks for a minute, wondering why Derek looks so wary when it's only Lydia.

"Well, well, well," Lydia says coolly, tossing her hair back as she flashes a dangerous grin at Derek.

"Hello, Derek."

"Lydia," he responds warily.

"In case you didn't already know, since this tête-à-tête was clearly planned so well, the Sheriff is just downstairs watching some sort of sport—and if you're not gone in the next twenty seconds, I start screaming for him," she says pleasantly.

"Lydia," Stiles tries.

Lydia holds up a hand to forestall him, keeping her eyes on Derek. "I'm fairly certain the Sheriff wouldn't be pleased to find you here, and I'm even more certain he wouldn't be pleased about what really happened in Arnold. If you want to chance it, that's up to you." She smiles sweetly again. "Oh, and that's five seconds left, if you weren't keeping count."

"We will finish this later," Derek says quickly to Stiles, before steadying him and then ducking out past Lydia to disappear into the hall.
"The bathroom window still works," Stiles calls quietly after him. He turns back to Lydia, and she's leaning in the doorway examining a nail with a bored expression on her face, like she hasn't just completely pwned an alpha werewolf.

"Lydia," Stiles whines. "I was finally getting somewhere."

"I'm so sorry to interrupt your little seduction, but we need to talk," she says.

"I didn't mean it like that," Stiles protests at once, flushing. "I was trying to get information from him!"

"That's adorable that you think that's what was just happening, Stiles," she says, breezing past him to examine his father's handiwork on his window with a critical eye. "I thought you were going to stay away from werewolves, wasn't that what we agreed? Any closer and you'd have been in his lap."

"I tried to stay away," Stiles says. "But they just keep showing up."

"And I suppose you didn't go rushing off to the Hale house to face off with a bunyip?" she asks.

"What? How did you—" he starts.

"The supernatural hotline is fully functional," she says easily. "Derek told Erica who told Isaac who told Scott who told Allison who told me. Then Jackson told me as well, because I've been working to de-program him as Derek's minion."

"Is this why you stopped by?" Stiles asks. "Because if it is—"

"I have information," Lydia cuts him off, glancing at him speculatively. "However I feel like I should withhold it for your own good. You clearly have enough to worry about."

"You have to tell me now," Stiles says. "I'll cause more damage knowing there's something to know without knowing what it is than I ever could if I just knew it."

"It worries me that's probably true. Very well. You might have noticed Peter hasn't been around for awhile?" she asks lightly.

"Uh, not really?" Stiles says. "But that's probably just because I make an effort to avoid him."

"Yes, well, he's been trying to track Gerard," Lydia says, crossing her arms. "He wants to make sure he's dead as he assumes, most likely correctly, that Kate Argent wouldn't have killed the Hales without his say so."

"How do you know that?" he asks

"I make it a point to know what Peter is up to," Lydia says evenly.

"So they think Gerard might still be alive?" Stiles asks. "How is that possible? They said, the bite either kills you or turns you, but—oh my god, do you think he's a werewolf now? An insane geriatric werewolf with a penchant for going after perfectly innocent teenagers? I am so screwed."

Lydia snorts. "As though he's ever going to get through your protective detail."

Stiles glances over at her in confusion. "Huh?"

"Your father barely lets you out of his sight, and Derek has his pack watching you pretty much around the clock," Lydia says. "Gerard went after you once to try and get to them, it's not
inconceivable he might try to do so again. The Argents, whatever else they are, have never been known to be particularly original. But this time, we're better prepared."

"That's—oh that son-of-a-werewolf!" Stiles snaps. Everything starts to click into place—Derek's crazy overprotectiveness and irritability about him meeting the Argents. Chris and Allison weren't the Argents he was really worried about. "This is why Derek's so pissed I was training with the Argents. How long has he known?"

"He doesn't know, not yet," Lydia says. "All they know is they haven't been able to find a body. Though with our lives, it's not as though that's exactly definitive in any case." She hums a little herself before nodding as if she's come to a conclusion. "Supposing we do find the body, we'll have to cut it in half."

"Lydia!" Stiles says in shock.

"That's the only way to be sure they won't come back," Lydia explains calmly. "Fool me once…"

"Okay, fine, but I have absolutely zero plans to be involved in any hemicorpectomies, just FYI," Stiles tells her. "It was bad enough when Derek wanted me to cut off his arm."

"I wouldn't ask you to," Lydia reassures him. "It's far too likely you'd vomit and leave your DNA everywhere."

Stiles just watches Lydia for a moment, stuck between that particular mix of terror and awe she's always inspired. "Right. Moving on."

Lydia rolls her eyes. "Yes, let's," she says. "Anyway, when Peter went off grid it took me awhile to track him and figure out what he was up to, but my source just came across certain text messages—"

"You mean Jackson," Stiles says helpfully.

"My source," Lydia insists, "says that Peter has been calling on all of the Hale family's old contacts to try and locate Gerard. They think if he's alive, he's gone to ground."

"If he's alive, he's with Chris. No way he doesn't know exactly where Daddy Dearest is," Stiles says easily. "Have you asked Allison?"

"Yes, we were doing each other's nails the other day, and it happened to come up in conversation for me to ask if she was, perhaps, keeping her murderous grandfather chained up in the basement," Lydia says.

"Is that supposed to be sarcasm? Because that actually sounds like something that might have happened," Stiles says.

Lydia glares at him. "Allison was put through hell by that man too," she says. "If Gerard is alive, she doesn't know anything about it."

"While I find your trust in her admirable, you didn't see the results of her last breakdown firsthand," Stiles says. "I'm not sure there's much Allison isn't capable of, if she puts her mind to it."

"I think that could be said about any of us," Lydia replies coolly. "Don't you?"

Stiles winces, but he can't exactly argue that. "I know you think I'm being hard on her—"

"I don't," Lydia says. "Your trust issues regarding Allison are fully understandable. I've forgiven her
for reasons of my own, but I'm not asking you to. I am asking that you believe me when I tell you she doesn't know about this, because I would know if she did."

"Okay," Stiles says. "But that still doesn't rule out Chris."

"Of course it doesn't," Lydia agrees. "But he's all the family she has left, and we can't ask her to work against him. We'll need to find another way."

Stiles nods. "How close has Peter gotten to finding him, do you think?"

"As far as I know, he hasn't found much," Lydia says. "But at the moment I only know what he's told Derek, and I'm sure he's keeping some of it to himself. There's not much we can do at the moment, anyway, but there are other matters we need to discuss."

"Please don't tell me there's something even worse," Stiles says.

"Not necessarily," she says. "I want to know what's going on with you and Derek."

"Ah, nothing?" Stiles says, and then Lydia stares him down until he caves. "Well, nothing except that everyone suddenly seems to be under the impression we're having some secret affair. It's doing wonders for my street cred, I'm sure, but we're not actually. So there's that. It's a bit awkward, really. I mean, we go from a stressful post-kidnapping first kiss in the woods to everyone thinking we've been together for ages and what do I do with that? I keep trying to explain, but it all seems to fall a little too in line with the theory of I think he doth protests too much."

"Yes, I wonder why anyone would get that impression," Lydia says flatly. "Stiles, do you like Derek?"

"What?" Stiles asks, looking over at her in confusion.

"It's a simple question," Lydia says. "Do you like him?"

"Yes?" Stiles says.

"Was that a question?" she snaps, moving over to him. She leans forward, her eyes scanning him carefully like she's some kind of android, collecting information. "There's no wrong answer. You either do or you don't."

"Yes, fine," Stiles snaps. "Of course I like him. He's brave and tragic and he's all gruff on the outside even though he's really sort of squishy inside and he gets my sense of humor even if he never lets himself actually laugh and also he looks like an underwear model, not to be shallow, but really, who hasn't noticed that? So yes, I like him. A lot. I love watching him when he's training because even though he goes about it all wrong he's always there, one hundred percent, like, I mean, he never half-does things. And I love arguing with him most of all, which is ridiculous, but I do. It's the best part of my day."

Stiles falls forward, putting his head between his legs. "Oh god," he moans. "There's something wrong with me, isn't there?"

"Do you remember all the stuff you used to say you loved about me?" Lydia asks. "Do you remember how every single one of them was good? Idealized to the point even I couldn't live up to it?"

Lydia kneels down in front of him, carefully pulling his face up until he meets her eyes. "It's because it was never real, Stiles. If you really love someone, then you love all the bad stuff too. How else do
you think I manage to stay with Jackson?"

Stiles snorts, and Lydia lets him go, moving to sit on the bed beside him. "It's easy to say love is chemical, that we're being flooded with phenylethylamine and norepinephrine and dopamine, but the truth is that it isn't rational. It's not something that can be explained, not even by us, not even when we know better. Love is not quantifiable. Trust me, I've tried."

"I just don't know what to do," Stiles says. "He wants me to join his pack. You think I should stay neutral. Scott wants me back with him. Allison and Chris want me to start training with them. My dad…he just wants me out of this."

"And what do you want?" Lydia asks, echoing her question from a few days ago, when she'd come to drive him home from Arnold and all he'd really wanted was sleep.

"I don't know. None of it," Stiles says. "All of it."

"No one is telling you to decide anything right now," Lydia says. "But as for neutrality, I think the time for that has past."

Stiles looks up in surprise. "What—are you saying you've chosen a side?"

"Yes," Lydia says, glancing over at him. "Yours."
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Stiles is great at pretending to be grounded—he has years and years of practice. Turns out he's not all that great at handling it when it's real. Go figure.

Chapter Notes

NOTE: This chapter is probably both way too long and also kind of slow, but things will be picking up again soon after this. Now if only I can start actually following my outline and stop adding in all the extras (my Magic 8 Ball says: "don't count on it"). Also, this is officially the longest story I've ever written, not counting multiples in a series! So yay me! My joke about this ending up 100K isn't really looking so ridiculous anymore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stiles and his father had finished watching the football game after Lydia left, eating the pizza and pretending to eat the salad. It had been nice and relaxing, and Stiles was starting to feel like they were connecting again. Which is why it hit so hard when he came stumbling down the stairs the next morning to find his father standing in the kitchen in uniform.

"Oh," Stiles says. It isn't as though he's forgotten that his father is the Sheriff. It's not like it slipped his mind, or something. It's just that maybe he's sort of been in a bubble the last few days, a weird, healing bubble where things had started to get better in ways they haven't been since long before werewolves entered the picture.

His father winces and Stiles regrets giving his disappointment away so obviously. It's not his dad's fault he has to work, and he's always tried his best not to make him feel guilty about it. He'll badger him endlessly over eating healthy but he never asks him not to go to the station. He's never begged him to stay home, not even once, even though he'll be fighting off a steady stream of low-level panic in the back of his mind the entire time his father is on shift.

"Tara called this morning," his dad says apologetically. "I've got to go in for a bit, but just for today. I'm going to get everything sorted, and then I'll have next week off, okay?"

"A week off?" Stiles asks, caught between relief and skepticism. "You haven't taken a week off since—" He swallows hard, cutting off the words before they can finish. "Since forever."

"I know, and I think that's been one of my mistakes," he says. "I want us to reconnect, Stiles. I need—we just need to get situated, figure this all out, alright? I want us to spend as much time together as we can before school starts up, so we can decide what we want to do about it."

"What does that mean?" Stiles asks suspiciously.

"Maybe Beacon Hills High isn't the best place for you," he suggests, deliberately casual. "There's
always Brentwood."

Stiles gapes at him in disbelief. Brentwood had tried to recruit him when he won the science fair in seventh grade, offering him a full scholarship. His dad had been ecstatic, but Stiles had convinced him that it was too much pressure with his learning disability (the first and last time he'd ever referred to his ADHD as such, because it actually wasn't, but desperate times and all that, and he'd found a shady pseudo-scientific journal to back himself up).

He hadn't really been worried about keeping up with the curriculum at Brentwood, of course. He'd been worried about the idea of facing school without Scott.

"You can't be serious. That was years ago! They probably don't even want me anymore, it's not like I've gone on to do anything remarkable with my scholastic career," Stiles says. "Also, I suspect Brentwood is run by vampires."

His father looks instantly wary. "Are vampires real?"

"I don't know for sure," Stiles admits. "But if they are, they're definitely going to Brentwood."

His dad heaves a sigh. "Look, I'm not going to force you to switch schools, but you still get an invitation every year, so it's an option. I didn't tell you that I was still receiving them because I didn't want you to spend another two-weeks creating a presentation on why your ADHD would prevent you from being able to keep up. Which, just for the record, I never bought for a second."

"But I had pie charts!" Stiles protests instantly.

"I know," he says wryly. "And I figured if you were willing to put that much effort into convincing me you didn't want to go, I wasn't going to force the issue. I still won't. I just want you to promise me you'll consider it, okay? Maybe it would be good for you. Maybe it's time for a change."

Stiles frowns, and tries to consider it. Brentwood is a private school the likes of which only Gossip Girl has ever seen, with its weirdly stylish and never actually to code uniforms, and Jackson-clones galore. But aside from that, its curriculum is pretty amazing, and the format more college than high school. He would be able to choose his areas of study with a lot more freedom, and he'd almost be guaranteed to get into at least one Ivy League.

And it's not as though Scott really needs him anymore, anyway. Even if they are talking again, Scott isn't his whole world anymore. A little distance might even do them some good.

"I'll think about it," Stiles says quietly. "Okay?"

"That's all I ask," his dad says, looking relieved. "Now, onto more immediate concerns. I'm not exactly thrilled about the idea of leaving you here alone."

Stiles immediately doesn't like where this is going. "But I promised to be good, remember, for another whole week and six days!" he says. "Doesn't that mean anything?"

"I think I'd feel better if you came with me to the office," John says.

"No! No, I’ll be fine here," Stiles says quickly. Being dragged to the office with his father when he was grounded was worse than detention with Harris. It wouldn't be so bad if he were allowed to get involved in the ongoing cases, but the last time he'd been forced to go to the station, he'd been banished to the corner with nothing but a Highlights magazine from 1999—and that had only been seven months ago. "God. No. Don't make me."
His dad points at him. "Fine, but I will be calling every hour. But not exactly on the hour, so no making plans to slip around it. You answer by the second ring or you will spend the rest of my shift sitting in my office."

"Second ring, got it," Stiles says. "Am I allowed to have anyone over?"

"Just Scott," his dad allows, because except for that one time Melissa had ruthlessly told Scott no Stiles!, Scott and Stiles have always been exempt from each other's groundings.

"Okay, but what about—" Stiles starts.

"No Derek," his dad snaps quickly. "And so help me if I find out that Camaro has been parked outside this house, Stiles—"

"I didn't even ask if—" Stiles protests. "I wasn't going to ask about Derek! I was going to ask about Lydia."

His father sighs. "You do realize you're still being punished, right?"

"I know, but, dad, do you really want to come home tonight if I've had no one to talk to all day long?" Stiles asks. "Because I will literally follow you around the house talking non-stop about my day. I will recite, in detail, everything I've done, I will—"

"Yes, fine, she can come over if you want," John says. "But not—"

"No Derek, got it," Stiles says. "I've never invited Derek over in my life, I don't know what you're so worried about. How would that even go? Hey, Derek, want to come play some Call of Duty? No? A little Mario Kart more your speed, perhaps? Dad. Seriously. He'd hang up on me."

"If I thought you'd be inviting him over for video games there wouldn't be an issue," his dad says. "As it stands, I don't want you alone with him."

Stiles mouth falls open at what his father is implying, but he valiantly keeps himself from protesting. As much as he wants to fight against the injustice of it all, the last time he'd been alone with Derek he'd literally fallen into his arms, not to speak of certain other times they were alone, in which he'd been paralyzed on top of him or trapped with him in a pool. Their track record of being alone together did not exactly inspire confidence.

His dad, oblivious to his shock, just grabs his coffee thermos and heads towards the door. "Pick up that phone by the second ring, Stiles!" he calls as he heads out.

* * * * *

Stiles is okay for awhile after his father leaves, but it isn't long before the silence starts to get to him. He turns on the downstairs TV and then the radio in his room. He alphabetizes his bookshelf before taking them down again and redoing them by genre. He figures trying to reorganize them again by author's last name is probably a step too far, so he considers playing a video game for awhile instead. He could call Scott so they could play together.

He grabs his phone at the thought, but can't actually get himself to push any of the numbers. His heart starts to speed up and his breath stutters, so he sets the phone back down. Things are going really well between him and Scott right now and he doesn't want to risk it. He doesn't think he can take one more ignored phone call, or one more brush off. Maybe it's the coward's way out, but for the moment he'd rather not try at all.
He falls back on his bed in frustration, and then grabs his phone again. "Come rescue me from death by boredom," Stiles says as soon as the call picks up. "Please. I am so bored that I will let you give me that makeover you've been hounding me about for months. Seriously. I will let you pluck my eyebrows, that's how desperate I am."

"Tempting," Lydia says, and it's kind of scary that she knows him well enough now that she responds to that little rant with all the reaction most people have to a simple 'hello.' Then again, Lydia's never really shown any sort of reaction to his rants, or any of his many declarations of love, so maybe it says more about her than him. "But I'm sorry, Stiles, I can't right now."

He hears what sounds like a crowd in the background, and frowns. "What are you doing?" he asks. "It sounds like you're with people. I remember people. At least let me live vicariously."

"I'm tailing Peter Hale," Lydia responds simply.

"What!" he cries, bolting up straight. "Lydia, what are you thinking? Where are you?"

"Relax, Jackson is with me, and we're just at the mall," she says. "Peter's already bought about three different long winter coats and now he's shopping for shoes. I hate him with my entire soul, but the man does know fashion."

Stiles hears Jackson say something that sounds suitably snide, but he can't actually make out the words. Stiles figures it could either be directed towards Peter or towards him.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Stiles says. "Maybe I should—"

"You're not coming," she says. "Your father would have an APB out on you in about five minutes, and I'm kind of trying to be inconspicuous."

"It would probably take longer than five minutes," Stiles says lamely. "Just be careful. If he finds out you're following him—"

"Oh, he knows we're following him," Lydia says easily. "I mean, I'm good, but he's a werewolf. We got spotted before he bought the first coat."

"Then why are you still following him?" Stiles asks.

"Because now he's occupied with pretending that he's not up to anything," Lydia says. "Which means he can't actually get up to anything. I wonder how much he'll spend before he gets tired of waiting us out."

"You're sort of an evil genius," Stiles says in admiration.

"There's no 'sort of' about it," Lydia tells him, and hangs up.

He adds Lydia along with his father to that vague worry in the back of his mind, though he's not feeling generous enough to spare any concern for Jackson. He decides to be productive to try and get his mind off everything, so he washes all the dishes, vacuums the living room, and then does some much needed remodeling in the downstairs bathroom. In between, he dutifully answers the phone whenever it rings, cheerfully announcing, Beacon Hills Juvenile Detention Center, Stiles Stilinski speaking. His father had not been amused.

After the house is pretty much spotless, he collapses onto the couch with a heavy sigh, and glances at the clock. It says 10:00 AM and he thinks it must be wrong, but when he pulls out his phone it says the same thing. It's only been three hours since his dad left.
"Oh god. I feel like Rapunzel," he moans. He leans back against the cushions before apathetically scrolling through the contacts in his phone. He thinks about calling, then decides not to, then thinks about it again, and finally he's hitting Derek's name faster than he can talk himself out of it.

"What's wrong?" Derek asks instantly.

"Is that your standard greeting whenever you answer the phone, or something specific to me?" Stiles asks. "Does something have to be wrong? Can't I just call—"

"What," Derek says, which isn't really the change of pace he probably thinks it is.

"Uh…so, I was just wondering….you want to come play some Call of Duty?" he asks.

"What?" Derek asks, confused enough that 'what' sounds like an actual question again.

"Mario Kart, maybe?" Stiles tries.

"Stiles—where are you?" Derek asks.

"I'm at home," Stiles says.

"Are you safe?" Derek demands.

"What? Yes, I'm fine—hello? Derek? Hey?" Stiles looks at his phone in disbelief. Derek had just hung up on him.

Stiles heaves a sigh. He supposes it isn't as though he can say he didn't see that coming. His phone starts ringing in his hand and he picks it up without looking.

"I knew you would call back—" he starts.

"Stiles?" Lydia's voice comes through, sounding unsettled, and he immediately tenses.

"Are you okay?" he asks quickly.

"Yes, but we lost him," she says, and apparently she's not so much unsettled as she is furious. "I have to head home, because my mother wants us to have 'family time,' but I wanted to let you know Peter didn't try anything. Aside from mysteriously disappearing from the men's dressing room, where incidentally, there are no windows."

She sounds frustrated and angry by losing the tail, but Stiles is just glad she's away from Peter. "Okay, good," he says. "Maybe don't make a habit of this? Peter's dangerous."

"Yes, I know," Lydia says sharply. "If he was harmless, I'd hardly be wasting my time, would I?"

"Lydia—" Stiles starts.

"I'm sorry," she says, even though she doesn't sound like she is. "He sets me on edge, but I'm fine. How are you holding up? It sounds as though the boredom hasn't quite killed you yet."

"I'm fine," Stiles says. "I can call Scott if I get really desperate. He might even answer."

"Oh, Stiles," Lydia sighs, because she probably understands this better than anyone. She and Allison might not have been besties since grade school, but they've gotten close fast, so she's had to deal with the other end of the all-consuming Scott and Allison romance.
"I'm fine," he insists again.

"Okay, but call me if you need anything," Lydia says. "I'll keep my tweezers handy."

The way she says it sounds like a threat. "Actually, I think I've changed my mind about that—"

"Bye, Stiles," Lydia says sweetly, hanging up before he can opt-out of the makeover request. He knows he's probably in for trouble sometime soon.

He's still there, lying on the couch, wondering if death by boredom really is an actual thing, when he drifts off to sleep. He startles awake about ten minutes later when the phone rings, and he lunges ungracefully for it to pick it up just at the second ring. "I'm here, I'm here!" he shouts. "Please don't make me do the puzzles in *Highlights* again!"

"Stiles, exactly how much Adderall have you had?" his dad asks.

"I took the right dose," Stiles says, even though he'd actually forgotten about it entirely. "I just fell asleep."

"Oh," his dad says. "Look, if you need to sleep, just, how about you just call me when you wake up, okay? I know you haven't been sleeping well."

"Yeah, okay," Stiles says. "I could probably sleep some more. Not like there's anything else to do here. Which reminds me, I tore down all the wallpaper in the downstairs bathroom because it was powder blue with hot pink flowers and who even does that? I'm pretty sure the people that owned this house before us were serial killers. So you need to bring home some paint. Off-white, or something. I'll fix it up tomorrow."

There's a long pause from his dad. "Are you serious?" he asks. "I can never tell over the phone."

"Yes, of course I'm serious," Stiles says. "I couldn't even go in that bathroom. It was like something from the mind of Charlotte Perkins Gilman."

"Just get some rest, kiddo," his dad says with long-suffering. "Call me as soon as you get up."

Stiles does manage to go back to sleep, and doesn't wake up until after three. He groggily stares at the clock, trudges in to the kitchen to take his much-needed dose of Adderall even though it's nearly too late, and then heads upstairs to use the bathroom. He's heading back towards the stairs to go call his dad when he sees something sitting on his bed.

He stops in the doorway, frowning at the folded red velvet cloth that has mysteriously appeared atop his bedspread. He approaches it cautiously, taking the edge of the cloth and quickly flipping it over to see what it's been wrapped around.

It's a book, which is sort of anticlimactic, but Stiles isn't going to complain.

There's only one creeper he can think of that would break in while he was sleeping to leave him presents. He wonders if this is another repressed attempt at an apology from Derek Hale. An apology book.

Stiles runs his hand over the cover, and notes that it looks old. Authentic old, not made-to-look-vintage old. He flips open the pages and instantly picks out a number of key words tied into the supernatural.

He decides if this *is* an apology book, Stiles will forgive Derek forever.
He takes out his phone and sends Derek a quick text: *Thanks for the book.*

**Derek: What book?**

**Stiles: The one you left in my room.**

His phone rings instantly. Stiles picks it up distractedly, still flipping through the book. "Hello?"

"What book?" Derek growls.

"Something to do with werewolves," Stiles says. "Looks like it should have 'Property of Hermione Granger' stamped on it somewhere. You mean it's not from you?"

"Stiles, I want you to get out of the house," Derek says. "Right now."

"Okay, I think you should calm down," Stiles says. "It's a book. It's not a pipe bomb."

"Get out now," Derek snarls, and Stiles sighs, because obviously Derek has not been taking his 'how to communicate' advice to heart.

"I can't go anywhere," Stiles explains. "I'm grounded. Not like I'm usually grounded, where I just need to be here when my dad's here to keep up appearances. But like seriously grounded, to the point I think my dad may have installed bugs or security cameras or both."

"I don't care. get out of the fucking house. I didn't leave you any book, someone's been there," Derek snaps. "Call your father and tell him you had to leave. Have him come pick you up."

"So let me see if I understand your logic: there's been an intruder, so I should go out into the street? Right out in the open? Cause that's not a terrible idea. Haven't you ever even seen *Halloween*? That never ends well for anyone. Anyway, this isn't exactly ominous, so let's not overreact," Stiles says. "It's just a book. It's an awesome book, actually. I seriously doubt my mysterious benefactor means any harm."

"Let me see it."

Stiles jumps, spinning around when he realizes Derek's voice is reaching him in stereo. "Oh my god!" he cries. "Where did you—how did you—"

"I ran through the woods," Derek says, though he's not even out of breath. Stupid werewolves and their stupid supernatural stamina.

"You ran through the woods—what are you faster than a speeding bullet now? Jeez. I hope you know you nearly gave me a heart attack. There are recorded instances of heart attacks in teenagers, you know, it's not like it's outside the realm of—" Stiles breaks off, quickly switching tracks. "You said you ran, right? So that means the Camaro isn't parked out front?"

"Yes, I came on foot," Derek says impatiently. "Why?"

"No reason," Stiles says quickly.

Derek holds out a hand. "The book, Stiles, let me see it."

"Keep your grabby hands to yourself, this was left for me," Stiles says, flipping back to the cover page. "I think it belonged to a hunter."

Derek pushes up behind him, leaning over his shoulder so he can see. "Not just any hunter," he says
darkly, running his eyes over a coat of arms. "That's the Argent crest."

"Huh," Stiles says. "You think Chris left this for me?"

"It doesn't matter," Derek says sharply. "You obviously can't keep it."

"I can absolutely keep it," Stiles says, stepping away from Derek and holding the book protectively to his chest. "Finders Keepers."

"Stiles," Derek says, narrowing his eyes. He reaches out to grab the book from him, and the moment his fingertips make contact, he's flying backwards. He slams into the wall behind him with enough force that a spider-web thin crack splits all the way up to the ceiling.

Stiles drops the book and rushes forward, falling to his knees in front of Derek's dazed form. "Are you alright? What the hell was that? Did I do that? How many fingers? Derek?" Stiles asks frantically, holding up one hand. "How many fingers?!"

"Four," Derek says.

"Four because you're being clever and not counting my thumb, or four because you're brain-damaged?" Stiles asks.

"Thumbs aren't fingers. They're thumbs," Derek says petulantly. "So four."

"Right, you're obviously fine," Stiles says.

"What the hell did you do to me?" Derek demands.

"You don't think that was on purpose?" he asks. "That was the book! That wasn't me!" Stiles eyes widen and he gets back to his feet, dropping back to the floor again when he reaches the book. "I think I know..."

He runs his fingers across the inside cover. There's a printed lining on it, with a small repeating pattern of little, black-inked trees. Mountain Ash trees. "I think its covers are paneled with mountain ash." His eyes light up. "So mixed with my Jedi—"

"Stop calling yourself a Jedi," Derek snaps.

"I just sent you flying across the room without even trying," Stiles says. "I am so a Jedi. I don't care what you say." He glances back over at Derek in concern. "Are you sure you're okay? I really didn't mean to go momentarily dark side and toss you like that."

"I'm fine," Derek says, getting back to his feet. "Werewolf, remember? But I think I've made my point about the book. You can't keep it."

"All we've learned is that it's dangerous for werewolves," Stiles says. "Which is all the more reason I should keep it, so I can make sure it isn't used against any of you."

"I don't like this," he says, frustrated. "Someone's obviously trying to influence you."

"I say we let them," Stiles says, glancing back at the book. "I am impervious to their wooing ways. I will keep the presents, but they shall never have my heart."

"This isn't a game," Derek snarls. "There's too much going on right now. I can't be worrying about this too."
Stiles finally tears his eyes away from the book. "You're really worried about Gerard, aren't you?"

"How did you—" Derek starts.

"Your pack is full of teenagers, did you really expect to have secrets?" Stiles asks.

Derek tries to glare him down, which is much less effective than it would have been when they first met. Well, not that Stiles had paid too much attention to it even then. "I want you to keep out of this."

"I thought you wanted me in your pack?" Stiles asks innocently.

"I do," Derek says instantly. "And if you want to join, I'll tell you what I know. Right now. If you don't—then I can't fully protect you, and you're better off not knowing."

"By fully protect me you mean alpha-command me to stay out of it, don't you?" Stiles asks. "You know that even if I was in your pack, I still wouldn't follow your every order, right?"

"Yes, I know," Derek says wryly. "I stopped believing in miracles when I was about five."

"Was that a joke?" Stiles asks. "You actually made a joke! It was even almost funny. Wow. Look at you. I must be a good influence."

Derek ignores him, prowling over to the window, and glancing his fingers off the edge to test the mountain ash. "How did someone even get in here?" he asks. "Didn't you hear anything?"

"I kind of fell asleep," Stiles says defensively. "For like maybe five hours. Well, with brief bed-check intermissions, but still. I did not realize I had to be on guard in case mysterious people would be breaking in to leave me books! Or at least, I didn't if it wasn't you."

"So someone was here while you were sleeping," Derek says darkly, turning to survey the rest of the room.

"Can't you just sniff 'em out?" Stiles asks. "You found out Scott in no time at all."

"I don't—no, there's something interfering. I think it's that damn book." Derek glares at the book like it's responsible for all the injustice in the universe. "I don't like it."

Stiles holds it to his chest defensively, because this is not the book's fault. "Books are neutral, Derek," he says. "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book."

"Are you quoting Oscar Wilde at me?" Derek asks in disbelief.

Stiles grins. "Yes," he says. "I didn't expect you to catch that." He's about to say something else when he hears the ringing from downstairs, and his eyes go wide. "Oh, no. My dad! I forgot to call—"

He pushes up from the floor and goes rushing towards the stairs, throwing himself down them with such force that he's pretty lucky to make it to the bottom without breaking his neck. He collapses onto the couch, reaching out and snagging the phone just as it starts its third ring.

"I'm still here! I'm here! Don't send in S.W.A.T!" Stiles shouts.

"We don't have a S.W.A.T. team, Stiles. But I was starting to get worried," his dad says, his tone verging on disappointed. Stiles feels his heart constrict. "And why are you out of breath?"

"Sorry, I fell asleep in my room, left the phone downstairs," Stiles explains. "I didn't mean to sleep so
long."

"It's good you finally got some rest. You feeling any better?" John asks, sounding more sympathetic.

"Yeah, I'm good, how's work?" Stiles asks, putting some cheer into his voice. He can see Derek lurking in the corner of his eye, and he hates how many promises he's broken to his father already. He wonders how much has really changed at all.

"Nothing much going on, thank god," John says. "I might come home early. I don't know yet. I'll pick something up for us, though."

"How about Chipotle?" Stiles asks. "They use all fresh ingredients, it's real food, dad, and I think—"

"That's fine, I like Chipotle," his dad says.

Stiles is immediately suspicious that his dad has given in so quickly. "Don't sneak anything into your burrito you're not supposed to have," he warns.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he says wryly. "See you soon, kiddo."

Stiles hangs up the phone, and glances up to see Derek watching him seriously. "What?" he asks uncomfortably, pushing himself back into a sitting position.

Derek just raises an eyebrow. "Nothing."

"You're looking at me like you're trying to take me apart with your eyes," Stiles says. "It's obviously not nothing."

"Just, you and your dad, you're not what I expected," Derek says.

Stiles knows that most people don't understand the way his father and him interact, but Derek doesn't look judgmental. He looks curious. "Meaning?"

"You take care of each other," Derek says hesitantly. "That's all I meant."

Stiles pulls one of his knees up to his chest, resting his chin on it so he won't have to look him in the eye. "My therapist used to tell me it's a defense mechanism," he explains. "That I dealt with the loss of my mother by putting all my attention on my father. Trying to 'micromanage' his health. But it's really much simpler than that. I just don't want to lose him too."

"Stiles—" Derek says, and his voice is gentle, but for some reason it cuts Stiles deeper than any of his angry commands ever have.

"I never wanted him involved in this," he says, and closes his eyes.

"It's too late for that," Derek tells him.

"I know," Stiles says.

"I don't want you involved in this, either, you know," Derek says softly.

Stiles laughs, glancing back up. "It's definitely too late for that."

"I know," he echoes. "Maybe it's time we both accepted that, what do you think?"

Stiles meets Derek's eyes steadily. "Does that mean you're finally going to be honest with me?" he
asks.

Derek sits down on the coffee table, looking resigned. "How much do you already know?"

"Just that you haven't been able to find Gerard's body," Stiles says.

"Peter and I tracked Gerard that night," Derek says. "The trail just kept going, and we couldn't understand how he was still moving. Then we found tire tracks. Someone had picked him up."

"Chris," Stiles says instantly.

"That would be my guess, too," Derek agrees.

"And you couldn't have maybe said, 'hey, Stiles, don't hang around the Argents because they might be harboring their insane, homicidal relative?' Instead of just growling 'stay away from them' a whole lot?" he asks, pushing his leg down so he can lean forward. "I do respond to sound reasoning, you know. Commands not so much."

"I didn't growl," Derek says. "I was trying to express—"


"—the seriousness of the situation," Derek finishes tightly. "If Gerard is alive and he finds out what you can do, you'll never be safe. He'd never have let you go when he took you, if he had known what you can do."

"It sounds like you have some experience with this," Stiles says.

"I do," Derek agrees.

Stiles waits for the explanation, but as usual, he waits in vain. "Derek, I kind of need more than that," he says. "I know grouping together large amounts of words is something of a foreign concept for you—"

"Shut up," Derek says, but there's none of the usual heat to it, and Stiles slams his mouth shut instantly. "Fine, look, it happened when I was about fourteen. My parents and Peter were attacked by hunters when they were out patrolling the Preserve, and they were trapped with mountain ash. We'd never—we'd never known the hunters to use it, usually it was only our allies that had that sort of power. So it caught them off guard."

Derek presses his eyes shut for a moment, and it looks like it's causing him physical pain to speak about his family, his past. Stiles wishes he could tell him he didn't have to, but he needs to know, and there's always the chance that maybe talking about it will help.

"There were two men and a woman. The men were the only ones armed, and they shot my father five times, thinking he was the biggest threat," he explains. "My mother was actually the Alpha, so that was their first mistake. Then the barrier just dissolved, and in her rage my mom tore the men apart. Then she went for the woman." Derek glances up at him. "It was actually Peter who stopped her."

Derek flashes a ghost of a smile, before looking away again. "I had to hear this story so many times. The way he just went and stood in front of that woman before my mom could touch her, even though she was an Alpha in a rage and could have seriously hurt him. But he knew what that woman was, right away. Peter's always been able to pick up on that kind of thing, though none of us ever knew if it was her power or her reluctance that he saw. He just knew she hadn't been there by
choice. He knew she was the one that had let the mountain ash barrier down."

"She was like me," Stiles realizes.

"Yes," he agrees. "The hunters forced her to create the barrier, but the moment they were distracted she pulled it back down, and saved them. She had basically been their slave." The anger in his voice starts to rise as he continues, deepening his voice. "I never knew all of the details about what they did to her. I was too young, they wouldn't talk about it with me. But I saw her one time, she came out in a swimsuit when we were having a party and...she was covered in scars. I'd never seen anything like it."

"Who was she?" Stiles asks.

"Her name was Emily. They'd taken her when she was only fifteen, on her way home from school. She'd lived somewhere in Georgia, I think," Derek says. "She was almost twenty-three when I met her, so she was with the hunters for at least seven years. That's as much as they ever told me about her past. To be honest, I never asked to know more. I was pretty sure I wouldn't want to know. I thought there would be time later, if..."

Stiles awkwardly taps his hands against his legs as Derek trails off, unsure what to say. Derek's concern for him is starting to make a lot more sense. "They do that a lot? With people that can use mountain ash?" he asks.

"Whenever they can, which thankfully isn't often," Derek says. "Few can do it, and fewer still even have the opportunity to try and realize that they can."

"What happened to her? To Emily?" Stiles asks. "You said she was at a party? She stayed with you?"

"Yes, she married Peter, just a few months before she died in the fire with the rest of my family," he says, and his emotionless tone is jarring when matched against the reality of his words.

Stiles has been through every page on the Hale fire reports, multiple times, and he knows Peter never had a legal wife, and that there was no Emily Hale listed as being in that fire. But he knows that means nothing, really. The fire had burned so hot they couldn't identify hardly any of the bodies, and there'd been very little left of any of them to bury. Maybe Peter and Emily were werewolf-married in some secret forest ceremony, or maybe they'd kept her hidden because they didn't want her taken again.

He doesn't want to hurt Derek more by asking all these questions merely to satisfy his curiosity, so he keeps them to himself, but there is one thing he still needs to know.

"Who were the hunters that had Emily?" he asks.

"The Argents," Derek says, glancing up at him seriously. "You could say that's probably what started the feud between us. It was only a couple of Gerard's distant cousins that were killed, and I doubt he cared about them. He just wanted a reason to come after us."

"I'm sorry, Derek," Stiles says.

"Do you understand now why you have to be careful?" Derek asks. "The Argents might have all but fallen from power but there are still plenty of hunting families out there, and if this gets back to any of them—"

"Yeah, I don't think I would make a really good hunter slave," Stiles says, trying to keep his tone
light, even as he feels the anxiety slipping up on him. "I talk too much and I don't take orders very well. I probably wouldn't last a week."

Derek moves immediately, crouching in front of him with a serious and angry expression. He reaches out and grabs Stiles' wrists, tugging him down a bit so he's sure he has his full attention. One of these days Stiles is really going to have to sit him down and have a long talk about all the manhandling.

"I'm not going to let that happen to you," Derek promises, his voice part snarl, and part reassuring. "That's why we have to find Gerard. I don't think Chris will betray your secret to another family, but he might tell his father."

"When you say we, you don't mean you and me, do you? You mean you and Peter," Stiles says accusingly.

"Yes," Derek admits. "He's a good tracker, and not just as a wolf. He can follow paper trails, and he has more contacts than I do. He's a lot better at stuff like that than me. I need him."

"But can you trust him?" Stiles demands.

"I can trust him to keep looking for Gerard until we're certain he's dead, one way or another," Derek says easily.

"The trouble is, he won't care what it takes or who he has to hurt to make it happen," Stiles reminds him.

"No, he won't," Derek acknowledges, letting him go. "Which is why you're going to stay well out of the way."

"And what about you?" Stiles demands.

"Call me if you get any more suspicious gifts," Derek says instead of answering, and then he gets to his feet and pushes out through the kitchen door.

"One of these times, you might want to try out a 'goodbye' just for the novelty of it!" Stiles calls after him angrily.

His phone buzzes and Stiles looks down at it in irritation, which quickly turns into confusion when he sees the text is from Derek.

It just says: **Goodbye, Stiles.**

It's not as reassuring as Derek might have meant it.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Fun Fact: The entirety of these last two chapters was written to achieve a single line in my outline: Stiles receives a mysterious text from (REDACTED)

And that didn't even happen.

In other news, I finally added that tag for Slow Build (see above for reason why).
Okay, so I think I've said at some point during the bunyip storyline that the action was going to wrap up soon, but that was apparently a total unintentional lie. Cause now we're onto a whole secondary storyline, and we're heading back into cliffhanger territory, I'm afraid. So, I apologize (yet again!) in advance. In these next few chapters leading to the end, there's probably going to be one every time.

His dad doesn't end up coming home early, but that just gives Stiles time to work. He doesn't want to force an interrogation on Derek, who had already talked about 250% more than usual, so that means he needs to find answers on his own. Looking into the Sheriff's Office database wasn't going to do him much good here, since Emily had gone missing in Georgia. Luckily, Scott's dad is in the FBI.

Stiles had been eleven the last time he remembers seeing Mr. McCall. He'd been logging on to the database from home, and Stiles had just happened to see the log in: rmccall, pw: melissascott52.

Stiles didn't have a use for it back then, of course. Rules still sort of meant something at that time, but it had stuck in his mind. He couldn't figure out the '52', it seemed so arbitrary, except he knew a lot of people that were forced to update their password often tended to up it by one number each time.

Law enforcement typically required a new password every three months, so Stiles had counted it up incrementally when he was fifteen, just to see what would happen. McCall had never been particularly creative, but Stiles was still surprised when it had worked—he'd abandoned his family, but kept them as his password. Stiles had nearly told Scott, but he wasn't sure it didn't just make Mr. McCall that much more of a bastard, so he never did.

Five years on, and all it takes is a little basic math for him to get into the FBI database pretty much any time he wants. He's only ever done it three times (1: to see if he could 2: to do a background check on Mrs. Hamilton from down the street, when his father mistakenly thought he was ready to date 3: to see if the x-files really did exist). Stiles knows better than to push his luck and access it too much. If they ever check the access logs and see Rafael McCall signed in from an IP in Beacon Hills, well, he's too much of an asshole for anyone to just assume he'd only gone to visit his son.

He pulls up the database, covering his tracks as he does with a few tips he'd picked up from Danny, and starts a search for missing children between the years of 1998 and 1999 in Georgia, narrowing the parameters more and more until he finally comes across the case file for Emily Dewitt.

She's pretty, in a young, tom-girlish way. She looks a little like she could have won out over Ellen Page for the part of Juno. He has trouble picturing her with Peter, but then he knows that she probably had very little in common with the girl in the picture by the time the Hales found her, seven years later.

He reads down and sees the case is still listed as open, because she was never officially found. Now, he knows, she never will be. She'd been in foster care at the time she was taken, and he doesn't know whether or not to be relieved she didn't seem to have any family that was mourning her. He's never really been sure if that makes things better or worse.
He makes copies of the pages and prints them out, and is just about to log off when it occurs to him to cross-reference the case against the name of Argent. Gerard's name comes up a moment later, as one of the witnesses questioned when she'd first gone missing.

He'd been teaching at her school.

"Holy shit," Stiles breathes, because that utter bastard. There is nothing in the code about snatching fifteen year-old-girls off the street to force them to work for you. He thinks then of Chris, who would have been newly married with a toddler at the time—had he known the depths his father had sunk to even then?

He gets a text that his father is on his way and considers hiding what he's found, but then he notices the crack along the wall and gets another idea instead. He gets rid of the official FBI seals and just prints the text, printing out color photos of Emily and the Argents, before grabbing a picture of Derek off Erica's Facebook. She'd caught him half turned away, his eyes pressed shut just enough they don't spark a flare against the lens.

He stands on his desk chair and tapes the picture of Emily at the top of the wall, right over the crack, and then puts up everything else around it. He connects the pictures with a spool of red thread.

He stands back and looks at his handiwork. It looks chaotic but it settles him, somehow, and he can follow the connections along one edge of the wall to the other. It's a little like a mosaic, and if he stares at it long enough, he can start to see the whole picture taking shape.

"Stiles, I'm home!" his dad calls from downstairs. "And so is Lydia. You've got twenty minutes."

Stiles frowns and turns as Lydia comes strolling into his room. She stops and stares at his wall, apparently unimpressed. "I thought I should come check that you hadn't lost your mind," she explains. "I guess I'm a little late."

"I was just—" Stiles starts.

"First things first," Lydia interrupts, holding up a hand to cut him off. "What's this about you going to Brentwood?"

Stiles' eyes widen. "What? My dad told you that?"

"No," Lydia says slowly. "He asked me what I knew about Brentwood, and I figured out the rest from there."

"It's not…I'm not going there," Stiles says. "I just didn't realize that they were still trying to recruit me."

"Well-dressed vultures," Lydia sneers, sympathetically. "They call me at least once a week during the summers."

"Yeah, see, that doesn't surprise me, but I can't see why they're still offering me a spot," Stiles says. "I mean, I have straight A's, but so do a lot of people, and Brentwood is supposed to be pretty elite. I really didn't think my science project on the regenerative qualities of earthworms was this memorable."

Lydia rolls her eyes. "Stiles, you're second in our class."

"I am?" Stiles asks in surprise. "Wait—how do you know that and I don't?"
"I have no idea why you don't know that," she says. "Personally, I like to keep an eye on the competition. There's always the possibility you might actually start to apply yourself and become a real threat."

"I can't believe I'm second," he frowns.

"Most people in the top five of any given class are pretty much attached to their textbooks, and calculating their grades up once a week to see if their GPA has moved at all," she says. "That you made second without even meaning to is exactly why I keep an eye on you. I always have."

"What do you mean you always have?" Stiles demands. "You didn't even used to know who I was."

"We've been in the same schools since first grade, and you're the only one that's ever beaten my score on a test. Of course I knew who you were," she says.

"So you were just ignoring me," Stiles says.

"It certainly seemed effective," Lydia says. "And honestly it was the only way to deal with you that didn't require being exceedingly cruel."

"Okay, fair point," Stiles allows. Lydia would have had to verbally annihilate him, probably multiple times, before he would have given up if he'd known back then that she had any type of vested interest in him at all. "So why aren't you at Brentwood?"

"Jackson and I were supposed to go together our Freshman year," Lydia says.

"So why didn't you?" he asks.

Lydia glances away. "He didn't get in."

"Big deal," Stiles snorts. "His dad could have bought that school for him."

Lydia turns back to Stiles, meeting his eyes seriously. "Jackson wouldn't let him," she says. "I know what you think of him, Stiles, but most of what you hate about him is only there for show."

"Then it's his own fault for being such a stellar actor," Stiles says unsympathetically. "His commitment to his role is obviously verging on Christian Bale levels of dedication."

Lydia sighs, but lets it go. "Anyway, there is that old saying, better to be a big fish in a small pond," she says. "I stand out at Beacon Hills High."

"Lydia, you'd stand out anywhere," Stiles tells her.

"True," Lydia says, humming thoughtfully. "But I wouldn't know anyone there."

"You might know me," Stiles says quietly.

She turns sharply. "You sound like you're actually considering transferring," she says in surprise.

Stiles just shrugs, turning away from her to look back at the wall.

"You don't get to say something like that and then just drop it, Stiles Stilinski," Lydia says seriously. "What's going on?"

"I promised my dad I'd think about it, that's all," Stiles says.
"You promise a lot of people a lot of things, but you only ever do what you want," Lydia says. "Which means you're not just thinking about it because he asked you to."

"Okay," Stiles admits. "So maybe I'm considering it. It's not exactly as though the denizens of Beacon Hills High are going to be rioting in the halls if I decide to leave. I think Harris might actually throw some sort of celebration. Maybe he'd even ease up on the detentions."

"You think you won't be missed," Lydia says, her voice strangely cold. "Is that what you really think?"

"I think I can still see the only people that would miss me," Stiles corrects. "And I couldn't care less about the rest."

"Okay," Lydia says softly. "Okay. I see your point. Maybe you're right."

"I'm not saying it's what I'm gonna do," Stiles assures her. "I'm just saying I'm considering it, okay?"

"Then I'll consider it, too," Lydia says.

"Thanks," Stiles frowns, "but I really have to make this decision on my own."

"No, you idiot," Lydia says. "I'll consider transferring there too. I can't very well let you get an edge on me, can I? The next time they call, I suppose I can give them thirty seconds before I hang up."

Stiles turns to her in disbelief—he doesn't know what to make of the fact that the girl he'd chased for years might actually be considering following him to a new school. "You don't have to do this."

"I know that," she says. "You know what it's like there for me. They all still look at me like I'm broken. I told myself I had to stay, to show them it didn't hurt. That I didn't care. But maybe it's time I actually stop caring, and do what's best for me." Lydia tosses her hair, putting her perfect mask back into place. "Besides, I do look amazing in uniform."

"What about Jackson?" he asks.

"Three years ago going to separate schools would have broken us," Lydia says. "I'd like to think we're stronger than that now. And if we're not, maybe it's better I find that out now than when I get into M.I.T. and he doesn't."

"Yeah, I can't really picture Jackson anywhere but Chico," Stiles says with a smirk.

Lydia just shoots him a glare, and then glances towards the wall. "So why are you researching a missing child case from over a decade ago, anyway?"

She's barely even looked at the wall, and she's already figured out the root case. Stiles may not be in love with her, but he will love her forever. He steps up to the wall, running his fingers down a piece of string.

"Because she was like me," he explains. Emily's picture is at the top, and attached by red threads to a number of the Argents, as well as Peter (in caricature, since Stiles and Peter were not Facebook friends). He had photocopies of the fire reports he wasn't strictly supposed to have, and the official FBI reports on Emily's kidnapping that he definitely wasn't supposed to have.

"How did you get these?" Lydia asks, as she traces her fingers down one of the kidnap reports.

"Better if you don't ask," Stiles says. "Plausible deniability, and all that."
Lydia just turns back to the print outs, apparently unconcerned. "I might consider Brentwood, but I'm not doing prison time for you," she says.

"It's only a class B misdemeanor, technically," Stiles shrugs. "Even Danny's done it. And Danny's pretty much a perfect human being."

"Which is why he can get away with it," she says shrewdly.

"I get away with stuff," Stiles protests. "It's just that unlike Danny, I don't get caught in the first place."

"Except when you do," Lydia reminds him.

"Right, except for then," Stiles agrees. "Can we stay focused please?"

"Hmm," Lydia says. "And why do we care about her again?"

"She could do the same things I can, she could use mountain ash," Stiles explains. "She was taken by the Argents, and they forced her to do horrible things. Derek thinks it's going to happen to me."

"It's not," she denies sharply, eerily certain. "You have the town Sheriff, two werewolf packs, and most importantly me on your side. Is that what this is about? Is that why you're—?"

"No, I'm just trying to figure it out," Stiles says, frowning as he runs his eyes over the wall again. "I thought, I mean, I know how Gerard is, okay, I knew he was a bastard. But I still thought Kate was sort of a psycho-bitch hunter aberration. I thought burning an entire family alive was just her being a sociopath, but I've been thinking about what you said—that Kate did it on Gerard's say so, and I think you and Peter are right."

"Much as it pains me to agree with him on anything," Lydia says.

"Yeah, but unfortunately Peter is good at figuring out motivations for crazy people—probably because he can relate to them on a level we just can't," Stiles says, and tosses her a grin. Lydia just stares back, but Stiles notes the subtle way she starts to relax. He turns back to the wall. "So if Gerard could do that he could do anything. And now I think he stalked and kidnapped a fifteen year-old-girl and then, I don't know, like gifted her to his distant cousins! And seriously, who does that? What even is that? Derek was right, these hunters are freakin' nuts, and I don't even—"

"Take a breath, Stiles," Lydia says calmly.

"Right. Yeah. Breathing. Okay," he agrees, but still doesn't really stop talking long enough to take in much air. He grabs the book off his desk. "But look, okay? This book belonged to the Argent family once. It's basically the opposite of the Bestiary. This is a Hunter's Manual, supposedly—but it actually borders on being a Grimoire."

Lydia moves closer in interest, gently tugging the book from his hands before dropping down onto his bed to flip through it. "You'd think Argents would frown on that sort of thing."

"Yeah, I know, right?" Stiles says. "Except historically it's never actually gone that way. I mean, look at Hitler. Tyrants are always 'do as I say and not as I do,' so the Argents were using all kinds of dark magic. Or rather, they were getting others to do it for them. And that's not all." He drops down beside her. "There's a ritual in there, for gaining power and control as a werewolf."

"Why would they want to help werewolves get more power? Allison's mother killed herself rather than turn," Lydia reminds him. "I'm fairly certain the Argents take their codes rather seriously,
because that's about as dedicated as you can get."

"Yes, but not Gerard,…and there's something strange there," Stiles says. "It's the women that lead, right? They're supposed to be matriarchal? Except Chris ranked higher than Kate by all accounts, and Gerard is the real head of the family. I think the women were just figureheads. Told to practice the code, to keep up appearances, while behind the scenes Gerard did whatever the hell he wanted. Maybe it wasn't always that way, but—"

"But that's what Gerard made it," Lydia finishes.

"Exactly. I mean, he had to know he was dying when Allison's mom killed herself," Stiles says. "He let that happen even when he was already planning on becoming a werewolf himself."

"Because he couldn't control Victoria or Chris, but once she was dead, Allison was next in line," Lydia finishes. "And Gerard was planning to keep her well under his thumb."

"Right," Stiles agrees, flashing her a quick grin. It was nice to have someone keeping up with him for once—well, he says keeping up, but sometimes he wonders if Lydia's not already a few steps ahead.

"What's this ritual then?" she asks.

"That's where you come in," Stiles says. "It's written in Archaic Latin. My Archaic Latin is a little rusty, and it's not currently an option on Google Translate, so…"

"Yes, fine, I'll do it," Lydia says, pulling the book closer. "It'll probably take me a few hours."

"That long?" Stiles asks, in mock-disbelief.

Lydia just huffs in annoyance, pulling out her phone to photograph the pages. "I can have it to you by morning, good enough?"

"You're amazing," Stiles says. "You know that, right?"

"Of course," Lydia agrees, as she hands the book back.

"Okay, time's up," his dad says, as he comes and leans in the doorway. He takes one look at the wall, sighs, and then turns to glare at Stiles. "Really, Stiles?"

"You left me alone all day, what did you expect?" Stiles asks.

"Do I need to be worried about this?" he asks, motioning to the wall.

"Not yet," Stiles says honestly.

"Well, I'm going to leave now," Lydia says primly. "Sheriff, it was nice to see you again. Please try to remember that Stiles is at his most dangerous when he's bored. You might be doing us all a favor if you cut him some slack."

"I'll be sure to take that under consideration," John says politely.

Lydia nods and steps around him. "Then I'll see myself out."

His dad turns back to him and raises an eyebrow. "There's a time you would have been a gibbering mess over being in bed with Lydia Martin."
"I was the first time," Stiles says. "She touched my leg and I nearly passed out, but she was on meds powerful enough to take down a horse at the time, so it kinda killed the romance. Sorry to say, the thrill is gone."

His dad just snorts and turns back towards the stairs. "Come on, I got us dinner."

"Did you get me a steak burrito?" Stiles asks excitedly.

"Now, Stiles, you know that's no good for you," he says, with a wicked grin. "I got you the tofu."

"I guess I deserve that," Stiles sighs.

* * * * *

His father had tried to slyly interrogate him throughout their dinner about Stiles' wall of mystery, but Stiles had managed to dodge enough that he only handed over the basics: he's checking into the Argents, and other mountain ash users.

"Mountain ash users," his dad had sighed. "It sounds like you're hooked on some kind of drug."

It's just a throwaway comment, but it gets Stiles thinking. He knows he's not addicted to mountain ash, but there is a rush of power that comes from it that's a little hard to resist. He'd been nearly giddy the first time he'd successfully pulled it off, with all that trapped energy thrumming through his own veins.

He wonders if maybe that's how they got Emily—promises of power to a girl that had nothing else. Had he been testing all the students at her school? How else could he have known to target Emily, of everyone?

He thinks back to Gerard's short-lived time as their principal, and wonders if he'd been testing them, too.

The unanswered questions are tugging at his mind, but no matter how many new pieces of the puzzle Stiles puts on the wall, he knows he's never going to get the whole picture. Emily is dead, and even if Gerard's not, he can't be trusted. Not even his usual channels, forums hidden in the depths of the internet where the supernatural is spoken of in a coded short-hand only those that know can understand, have anything about mountain ash except some vague allusion to the druids or emissaries or some such.

Stiles prints out a picture of Deaton from his veterinary website and tapes it up right in the middle of the wall.

Deaton can use mountain ash, too. He can use it so well he doesn't even have to be there, he can just build it into the very walls. Deaton's the one that showed him what he could do, and had known, beforehand, that he would be able to.

But Deaton's also about as helpful as a Sphinx.

His phone rings and he picks it up distractedly. "Uh?" he grunts, tilting his head as rereads the initial report for Emily's kidnapping.

"Stiles."

Stiles straightens at Derek's voice. It sounds strange, breathy and deep and more relieved than angry—which really, is just wrong. "Derek?" he asks. "What's wrong?"
"I thought that was my line," Derek says. "Are you still home?"

"Yes," Stiles says. "Where are you?"

"Stay in tonight," Derek says, with his usual way of giving orders instead of answers.

"Well, I was planning to go clubbing, but those plans sort of hit a snag when my dad confiscated my car keys and put me under house arrest, so..." Stiles says dryly.

"Please," Derek says, his voice almost gentle. "Please, Stiles, I just need—"

"Why do you sound weird?" Stiles demands, cutting him off as he feels his own heartbeat pick up. He can feel prickles of unease crawling over his skin and he doesn't know why. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Derek says. "I just need you to stay in tonight. If you have more mountain ash, put it around the whole house."

"What you need is to tell me what's wrong," Stiles insists sharply.

There's a long pause, and Stiles thinks for a moment that's all he's going to get. That Derek's gone back to his default level of cryptic growled orders, but then he speaks. "Gerard's alive, and he's back in town," he says simply. "So stay in the goddamn house."

The call ends and Stiles stares at the phone in disbelief, before hitting redial. He's not exactly surprised that he gets sent straight to voicemail, but it still hurts. "You don't get to do that," Stiles snaps, once the message starts recording. "You don't get to just say that and then hang up. Derek, call me back. I mean it. Right now. Call me back."

Derek doesn't call back. Stiles spends the next two hours pacing and leaving increasingly frantic voicemails before he finally falls asleep for a little while, his phone tightly gripped in his hand. There's still no word from Derek when he jerks awake at four in the morning, so he tries to call him again. He has to push down a rush of sick relief when the call picks up.

"Finally," he snaps. "Derek, where the hell do you get off—" He trails off with a feeling of increasing dread when there's no impatient interruptions or growling or creepy heavy breathing from the other end of the line. "Derek?" he asks hesitantly, his anger disappearing. His heart sinks, and he grips the phone tighter. "Who is this?"

The call clicks off.

The walls go suddenly fluid, rippling and closing in. Stiles pushes his eyes shut and braces his hands against the wall, trying to take in air. He locks his panic away as he works to steady his breathing out, because he doesn't have the time to let himself fall apart. He needs a plan, and he's already dialing Lydia's number before he fully knows what that plan is going to be.

He knows he might regret this, but it's always sort of been there, in the back of his mind, as a last resort. There's always a risk when making a deal with the devil, but it's almost always effective at the onset. He can deal with the consequences later.

"Lydia," he says urgently, the moment she picks up. "I need Peter's number."

"Why?" Lydia asks, and she sounds far too awake for four in the morning.

"I think Derek's in trouble," Stiles says. "Please, just...I know you have it, okay? I don't have time to explain."
"I'll send you the contact info," she says, and ends the call. He gets the alert a second later, and Lydia's sent the contact info for someone she's had listed as 'Subject One.'

He dials the number, not sure he's doing the right thing even as he does. He could call Derek's pack, of course—but Erica and Jackson are unstable at best, and Boyd might be calmer but he'll follow their lead. He knows his best shot at having someone get to Derek fast enough is Peter.

"Stiles," Peter says when he answers, his voice amused and sly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Stiles doesn't waste time demanding to know how Peter knows it's him. He's pretty sure Peter had been the one to clone his phone, so he probably knows more than just the number.

"Derek says Gerard is alive," he says without preamble.

"Of course he is," Peter says. "I've been telling Derek that for weeks."

"Do you know where he is?" Stiles demands.

"Gerard?" Peter asks.

"Derek!" Stiles cries impatiently. "Do you know where Derek is?"

"I assume he's lurking in some dark corner somewhere, looking conflicted," Peter says.

"I think Gerard has him," Stiles says.

"Entirely possible," Peter says after a moment. "It's Gerard's style to go after the biggest game in town, so it wouldn't surprise me if he'd start with the Alpha instead of working his way up to it like anyone sane."

"Well, don't you think you should do something about that?" Stiles asks.

"Why, Stiles, whatever are you asking me to do?" Peter asks.

"I'm not asking you to do anything. I was just sort of hoping you'd kill him," Stiles says.

Peter laughs brightly, sounding genuinely pleased. "You never cease to surprise me."

"If we all have to put up with you being a murdering psychopath, we might as well point you in the right direction," Stiles says.

"Let's not stand on ceremony, why don't you say it like it is?" Peter says. "You want me to do your dirty work for you."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend your delicate sensibilities," Stiles snaps. "You can give Gerard an all expense paid vacation to Hawaii for all I care, just find Derek."

"Don't get defensive, I meant that as a compliment. You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. It's rare to be as clever as we are and not be just a little cruel," Peter explains. "We understand the world far too well to want to save it."

"There's only one thing I'm interested in saving right now, and that's Derek," Stiles says. "He's your family, don't you even care?"

There's a momentary pause. "You just want…so that's why," he says knowingly. "You've gone and fallen for him, haven't you? I can't say I'm not disappointed in you, Stiles. I mean, my nephew,
"really? You could do so much better."

"Would you just give me a straight answer?" Stiles demands.

"But you're not asking any of the right questions," Peter says.

"I don't have time for games, Peter," Stiles says. "If you have something to tell me, then just say it."

"Alright. Why don't you think on this: if Gerard is alive, then he's weakened," Peter says. "He would have tried something far before now if he wasn't. Do you agree?"

"Yes," Stiles says impatiently. "By all accounts he was in pretty bad shape, hacking up black tar. So I guess you could say he was weakened."

"Weakened," Peter repeats silkily. "You remember what I told you in that garage? About the bite?"

"Yeah," Stiles says. "You either turn or die. Then you bit Lydia and that sort of went out the window."

"Lydia's special," Peter says. "Don't expect lightning to strike the same place twice."

"What are you saying?" he asks.

"Well, if he's not dead, he's a werewolf," Peter explains slowly, as if to a small child. "And if he's a werewolf, then why is he weak?"

"What are you the Riddler now?" Stiles asks sharply. "I don't care about Gerard, okay? I just want you to find Derek!"

"You don't get to have everything that you want," Peter reminds him.

"So you're not going to help," Stiles says.

"I am helping," Peter says. "Perhaps you're not listening."

"I am so sick of everyone in my life giving half-answers or this cryptic bullshit," Stiles snaps. "Are you going to make sure Derek's okay or not?"

"I'm a little...preoccupied, at the moment," Peter says. "So not. But you shouldn't worry so much about Derek, Stiles. There's only one thing he's any good at, really. And that's staying alive."

Peter hangs up and Stiles' head starts swimming again. He checks his phone for any word from Derek, but nothing's there. He hadn't really expected for there to be, because he knows Gerard has him. He knows it because Derek can be an asshole, but he'd never let him worry this much. He would have called back if he could. He would have spoken when the call picked up.

Gerard has Derek, and he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know who he should call: all of them? none of them?

He could do it on his own, because it's not like he hasn't before. He could go grab the mountain ash arrows sitting beside the safe downstairs, and head to the rail car. He could try and find them and stop Gerard once and for all. He's actually kind of disturbed about how easily he thinks he could do it—just toss one of those arrows at him, whispering one little command: hit the heart.

So he thinks about it. He thinks about slipping down the stairs and out the back. Putting the Jeep in neutral and sliding it far enough down the street his dad won't hear it when it starts.
He thinks about it, and then he steps across the hall into his father's room instead.

"Dad," he says, and his voice sounds shaken, and too young. His dad is scrambling to turn on his bedside light almost before he can finish the words: "Dad, I need your help."

Chapter End Notes

P.S. The idea of Brentwood came out of nowhere, but now I kind of want to have a sequel (kind of an alternate season four since this has somehow turned into an alternate season three) where Lydia and Stiles enroll there for their junior year to solve a mystery there (hint: it wouldn't be vampires!).
Okay, so this is another chapter that was getting way too long and had to be split in two! At this rate, it's probably going to take a few more chapters than I was planning for so that dubious little "/?" on the chapter count will have to remain for now. I'm still planning to keep it under or at thirty chapters at the most though! Of course if you'd asked when I started this thing I would have been like, pish, this will be done in ten.

"Here! Turn here!" Stiles shouts. He has his seatbelt on only because his dad refused to start the car until he buckled it, but he's leaning just as far forward as it will allow, squinting into the predawn as he directs his father to Derek's lair.

His father hadn't even hesitated, when Stiles told him Derek was in trouble. They'd been packed up and out in the cruiser in less than five minutes. His father had loaded his service weapon with Chris's ammo and Stiles had thrown his mountain ash arrows into his backpack like a makeshift quiver, the Argent book buried at the bottom.

"Doesn't this thing go any faster?" Stiles demands. "Shouldn't we turn on the lights? Run the siren? Dad—"

"We can't draw attention. Deputy Jones is on call tonight, and he'd ask too many questions," his dad says calmly, before glancing at him in concern. "I need you to calm down, okay? Or I'm taking you back home, and I'll look for Derek myself."

"Sorry," he says anxiously, and he's glad his father isn't a werewolf, because if he had any idea how much he's actually freaking out, he never would have been able to convince him to take him in the first place. It probably won't help his case if he tries to explain to him that this is pretty much his usual reaction to crisis—freak out, flail about, make up a plan on the fly, and somehow manage to pull through just when it's almost over.

"Are you sure this is the place?" his dad asks, as he pulls to a stop in front of the abandoned station. "I think this whole area's condemned."

"Yeah, it is," Stiles agrees, as he fights with his seatbelt and spills form the car. "Derek likes it that way, keeps out unwanted visitors."

His father follows him out, clicking on a flashlight. He runs it across the ground in front of them, and there's a long streak trailing out from the doorway that cuts off abruptly.

"Is that blood?" John asks.

Stiles looks down, because he's practically standing in it, and it's definitely blood. "Oh god," he whispers, before he takes off running. He slams into the doors, noting as he does the already broken latch, and rushes down the steps.

"Stiles! Stiles, wait," his father calls after him. "God damn it, Stiles!"

He sees a stream of light bouncing off the walls as his dad follows him in, and gets lighted snapshots
of a scene that's not doing anything to reassure him. But Stiles has never hidden from anything, so he's not starting now. He reaches out along the wall until he finds the light switch, and presses it on.

His dad is in front of him in an instant, his gun out along with the flashlight, held on top of it as he checks for any sign of a threat.

Stiles doesn't bother to check. He can tell they're already too late—Derek's long gone, and so is whoever took him. There's just the blood left. It's spilled all along the bottom of the stairs and the wall to his left, and there's so much of it that Stiles is getting a bit dizzy just looking at it.

His father moves forward to check the train car and look down the abandoned tunnel but he's back in a moment, shaking his head. "It's clear," he says, before turning his attention to the wall.

There are six bullet holes in the wall, at first count. Stiles can imagine Derek had been standing back up against the wall when he'd been shot, rather like he'd been subjected to a firing squad. He frowns when he sees a bloody handprint on the ground a few feet from the wall, where Derek had probably tried to catch himself when he fell.

Stiles kneels down shakily, reaching out on some instinct he can't understand, and presses his own hand over the bloody palm print on the ground.

The world shifts the moment his hand makes contact, and there's a burst through the air like a sonic boom that sends waves rolling through the station, knocking him back against the ground. He presses his eyes shut and he can see flashes of men coming through the door, a burning pain in his chest and someone tugging at him. He hears someone calling his name.

When he opens his eyes, he's laid out spread eagle on the cold floor, and his father is kneeling above him looking panicked. "Stiles?" his dad calls. "Hey, look at me. What just happened?"

"I have no idea," Stiles says, his voice sounding rough, as he tries to push himself up. His dad won't let his arms out of his grasp. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Stiles…you were screaming," his dad tells him worriedly. "I felt…I don't know what I felt, but I'm getting you home."

"I need to be here," Stiles insists. "There was probably mountain ash in the blood, from the bullets. I probably just…activated it, or something."

It sounds like a lame excuse even to him, and Stiles is pretty sure these bullets had wolfsbane and not mountain ash, but he can't actually think of what else it could be.

"This isn't normal, Stiles," John says. "We can't just ignore it."

"It actually kinda is. Welcome to your new normal," Stiles tells him, as he finally disentangles himself from his father's hold and gets back to his feet.

"I don't think this falls under any definition of normal, Stiles," John says. "Not even yours."

Stiles doesn't look at him as he pulls out his cell phone.

"Stiles?" he says, irritated at being ignored. "Who are you calling?"

"Lydia," Stiles says, and it's only a second until she picks up.

"What's happening?" Lydia asks, and she sounds strangely frantic. "Stiles, I—are you alright?"
"I'm fine," Stiles says quickly. "But Derek's not. I need to know everything you've been able to translate."

"Where are you?" she asks sharply.

"The train station," Stiles says. "Lydia—"

"Jackson and I will be there," she says, and hangs up.

"Please tell me you didn't just invite a teenage girl to a crime scene," he says.

"You can't be the Sheriff right now," Stiles says quietly, glancing over at his father, hoping he'll get it. "If you try, this won't work."

"We can't just cover this up," his dad insists, as he walks back towards him.

Stiles has to fight down a hysterical laugh, because of course they can. Stiles has been doing it for almost a year—covering it up is easy, trying to explain the truth is what can't be done.

"Dad, look around, you call someone in on this and they won't just see a crime scene, they'll see a murder site!" he yells. "This much blood, no one human would have survived. But Derek's not dead, dad, he's not. I know he's not. Gerard would have left him here if he'd only been planning to kill him, and I'd know if he was dead—I just would—so he's alive, and we can't explain this, we can't—"

"Hey, come on, kiddo, it's gonna be okay," his dad says in concern, and Stiles clenches his hands as he pulls in air.

"No one can help us with this," Stiles says steadily. "We're on our own. Do you understand?"

Stiles watches the realization come into his father's eyes. "This is what you've been dealing with all this time, isn't it?"

"Yes," Stiles says quietly. "It's like...like living in another world, one that no one but you can see. I mean one minute you're sitting next to werewolves in Chemistry passing notes about the fate of the town and the next you're in the locker room and you have Greenberg going on and on about some weird orange cerumen he found in his ear that he really wants you to have a look at, and it's like culture shock, dad, it's like—"

"Hey, hey," his dad says softly, framing his face and forcing Stiles to look at him. "I understand." He waits until Stiles' unfocused eyes finally still and latch onto his. "But I need you to understand something, too. You're not alone in this world. Not anymore. I'm sorry you ever thought you were."

"So am I."

Stiles pulls away from his father in surprise, his eyes widening as he looks up to see Scott taking the stairs down to them, two at a time. "Scott, what—"

Scott reaches him and drags him into his arms. Stiles lets himself fall against him, bunching his hands in the back of Scott's jacket as he holds on. He can feel his heartbeat already steadying, and he closes his eyes. "How are you here?" he asks.

"Are you alright?" Scott demands, pulling back enough to look at him.

"What? Yeah, I'm okay. How did you even get here?" he asks.

"I heard you, Stiles," Scott says slowly, his voice brimming with concern. "I could hear you
"Right while we were trying to enjoy an all night movie marathon," Isaac says dryly, appearing behind Scott.

"What happened here?" Scott asks, stepping away as he glances across the floor. Stiles can see his eyes alight briefly before returning to normal. "Stiles?"

"Gerard's taken him, Scott," he says. "He's taken Derek."

Scott frowns, spinning in place as he takes in the scene. "Not just Gerard," he says, after a moment. "There were at least two others. They were armed with wolfsbane. A lot of it."

Isaac walks over to stand beside Scott. "There's a lot of blood," he says quietly.

"He's not dead," Stiles snaps.

"Stiles—" Scott starts.

"Until we know otherwise, we proceed under the idea that Derek is alive and being held somewhere," John interrupts calmly. "That's the only way to handle a case like this. Understood?"

"You're damn right he's alive," Erica says, as she comes rushing down the steps with Boyd right on her heels. "I can still feel him."

"Did Jackson call you?" Stiles asks, not sure whether or not it's a good thing to have them here. Scott and Isaac haven't been able to play nice with the other wolves for quite awhile, and he doesn't have time to act as mediator.

"You called us, Stiles," Erica says guilelessly, watching him carefully.

"We were hanging out at Erica's, when we heard your call," Boyd explains.

It takes Stiles a minute to realize they must mean they had heard him when he'd apparently been screaming. "Erica lives all the way across town," he says hesitantly. Scott's house is only a few blocks away, Scott and Isaac hearing him might be explained, but—

"Yeah, well, it sounded like you were right behind me," Erica says. "And I knew you were leading me here."

"It was like when we hear one of our pack howl," Boyd explains. "I didn't know you could do that."

"Stiles?" his dad prompts.

"What?" Stiles asks, glancing around to see everyone looking at him. "I didn't know I could do it either! I don't even know what I've done!"

"Yeah, I don't either, because I don't know if you could call that a howl," Isaac says wryly. "It sounded more like Little Red Riding Hood getting mauled than the Big Bad Wolf."

"You," Stiles says, pointing at Isaac, "we don't need. You can go."

"Stiles," his dad chides.

Scott reaches out and puts a hand on Stiles arm, and it causes that strange calm to come over him again. Stiles swallows hard, not sure what's happening to him. He has his suspicions that he's somehow made himself pack whether he meant to or not, but he never thought it would work this way for humans too. He shouldn't be able to feel them this way.

"Lydia and Jackson are here," Scott announces, and soon enough they're both coming down the steps.

Lydia is wearing a yellow dress and two-inch heels, looking like she's ready to head out on the town and not like she was just woken up at four in the morning. Jackson looks annoyingly well put together as well. Stiles realizes vaguely that he's the only one in his track pants and sleep shirt, though he'd thrown a hoodie on at least—even his dad had taken the time to put on his Sheriff's uniform. He never thought he'd feel underdressed for a rescue mission.

"What the hell's going on?" Jackson demands. "My ears are still ringing."

"You heard Stiles too?" Scott asks in surprise.

"Yeah," Jackson says, though he looks a lot more unconcerned about it than the others had. "Sounded like Stilinski was getting murdered."

Stiles recalls Lydia's voice when he called her earlier and frowns. "Lydia, did you hear me too?"

"No," Lydia says, though she looks shaken, and that's worrying enough. Things have to be bad, for her to let even a fraction of it show. "I just knew. I knew something was wrong."

"We can worry about that later. What are we going to do about Derek?" Erica demands suddenly. "Why would Gerard even want him? Peter killed Kate."

"I don't think this is about revenge for Gerard," Stiles explains. "Peter reminded me that Gerard wasn't healing quite right. And Peter would know, right? Because it happened to him, too. He was stuck in a comatose state for years, unable to get over that healing plateau. Not until he became Alpha."

"What are you saying exactly?" John asks.

"Derek bit Gerard—he bit him, and it didn't take right, but it didn't kill him either. And those are the only two choices, unless you're Lydia," Stiles says. "You either turn or you die. So he turned, he's just not healing. He's still sick and that's why he needs Derek."

"He kills the Alpha—" Lydia explains.

"—he becomes the Alpha," Stiles finishes. "And he'll heal."

"But if he kills the Alpha that turned him, won't that just make him human again?" Scott asks in confusion.

"Scott, I don't think that's how it works," Stiles says gently. "Derek just...he was just using that to get your help. I think it's just a myth. Like silver bullets."

"Then why keep him alive at all?" Jackson demands. "It's pretty obvious Derek didn't come out on top in this fight. Gerard could have killed him here."

"I have my suspicions about that," Stiles says, before turning to Lydia. "Did you get to work on the translation at all?"
"Enough to understand what it's for, but you're not going to like it," she says. "Most of it falls in line with your theory. It's a sacrificial ritual of an Alpha werewolf to increase the power of a Beta. Except there's one thing you didn't mention."

"Is this a good surprise or a bad surprise?" Stiles asks with a wince.

"There is no such thing as a good surprise," Lydia says. "The ritual is meant to take more than just the Alpha's power, it's meant to take his pack."

"That's what happens though, right?" Isaac asks. "The new Alpha inherits the pack?"

"Peter attempted to force Scott into his pack, but Scott was able to fight against it. Werewolves do still have some measure of free will," she explains. "This is something else—if it works the way it says it does, it would take that free will away."

"What if we're not part of his pack any longer?" Isaac asks.

"I'm not sure that will matter," Stiles says. "Maybe it won't include you and Scott, but it might, if it's powerful enough."

"And Peter," Lydia says. Her voice doesn't falter, but Stiles can tell from the way her back straightens that the idea frightens her. Peter is dangerous enough on his own—the thought of him as a weapon, in the hands of Gerard, is almost too horrifying to contemplate.

So Stiles doesn't mention that Derek's pack might also now include him. They all have enough to worry about.

"The only good news is that the ritual must be performed on a full moon," Lydia says. "That's why he didn't just kill Derek here."

"When's the next full moon?" his dad asks.

"Um," Stiles starts, before faltering. "Soon, I think?"

"Stiles, you should know this," Lydia says disapprovingly.

"I know the next full moon is August 2nd," he says defensively. "I just don't know what today is."

"That is what today is," Lydia says. "The full moon is tonight."

"We should call Allison," Scott says quickly. "If anyone would know how to find Gerard, it's her."

"That's sort of the problem with asking her," Stiles says.

Scott looks confused for a moment, before his expression turns almost devastated. "You think she already knows."

"I think if she does she won't tell, and if she doesn't, Chris does, but won't tell her," Stiles says. "Either way, we're not getting what we need from her. We should just leave them both out of this, and try to track Derek. Can you guys follow his scent? Try to find him that way?"

Scott nods, looking resolute. "Isaac and I will take care of it," he says, glancing at Erica, Boyd and Jackson. "Are you willing to work with us?"

Erica and Boyd nod but Jackson just snorts. "I'm staying with Lydia," he says.
Scott looks ready to fight him on it so Stiles steps between them. "That's a good idea," he says. "Derek's phone was still on as of an hour ago. It's probably a long shot, but maybe you and Lydia can go to Danny, see if there's any way for him to track Derek that way?"

Jackson nods grudgingly, and Stiles turns back to the others. "Good," he says. "So let's find him."

Everyone starts to scatter, and John lets out a sharp whistle. The wolves all freeze and then turn to him in surprise.

"Hold it, all of you!" John shouts. He points at the werewolves. "I don't care if you're supernatural creatures of the night with super healing, you're all still kids. If you find him you do not approach alone, you call me, and we'll come up with a plan. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Stilinski," Scott says obligingly.

"You got it, Sheriff," Erica says with a wink, before giving a little salute. "I'd call you any time."

The werewolves, except for Jackson, disappear up the steps, before Stiles can freak out about Erica's not so subtle innuendos about his father. His dad looks a little traumatized too, but that's pretty much par for the course when it comes to the Erica-effect.

Lydia steps up to him and hands him a folded sheet of paper. "The details I've been able to gather about the ritual," she explains. "And don't think I didn't notice you never said what you would be doing during all of this."

"Lydia—" Stiles starts.

"Just don't do anything stupid," she orders, before grabbing Jackson's hand and leading him back up the steps.

His dad comes up behind him, and gives him a gentle push towards the stairs as well. "Come on," he says. "Let's get you out of here."

They climb back into the cruiser, but his dad stills after he puts the key in the ignition, his hand hovering beside it without turning. "Why do I get the feeling we're not really leaving the Argents out of this?" his dad asks quietly, because even after everything, his dad still understands him better than anyone except maybe Lydia.

"Because there's no way that Chris doesn't know exactly where his father is," Stiles says.

His dad nods. "I'll talk to him."

"We can't risk it," Stiles says, his voice steady. "We can't force him to talk, and if he doesn't help us then we've tipped our hand."

"Stiles, I can't just sit on this," his dad says.

"He'll do what he can to protect his father, but he wouldn't help him with something like this," Stiles says. "Which means he doesn't know about Derek yet. We know more than him for once, but if you go at this like it's an official case we completely lose our edge."

"What are you suggesting?" John asks tiredly.

"He told us both to come over any time—" Stiles starts.

"And you told him you would rather have a root canal, without the anesthesia," his father reminds
"I stand by that, which is why you need to be the one to accept the invitation, and drag me along," Stiles explains. "And if I happen to get lost on the way to the bathroom and end up in Chris's office, well, that sort of thing happens. You know I've got no sense of direction."

"It's barely five in the morning, we won't be able to arrange to meet for at least a few hours if we're not going to get him suspicious. We don't have that kind of time, Stiles," John says gently. "That was a lot of blood."

"Derek will heal," Stiles says, and even though he tries to keep his tone detached, he's not quite managing it. "Gerard's going to keep Derek alive until the full moon, so we have until sunset to find them. We have to play this right." He takes a shaky breath. "I want to find him. I don't want him with that psycho for one more second than he has to be, but if we give ourselves away and Gerard knows we're coming for him then—"

"Then he might cut his losses and kill Derek ahead of schedule," his dad finishes.

"Exactly," Stiles says. "He doesn't need the ritual to become Alpha, it's just a bonus. We have to let him think he's winning, or else we'll lose."

"I'll make the arrangements with Chris in a couple of hours," his father says. "Until then, I can check over recent police reports and look for anything suspicious. If he has other hunters with him, they might have been noticed. With any luck, we might track him the old fashioned way."

"That would be great, but first, I think we need to see Deaton," Stiles says.

"Deaton? Why?" his dad asks.

"So I can ask him what's happening to me," Stiles explains, and pulls back the sleeve of his hoodie. The blood veins at his wrist have turned luminescent, glowing faintly gold beneath his skin.
"Stiles," his dad says shakily, "you're glowing."

"Yes," Stiles agrees.

"Why are you glowing?" he demands.

"I don't know! Not like it's a common occurrence," Stiles says. "It's been happening since whatever happened at the train station."

"And you're just mentioning it now?" he snaps.

"Derek's missing! We had more important things to discuss!" Stiles says, before slouching in his seat and roughly running a hand over his hair. "But I think this is related, somehow. I think maybe...I think I saw Derek get taken."

"You saw—" his father lets out a steadying breath. "Are you telling me you're psychic now?"

Stiles snorts. "No, of course not," he says, but then his eyes widen. "Oh, god. I hope not. That never ends well in fiction. I mean, makes for a great story, but who really wants to walk around seeing horrible things happen all the time? I get enough of that right in front of me, thank you very much, I do not need the instant replay in my head."

"Christ, kid," John sighs.

"Look, that's not gonna happen to me," Stiles decides. "It's something else, and I have a feeling Deaton will know what. He's been holding out on me for quite awhile, and I've been letting him because he can get me books you can't exactly check out at the local library, and I didn't want to piss him off."

"Alright," his dad says, starting the car and heading towards the vet's. "But I hope you're telling me everything, kiddo."

They don't say much else on the ride to Deaton's. Stiles itches absently at his wrists, feeling a strange tingling warmth, spreading ever quicker up his arms. His hands are glowing lightly now as well, though it's faint enough it would go unnoticed in the light.

It occurs to Stiles after they arrive that he probably should have tried to call Deaton first, since it's only half-past five in the morning—but the vet's car is there, anyway. Sometimes Stiles' wonders if maybe Deaton doesn't sleep.

He grabs his backpack and his dad ushers him inside. Deaton comes out to meet them as soon as the welcome bell dings. "Sheriff," he says in greeting. "Stiles. Is Derek alright?"
"No," Stiles says. "And I don't think I am either." He pulls up the sleeves of his hoodie and holds his arms out. "You wouldn't know anything about this, would you?"

Deaton looks surprised, for Deaton—of course there's actually very little change in his expression at all, but Stiles is getting good at reading people with good poker faces. "Come back," he says, before turning on his heel quickly. "Up on the table, Stiles."

Stiles only hesitates for a moment. Deaton is a vet, so Stiles still has some hesitation about him being the pack doctor, but at least when it's the werewolves he can laugh it off. He swallows hard and shrugs out of his backpack, before jumping up on the table. His dad hovers anxiously behind him, but what's really bothering Stiles is that Deaton looks concerned.

"Oh god," he says. "It's bad, isn't it? Am I going to explode? Like some spontaneous combustion urban myth? Am I going to ascend to a higher plane? Am I—"

"Stiles, I need you to calm down," Deaton says, grabbing his wrists and tugging until Stiles looks up to meet his eyes. "Close your eyes, and take deep breaths."

Stiles tries, but his inhales are shaky at best. Deaton's grip tightens on his wrists. "Remember I told you about that spark?" Deaton asks. "I need you to imagine it now, and I need you to control it. You're letting it overwhelm you."

"I tried to take a meditation class once," Stiles says. "I got kicked out in less than five minutes. I was told that was a record. So I think we're going to need to come up with something else."

Suddenly Deaton's grip on him is dislodged, and Stiles opens his eyes to see his father pushing his way into his place. He gently places his hands over Stiles wrists. "It's okay, Stiles," he says. "Just try to do what he says. Don't think of it like meditation, think of it like coming out of a panic attack, okay?"

Stiles nods, pressing his eyes shut tighter and trying to reign in all his worry and fear, trying to breathe until the panic fades, until all that matters is taking air out and in.

"You can open your eyes," his dad says.

Stiles looks down and he's stopped glowing. He flexes his hands and glances over at Deaton. "If that's related to my focus," he says, "we're gonna have problems. Focus is not my strong suit, and if I'm going to be lighting up like a Christmas tree every time I have a Chemistry test, it might draw attention."

"This kind of reaction in someone like you has a very direct correlation, it's not going to happen at the drop of a hat," Deaton assures him. "I'm assuming Derek's in trouble?"

"Gerard's taken him," Stiles agrees. "He wants to sacrifice him on the full moon. He's apparently even more psychotic than we were giving him credit for."

"Then it's as I suspected," Deaton nods. "You're Derek's emissary."

"Derek's emissary, yes, of course," Stiles says. "Why don't you ever start with an explanation that makes sense?"

"Why don't you tell me how this started?" Deaton asks instead.

"We went to look for Derek. He was already gone, but there was a lot of blood, and I… I sort of touched it? Which, okay, in hindsight sounds kinda creepy," Stiles says, scrunching up his nose. "I
actually have no idea why I even did that."

"And what happened, when you did?" Deaton asks.

Stiles can feel his father tense beside him, picking up on the same thing as him. Deaton's asking, but it's obvious he already knows.

"I think I felt what he felt, I saw flashes of things, and it wasn't pleasant, so I guess I started screaming," Stiles explains. "I wasn't really, you know, all that present? I don't remember doing it."

"You were definitely screaming," his dad says quietly, the lines around his eyes tight.

"Yeah, ah, anyway, the wolves heard it too, all the way across town," Stiles explains. "They're trying to track Derek now."

Deaton nods leaning back against the counter as he watches Stiles. "I've suspected a bond was forming between you and Derek for awhile now. Just like the actual pack, emissaries are bound to their alphas by blood. In performing that kind of blood rite, you've cemented the bond, and now your power is expanding. Usually the chosen Alpha would be here to help you control it, but with Derek missing, you're going to have to learn to manage it on your own."

"Can't Scott help me until we get Derek back?" Stiles asks. "He has before."

"Scott?" Deaton says in surprise.

"Yeah, he and Isaac heard me screaming too," Stiles says. "They came to help, and sometimes Scott is able to do that Alpha thing, where he makes me calm down?"

"What Alpha thing that makes you calm down?" Deaton asks intently, pushing off the counter to study him carefully.

Stiles frowns, shrugging a bit. "I never really thought about it, I guess. It's just, sometimes when he touches me, I feel better. I don't know. It…went away for awhile, or, I mean, I guess Scott just didn't really touch me anymore, and then Derek…then it was like, Derek could make me feel better too. He stopped a panic attack once, just by touching my wrists. But it was probably just his freaky pain-sucking abilities, right? I mean, that makes sense, doesn't it?"

"That's not quite how it works," Deaton says, and he looks unsettled, which is never a good sign. "I think you've somehow bonded with them both."

"Bonded?" Stiles asks. "Is that—that's the emissary thing? I read a bit about it, but not much is known, or written about it in any case. So I'm gonna need the SparkNotes version. Because from everything I could find, emissaries could only be emissaries to actual Alphas."

"Scott has always been a special case," Deaton explains. "He may still be a Beta physically, but he has a number of Alpha characteristics. I've always suspected he might become a True Alpha."

"A True Alpha?" Stiles asks. "What, like a Highlander, 'there can be only one' sort of deal?"

"As in, I believe he might become an Alpha, without having to take the power by killing another Alpha," Deaton clarifies.

"Oh, so the opposite of Highlander, then," Stiles says. "That's—okay, that's interesting, and it might have been nice to know that was even a possibility. But I still don't know what an emissary even is or why I started glowing."
"You already know what an emissary is, Stiles, because you are one," Deaton says. "I would guess that you have Druid blood. From your mother's side, most likely, as I have never sensed anything from the Sheriff." Deaton glances over at John, who frowns in concern.

"Druid blood," Stiles echoes. "You're saying I'm Celtic?"

"Druids, that's something to do with trees, right?" John asks. "What does that have to do with any of this?"

"Druid means 'oak-knower,'" Stiles says, before Deaton can. "They were involved in a lot of human sacrifices, mostly."

"'Wise-Oak,' actually, and they were philosophers," Deaton contradicts lightly. "True Druids never committed sacrifices. They were the people tasked with helping werewolves control the shift, and that tradition has remained. Most well established packs have what we call an emissary, someone of druid blood, who is able to use their magic and wisdom to help protect the pack. This was once my role in the Hale pack, when Talia Hale was Alpha."

"Wow," Stiles says. "Actual answers, and it didn't kill you. Sure would have come in handy, I don't know, a year ago!"

"Stiles," his dad warns.

"No, he's right," Deaton says softly, before turning back to Stiles. "I was protecting myself, and for that, I apologize. I did not realize you had the potential to become a full-fledged emissary at first, or I would have told you this sooner. I just thought you only had a spark, enough magic to work mountain ash."

"That is all I can do," Stiles agrees. "Well, that, and apparently I have the ability to turn into a human nightlight."

Deaton shakes his head. "The bonds you're creating between the packs is a magic that goes much deeper than anything you've done with mountain ash," he says. "It's an ancient power you've been drawing on, to do something like that. Usually it's something that can only be done with years of training, by druids with far purer blood than yours."

"Pure-bloods aren't so special," Stiles says. "Us muggles are clever."

"Stiles," his dad sighs.

"I know, I'm sorry," Stiles says. "But he walked right into that."

Deaton just watches him for a moment, and then carries on like he hasn't spoken. "In any case, an emissary becomes bound to an Alpha, and that's how they create a connection to a pack," Deaton explains. "Sometimes they interact solely with the Alpha, and that's how they create a connection to a pack," Deaton explains. "Sometimes they interact solely with the Alpha, and sometimes they take a more active role in the pack, but the bond is always the same. It is built on the mutual respect of the druid and the alpha, and can only be created if both parties are willing. But it cannot ever be undone, neither can ever replace the other. They are bound unto death."

"Alright, hold it for a minute, cause I'm really hoping I'm misunderstanding the situation here," John says. "But just to be clear—my son, my under age son, has just been bound to Derek Hale until death, and this was something you not only knew could happen, but actively encouraged? And yet you didn't, at any time, feel you should maybe warn them about it?"

"There are no downsides to having a bond of this type. It can be as much or as little as they want,"
Deaton explains. "There are no rules of distance or proximity, though of course contact is encouraged and helps ease the pack bonds—which Stiles is already discovering."

"That answered absolutely none of my questions," John snaps.

"Welcome to my life," Stiles tells him.

Deaton glances back to Stiles with a sigh. "The trouble with me giving you answers here is that I've never known something like this to happen. You've obviously become Derek's emissary," he says. "But I'm starting to suspect you were Scott's, first. That isn't supposed to be possible. An emissary always only has one pack, one Alpha."

"So I'm a two-timing emissary, is what you're saying," Stiles says in disbelief.

Deaton looks like he's going to protest for a moment, and then his expression reverts back to its normal non-expression. "Essentially, yes," he agrees.

"And all of that stuff you told me about my loyalties being divided, about bringing the packs together 'into one'—you couldn't have just said, hey, look, Stiles, you're basically Merlin—"

"You're nothing like Merlin," Deaton interjects calmly.

"And you have the power to lead—"

"To guide," Deaton corrects.

"—all the werewolf packs, apparently, into one big happy family as their emissary—"

"I didn't realize you had begun a bond with either of them at the time," Deaton explains. "I certainly didn't think you could bond with them both. I merely thought if you could finally choose one of them, the other would follow—"

"If you suspected I was even slightly emissary-inclined, how could you not know I was Scott's? We used to sleep in the same sleeping bag!" Stiles cries. "I mean, it wasn't like we didn't each have our own. We just got cold easily and we didn't really like the dark, so, you know...my point is, we had zero boundaries. Like, if I'm some magical Merlin—"

"Again, Stiles, you're not—"

"—and he's the werewolf version of King Arthur, there's gonna be bonding," Stiles says. "We practically came pre-bonded, okay? We're superglued!"

Deaton lets out a harassed sigh, because Stiles has always been the only one to get his serene expression to crack. "And Derek?" he asks.

"Derek's just...Derek" Stiles starts uncertainly. "Or, Morgana, I guess, if you mean who is he in the metaphor. I'm referring of course to the recent BBC adaptation and not the original legend, but I'm pretty sure Morgana goes evil in that too, so maybe it doesn't apply. To be honest, I kinda lost interest after season two."

"Stiles, I'm not sure—" Deaton starts, looking overwhelmed.

"Just...move on," John suggests tiredly. "Don't try and make sense of it."

Stiles would be offended, but this probably will save them time. "Yeah, you probably shouldn't," he agrees. "Sorry. I ramble when I'm anxious."
"It's not just when you're anxious," his dad says.

"Enough from the peanut gallery!" Stiles points at him. "This is why you've never been invited to the supernatural pow-wows before."

"Typically, emissaries are only bound by blood," Deaton says, still choosing to ignore their bickering. "You said you came into contact with Derek's blood right before the connection was made, and while it's not how it's usually done, it makes sense. I imagine the reason it was somewhat…traumatic, is due to Derek's current circumstances. The forming of a bond is supposed to be pleasant, a moment of shared thoughts."

Stiles pales as he realizes what Deaton means. Derek’s in pain, and when the connection had snapped in place—Stiles had felt that pain himself.

"Stiles," his dad says gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. Stiles looks at him, startled, only for his dad to nod down. He glances down and his blood is starting to glow again around his wrists and faintly through the palms of his hands. He presses his eyes shut and tries to calm down until it stops.

He manages okay, but Deaton doesn't give him long to collect himself, before he continues. "In any case, that only explains how you bonded to Derek," Deaton says. "This has never happened to you with Scott, has it?"

"We cut open our hands and became blood brothers when we were like nine years old," Stiles says, after a moment. "Think that counts?"

"You did what?" John demands. "Stiles, I told you no—"

"It was seven years ago, dad," Stiles interrupts. "I'm pretty sure the statute of limitations on tomfoolery has run its course."

Deaton glances between them with something like amusement. "I've never heard of it being done that way," he says. "But if you accepted him already as your blood brother, your magic might have recognized that. I suppose it's possible, and it really isn't so different from what is usually done. Traditionally, the connection is formed by a bite."

"A bite?" Stiles asks in surprise. "Emissaries are werewolves?"

"Emissaries cannot become werewolves," he says, shaking his head. "The bite has a very different effect on those like us." Deaton rolls up his sleeve to reveal a bite scar along the edge of his wrist. "It's an act of trust, for an emissary to allow themselves to be bitten by an Alpha. And it must be willingly given, or it won't work. This is how a blood connection is normally formed."

"Is it always on the wrist?" Stiles asks faintly.

"Yes," Deaton says, glancing over at him. "Why?"

"Oh, that bastard," Stiles whispers, giving a disbelieving laugh. He remembers Peter in that garage, his teeth hovering over his wrist, asking, not taking. Because it must be willingly given—and Peter hadn't wanted to make him his Beta, he'd wanted to make him his emissary.

Peter has always known exactly what Stiles is.

"Stiles?" his dad asks in concern.

"Nothing, just…a lot is starting to make sense to me now," Stiles says. "I bet that sort of bite doesn't
kill, either, right? And it doesn’t turn you. Just how many exceptions to the turn or you die rule are there? Maybe Gerard’s not even a werewolf. For all we know, he turns into Tinker Bell whenever someone claps."

"Gerard is not like you or Lydia, I can assure you,” Deaton says. "He will have turned, if he is still alive."

"Yeah, but are you certain he’s a werewolf?” Stiles demands. "Sometimes it reflects who you are—that’s what you said when Jackson became a Kanima, right? Jackson may be a douchenozzle extraordinaire—"

"Language!” his dad snaps, because his priorities are apparently broken.

"—but he’s not even half as terrible as Gerard,” Stiles finishes.

Deaton watches him thoughtfully. "You do have a point."

"Oh my god! No! You were supposed to reassure me! What the hell.” Stiles hides his face with his hands. "Please tell me he’s not going to turn into the dragon thing Scott said Jackson was becoming, because I cannot handle that. Slaying a dragon is nowhere on my Bucket List—it’d have to be the only thing on there, if it was."

"I don’t think that kind of change will be possible. That requires great power,” Deaton assures him. "I can’t imagine Gerard is even healed enough to shift into his beta form."

Stiles glances over at him with narrow eyes. "What exactly did your little miracle pills do to him?"

"They were meant to kill him,” Deaton says simply.

John winces. "Yeah, and don’t think we won’t be talking about that at some point too," he says. "But I think Stiles meant more along the lines of, what did your little pills actually do?"

"Yeah, that,” Stiles agrees, motioning to his father. "We all got briefed on the plan, if not until well after it was carried out. Which, by the way, you could have trusted me, you know. I would have been totally on board with—"

"Stiles,” his dad says disapprovingly.

"—weakening him just enough that he could safely be arrested,” Stiles finishes with false cheer. "Except he went wandering off into the wilderness leaking black gunk like it was motor oil and was never to be seen again. So pretty much a failure in every way."

"Yes, that was…unexpected,” Deaton agrees.

"Unexpected? Meaning you have no idea what actually happened, do you?” John sighs.

Deaton glances at John like he’s just now noticing the similarities between father and son. "I imagine the dose was not high enough to be fatal,” he says. "But without more information, I can’t say any more than that."

"Meaning you have no idea what actually happened,” John repeats.

"Okay,” Stiles sighs, hopping off the table to grab his backpack. He pulls out the Argent book. "If we don’t know what happened, maybe we can at least make sense of what’s going to happen."

He plops the book down on the vet’s table and Deaton’s eyes go bright. "Where did you get this?” he
Stiles glances at his father, before reaching up to nervously scratch at his neck. His father didn't need to know about books mysteriously appearing in his bedroom—he'd already gotten a lecture from Derek. "I found it," he says. "Uh, out by the Hale Estate."

Deaton glances at him doubtfully but doesn't call him on the lie. Surprisingly, his dad doesn't seem to catch it. Stiles pulls Lydia's notes from his hoodie and unfolds them, spreading it out on the metal table beside the book. "Lydia already mostly translated the ritual we think Gerard is enacting," he says. "We're pretty sure about it, since this is an Argent book and he's got to be keeping Derek alive for something."

He doesn't mention that this book practically falling into his hands was probably not a coincidence either. He knows whoever left it for him wanted him to find that ritual.

"He wants Derek's Alpha power," Deaton says, as he scans the ritual. "This requires two lives to be sacrificed in addition to the Alpha."

"What?" Stiles says, eyes going wide as he glances down at Lydia's perfect handwriting. "You think she would have mentioned that bit. I didn't expect any more surprises."

He leans over to read Lydia's rather detached description of the ritual:

*Two additional sacrifices will be needed at the onset, throats slit. Their blood will be used to create a closed circle.*

*The Alpha is to be poisoned with wolfsbane and bound spread eagle in the circle by wolfsbane spun rope.*

*Supposedly the blood circle will temporarily muffle the Alpha's connection to his pack, so when he is killed and the power-transfer completed, the new Alpha can take his place seamlessly without the connection ever needing to be severed and re-formed.*

"Lovely," Stiles says in disbelief. "And these are supposed to be the good guys?"

"Books like this were not meant to be how-to manuals," Deaton explains. "It was meant to catalog things that they had encountered and ways to counteract it. It is strange that they have the entire ritual recorded in this way."

"It belonged to the Argents, enough said," Stiles reminds him. "Don't suppose there's the counteracting part in there somewhere?"

"Yes. Stop the ritual before the Alpha is killed," Deaton says.

"Of course," Stiles snaps. "Why didn't I think of that?"

His dad loudly clears his throat. "Hey, I'm going to head out to the cruiser, call in some favors, see what I can find out," John says. "I'm not going to be much help with all this ritual stuff, but maybe I can find something out about where Gerard's been. Stiles? I want you to stay right here."

"Huh?" Stiles says distractedly. "Yeah, sure."

"Stiles," his dad snaps.

Stiles glances over at him. "Dad, I'll be here," he promises. "We're in this together now, right?"
"Right," John says, relaxing a bit. He nods at Deaton and then heads out the doors.

"He seems to be handling this remarkably well," Deaton says.

"Tell that to my window," Stiles says.

Deaton raises an eyebrow, but doesn't ask. "And how are you handling it, Stiles?"

"I can't even think about any of this right now," he says. "I have to save Derek, then I can freak out."

"You know how fond I am of Scott," Deaton starts, and Stiles nearly laughs, because how was he supposed to pick up on that when Deaton had less expressions than Derek? "But I can't say I'm not pleased that you've bonded with Derek."

"Derek needs me more than Scott," Stiles says, and he realizes as he does that it's true. He doesn't say how much he needs Derek, too, but he figures Deaton probably already knows considering the fact that Stiles has started to literally light up whenever he thinks about him.

"Yes, I believe he does," Deaton agrees. "I made a promise to his mother a long time ago that I would look out for him, but I could never be his emissary. He doesn't trust me."

"You think he trusts me?" Stiles asks incredulously.

"This," Deaton says, tapping on his wrist, where a slight glow still flickers, "wouldn't have been possible, if he didn't."

"Does he know?" Stiles asks quietly. "Does he know what I am?"

"I'm not even convinced Derek knows what an emissary really is," Deaton says gently. "Talia's pack consisted entirely of family—that's unusual, these days. She trusted me completely, but understood the others would never accept an outsider. I was her emissary, but never truly pack, and I never met any of the other Hales. That was the nature of our particular bond, so Derek and I never formally met until he returned here."

"And you thought you'd just continue to leave him in the dark?" Stiles asks.

"You need to understand something, Stiles," Deaton says. "An emissary's greatest weapon is their secrets—without them, we're nothing. It's the only way we stay safe."

"You said it yourself, the bond can be as much or as little as you want, right?" Stiles asks. "Well, I didn't just bond with Derek. I felt it open to all of them, including Scott and even Isaac. I don't see secrets doing any of us any good, and I don't think I could shut them out now if I tried."

"That will either make you very, very strong," Deaton says, "or extremely vulnerable."

"I already got the cautionary tale about Emily from Derek," Stiles sighs. "I understand the risks."

Deaton looks at him in surprise. "Emily," he repeats. "Emily DeWitt?"

"You knew her?" Stiles asks, even though it makes so much sense he doesn't know why he didn't figure it out himself. Emily was a Hale at the end, of course Deaton would have known about her.

"Yes, I knew Emily," Deaton says. "I advised Talia not to take her in."

Stiles looks up with a glare. He always thought Deaton was the kind that would take a risk to help someone, despite his penchant for keeping all his secrets. He can't see him being so cruel to someone
"You know how I said an emissary's bond had to be willing?" Deaton asks. "That wasn't strictly 
true."

"Let me guess, you were being vague and misleading," Stiles says. "I'm shocked."

"There is no way for a werewolf to initiate an unwilling bond, but for a human, there is a way to bind 
a druid, to put us under thrall," Deaton says reluctantly. "But it's rarely done and few know how."

"Gerard Argent knows how," Stiles says with certainty.

Deaton doesn't deny it. "Even if he could, now that you're officially an emissary, he can't control 
you," he assures him. "And he wouldn't dare come after me."

"Derek said Emily was the Argent's slave, but it was more than just that, wasn't it?" he asks. "She 
was under their thrall?"

"Yes," Deaton says. "She claimed the bond was broken when the hunters with her were killed, but I 
always suspected that wasn't the case."

"You think she was bound to Gerard," Stiles realizes.

"Emily was clever, and she knew how to hide. Distance allowed her to fight the bond," Deaton says. 
"I wanted to help her run as far as she could, but Gerard was always going to find her. It's why I 
advised Talia against taking her in. It was as good as a declaration of war."

"You're actually blaming the fire on her," Stiles accuses.

"I think if it hadn't been Emily, it would have been something else, but she was the tipping point," 
Deaton says. "Gerard has always wanted to get rid of the Hales. They were everything he said 
werewolves weren't, and because of that they were a threat. His son was already beginning to 
sympathize with their kind."

"So instead of going after the werewolves that were actually a threat to innocent people, he was 
going after the ones that were a threat to him," Stiles realizes sickly.

"Gerard has never been anything but a soldier in a war," Deaton says. "He would have had no 
purpose if there was peace."

Stiles is already determined to save Derek from Gerard—but he feels his anxiety rising up and up as 
he realizes it's not just Derek's life at stake. It's all of them. Gerard with this much power would 
destroy them all.

The glow creeps back into his hands and he clenches his fists, trying to push it back down.

"You said he couldn't control me, but that's not true, is it? He can't control me while Derek lives, but 
this ritual, it transfers pack," Stiles says. "Well, I'm pack. So if this actually works, I'm going to be 
stuck with him, too."

"Perhaps not," Deaton says, giving a faint smile. "Unlike the rest of the pack, you don't have a single 
bond, you have Scott to fall back on. It's unlikely Gerard would be able to control you, at least not 
fully. But I suppose I should have learned better by now than to present anything as certain, and I 
don't know how long two separate bonds can last."
"It's all moot anyway," Stiles decides. "No way am I letting Derek die."

"No, I don't suppose you will," Deaton says, grinning faintly. "But saving him is only the start."

"You think I'm going to have to choose between them," Stiles realizes. "I'm going to have to pick between Derek and my best friend."

"I honestly don't know," Deaton says. "I truly believe Scott is destined to become a True Alpha, and I had thought, at the beginning, you might someday become his emissary."

"But?" Stiles says, sensing it coming.

"But all you did was come into contact with Derek's blood, when he wasn't even there, and you were able to forge one of the strongest connections I've ever seen," Deaton says. "So it's like I said, Stiles." The vet carefully meets his eyes. "I've been at this too long to be certain of anything."
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

So sorry there was no update last week you guys! Halloween parties and some unpleasant dentistry all conspired to keep me from my computer. I should hopefully be back on track for next week, but I already know the next chapter is going to run a little long, so it might take some extra time (a lot is already written though, so maybe not!). I want to say this story should be done within five more chapters, but the way they've been going over my estimates it's probably closer to ten—I'm still hoping to have it finished by chapter thirty though!

Stiles wanders back out into the reception area, fairly certain he's not going to get anything more out of Deaton—whether Deaton knows more, or not. His phone starts ringing before he makes it to the door, and he pulls it out to see Scott's name. He answers it before heading out, holding his breath as he does, trying to prepare himself for the worst.

"Have you found him?" he demands, the minute he accepts the call.

"Sorry, Stiles," Scott says, sounding tired. "We think they put him in a car right out the door. There's really no trail to follow. We're still looking, though, okay? We've divided the county into quadrants. We're going to find him."

Stiles nods his agreement, before realizing Scott can't see him. "Right, yeah, we will."

"Where are you now?" Scott asks.

"I had to get Deaton's help with something," he says. "I was having some kind of reaction to all this. It has to do with the way I'm able to handle mountain ash."

"What did he say?" Scott asks anxiously. "You're okay, right?"

Stiles considers telling him that they might have accidentally been mystically bonded due to their weirdly close childhood friendship, and also he might have accidentally mystically bonded to a certain sourwolf for reasons unknown, but it just doesn't seem like the kind of conversation one should have over the phone.

"I'm fine," Stiles says, instead. "It was nothing."

"Okay," Scott says, in a way that means that he doesn't buy it for a second. "What are you going to do now? You're not out looking for him alone, are you?"

"My dad pretty much refuses to let me get more than twenty feet away," Stiles says wryly. "So I don't think that's gonna happen."

"Okay, so...?" Scott prompts, starting to sound frustrated. "Stiles, I want to help."

"You can't help with this part," Stiles tells him. "I'm going to Allison's."

"I thought you weren't—I thought you didn't trust them?" he asks quietly.
"I don't, that's why I'm not going to ask for the information I want," Stiles says. "I'm going to try and find it."

"Why didn't you tell me that's what you planned?" Scott asks after a moment.

Stiles sighs. "I wanted you to have plausible deniability."

"Then why are you telling me now?" he asks.

"Because it doesn't feel right, and I suck at lying to you," he says with a slight laugh. "It doesn't feel like a plan, if you're not in on it. I don't know how you managed to do it."

"Stiles," Scott says gently. "I was trying to keep you safe. That's how I could do it. I didn't tell Allison, either."

Scott couldn't tell Allison because she'd been in the middle of a psychotic break, and probably would have stabbed him in the chest a few times, so Stiles figures it isn't exactly the same thing.

But still, he appreciates the thought.

"Just…Allison wouldn't do this," Scott says. "I know she wouldn't."

"Because she's never tried to kill Derek before?" Stiles asks. "Does she still think he bit her mother for no good reason?"

"I—it's her mom, Stiles. She doesn't need to know what she did," Scott says.

"She sort of does, if it means keeping her from some bloody revenge trip," Stiles says. "Look, I don't think she's working with Gerard, okay? He tried to kill her, too. But Chris knows something, for sure. And I don't think he's going to just hand over his dad to us, even after all he's done. So I'm going to skip the formalities, and not ask."

"How are you going to do that?" he asks.

"I'm going to find evidence, somehow, I don't know," Stiles sighs. "It's a work in progress, okay?"

"Just be careful," Scott warns. "I don't think Mr. Argent would hurt you, but…"

"My dad will be with me, he can't touch us," Stiles says. "Just…keep looking, okay?"

"I won't stop," Scott assures him. "I will find him."

"Yeah, thanks, buddy," Stiles says, hanging up the call as he pushes out the doors. He drops down into the passenger seat of the cruiser beside his dad.

"Got it, Maria," John says, finishing up a call on his radio, before clicking it off and glancing at Stiles. "Everything good?"

"Scott called, no sign of Derek or Gerard yet," Stiles says. "How about you? Find anything out?"

"There was one thing that caught my attention," his dad says. "Guy rented a room at Beacon Motel for a night, never checked out. They went to check the room and all of his stuff was there, but there's no sign of him. Coincidently, the 'stuff' left behind happened to be a whole lot of guns and some very strange custom-made bullets."

Stiles frowns. "Were they checked in under their real name or an alias?"
"Guy's name is Andy Mason, seems to check out. And get this, his last known place of employment is Argent Arms."

"They named their company *Argent Arms*?" Stiles asks in disbelief.

"Not actually the most relevant part of that, Stiles," his dad says.

"Yeah, no, I know, but still," Stiles says. "Leaving a trail though? That's sloppy, for them. The Argent's only hire professionals. You thinking foul play?"

"You tell me," he says. "Your little gang know anything about a missing Hunter?"

"We're not the supernatural mafia, you know," Stiles says defensively. "We only ever fight in self-defense. Mostly there's just a lot of running away from things that want to kill us."

"I know, I'm sorry," he says. He runs a hand through his hair and turns to look back out the window. "I called Chris. Told him I can't even sleep, I'm terrified to let you out of my sight. Asked if I could stop by and he could give me a little more advice about protective measures for the house."

"Nice," Stiles says appreciatively. "And you wonder where I learned to lie."

"None of that's exactly a lie, Stiles," his dad says.

Stiles winces, before biting at his lip. This is exactly why he had kept it from his father for so long—he had so much to worry about already, he'd wanted to protect him from this for as long as he could. "I'm sorry," he says.

"You didn't cause any of this," John says firmly. "I hope you know that."

"Yeah I know," Stiles says. It's mostly true, except he watches so much science fiction and he's always found the idea of parallel universes fascinating—sometimes he can't help but think that night he dragged Scott into the woods was the turning point. He wonders how different things might be, if he hadn't.

Except he knows it goes much further than that. Laura Hale would still have been dead in that forest, whether they went looking for her or not.

"I know I haven't said it, but I hope you know…" Stiles starts haltingly. "I mean, thanks, for doing this. I know it's a lot to ask considering you're just figuring this all out, and I know you don't know Derek, and you didn't have to listen to me—"

"I will always be there when you need me," John cuts in. "I thought you knew that, or I would have told you sooner."


"I'm safe when you're safe," his dad snaps. "You want to protect me, kiddo? Protect yourself. Cause I won't survive losing you, I can promise you that."

Stiles stays silent for the rest of the ride. He doesn't really know what to say to that, because he knows it won't help to explain to his dad that he feels the same way. It's strange to think how destructive love can be. He'd seen what losing his mother had done to his father firsthand—sometimes he wonders if that's not why he fixated on Lydia to the exclusion of everyone else.

He'd kept her on a pedestal where she couldn't really hurt him.
He knows that Derek is far more dangerous for him than she ever was, and not just because his claws were a little more literal than Lydia's.

"We're here," his dad says, as he parks in front of the Argent's. "You got a plan?"

"Just keep Chris busy," Stiles says. "I just need a quick look in his office."

"I don't approve of this," John sighs.

"Okay, let's wait for the warrant," Stiles says. "When they ask for a reason, tell them 'suspicion of harboring a werewolf.'"

"I don't need the reminder that there's not much else we can do here," John says tightly, glancing at Stiles. "But we could try trusting them."

"Except that we can't trust them," Stiles says. "That's the whole problem."

"I still don't like it," he sighs.

"Allison is my friend," Stiles says. "Well. Sort of. She's friend-adjacent, anyway, so I'm not exactly enjoying myself, either. I just don't think we have any other options. We need to know if Chris is hiding Gerard, and if he is I really don't think he'd tell us, and if he isn't and he told us he wasn't, I probably wouldn't believe him, and I'd waste time thinking he was guilty anyway."

"When did you get so cynical?" his dad asks.

*Eight years ago,* Stiles thinks, but can't bring himself to say it out loud. He climbs out of the car without answering. He's pretty sure it had been rhetorical, anyway.

Stiles makes it to the door first, but he waits for his father to catch up to knock. Chris opens the door a moment later. He looks suspicious, because Chris isn't an idiot.


"As all teenagers should be," Stiles says wryly, playing up his part as getting dragged along.

His dad raises an eyebrow at him before turning to Chris. "You think we could talk alone? I need… there's something I want to discuss with you, but I didn't want to leave Stiles alone at the house."

Chris nods and motions them towards to the living room. "He can stay here," he says, before tossing Stiles the TV remote. "You're welcome to watch the TV."

Stiles collapses onto the couch, and turns on some cartoons. He pretends not to notice when Chris leads his father back out of the room. He hopes they're not headed to Chris's office, but he doesn't think Chris would take him there. He's counting on the fact that Chris has too much to hide to risk the Sheriff seeing it.

He turns up the TV loud enough to disguise his absence but not loud enough to draw attention, and then carefully looks back the way they'd come. He can just make out his father and Chris across the hall, talking at the kitchen table, and he lets out a breath in relief.

He doesn't know how long he has, so he slips back into the living room and heads down the other hall. He's planning to head straight to Chris's office, but pauses when he sees the door to the basement has been left ajar. His heart speeds up for a moment, flashes of getting dragged down this hall and carelessly pushed through this door, down the stairs—
He blocks the memories from his mind and pulls the door open, cautiously taking the steps down. It occurs to him for the first time that Gerard and Derek might even be here, and he puts a hand on the wall as he takes the steps carefully down, trying to see by the light coming in from the hall.

He reaches the bottom and runs his eyes over where Erica and Boyd had been hanging. There's no one here now, and he doesn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. He pulls the string on the light bulb hanging from the ceiling and then steps further in, jumping nearly three feet when his phone vibrates violently in his pocket.

He takes a steadying breath, and answers it quickly when he sees Lydia's name. "What's up?"

"We tracked Derek's phone," Lydia says without preamble. "Stiles, it's...it's at Allison's. I didn't want to believe they were involved, but Danny was able to get it within fifty feet so there's really very little doubt now."

"I'm not so sure of that," Stiles says, as he carefully takes in the rest of the room.

"Stiles?" Lydia asks sharply.

"I'm in their basement right now," Stiles tells her. "And it looks like they've been robbed."

The latches are broken on all the cabinets, and Stiles can clearly see where more than half of the ammunition and guns that had been stored here were taken.

"They've been pretty cleaned out, and all the locks are broken," Stiles continues. "Since I'm betting Chris has the key to the cabinets, I'm thinking Gerard or one of his lackeys stopped by to stock up, and make Chris our red herring at the same time. Gerard answered the call before when I called Derek, and I think he left the phone on for a reason. He wanted it to lead us here."

"What are you going to do?" Lydia asks.

"I still think Chris is involved, I think he's trying to hide Gerard, or was, at least," Stiles says. "And I'm going to find out where."

"And what about Jackson and me?" she asks. "What do we do?"

"Just hold tight for now," Stiles says. "Or call Scott, if you think Jackson can handle working with him."

"Be careful, Stiles," Lydia says. "Even if Gerard did leave the phone there to throw us off, it doesn't mean that Chris isn't involved in this."

"That's what I'm counting on," Stiles says. "Do me a favor. Call Derek's number after we hang up. Let it ring five times then end the call. Don't speak if someone answers."

"Stiles—" Lydia breaks off, and Stiles can imagine her pursing her lips in frustration. "Fine, but be careful."

She hangs up and a moment later he hears the distinct buzzing sound of a phone set to vibrate. He steps forward, following the sound, and sees a black phone sitting on a table set back against the wall. He'd know even without the 'Lydia' flashing on the screen that it's Derek's.

It still has the little piece of masking tape covering the camera lens, from when Stiles had been reading articles about malls hacking into the cameras of anyone on their wireless network for supposed 'marketing' purposes. That was invasive and creepy enough without having to worry about
being accidentally out-ed as a werewolf, so he'd been on a mission to spy-proof all the wolves' phones. Derek had complained the entire time Stiles had been messing with his phone, but he'd left the tape on.

Stiles swallows hard, reaching out to grab it. Part of him wants to go straight back upstairs and confront Chris, but he knows the man would never be this careless. If Chris had anything to do with taking Derek, he never would have brought the phone here. At the very least, he would have made sure to shut it off.

In any case, he still has a mission to complete. He creeps back into the hall. He can just barely hear his father asking Chris for advice on how to handle Stiles' involvement in the supernatural. Stiles has to hold back a snort, because stealth has never come naturally to him. Really though, while Chris is a great source for weaponry and advice on how to kill things, considering Allison's track record he doesn't seem like the first person to go to for parenting advice.

He supposes that his father has to keep Chris busy somehow, and Stiles doesn't know how much longer he can keep him occupied. He stops stalling and makes his way to Chris's office. He says a quick prayer to the werewolf gods that it isn't locked.

Something finally goes right for him, because the door opens easily. Stiles slips inside and shuts it softly behind him, before heading straight to the desk. He drops down in Chris's leather chair and opens the laptop. Predictably, there's a pass code.

It's a long shot, but Stiles lifts up the external keyboard, and there's a post-it there with a list of log-ins. It has everything from his AT&T account to his banking information, so it's pretty much anything he could need. It's careless in a way Chris usually isn't, but then he remembers that Victoria Argent had probably taken care of everything and Chris was still trying to figure out a way to do this without her, and Stiles feels almost bad.

Then he remembers Victoria Argent and he's fine again.

He grabs a post-it and a pen and copies down all the user names and passwords on the list, before returning Chris's copy back to its place underneath the keyboard. He closes the laptop again and is just about to get back to his feet when the door opens.

He prepare himself to get viciously thrown out by Chris, and doesn't know what to do when it's Allison that steps inside.

She crosses her arms as she lets the door click shut behind her, her fierce dark eyes calculating as they run across him. He fights back a shudder and wonders if he might actually prefer to have been caught by Chris.

"Hey, Allison," he says, awkwardly drawing out the greeting.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asks coolly.

Stiles reaches out and covers the post-it, but not quick enough. Allison steps forward and pries it from his hands. She looks down at it in disbelief.

"These are my father's accounts," she says flatly. He can see her running through the possibilities— Stiles attempting credit card fraud under the very nose of his Sheriff father is so many levels of stupid she immediately dismisses it.

For all Stiles' mischievous ways, anyone who really knows him knows he only ever breaks the law for good reasons anyway.
"You think my father's hiding Gerard," she says quietly. She glances up at him, meeting his gaze so intensely Stiles has to fight not to look away. "Don't you?"

"Yes," Stiles says. There's no reason to deny it now. He knows his only hope of getting out of this is getting Allison on his side. Looks like he's going to have to trust her after all.

"Gerard is dead," Allison says.

"And Derek's missing," he tells her. "Someone took him, and from the looks of it, someone's been in your house. Been in the basement lately?"

"I don't really go in the basement anymore," she says.

"Well, it might be worth the trip," he says. "Someone's stolen most of your bullets, pretty sure to use them on our friends. I can't think of a better suspect for that than Gerard, except for maybe you, so you tell me who you think is more likely to be behind this."

"I haven't done anything to Derek," Allison snaps. "I even kept your secret about what he did to you! And what do I get for that? Nothing. You can still hardly even look me in the eye. Stiles, what is it going to take—"

"What's it going to take to forgive you?" he interrupts quietly. "You tried to kill our friends. You brought them here to be tortured. If it weren't for the fact that we can't afford to draw attention, you'd probably be getting tried as an adult right about now with your best prospect being a ten-year prison sentence. So, you know, you just not trying to kill someone this time doesn't actually make up for that."

Stiles realizes at some point he's pushed to his feet, and he's really glad his hoodie is big enough that it's covering half his hands, because he can feel the power building in them even if he can't see the light through the heavy material. Allison, for her part, looks to be near tears. Stiles hates that he feels like an asshole even though he hasn't said anything that isn't true, because he doesn't think he's ever made a girl cry before, at least not on purpose.

"Okay," she says quietly. "I deserved that."

"How could you do that to them?" Stiles asks brokenly. "We trusted you! I trusted you!"

"I could do it because I thought I was the one that had been betrayed," Allison says. "I thought I'd been wrong about them, that they were dangerous. That everything I thought I knew was wrong—I thought they killed my mother—"

"Your mother killed herself, and Gerard and Chris stood by and let her," Stiles says. "That wasn't Derek's fault, he didn't have a choice. You think what, he wanted her to be pack? Does that make sense to you? He only bit her because he was fighting for his life, because he was trying to save Scott."

"What are you talking about?" she demands, stepping closer as her eyes clear. "What do you mean, saving Scott?"

"Your mom was trying to kill Scott," Stiles says. "I'm sorry, Allison. I know you want to think the best of her, but what happened wasn't anyone's fault but hers."

Scott will probably kill him for this, he thinks, but Allison is still on the fence. She's still caught between her crazy family and the werewolves and she needs all the facts to finally make her choice.
"That's not true," she denies. "Scott would have told me."

"He thought you would be better off if you didn't know," Stiles says. "Except that plan sort of backfired when you tried to kill us all."

"I never—" Allison starts. "No one was going to be killed."

"You're not that naïve," Stiles says. "Gerard wasn't going to kill me, maybe. But he was never planning to let Erica or Boyd out of your basement alive. Even if—even if Derek had attacked your mother unprovoked, what the hell did that have to do with Erica and Boyd?"

"They were going to kill Lydia, or did you forget that?" Allison asks. "They were never actually innocent."

Stiles lets out a disbelieving laugh. "See, that right there. You want to know why I really can't forgive you? Because you still won't admit you were wrong. You're still finding excuses to make yourself feel better. You blame Kate, or you blame Gerard. It's never your fault, right?"

"I know I've made mistakes—" Allison starts.

"You really don't get it, do you?" Stiles demands angrily, and he knows he should be trying to win her to his side. He knows this is the worst possible time to try and have this out, but he can feel weeks and weeks of righteous indignation just fighting its way out. "They weren't just mistakes! It's not like you cheated on one of our history tests, this isn't just going to go away! I don't know if you even can make up for the things you've done, but you should at least be trying. You should spend the rest of your life trying, if that's what it takes."

"How am I meant to make it up if none of you will let me?" she demands.

The door pushes open again, and Chris frowns in at them. "You kids alright?"

Stiles can see his dad looking anxious behind Chris's shoulder. Stiles is preparing to take the fall for this, to pretend he's been acting on his own, when Allison turns to her father with a smile. Her eyes are cold and assessing even as she widens her grin, and all trace of her previous tears are gone.

"I was just showing Stiles your book collection," she says smoothly, her lie so flawless Stiles wonders if even a werewolf would have been able to catch it. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," Chris says warily, and whether werewolves would have caught the lie or not, he's pretty sure Chris doesn't miss it.

"I guess we should be going anyway," John says, motioning to Stiles. "Come on, kiddo."

Stiles quickly moves to leave, but Allison catches his hand before he can. He turns back to her, and tries not to show any reaction as she presses the post-it with Chris's accounts into the palm of his hand.

"I am trying," Allison says softly, and then lets him go.
So, back when this story was crack fic and supposed to be 10K max, Peter was not going to be in it. I should have known he'd find a way to work himself into this story somehow. Now I can't really imagine it without him.

His father ushers him from the Argent's house and into the cruiser without stopping. Chris lets them go, despite the fact that he watches their rushed exit with increasing suspicion. Stiles knows they only get away with it because Chris doesn't actually want to get on the Sheriff's bad side, but Stiles had sort of been counting on that.

"What did you find out?" his dad asks, as he pulls them quickly out into the street.

"Nothing yet," Stiles says, flashing the post-it. "We need to go to the library."

"The library?" he asks. "Are you going to check out the Werewolf Handbook, or what?"

"Ah, no. But hey, they don't have any security cameras, and it's impossible to track who was using their computers at the time certain sites are accessed," Stiles explains. "Public libraries are still an invaluable institution even in our modern-day, high-tech society, dad. I'm disappointed in your shortsightedness."

His dad just sighs, and heads to the library without bothering to argue. Stiles tries not to fidget too much on the way there, but there's a ticking clock in the back of his mind. He's already wasted hours without getting any closer to finding Derek, and he doesn't know what he's going to do if this move doesn't pay off.

Stiles pushes out of the car the moment his dad parks, and rushes into the library. They've just opened so there's no one there, and he vaguely overhears his dad making small talk with the librarian behind him, spinning some story about how Stiles had left a research paper until the last minute, as he heads towards the back.

He drops down in front of one of the computers and sticks the post-it on the desk, bringing up Chris's banking site first thing. He really doesn't have time to try and sort through his phone records, though he will if he has to. He has a feeling he's going to find everything he needs on Chris' payment statement.

Hunters never really have to worry about covering up a paper trail, because the werewolves they go after are usually either rogue or just ordinary citizens, who don't have the access or resources to fight back like this. As careful as Chris is, for him staying off the radar has never had to include using cash or pre-paid credit cards.

"Do I want to know how you know how to do all this?" his dad asks as he drops down into the desk chair beside him, leaning over his shoulder with a frown.

"Nope," Stiles says. "Do I want to know how often you charm unsuspecting lady librarians with
stories of your impossible son and how much you miss being able to eat something with bacon in it?"

"Heard that, did you?" he asks wryly. "I'm still not lying. That's all true."

Stiles just snorts, and finishes entering Chris's information to bring up his electronic credit card statement.

"This is so illegal," John sighs.

"Avert your eyes," Stiles advises. "They'll never be able to pin this on me."

"You mean I won't," John says flatly. "I won't be able to pin this on you."

"I know, I've got you as my inside man in the Sheriff's department and everything," Stiles says. "I could totally make it as a master criminal."

"Only if you want to be sent to bed without dinner," he replies flatly.

"You would never do that, you would cave," Stiles decides.

"Yeah, probably," John says. "But no dessert, for sure."

Stiles snorts. "As if I'd let dessert into the house, anyway," he says. "Which reminds me, I replaced all your cookies with medjool dates. They're nutritious, yet still full of sugar. You're welcome."

"God damn it, Stiles—" his father starts.

Stiles ignores him, grinning as he finds what he needs. "You can complain about that later, I've got something," he says. "Chris has been shelling out daily payments to the Motel Glen Capri in Fairvale. Not really the usual Chris hang-out, he likes to pretend he's all suburban house-dad."

His dad narrows his eyes at the payment records. "Shit."

"You didn't think he was really hiding him," Stiles realizes.

"I had hoped he wouldn't," John says. "Though I guess it's better this way. At least we have somewhere to start now."

"You can't blame really Chris," Stiles says, going through to delete the history and clear the cookies. "Gerard's a nutjob, but he's still his dad."

"There are still limits, Stiles. I would hope you wouldn't help me hide if I'd turned into some psychotic murderer," he says.

"I would," Stiles admits with a shrug. "Of course I would."

His dad laughs, but the sound is a bit broken. Stiles turns to him concern, preparing to take it back—he can lie and pretend to be a better person for his father if he has to, it'll be one of the nicer lies he's told. Except his dad is just watching him fondly. "What?" Stiles demands.

"Nothing," John says. "It's just sometimes, you're exactly like her."

Stiles looks away. "Pretty sure mom never offered to hide you if you went crazy and started murdering people."

"Maybe not, but I know she would have," John says. "She'd have done anything for us."
His father's voice holds the same sadness it always does when he speaks of her, but as much as it hurts Stiles is pretty sure this is something they both need. He doesn't want to keep pretending that she's not a part of them anymore just because it hurts.

"Sometimes I worry I'm going to forget her," Stiles admits quietly.

His dad goes pale, looking shattered, and this is why they never talk about her. "Stiles—"

"It never used to happen, but now, sometimes, I do," Stiles says. "Sometimes I can't remember the sound of her voice. Sometimes I have these memories of her and I can't remember if they're real or I made them up."

"You haven't forgotten her," John says gently. "You can't, because she's in everything you do. I've always been called brave, you know, it comes with the job description. But you're fearless, Stiles. You don't turn away from anything, you just go rushing in. And you get that from her."

Stiles tries to imagine what his mother would think of all of this. He remembers all of the stories she used to read to him, the way she'd been fascinated about the idea of there being more to this world than there appeared, and he knows she would have loved it. She would have taken to it just as he had, probably a little bit too well.

"Come on, let's go," his dad says, gently pulling him up from the chair. "Fairvale's almost two hours away. We need to get moving."

* * * * *

Somehow Stiles actually manages to get to sleep during the drive, but he doesn't exactly get any rest. The moment he closes his eyes he starts dreaming in the colors red and gold. He's in an old abandoned building, calling for Derek. He keeps trying to find a way out, but every door he exits only leads him back inside.

He wakes up screaming out Derek's name about ten minutes from Fairvale.

"Christ, Stiles," his dad curses, looking like he's getting ready to pull over. "Are you alright?"

"Fine, I'm fine," Stiles says quickly, even before he's really awake. He sucks in a gulping deep breath and tightens his fingers on the edge of the seat. He wants to play this off but he can hardly tell his dad this is not the first time he's woken up screaming, because his dad will only feel guilty that he's been working night shifts and hasn't been home to hear it.

"Is this…bond-related?" John asks hesitantly.

Stiles looks over at him in surprise. "Uh, I don't know?" he says. "I didn't think of that."

It makes sense now that he's thinking about it though, and it was similar to the flashes he'd received of Derek at the train depot. He closes his eyes for a moment and tries to get a better sense of where he'd been in the dream, but it's no use. It was just an old building, with grey concrete walls and floors.

"Well, we're almost there," his dad says to reassure him.

"How do you know where to go?" Stiles asks. "Have you been there before?"

"I have GPS on my phone, Stiles," he says wryly. "I'm not a total dinosaur."
Stiles grins slightly as he relaxes back into the seat, glancing out the window. He's never been to Fairvale before. He's passed through it any number of times, but no one ever stopped there unless they had to. It was a transient town, sort of like a full-service rest-stop.

"We should have taken my jeep," he says. "This is a little conspicuous."

"It's also a good cover," his dad says. "Even if I'm not in my jurisdiction, chances are 9 out of 10 people won't even notice the county written on the door."

"I don't want you to get in trouble again because of me," Stiles says. "I can—"

"You're not doing this without me," John snaps. "I never really blamed you when I lost my badge, I blamed myself for not seeing what was going on with you. I certainly don't blame you now that I know you only did it to try and protect people. So if I lose my job, it happens, and I'll deal with it. But if I let someone get hurt when there's something I can do to stop it, then I don't deserve to wear a badge anyway. I may be doing this for you, but I'd do it anyway, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Stiles agrees, but he knows that none of that is going to make a difference if his dad gets hurt because of this—he's going to blame himself, anyway.

The cruiser pulls into the parking lot of the Motel Glen Capri, and his dad sighs. "Alright, I'm going to go in and figure out Gerard's room number, with my uniform it probably shouldn't be hard to convince them to give it to me," he says. "Then I'm going to go check it out. You're going to stay here."

Stiles gapes at him. "Uh, no, I'm not," he says. "We're in this together, remember?"

"I can't exactly pull off the officer on the job angle if I'm toting along my teenage son, can I? I'll come get you if the room's clear and it's safe, and we'll go through it together," he says.

"And what if the room isn't clear? What if it's not safe?" Stiles demands.

"Then I've got wolfsbane bullets in my gun, and I'll handle it," he says. "Stiles, this isn't a negotiation. Now, are you going to stay in the car or do I need to put you in the back?"

"Because that worked out so well the last time?" Stiles asks incredulously.

"Right," John sighs, as he opens the driver's door. "Please just stay in the car."

Stiles glares at his retreating form, but he can admit his dad has a point. He'll have more luck getting the motel staff to talk if he's alone, but it doesn't make this any easier. He looks anxiously out the passenger side window, trying to find any trace of his father heading towards one of the rooms.

Then the driver's door opens, and he hears his dad drop back down beside him.

"What did you—aahhh!" Stiles cries. "You are not my dad."

"Thankfully not," Peter says pleasantly. "That would make some of my previous actions wildly inappropriate."

"They were inappropriate anyway. Wildly," Stiles says. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I've come to help. You're welcome," Peter says. "And Gerard's not inside, if you were wondering. He's long gone."

"How can you be sure?" Stiles demands.
"His scent is faint," Peter shrugs. "The stench of decay and sickness that follows him is barely noticeable, so I imagine he hasn't been back here for at least a day."

Stiles frowns, leaning forward to try and see past Peter to the other side of the motel. "My dad—"

"Your father is fine," Peter says. "But we're wasting time."

"We? There is no we!" Stiles cries, motioning empathically between them. "That is not the pronoun I use when referring to myself and the walking dead."

"Oh?" Peter asks.

"I use me and it," Stiles snaps. "Now I suggest you leave before my dad comes back and shoots you. Chris gave him bullets with a particularly nasty strain of wolfsbane, on my recommendation. I was thinking of you."

Peter flashes him a smirk. "I like you, Stiles."

"And that's a constant source of unease for me," Stiles says, before noticing a suspicious stain on the collar of Peter's coat. "Oh god. Is that blood?"

"Yes," Peter says, glancing down with a frown. "Luckily I've recently purchased two others just like it, because I don't think I'm getting this out."

"If you've done something to Derek—" he snarls.

Peter grins, his eyes flashing blue as he leans closer. "If I went after Derek, he'd be dead, I'd be Alpha, and I wouldn't be wasting my time trying to reason with you," he says, before leaning back again with a shrug. "I may have disemboweled a hunter a little. Don't worry about it. He deserved worse."

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Stiles says.

"Really, Stiles, you need to get over this aversion to bloodshed," Peter says. "You're so delightfully spiteful in the abstract, you shouldn't let a little carnage hold you back from your full potential."

"That's where you were, when I called, wasn't it?" Stiles demands. "You were torturing him. Why didn't you just tell me that?"

"You would have felt obligated to try and stop me," Peter says. "Neither of us wants that. There's absolutely no reason for us to be on opposite sides."

Stiles looks away from him. "Why did you do it?"

"He was working for Gerard," Peter says. "I told him to tell me where Gerard was, he rather impolitely declined, and I informed him I would cut him open if he didn't reconsider. For some reason he seemed to think I was bluffing."

"It was Mason, right?" Stiles asks quietly. "Oh, god. You're the supernatural mafia."

Peter looks surprised. "Now, how did you know that?" he asks. "I didn't leave any evidence. I can promise there's nothing left of him to find."

"You should have cleaned out the motel room," Stiles says. "Guns and wolfsbane bullets always raise a bit of a red flag, even to the uninitiated."
Peter purses his lips. "I got rid of the car," he says. "How was I supposed to know he was careless enough to leave things laying around his room? I can't be cleaning up after him all day."

"Did you even learn anything?" Stiles asks. He will never approve of Peter's methods, but Derek doesn't have enough time for him to turn away information, no matter the source.

"Not from him," Peter says. "I'd almost admire his loyalty, but I'm pretty sure he went into such violent shock that he couldn't have told me anything coherent anyway. However, I did find this in his wallet."

He holds out a receipt between two fingers, and Stiles snatches it from him.


"That's not what's significant," Peter says.

"The hell that's not significant," Stiles snarls. "They're torturing him."

"We already knew that," Peter says calmly. "Look at the location."


"Gerard's a new wolf, and he's been off licking his wounds here," he explains. "He won't have stayed in Beacon Hills any longer than he had to, which means you have the pack looking for him in the wrong place. He would have brought Derek back to Fairvale. He's claimed this territory as his own."

Stiles is pretty sure that Peter is right, but that doesn’t mean he can trust him. He glances at him shrewdly. "Why are you here?" he asks. "You obviously want something from me. What is it?"

"I want you to help me find Gerard," Peter says. "I thought you would have figured that out by now."

"What are you—" Stiles trails off, his eyes widening. "The book was from you. I slept with that book. I feel so dirty."

"Of course it was from me," Peter says. "Derek certainly wasn't going to tell you anything. He didn't want you involved. A gross misuse of his resources, if you ask me. You've gotten closer to finding Argent in hours than we've managed in weeks."

"I was highly motivated. Anyway, I already knew Derek was looking for Gerard," Stiles protests half-heartedly. He knows Derek had been doing his best to keep him out of it though, no matter that he'd gotten him to open up a little and admit to what was going on.

"Hmm, perhaps," Peter says. "But Derek and I have been looking for him since the night he disappeared. Did you think we were just going to take it on faith that he found some rock to crawl under and die? Argents are surprisingly resilient, and we needed to be sure. We tracked the trail of his…ooze, for about two miles before it disappeared and a tire trail picked up."

"I was just sort of hoping he was dead, myself," Stiles admits. "Then we had to scare off the Alpha pack, and then there were the bunyips—"

"Bunyips?" Peter asks in confusion, before shaking it off. "Nevermind that. Derek doesn't have long, we have to stop Gerard before moonrise."
"Before the ritual," Stiles says. "You could have just told me about that, you know."

"I may have known about the ritual, but I don't have the details, and I can't open that book to get to them," Peter says. "It's lined with mountain ash, so it had to be you. Be honest—if you'd known the book was from me, would you have trusted it?"

Stiles glares at him but he does have a point. If he'd known the book was given to him by Peter he would have been second guessing every word of it, that is if Derek hadn't just burned the thing the moment he knew where it had come from. As it was, he'd suspected Deaton or Chris had left it for him, and had never really doubted it was there to help.

"I trust you got the details from the book?" Peter asks, deliberately casual. "You know what it entails?"

"I know what Gerard's planning," Stiles says. "I don't see what good it's going to do us if we can't actually find him."

"Knowledge is always useful," Peter tells him. "I need you to keep that book safe for me, Stiles. It belonged to someone very special to me. I wouldn't trust it to anyone but you."

"It belonged to your wife," Stiles realizes. It makes perfect sense in hindsight, since Emily was, for all intents and purposes, the Argents' version of an emissary.

He knows he should have suspected the book was from Peter from the start. But Peter's good at getting people to forget about him, he's good at standing right beside you while you suspect everyone else in the room.

"How do you know that?" Peter demands, looking genuinely startled.

"Derek told me about her," Stiles says, trying not to feel bad for Peter. Still, it's hard, when Peter has the same look in his eyes that his father always got in his whenever he spoke of his mother.

"She's the reason I was the only survivor," Peter tells him, glancing away. "She was burning alive, and she looked right at me, and the next thing I knew I was waking up in the hospital. I've never known what she did, but I know it was her. Because if it had been left to me, I would have let myself burn beside her."

"I'm sorry," Stiles says honestly. "I wish I could have known her."

Peter blinks the sadness away like it was never there, and turns to watch him with darkening eyes. "Gerard will be waiting for the full moon to be at its peak but it may be visible as early as 7:00, so don't get complacent about your timeframe. We need to find Derek as soon as possible. If Gerard completes the ritual he'll have greater control over Derek's pack, and he believes he will be able to compel them to do his bidding."

"Derek's pack includes you," Stiles points out.

"Gerard Argent is a fool," Peter says. "Scott is a child and he was able to resist me, and I was far more powerful than Gerard can ever hope to be. He'll have no control whether he waits for the full moon or not, but he doesn't understand werewolves, never has. He thinks he can read something in his little book of monsters and recreate it at will."

"So it won't work," Stiles says.

"Of course it won't work," Peter agrees.
"Then why are you so worried?" he asks.

Peter turns to glare at him, obviously irritated at Stiles' perceptiveness. "I'm not worried, but I'm not going to allow him to try and take over the pack—which includes me, as you've so helpfully pointed out—just because it won't work."

"So you're doing this out of the goodness of your heart, then," Stiles says skeptically, shifting away, glancing back towards the motel. "Why do I find that—"

Peter reaches out suddenly and grabs Stiles wrist, pushing back the sleeve and turning it up, running his hands over his faintly glowing veins. Peter's eyes flash blue as he tightens his grip. "You're an emissary," he snarls.

Stiles tries to pull away, but Peter only tightens his grip. "Let go."

"You little fool," Peter whispers, looking up at him with something like betrayal in his eyes. "Do you even know what you've done?"

"I said let go!" Stiles shouts, and the light underneath his skin flashes brightly. Peter releases him with a pained cry, and Stiles falls back against the passenger door as the smell of burnt flesh fills the air.

Peter's hand is blackened and bleeding, and he glances at Stiles with an irritated glare even as it begins to heal. "When did you bond?"

"This morning, and not exactly on purpose," Stiles says shakily, watching Peter warily for any sign of retaliation. But Peter looks less concerned with his injured hand than Stiles is.

"My nephew, I suppose?" he asks, falsely casual. "You're getting too powerful too quickly, and you're heading for trouble, you know that, don't you?"

"I'm fine," Stiles says. "I totally meant to burn you just now. Fully in control, that's me. So, you know, maybe don't grab me again."

"My nephew is a disaster of an alpha, and he doesn't deserve you," Peter says, falsely sweet, as he leans close with a smirk. "He'll never be able to help you control this. You should have said yes to me, Stiles."

"So you were trying to force me to become your emissary," Stiles breathes uneasily.

Peter raises an eyebrow. "If I could have forced you, then you would be, but it doesn't work that way, which is the whole point."

"What would you have done, if I'd said yes?" Stiles asks curiously.

"I would have bitten you, of course," Peter says. "You're useful as you are, but you can't be controlled. It's like the difference between a firework and a gun. Both can be fairly destructive in the right hands, but only the gun can be aimed."

"And that's why I never would have said yes," Stiles says, narrowing his eyes. "An emissary is not meant to be a weapon. Maybe you're the one that's missing the point. Say what you want about Derek but he's never used me."

"You're too smart to believe that," Peter says snidely.
"He doesn't hide his intentions, every time I've helped him I've known exactly where I stand," Stiles says. "I trust him."

"Yes, well, if you ever come to regret that decision, just say the word," Peter says.

"Deaton says there's no way to break the bond," Stiles tells him, conveniently leaving out the 'till death' loophole, since he doesn't want to give Peter any ideas—even if he does probably already know.

"He would probably also tell you that you can't bring someone back from the dead," Peter says. "I've never had much use for Deaton. There is always a way, Stiles. I want you to remember that."

"Okay. Great pep-talk, I'll be sure to remember. Now I should call the pack," Stiles says, trying to keep his voice steady. "We'll start searching here. You can go. Maybe have a spa-day, or something. We don't need you."

"Yes you do," Peter says instantly. "You know very well that you do, don't let your fear drive away the best chance you have at getting Derek back."

"And is that what you want?" Stiles demands. "Are you really here to save him?"

"I'm not the man you first met, not anymore," Peter says. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

"The man that killed his niece, turned my best friend against his will, nearly killed Lydia, and then tried to trap me in a bond for life, that man?" Stiles asks. "Because I've got to say, you look just like him."

"At the time I only cared about power," Peter says. "I'd have done much more than just mislead you to get it, but I regret that now. I truly do."

"I don't believe you," Stiles says.

"This is the one time you really should," Peter assures him. "Because if I'd had the time, I would have explained to you what you were, what you were capable of, I would have groomed you until you were begging me to wrap my teeth around your skin and bite down to the bone—"

"Peter," Stiles interrupts, looking past him with widening eyes. "You know my dad is standing right behind you, right?"

"Yes, I heard his heartbeat," Peter says, eyes narrowing in irritation. "But I was much too into my speech to stop, I—"

John rips the door open and grabs Peter by the back of his coat, unceremoniously dragging him out and slamming him up against the cruiser, before stepping out of range and aiming the gun at his head. "Give me one good reason not to kill you," he says.

"Dad!" Stiles protests, scrambling out of the car from the other side. "Wait! I know it's really hard to resist killing him. I couldn't manage it, myself. But I think we need him. Without Derek he's the only werewolf we have that wasn't made within this last year. I don't like it, but we're kinda stuck with him."

"Thank you for that glowing recommendation, Stiles," Peter says dryly.

"Did he touch you?" John asks Stiles, though he never takes his eyes from Peter.
"He didn't hurt me," Stiles says quickly. His dad probably catches that it isn't exactly a straight answer, but he does seem to relax slightly.

Peter just smiles, like the gun being leveled at him is of no concern. "Really, Sheriff," he begins pleasantly. "I was just—"

"I don't care," John snaps. "You make one wrong move and I'll bury you right back in the same hole you crawled out of."

"I'm starting to see where your charming son gets his wit from," Peter dryly.

"What are you doing here?" he demands.

"Same thing as you," Peter says. "Looking for Gerard Argent. You're not going to find him, however. I already checked."

"Just because he isn't here doesn't mean we can't find something that might lead us to him," Stiles says, looking between his dad and Peter anxiously. "Maybe we should take this inside? Before any unsuspecting Fairvale citizens happen to wander by?"

"How are we supposed to trust you?" John asks Peter, ignoring Stiles' awkward attempt at peacemaking.

"I have a very well developed survival instinct," Peter says silkily. "I'm not going to harm the people trying to take down my enemy."

"We've worked with him before, sort of," Stiles admits hesitantly. "He'll help as long as it's helping him too. And he won't hurt us, because I won't let him."

Peter glances to Stiles in amusement. "I wouldn't hurt you anyway, Stiles," he promises, but it's not as reassuring as he probably thinks it is.

John reluctantly holsters his gun, though he keeps his hand on it, ready to draw. Peter's probably quicker with his claws, but Stiles can feel the power tingling at his fingertips, and he's pretty sure this new power is faster than them both.

"Truce then?" Stiles asks. "Just for now?"

"Fine," his dad snaps reluctantly.

Stiles moves beside him, and his dad relaxes marginally now that he's between him and Peter. "Did you find anything?" Stiles asks.

"I didn't get to go through it all yet," his dad says wryly. "I looked out the window and saw some full grown man leaning over you in the car, so I had to rearrange my priorities."

John glares at Peter the whole time he speaks, but he just watches him back in amusement, unrepentant. "Shall we go see what he's left behind then?" Peter asks.

John motions him ahead. "You first."

Peter walks ahead of them, heading up the stairs to the second level of rooms without anyone telling him the number of Gerard's room. Stiles moves to follow him but his dad grabs him by the back of his hoodie, and then pushes ahead of him.

"He gets that close to you again, I won't be responsible for my actions," John warns. "Stay away
"Not a problem," Stiles says quickly. "Staying as far away from Peter as possible is practically a way of life for me."

"I can hear you, you know," Peter calls down to them in irritation.

"Yes, I know!" Stiles calls back.

"Still getting used to that," his dad mutters with a frown, because he knows about the special abilities of werewolves, but he's still having trouble applying that knowledge to practical application. He quickens his steps up the stairs and enters the motel room on Peter's heels, with Stiles right behind him.

Peter's already in the bathroom when Stiles enters, leaning across the sink, sniffing like the creeper he is. "He's not getting any better," Peter says, before turning to lean back against the sink and cross his arms. "The smell of his vile black vomit is everywhere here."

"Lovely, thanks for that unnecessarily descriptive piece of evidence," Stiles says.

"If he's so sick how's he managing to do all this?" John asks.

"He's got help," Stiles says. "He's hired some of his hunters, like Mason. He's probably playing the part of the sickly old human, staying back, letting them do all the dirty work."

"That hunter that went missing," his dad says. "You think he left without a trace because he came here to help Gerard?"

"Uh…" Stiles starts.

"He's dead," Peter says helpfully. "But there are others. At least two more, but probably not any more than that. Gerard burned a lot of bridges even before he tricked Scott into helping him get the bite, and good help is so hard to find."

"You killed the hunter," John says tightly, his hand tightening on his gun again. "Tell me it was at least self-defense."

"I was absolutely defending myself," Peter agrees calmly.

"How did you even find this place?" John demands. "Did you torture him for information? Is that what happened?"

Stiles can see the flash of admiration in Peter's eyes, before the werewolf can hide it. He knows it well, because usually it's aimed at him. Peter smirks at them both. "I was just checking out the hardware store in town when I caught Stiles' scent," he says. "I thought you might require my assistance, so here I am."

Stiles glances away from him, and his eyes narrow at the wall beside the bed. There are four holes forming a small rectangle shape, with a series of other tiny holes scattered across its interior.

"Did you see this, dad?" Stiles asks. He runs his fingers along the surface, counting the numerous little holes in the wall. The way the paint is just barely chipped off from the tiny holes, they look recently made.

Stiles doesn't want to have anything in common with Gerard, but he can imagine him here, with a
map tacked up along the wall, trying to find the best place to hold Derek until the full moon. It's the way he plans too.

But Gerard is arrogant, and though he's careful he's not careful about the little details. Stiles can tell from the strange jagged angles of the holes in the wall that Gerard had ripped the map away without pulling out the push pins one by one. He'd have been too impatient for that.

"He left the pins here," his dad says from behind him.

Stiles turns around and looks down when he sees his dad pointing at the floor. He can see where a few of the clear plastic push pins have fallen into the carpet, mostly obscured, but there are little bits of paper attached to some of them. Then he sees one red one, laying a few feet away. Stiles kneels down and picks it up, and there is a torn piece of map still stuck around the edge of the pin point.

There's only five letters remaining along the left side edge:

ale
rf

"How careless of him," Peter says, making a tsk tsk sound, though he seems content to let Stiles do the work. He hasn't moved from where he's leaning casually against the bathroom sink, but that suits Stiles just fine.

"He just doesn't know who he's dealing with," Stiles says, as he pulls out his cellphone and searches for a map of Fairvale. He brings it up and runs his eyes along all the street names, the parks and businesses.

Then he sees it, right on the edge of the map:

Fairvale
Wharf

"It's the wharf," Stiles says. "He's got to be holding him at the wharf. It'll have the best view of the moon in town, and hardly anyone will be around at night."

"That doesn't narrow it down much," John frowns.

"Actually, that narrows it down more than enough," Peter grins, straightening up from the sink. "I can take it from here."

"I don't think so," Stiles says, reaching into his pocket to pull out a handful of mountain ash, a parting gift from Deaton. He tosses it in Peter's direction, and it snaps down in a line across the door.

Peter's eyes narrow as he looks down at the line across the doorway, his fangs dropping as his eyes turn a violent, brilliant blue. "What do you think you're doing, Stiles?" he growls.

Stiles steps forward, and his dad makes an aborted move to grab him to pull him back. He can see his dad is still trying to reconcile the fact that the thin line of ash will hold something like Peter back.

"You care more about killing Gerard than saving Derek," Stiles tells him simply.

"They don't have to be mutually exclusive," Peter says sweetly. "I can multitask."

"It doesn't matter if I can't trust you," Stiles says.

"I guess that's why you're the clever one," Peter says, leaning as close as the barrier will allow. "Let's
just hope you don't end up being too smart for your own good."

"Come on, Stiles," his dad says, grabbing his arm to tug him out of the motel room. "We're going. Now."

Stiles lets his dad push him out the door and they both quickly make their way back towards the cruiser. "Is that really going to hold him?" his dad asks.

"Any other werewolf and I'd say yes, 100 percent," Stiles says. "I've found guarantees aren't very useful where Peter is concerned."

"I was afraid you might say that," John says as they climb into the car. He takes a deep breath, hesitating for a moment before finally starting the car. "Stiles?"

"Yeah?" Stiles asks, turning to look at him.

John pulls out into the road. "That's the last time you're staying in the car."

Chapter End Notes

A note about updates: The next chapter is a major one, and I’m on extended hours at work this month and may have to work some weekends, so I can't promise the next chapter by next weekend. That said, we're getting very close to the end (seriously this time!) and I'm very hopeful it will be finished completely by the end of December.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

NOTE: Okay, so I could probably list like EIGHT MILLION excuses for why this has taken me so long, but let's just say I'm terribly sorry and feel awful about it, and leave it at that. Also, I am never setting a deadline for this story again, as I seem to jinx myself EVERY SINGLE TIME.

I really just want to thank everyone that has continued to read/comment/kudos this story, because you all are the reason I will never give it up until it's done!

NOTE THE SECOND: Apologies in advance for any typos or weird mistakes. It got to the point where I either just post this thing as is or OBSESS FOREVER. So yeah. There's a lot going on in this one, hopefully it does not disappoint.

His father is already driving them towards the Wharf by the time Stiles gets out his phone. Scott picks up on the first ring, and Stiles can't help the little hitch in his heart when his friend's voice washes over him and instantly asks what's wrong. It's been a long time since he's allowed himself to rely on Scott, but it's starting to feel like he might manage it again.

"I think Gerard took Derek to Fairvale," Stiles tells him.

"What did you find?" Scott asks anxiously.

"Gerard's been staying here, and Peter thinks that he's made this his new territory," Stiles says. "That he wouldn't feel safe in Beacon Hills."

"Peter," Scott repeats tightly. "Stiles—"

"I know what you're going to say," Stiles interrupts. "But it makes sense. I'm not just taking his word on it, okay? I found pieces of a map Gerard was using, and everything is leading us to the Wharf."

"Fairvale isn't close," Scott says. "And Jackson told me his Porsche is still in the shop."

"Lydia can drive you," Stiles says.

"I didn't know she had her license," Scott says.

Stiles decides it's probably best not to mention that she technically doesn't. "You just need to get here, Scott, okay? I don't care what you have to do. Gerard's torturing Derek. He's—"

"We'll get there," Scott reassures him quickly. "Just…don't do anything until we do."

Stiles glances at his father. "We'll wait as long as we can," he says, and hangs up.

"I don't like calling in a bunch of sixteen year olds as back up, Stiles," his dad says.

"I'm pretty sure Boyd is seventeen," Stiles says.
His dad glares at him, before turning his eyes back to the road. "You know what I mean," he says. "I know we can't exactly call the local police—" he cuts himself, before grinning. "Actually, we can."

"Ah, no, we can't," Stiles says slowly. "Remember werewolves? Satanic rituals being performed by sadistic former high school principles? Not exactly in the purview of your average LEO."

His dad pulls into the driveway of a Starbucks, which looks out of place in-between the otherwise outdated buildings along the street. "No, but they will have access to information I can't get my hands on without raising suspicion," he explains. "And I know an officer here. She might be willing to help."

"She?" Stiles demands with narrowed eyes. It isn't that he discourages his father interacting with the opposite sex, exactly. It's just that he's had years and years of dealing with manipulative divorcees that tend to ply his father with cholesterol laden casseroles under the guise of wanting to help the poor widowed single-dad. They were like perfectly manicured vultures.

"She," his father says wryly, not reacting to Stiles' scandalized tone. He pulls out his cell phone, and gives Stiles a warning look as his son not so surreptitiously tries to get close enough to hear.

"Rebecca, hey, how are you doing?" he asks after a moment, smiling wide with his charm dialed to full force. Stiles figures he could probably learn a few things from his dad. His own charms thus far have been mostly limited to disorienting his victims with so much babble they eventually just give in. "Yeah, you got me. I need a favor, but it's gotta be off-book. I promise I'll tell you if anything comes of it, it's just a hunch. Yeah. You're the best, you know that? I just need to know if anyone by the name of Argent owns any property on Fairvale Wharf."

His dad snaps his fingers at Stiles, and he scrambles to grab his father's ticket book and a pen, thrusting it at him so he can write down an address.

"Gerard, huh?" he asks. "Yeah, I've got it. No, that's all. I promise, next time I'm in town. Talk to you later."

"Did you just make a date?" Stiles demands.

"I just got us an address," his dad says, nodding towards the ticket book.

"If something happens there tonight that gets noticed, it's going to lead straight back to you," Stiles reminds him.

"Rebecca knows how to be discreet," his dad says.

"Apparently," Stiles snaps.

"Stiles, she's twenty-four," his dad says with a sigh.

"Oh my god," he cries. "And you were on me about the age difference with Derek?"

"She's not—I'm not dating her, don't be ridiculous! She's the daughter of an old friend," he says incredulously.

"Oh," Stiles says, flushing in embarrassment.

"Christ, I wouldn't—" he says. "I remember when she was in grade school. I helped get her the job here, that's all. We can trust her." Then his dad turns the glare back on him. "And I thought nothing was going on between you and Derek?"
"Can we table this? You know, until we get him back?" Stiles asks quickly.

"About that," his dad starts. "How are we going to handle this, exactly? Because I'm not sending those kids in alone."

"It's going to be two hours before they even get here," Stiles says. "Well, maybe ninety minutes, the way Lydia drives. But we have to make sure we have the right place. We need to see if they're even there."

He can see his father wrestling with himself, and Stiles knows it's not the best plan ever. If they see Derek getting tortured, it's not like either of them will be able to walk away and wait for the others like sensible people. Stilinskis were never known for being sensible.

He also knows his dad's first instinct is to lock him up somewhere so he can handle this alone—and he gets it, he does. Because Stiles sort of wants to do the same thing to him.

"It's risky," his dad says. "If Gerard's one of those things—"

"A werewolf," Stiles says. "Or a kanima, I guess. I was kidding about the Tinker Bell thing, but I suppose anything's possible."

"Right," his dad says impatiently. "The point is, we don't know. So I don't know that I can stop him."

"Your bullets can stop him, but he might be fast, and even if he's weak for a werewolf, he'll still be strong," Stiles says, before pulling an arrow from his backpack. "But I've got these, and I'm pretty sure I can't miss."

His father watches him carefully, his eyes assessing. Stiles has seen him look at incident reports that exact same way, like he's trying to unravel a mystery.

"So we go," John says after a moment, his voice quiet but sure. "Together."

"Yeah," Stiles agrees.

"I don't like the thought of bringing you into this," his dad says, glancing away.

"Pretty sure I'm the one that brought you," Stiles reminds him. "We need to trust each other, dad. We need to, or this isn't going to work."

He's talking about saving Derek, but he's also talking about so much more than that. He knows this will either make or break them. They almost buckled under Stiles trying to keep his father out of this, and Stiles already knows there's no way they'll survive his father trying to do same to him. He'd do absolutely anything for his father—anything, but walk away from this.

His dad shifts the car back into drive and starts them back towards the wharf. "If we do this, it's reconnaissance only," he says firmly. "We confirm their location, then we wait for the others and come up with a plan. We're not going to do Derek any good if we rush in there with no back up."

"It's a plan," Stiles agrees instantly.

* * * * *

His father pulls out his old binoculars from the glove box and takes them to the second floor of the abandoned building across from the defunct Argent Arms warehouse. Stiles would have probably been excited about the idea of a stakeout if it wasn't for Derek, but then again, maybe not. Because
the first forty minutes go by ridiculously slow, and it makes sense now why stakeouts are usually
done in montage in films. Stiles alternates between looking at his watch and watching the building,
but nothing much happens, and Stiles can actually feel himself getting more and more on edge. He's
had to start keeping his hands in his pockets so his dad can't see the power leaking out of them.

It feels a little like his ADHD, actually, having all this energy that he can't control. He can feel it
building inside of him, begging for an outlet. He's had years of practice in restraint—he knows his
friends would probably laugh, to think of him and restraint, but Stiles is always holding back.

At least, he always holds back until he can't, and when the gunshots start up he hits his breaking
point.

"We've got to go in," Stiles decides, reaching back to grab one of his arrows before spinning around
to start back down the stairs.

"We had a plan, Stiles," his dad snaps from behind him, but though he's following Stiles he's not
exactly trying to stop him, so Stiles takes that non-action as consent for the new plan.

Which is getting Derek the hell out of there right now.

"Would you slow down?" his dad demands, snagging his arm just before he can bolt out the doors
and across to Argent Arms. "You running in there and getting yourself caught won't help Derek."

"We can't wait for the others," Stiles insists. "They could be killing him right now. Derek is a terrible
hostage, okay? He's broody and kinda mean and he'll glare at you and he says awful things to people
he likes, so god only knows what he's been saying to them. If he's saying anything, and not just sort
of—"

His dad shakes him gently. "Stiles, focus."

"This is focused!" he protests. "Dad, we can't wait. You know we can't. He doesn't have that much
time."

"Okay," his dad says.

"I know, but—wait, did you say okay?" he asks incredulously.

"Yes," John says. "But how about instead of running straight through their front doors, we sneak
around the back and try to get a sense for what we're dealing with?"

Stiles nods reluctantly, and his dad leads him back around to the other exit door before motioning
him across to Argent Arms. They stay along the line of the wall until they come to a broken window
covered with a tarp and duck tape. His dad peels it off, does some complicated hand single Stiles
assumes means stay put, and then slips inside.

Stiles counts to ten—he makes it to five—and then goes tumbling in after him.

His dad just watches him with long suffering, before starting towards the next room. He's got his gun
out and held up, and he doesn't make a sound as he moves. Stiles considers for a moment the fact
that he might actually be a liability—his dad is good at this kind of thing, after all, which is
something Stiles doesn't often think about. He doesn't really know Sheriff Stilinski, he just knows
dad, who can't walk across the living room without stubbing his toe on the coffee table.

But it's not like Stiles can turn back now, even if it would be for the best. He can feel the mountain
ash arrow warming in his hands, humming like it's coming to life, and he knows he has some
particular talents of his own. His dad's never been up against something like Gerard before, but Stiles has, and the previous times he'd had no weapons at all.

So he does his best to be silent as he follows him, but staggers when he starts to hear a buzzing in his head, panic and dread reaching up from inside of him to grip at his heart. He doesn't realize for a minute that it's not all just his own.

He's sensing Derek's panic and pain, and it builds the closer to him they get. Stiles lets out a gasping breath, before stumbling forward again. His dad glances at him sharply in concern, his eyes widening when Stiles starts to cry out in pain. His father grabs him and pulls him back against him at once, his hand reaching up to cut off his cry before he can make a sound.

Stiles takes a deep shuddering breath the best that he can with his dad holding him in place. He can see his dad's gun still pointed ahead of them with his free hand, ready for anything, and after a moment he's able to push down the panic until it's almost gone. Stiles taps at his dad's wrist to let him know he's okay now, and his dad lets go and points past them.

Stiles turns to look, and he can make out the hunters in a large open room. There's only two, one probably late thirties, the other early forties, and they look enough alike that he suspects they might be brothers.

In the middle of the room, there's an old wardrobe trunk sitting on the ground with a target pinned to its side. The younger man fires off a shot and hits the target dead center. Apparently, the gunshots he'd heard were target practice. He doesn't know whether or not to be relieved—Derek's panic is still like a living thing, haunting the back of his mind.

"I don't see what we're waiting for," the younger hunter says, his voice echoing off the bare walls.

"Because he says he's found a cure," the other sneers.

The younger one is skinny to the point he looks like he could have played Meth-head #4 on the set of Breaking Bad, but the other hunter is so nondescript he doesn't really look like anything at all.

"So he should kill him," the younger snaps. "What's with all the waiting around? If it's going to work it's going to work."

"There's magic involved, Mikey," the older man says.

"Magic, right," Mikey the maybe-a-meth-head says. "I can't believe you're buying into this."

"We see these things spout hair and teeth and claws out of nowhere, and you're doubting magic?" the other man asks, as he drops into a chair. He lifts his feet and crosses them over the trunk. "You know what it will mean for us, if this works? No more killing our friends if they get bitten. We could save them."

"I still say we cut our loses, kill them both," Mikey shrugs, and fires another shot off at the target into the trunk. The trunk slams back from the recoil and knocks the other hunter's feet off.

"We're seeing this through," the other hunter says, glaring at him as he steadies his feet back on the ground. "Gerard is still an Argent, and until we know for sure he can't come back from this we will show him respect. Now, he asked us to keep an eye on the wolf, not sit around playing at target practice. So cut it the hell out."

His dad taps him on the shoulder, and Stiles pulls his eyes from the hunters to glance back at him. He nods down another a hall, and when he moves Stiles follows him. His grip is so tight on the arrow in
his hand that his knuckles have gone white.

His dad leads him into a large, open room. This is obviously the main warehouse floor, with a large vertical door along one wall. Stiles takes note of all this, clinically, until he turns and sees the wall behind him.

There are manacles hanging from a hook in the ceiling, a car battery with loose wires sat below them on a metal chair. This is all worrying enough, but it's the blood stains on the floor that have him trying to catch his breath. Derek's already lost a lot of blood, he can't afford to lose much more. He's not exactly sure how fast werewolves can replenish it, and he wishes he'd thought to ask Deaton.

"They've moved him," his dad whispers, scrubbing a hand through his hair in irritation.

"No, he's here, I'm sure of it," Stiles insists. "Maybe he got free, maybe—"

"Okay, but—" his dad trails off. "Stiles, I really don't think he's going to be in any shape for making an escape. He got pretty torn up by the bunyip, and as amazing as his healing was, he was still out of commission for a day. This looks like it was worse."

"I know," Stiles says, closing his eyes, trying to hone in on the sense he's getting from Derek.

"Anyway, you said Argent only hires professionals, right?" his dad asks. "I doubt they would be in there playing around unless they knew he was somewhere secure."

The guys they'd snuck past had hardly struck Stiles as professionals. Still, the older one had said Gerard had left them to watch the wolf, and his dad was right. They were far too calm to have Derek somewhere he could get out, they had to—

"Oh god," Stiles whispers in horror. His dad turns to him in concern. "I know where he is."

"Where?" John asks.

"They've got him in the god damn trunk," Stiles snaps, and he's moving before his father can stop him. He slams right into the room with the hunters, reaching back to grab a handful of arrows from his backpack as he does.

"Who the hell are you?" Mikey asks in surprise.

Stiles snaps his wrist and lets the arrows fly. He comes to a stop ten feet in front of them and pulls up a hand at the last minute, holding the arrows suspended just inches from the hunters' eyes.

"Drop your guns, and open the trunk," Stiles demands.

"Jesus, what are you?" the older hunter asks, eyes wide as he stares at Stiles in fear.

Stiles glances at his fingers to see his veins are pulsing again with a faint gold. He shifts the arrows a few millimeters closer to the hunters' eyes. "Drop your guns, and open the trunk," he says again.

"Do it, Mikey," the hunter says, as he takes his own gun out of his waistband, clicks on the safety and sends it sliding across the pavement.

Mikey is staring in horror at the arrows. "How am I supposed to do that exactly?" he asks.

Stiles glances over at him and pulls the arrows back just enough to allow him to reach over to the trunk. Mikey tosses his gun and then kneels down to remove the padlock on the trunk. He carefully pushes the lid open and stumbles back. Stiles can hear Derek groan and he fights to keep his hands
"Now back away," Stiles says, pushing the arrows forward slowly to give them some incentive. They stumble away and he rushes forward, kneeling beside the trunk.

Derek is curled up inside. He's just wearing jeans, and Stiles can see the marks along his bare chest. He's been shot at least seven times. Some are older, probably from when he was taken, and half healed over with sickly looking scabs—the wolfsbane in his system keeping them from healing completely.

"Come on," Stiles says softly. "Derek, come on, we've got to get out of here."

"Stiles?" Derek asks in disbelief.

Stiles just nods, reaching in to pull him out. Derek lets out an anguished cry as he unfolds and then falls into Stiles' chest the minute he's on his feet. Stiles nearly staggers under his weight, glancing anxiously back at the hunters to make sure the arrows are still holding them off.

"I've got you," Stiles says, pulling one of his arms over his shoulder as he steps out of the trunk. "My dad can—"

His dad. His dad had been right behind him. Stiles looks up as something pricks at his skin, and he sees Gerard enter the room from the same door he'd used, his father held against him with a tight grip around the neck, and a gun pushed into his temple.

"Stiles, this is a surprise," Gerard says.

Gerard looks terrible. What little hair is left is just in strange patches, lanky weird little tangles, and there are deep black craters beneath his eyes. His skin is sallow and the whites of his eyes a milky grey. But the way he's holding onto his father, he's obviously still got strength—even a weak werewolf would be at least five times stronger than a human.

"Dad," Stiles breathes. He wants to be cool, to handle this like a champ, but his voice just sounds terrified. He's already completely given himself away.

"Get out of here, Sti—"

Gerard yanks his arm tighter around his father's throat, cutting him off. "I wouldn't listen to him," Gerard tsks. "He won't live long if you run."

"Let him go," Stile demands. He knows he's lost any authority he might have had, but that's not going to stop him trying. He tries to stand up straighter, but it's hard considering he's holding up Derek's weight at the same time.

"I would love to. I have no quarrel with him, or you. I'm not interested in either of you, in fact," he says, though he glances over at the arrows, still held suspended. "Though I must admit, you are rather more interesting than I had previously believed. I will give you one chance to leave. Step away from the wolf, and let my men go."

Stiles knows that's not an option. Even if Gerard did keep his word and let them live, he won't take any chances they'd make a second attempt. He'd kill Derek the moment they were gone.

"I can't do that," Stiles says, keeping his eyes locked with his father's. He thinks he sees his father nod almost imperceptibly.
"I can," Derek says. He shoves Stiles roughly away from him. Stiles trips over the trunk and catches himself on his hands. He loses his grip on the arrows as he hits the ground, and they clatter to the pavement in his wake.

"Derek, don't," Stiles protests. He tries to get to his feet but the other hunters are already on him, dragging him up by his arms.

Derek stumbles forward, but he's too weak to stand and he crashes to his knees. "Leave them alone, Gerard," he says, his hitching between pained breaths. "You have me. You don't need them."

"I don't actually need my hands to move the arrows, you know," Stiles says, as he tugs them back into the air. He sends them shooting right back to the hunters holding him, and they let him go as they scramble to get away.

"Yes, it's very impressive," Gerard says, then moves the gun, lightening fast, to aim down at his father's foot. "But let's stop pretending I don't still have the upper hand, what do you say?"

Gerard pulls the trigger without any hesitation, and the bullet tears through his father's boot. Stiles watches as his dad tries to hold back the cry of pain, and he knows Gerard is right. Stiles will do anything to keep Gerard from firing that gun at his father again.

"Okay," he says, reaching back to the guide the arrows down. "You've got the upper hand. Please, just don't…don't do that again."

"Good boy," Gerard says, sounding a bit deranged. He drags John closer, moving past Derek like he's no concern at all, and drops John at Stiles' feet.

Stiles quickly rushes to his side. "Dad?"

"I'm fine," John assures him quickly, but Stiles can see the blood leaking the hole in his boot.

"You said you'd let them go," Derek snarls, as he pushes himself up to sit on his heels.

"That was a one-time offer, and it was refused," Gerard says. "Sheriff, get in the trunk."

"What? No!" Stiles cries, looking up in horror. "Let him go, I'll stay, okay, I'll do whatever you want, just—"

"In the trunk, or next time it's the knee," Gerard says.

"Stiles, help me up," John says, tugging Stiles around to look at him. "It's going to be alright. Just do what he says."

Stiles reluctantly helps his dad get to his feet, and starts them towards the trunk.

"Not so fast," Gerard says. "Your arrows go in first. All of them."

Stiles glances back towards the arrows. He could get them to go anywhere, and they were fast. He's just not sure they're faster than a bullet, and even if Derek can survive another shot, chances are his dad can't. He carefully lifts them from the ground.


Stiles pulls the arrows closer and guides them into the trunk, before tossing his backpack in as well. His dad puts a hand on his shoulder and then steps inside. He lowers himself in, but reaches out and grabs Stiles hoodie as he collapses, dragging him close.
"Stall," John whispers, before the hunters are there and ripping Stiles away. They close the trunk lid on his father and then fasten the padlock.

Stiles glares over at Gerard. "He's still bleeding, you can't just—"

"Then we'll have to be quick," Gerard interrupts. "You're going to help me complete a little ritual, Stiles. I wasn't quite sure of my chances before, but with the help of someone of your talents, well, it just might work."

"You want me to help you kill Derek," Stiles asks in disbelief.

"Yes," Gerard says. "What is he to you, anyway? Help me complete the ritual, and you and your father will be free to leave."

"Just do what he says, Stiles," Derek rasps. "I'm dead either way."

"Okay, fine," Stiles agrees, his voice falsely calm. "You're right. He's a pain in my ass anyway. So sure, let's kill him. At midnight, we'll—"

"We're doing it now," Gerard says.

Stiles laughs. "Oh, okay, sure," he says. "I just thought you wanted it to actually work. The moon needs to be at full power if this is gonna even stand a chance—"

"I think if I have a druid close out the circle, my chances will be pretty much iron-clad," Gerard says dryly. "The moon has started to appear. It'll have to be enough."

"Except I'm not a druid," Stiles says. His father wants him to stall, and if he can't reach his arrows he's going to have to rely on his original superpower: his mouth. "I mean, yeah, I'm pretty good at the basics, but you think if I had any real power I'd have let you knock me around in your basement? Deaton told me I had a spark, that's it. I can use mountain ash, but that's all."

"You controlled those arrows. No spark has that kind of power," Gerard says, but he looks uncertain.

"Dude, they're mountain ash arrows," Stiles says. "I got them from your son. That's the only reason I can move them around. I'm not actually a telekinetic or something. While that would be super cool, again, I probably wouldn't just be standing here talking to you if I had that kind of power. I'd probably just, you know, kill you with my mind."

"I hope for your sake that you're lying to me," Gerard says, as he steps over towards Derek. Stiles moves forward on instinct, wanting to keep Gerard the hell away from Derek, but Mikey reaches out and grabs him before he can take a step.

"Take him into the other room," Gerard says. "We've got to begin. Their friends will probably not be far behind."

The room the hunters drag him to has glass panels along the ceiling, supposedly to let in the moonlight. But the sky has just barely started to get dark, and Stiles can't even see the moon.

"This ritual needs actual moonlight," he says, as he turns to watch Gerard drag Derek in.

"We'll get it ready and wait as long as we can," Gerard says, before shoving Derek into the room. He sprawls onto the ground on his hands and knees, and Stiles tugs angrily at the hunters' hold.
"At least let me help him," Stiles demands.

Gerard nods faintly, and Stiles is moving the moment he feels the hold on him lessen. He drops down beside Derek, carefully helping him sit back up. "What the hell are you doing here?" Derek hisses.

"Hey, I came here to rescue you," Stiles says, as he helps him up and pulls him to where Gerard motions them impatiently. "You could be a little thankful."

"Thankful that now we get to die together?" Derek snarls.

"Okay, so things aren't going great so far, but I've got a Plan B," Stiles assures him in a whisper. "You may know him as Scott."

"I know him as Plan C," Derek snaps.

"That's fair," Stiles says.

Derek stumbles against Stiles as they finally reach the center of the room. Stiles gently helps lower him down, and Derek grips him tightly, tugging him close. "I'll distract them, I want you to get your father and run."

"How exactly are you going to distract them? With your mad fainting skills?" Stiles asks. "You can't even stand."

"I'll think of something," Derek growls.

"You can't distract him, because if you make one wrong move he'll just shoot you. Again," Stiles says. "You do get that the plan here is that he wants to kill you, right?"

"Yes," Derek says fiercely. "And you're going to let him."

"It really is like you don't know me at all," Stiles says.

Derek reaches out and grabs Stiles wrist. "What's—" he starts, staring at the faint glow in confusion.

Stiles feels himself calm the minute they make contact, the glow stops pulsing and grows fainter, thrumming beneath his skin. "Derek, don't—" he starts, but it's already too late.

Gerard appears behind him, ripping his wrist out of Derek's hold. "You almost had me believing you were just a spark," he sneers. "But sparks cannot become emissaries."

Derek's jaw tightens as Gerard pulls Stiles away, but he's too weak to stop him. "No one's going to miss me, Gerard," Derek says angrily. "But do you really think you can hurt Stiles and the Sheriff and get away with it?"

"I don't want to hurt him," Gerard says, shoving Stiles back towards his men. "He's an emissary, which makes him far too valuable to damage. And once I complete this ritual, he'll be mine."

"You bast—" Derek starts, and Gerard reaches out with the gun and slams it into the wolf's head.

Stiles surges forward but Mikey grabs him, tightening his hand on his upper arm as the other hunter grabs him on the other side. Stiles struggles against their hold. "Stop, don't—"

"You won't be arguing with me much longer, boy," Gerard says smugly. "You'll be bound to me soon enough."
Stiles stops struggling, and narrows his eyes. "Because you'll be my Alpha." Gerard looks pleased for a fraction of a second, before he catches on to what Stiles is doing. Stiles grins. "Right? Leader of the pack? That's what you're doing, I mean, you just said it. You're going to take Derek's place."

"What's he talking about, boss?" the nameless hunter demands. "I thought this was supposed to turn you human again?"

"It is," Gerard says, his voice way too calm. He steps back casually.

"Then what's that got to do with the kid?" Mikey demands. "If he's an emissary, nothing in this ritual should have any affect on him, unless—"

"Unless instead of becoming human again, I just wanted to be a stronger werewolf?" Gerard says helpfully. "Yes, that is the plan."

"You lying son of a bitch," Mikey starts, letting Stiles go to step forward.

Gerard glances over at them, raising his gun and shooting Mikey right in the forehead. The other hunter cries out in horror. "No, M—"

Gerard shoots him before he has a chance to finish.

Stiles takes in a gasping breath, looking down at the two fallen hunters in disbelief. He can feel blood splatter over half his face from Mikey, who had been standing close.


"Well, we need blood and sacrifices for the ritual, don't we?" Gerard asks, stepping away from Derek. "They were never going to stand by me once they realized I was going to remain a werewolf, that becoming an Alpha was the cure I sought."

Stiles lets out another shuddering breath, his hands shaking as he curls them into fists. It's not like Mickey and what's-his-name getting murdered is going to deprive the world of anything all that great. In the abstract, Stiles has wanted them dead since the moment he realized that they'd put Derek in that trunk.

But to stand and watch them so callously slaughtered wasn't exactly the same thing. He hadn't expected his half-formed plan to turn them against one another to end quite that like this.

"Do you remember what you have to do now, Stiles?" Gerard asks, his voice almost gentle. Stiles reluctantly glances away from the bodies to face him again, and Gerard flashes him some sick parody of a grin. "The ritual will be far more successful if performed by someone with your power. Do this for me, and your father will live."

"I remember. You need their blood," Stiles says.

"Yes," Gerard says. "So make me a circle."

Stiles glances at Derek. Derek's eyes are flickering red as he tries to keep himself from collapse, and he's obviously trying to communicate something. It could be anything from 'run, you idiot' to 'just do it, idiot.' Stiles really has no idea, since Derek trying to communicate with his eyes is even less understandable than his growls—but he is pretty sure about the 'idiot' part, at least.

"Right," Stiles says. He kneels down beside the bodies and takes a deep breath, before running some quick calculations: the drive to the wharf was seventeen minutes, and they did surveillance for at
least forty. The first gunshot must have been fifteen minutes ago, which means even with Lydia driving the others probably wouldn't be here for maybe another twenty.

His dad told him to stall, but he's pretty sure finger-painting the concrete with hunters' blood wasn't exactly what he had in mind.

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen," Stiles decides.

Stiles might have meant for the hunters to kill Gerard when he tried to turn them against each other, and yeah, maybe he didn't get that lucky, but that didn't mean the plan hadn't worked all.

However it had happened, Gerard had just killed his only reinforcements. Instead of three against two, now it's two against one.

Stiles glances at Derek in concern and frowns. Well, maybe one and a half against one.

"I'm not going to ask again," Gerard warns.

"Good, because it would be pointless if you did," Stiles says, glancing briefly at the dead man in front of him before pushing back to his feet to look straight at Gerard. "You have no idea who you're dealing with, do you?"

Gerard still looks at Stiles and sees that kid he'd beaten down in the basement. He doesn't understand that Stiles has changed in ways that have nothing to do with his druid powers. "You've left my dad safely out of the way and you just killed your only back-up. You'd have to get through me to get to him, and that's not going to happen. You just lost your only leverage."

Gerard aims his gun to line it up with the back of Derek's head. "Your father's not my only leverage. Get started, or I'll shoot Derek."

"You mean you'll shoot Derek now, instead of waiting for me to do what you want, at which time you'll kill Derek anyway and steal all his power?" Stiles asks, feeling the power coursing through him coming to life again as he takes a step closer to Gerard. "As bargaining chips go, that's not exactly the best."

"It's the only one you've got," Gerard snarls. "Do you really think I'll hesitate? I just killed my own men without batting an eye."

Stiles' powers are building up, trying to latch onto something, pulling his attention straight towards Gerard. He doesn't know why it's taken him so long to notice what was wrong with the old man, because it's not like he didn't already know exactly what had happened to him. He knows why Gerard is still weak, he just hadn't put together what that meant, not at first.

He tries not to look at Derek, tries not to advertise that the alpha is a weakness for him. Gerard knows he's Derek's emissary now, but he doesn't understand what that means. He doesn't know how valuable of a bargaining chip Derek actually is.

"You're just a pathetic, desperate old man that's terrified to die," Stiles sneers, getting Gerard's attention back on him. "So guess what? I'm not afraid of you anymore. I mean, I may not have ever agreed with you, but at least you had purpose before. At least you stood for something. Now you've gone and made a mockery of everything you believed in, if you ever really believed in any of it at all."

"You have no idea what I am," Gerard sneers.
"Yes I do," Stiles says. "You're the one that doesn't get it, because if you had any idea what an emissary really was, you never would have threatened my Alpha right in front of me."

Stiles slowly starts to raise one hand as he approaches Gerard. Gerard stumbles back, but keeps his gun aimed at Derek. "Stay back," he demands.

"You hurt him and you're dead," Stiles says. "I can destroy you without any effort at all."

"Emissary magic is defensive. You don't have that sort of power," Gerard says, though even Stiles can pick up on the uncertainty in his voice.

"No, not usually," Stiles agrees. "But we do have some rather unique talents. You know what I'm really good at? I can manipulate anything with mountain ash. It's sort of like my specialty."

Gerard suddenly loses the feeling in his hands, and gun slips from his lifeless fingers. He looks back at Stiles with widening eyes. "What are you—"

"And you? You've got it running through your veins," Stiles reminds him.

Stiles steps closer, feeling the power thrumming beneath his skin. He focuses it all straight at Gerard, who is held immobile in his control. Gerard's veins start to blacken, straining against his skin as though they're about to split him apart. They pulse, bulging and grotesque, all across his arms and his neck.

"How does it feel, Gerard, to be powerless?" Stiles asks, as he tightens his fist to drag all that mountain ash in Gerard's blood rushing forward at his command. "I know it's not as flashy as the electro-shock method you're so fond of, but the pressure's got to be unpleasant. You think if I pull hard enough, the veins will burst and it'll all come ripping straight through your skin?"

"Stop," Gerard chokes, black liquid slipping down his lips as he tries to back away.

"How many times have people begged you for their lives?" Stiles snarls. "Have you ever listened? Even once? Have you ever regretted a single thing you've done? Why should I stop for you?"

"Because you're not him."

Stiles stiffens at Scott's unexpected voice, but doesn't turn around.

"Stiles, you're better than him," Scott continues quietly. "Let him go. He's not getting away this time."

Stiles' first rush of relief at the others being here is quickly trampled down as he fights to keep his grip on Gerard. "My dad—" he starts.

"Jackson and Lydia have got him," Scott reassures him quickly, reaching out to cover his hand over Stiles, though the touch is more reassuring than restraining. Its not like Stiles has a weapon Scott can take out of his hands—he is the weapon. "We've got them both, Stiles. We won. Let him go."

"You're the one that put that mountain ash in him," Stiles says. "I'm just trying to finish the job."

"Stiles, please," Derek says roughly from behind him. "This isn't you."

"Yes it is," Stiles says, holding back a broken laugh. "There's no one else in here. No inner wolf instincts for me to fight off. Just me."

Gerard's lips have gone from black to a faint tinge of blue. Stiles knows Scott saves ants from the
shower and literally rescues puppies and other small fluffy animals, but Stiles doesn't have the luxury of viewing the world the way he does. He has to be the realistic one. He has to be the one ready to fire the gun, because sometimes someone has to.

Derek should understand that. He's the same way.

"You'd do it," Stiles says, without turning to look at him.

"Yeah, but that's me," Derek says. "You're way smarter than me, Stiles. Let Scott handle Gerard."

Stiles pulls back just enough to let Gerard breathe again, and Scott walks straight past him to Gerard, apparently unconcerned with Stiles' semi-Carrie level freak out. Scott pulls out a pair of leather cuffed shackles and drags Gerard's hands behind his back before he can get back his breath, and then passes him off to maliciously gleeful Erica and a stoic Boyd.

"Hey, grandpa," Erica purrs, her claws digging into his jugular. "Miss us?"

Stiles can feel the power still thrumming though him, and it leaves him gasping. He wants to latch back onto Gerard, he wants to pull all that mountain ash out of him until there's nothing of him left, and he wants it like he's never wanted anything in his life. He wants it for more than just the honorable reasons, too. Power corrupts absolutely, after all, and Deaton had all but told him he was Merlin.

He's not sure how long he can stand it, but then his father is there, dragging him into his arms, and the fight just leaves him all at once. He lets himself fall against his dad, pressing his eyes shut for a moment in relief.

"Thank god," John whispers, before he pulls back to frame Stiles' face.

"Hey, kiddo," he says. "It's okay now. Alright? We're all okay."

Except that's not exactly true.

Stiles can't hear the labored breathing coming from behind him anymore, or the sound of Derek's thundering, frantic heart. He pulls away and turns towards Derek, dropping down beside him almost before he's realized he's moved.

"Derek?" he calls, "Derek, hey, look at me."

Derek doesn't open his eyes, but he does give a faint smile. "You called me your Alpha," he says weakly.

"You are," Stiles says, his voice catching until he manages to suck in another anxious breath. "You are my Alpha, and you're going to be fine. I'm not going to allow you to be anything else."

"I can't—Stiles, I'm sorry," Derek chokes out, blood dripping down his lips. "I wasn't ever going to make it. I tried to tell you, you should have just run. The wolfsbane's infected me for too long, it's spread. I can't—" Derek coughs as his words choke off. "There's nothing you can do."

Stiles hasn't come this far just to let the stupid sourwolf give up on him now. He moves to straddle Derek, leaning forward to press their foreheads together. Touching Derek is a little like connecting a circuit, and he can feel his power cycling now through them both.

"Do you trust me?" Stiles asks.
"Yes," Derek whispers.

"Then just hold on."

Stiles can hear the others talking around him, his dad's frantic Stiles, what are you doing? and Scott's confused voice, Is he glowing? Since when does he glow!

Stiles tunes them all out and instead focuses in on the ever slowing beats of the alpha's pulse. He presses his eyes shut and searches until he can feel the poison that's wound itself around Derek's heart. Wolfsbane isn't like mountain ash: he can't control it.

But he can burn it out.

He opens his eyes again and he can see the black veins standing out against Derek's skin as the poison works it's way to the surface, and the wolf's lips are blackened from coughing it out. Stiles splays his hands over Derek's bare chest and puts forth all the energy he can, feeding his magic into the werewolf to help him heal faster.

It doesn't take long before Derek's wounds start mending, but by then Stiles almost can't hold himself up. He feels dizzy and he moves his hands, reaching out to brace himself on Derek's shoulders so he doesn't fall forward.

"Stiles, stop," Derek moans. "Whatever you're doing, you need to stop."

It's probably good advice, but Stiles doesn't actually know how to stop. He's not entirely sure what he's even doing.

"Stiles?" his dad shouts, and he feels a tight grip on his arm, trying to tug him away. He doesn't try to fight it, but it's like he's connected to Derek by a magnet. He can't be moved.

The last thing he sees before everything goes dark are the blackened bullet holes in Derek's otherwise perfect skin, neatly closing in.
First off, I would like to apologize for leaving you on a cliffhanger for months. This may sound crazy, but I actually did not realize how much of a cliffhanger it was. Probably because I know everything that's going to happen (bwhahah). Sometimes I forget others do not know everything in my crazy head.

So yeah. I thought that was a good place to stop.

The good news? My opportunities for further cliffhangers are going to be severely limited, because what is that I see? AN END TO THIS MADNESS? Yes, folks, you are correct. This story will be done in thirty chapters! The last chapter might end up either super long or as a shorter-than-usual epilogue depending on where all my inspiration falls, but it SHALL BE DONE. Maybe not quickly, but DONE!

The world comes back first in sound. Stiles can hear Scott scuffling around, speaking in tones that he probably thinks are quiet, but feel like the auditory equivalent of having railroad spikes jammed into his head. His father's voice answers back muffled, sort of like one of the parents on Charley Brown, and there's a low growling from somewhere that's got to be Derek. Because really: who else?

He lets it go on for awhile, not really understanding or picking out any words, just letting it all wash over him as he floats around in unconsciousness. It's not such a bad place, really. He'll take this deep black horizon over his Technicolor nightmares any day of the week.

But then he feels the pressure on his hand, and hears his dad's broken voice, the words are finally taking shape in his head: c'mon, kiddo, don't do this.

That's the voice his father had used when his mother was in her last days, and that's what finally gets him to open his eyes.

"Not doing anything," Stiles protests faintly, surprised at the strained sound of his own voice. He tries to shift but he's being propped up by some weird hard lumpy pillow, and can't get any traction.

"Stiles, thank god," his dad says, his worry-lines disappearing as he relaxes into a grin. "You've had us worried."

"Where'mI," he asks, swallowing hard when his voice still doesn't do what he wants it to. Stiles prides himself on his way with words, so he takes a deep breath and tries again. "Where are we?"

"We needed a place to take you quick, so we brought you to the Motel Glen Capri," his dad says.

"Are we in Gerard's room?" Stiles asks in horror, struggling to sit up. "Oh god. Am I on the bed that he slept on? Am I—"

"Stiles," his dad breaks in firmly. "Boyd and Erica booked another room under some false names, Gerard's room is going to be a crime scene soon enough."

"Peter?" he asks.
"Long gone," his dad says. "No idea how the hell he got free, but that's tomorrow's problem. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," Stiles says quickly. "What about Derek? Where is he? Is he—"

"He's fine." His father raises an eyebrow and tips his head towards him, and that's about when Stiles realizes that the firm lumpy pillow he's been pulled back against is actually Derek. He glances down to see Derek's hands firmly wrapped around his waist.

"Not sure this is appropriate, Sourwolf," Stiles says. "My dad's right here."

"Shut up," Derek says without any heat, and momentarily tightens his grip.

"It's a pack thing, I guess," his dad says, not sounding entirely convinced. "I was told the closeness would help you, and I was scared enough by your little Sleeping Beauty impression that I was willing to believe it, within reason."

"It's true enough," Deaton says, as he strolls into the room. "How are you feeling, Stiles?"

"Like someone sucked out all my insides and ran them through a blender, then poured them back in," Stiles tells him.

"Thank you for that rather overly-descriptive response," Deaton says. "But how about you just give me a number between 1 and 10? 10 being the worst?"

"3, I guess?" Stiles says, closing his eyes and letting himself fall back against Derek.

"Don't lie," Derek snaps tensely.

"It's not really pain, though," Stiles says. "It's like—"

"No need to try and describe it again," Deaton interjects calmly. "The blender analogy was more than vivid enough."

"Pretty sure it was a simile," Stiles corrects.

Deaton just ignores him. As usual. "You're suffering from magical exhaustion."

"Doesn't feel very magical," Stiles protests lamely.

Deaton grins slightly. "Meaning, you've exhausted your magic," he says. "You used too much by first taking down Gerard, and then to jumpstart Derek's healing, it very nearly killed you."

"Which is why you're never going to do something that stupid again, are you?" Derek growls from behind him.

"Your threats aren't so threatening when you're cuddling me like I'm your teddy bear," Stiles tells him. "Just so you know."

"Stiles," Derek snaps. "You can't do something like that ever again. It's not your job to look out for me."

"Didn't you tell him?" Stiles asks, glancing between his father and Deaton.

His father sighs. "I don't even think I understand it, kid," he says. "Not sure how I'd explain it to him."
"Explain what?" Derek demands.

"Uh, that it is actually my job to look out for you now?" Stiles says. "I'm your emissary."

"You're my what?" he snaps.

"Your emissary," Stiles says. "It means I'm responsible for you."

"That's not exactly what it means," Deaton says wryly. "You're responsible for each other. It's a symbiotic relationship, an equal dispersion of power. It is all about balance. Stiles will add to your power but not be directly influenced by your commands as an alpha, and as such will be the only one able to challenge you directly without fear of consequence—"

John sighs when Derek just looks more and more confused, and he takes pity on him. "My kid's a druid, apparently. He's got magic, and now he's bound himself to your pack to use his powers for good. Or something."

"I didn't think the druids were real," Derek says in disbelief.

"S'okay, not a real one anyway," Stiles says. "Deaton says I'm a mud-blood."

"I didn't, actually," Deaton says easily. "You'll be fine, Stiles. You just need sleep. You do, however, need to learn moderation."

"Moderation," John snorts. "I've been trying to teach him that since he learned to walk."

"Says the guy that lived off nothing but frozen Salisbury steak TV dinners that one time I tried to go to summer camp," Stiles says.

"I told you, they were on sale!" John says.

"It's a miracle you didn't end up with scurvy," Stiles snorts.

John runs a hand down his face, fighting off a grin at the fact that Stiles sounds pretty much back to normal, even if he is a bit too pale. "I don't want to argue with you," he says smoothly. "You need to rest."

"No time for that," Stiles shakes his head. "We've got to figure out what to do with Gerard."

"He already got picked up by the local police," John says. "He's being charged with the two deaths in Fairvale, but I was able to convince Rebecca to release him into my custody so we can take him back to Beacon Hills. I told her he's the prime suspect in an ongoing missing person's case, and it takes priority."

"But Derek—" Stiles protests at once, trying to turn to look at the alpha. Derek makes a strange rumbling growl, holding him still.

"Calm down," the alpha whispers, and somehow Stiles does.

"She doesn't know about Derek, we're keeping him out of it," John assures him. "I said the missing person was Andy Mason, the other hunter. Rebecca's not stupid, she knows there was someone else in that warehouse being tortured. I had to tell her something, so I told her it was most likely Mason. He doesn't have any DNA on file and I have it on pretty good authority we're never finding the body, so they've got nothing to compare it to. Derek was never actually charged when I arrested him, and we never collected DNA. We did finger-print him, but the wolves wiped down the place before
we left. There's nothing to connect him."

Stiles watches his father in admiration. "Maybe you're the one that should be the master criminal."

John's expression tightens. "I don't like it," he admits. "I'm not comfortable with any of this. But it's my job to protect and serve—and I can't protect these wolves if anyone finds out about them. That's got to be the priority. That doesn't mean I won't go after them myself if they're ever actually guilty, because you can be damn sure that I will."

John is looking past Stiles' shoulder at Derek as he says this.

"Understood," Derek says gruffly.

Melissa and Scott come pushing through the motel door, and while Scott breaks out into a huge grin to see Stiles awake, Melissa just puts on her nurse-on-a-mission face and marches over. "Stiles, thank god you're awake," she says. "You've been out six hours. I was just about to insist we take you in to the hospital."

"I'm good," Stiles says. "I could probably even sit up, if I didn't have a werewolf wrapped around me."

"It's a pack thing," Derek says grudgingly, like it's Stiles fault that he's been reduced to initiating contact.

"Right, of course," Stiles says. "But just so you know, I'm not doing the puppy pile thing. It's one thing when it's you. I'm not getting this up close and personal to Jackson or Erica. I value my life."

"Stiles," Melissa says in exasperation, as she sits on the edge of the bed. "I need you to look at me."

He pulls his gaze towards her and she gently catches his chin, checking his eyes.

"He is suffering from magical exhaustion, he doesn't have a concussion," Deaton says flatly.

"Yes, well, you're a vet," Melissa says. "I think I'll just double-check."

"Mom!" Scott protests, but Deaton doesn't look offended.

"Any dizziness?" she asks.

"No," Stiles says.

"Lie," Derek says.

"Nausea?"

"Nope."

"Lie!" Derek snaps.

Melissa purses her lips. "Stiles."

"Okay, yes, and yes, I feel awful, are we all happy now?" Stiles demands.

"We will be when you agree never to do this again," John says.

"Me? What about you?" Stiles asks. "Have you even been to the hospital?" He tries to pull away
from Derek to sit up so he can get a look at his dad's foot. "I mean, oh my god, dad, you could get
gangrene! They might have to amputate! I don't think you want to become Beacon Hills' answer to
RoboCop."

"Your dad's foot has already been treated," Melissa assures him. "Let's focus on you, okay?"

Stiles manages to pull away enough that he can see his dad's foot wrapped in bandages, held
securely in one of those walking casts. "What did the doctors say?"

John gives his son a long-suffering look, knowing they won't get anywhere with Stiles until they get
this out of the way. "It was through and through, Stiles. Six weeks with the brace, and I should be
good as new."

"Okay," Stiles says. "Okay, good. So what's the plan then? We can't stay here."

Stiles manages to lift himself up a little more, and do a pretty good approximation of sitting up on his
own. Derek carefully slides out from behind him, but stays close, like some kind of hairy guardian
angel.

"Erica, Boyd, Jackson and Lydia already headed back to Beacon Hills," his dad says. "We needed
them to keep up appearances that everything is normal, can't have the kids reported missing right
now. Deaton's offered to take Derek home. Melissa's gonna take you and Scott home with her."

"What about you?" Stiles demands at once.

"I've got to pick up Gerard for transport back to Beacon Hills," John says.

"I don't like you dealing with him alone," Stiles says. "We still don't know what he is."

"He can't do anything," Deaton says carefully. "I thought you knew what you had done."

Stiles looks towards him sharply. "Ah, that would be a negative, ghost rider," he says. "I just felt the
mountain ash, and uh…" His father looks away, and Stiles breaks off guiltily. Going all revenging
angel wasn't exactly his finest moment. "I don't really know what happened after that. It's all kind of
fuzzy, to be honest."

"You fully activated the mountain ash in his blood," Deaton says. "You created a barrier inside of
him so that whenever he tries to enter a shift, he hits up against it. You've effectively made him
human again. You could almost say you've found a cure for lycanthropy, though it isn't one I'd wish
on anyone other than Gerard. I imagine the shift attempts are…painful."

"How sure are you that it will hold?" Stiles asks.

"There is no such thing as certainty, but we must learn to have faith in our actions," Deaton says.

"You know, you ever get tired of being a supernatural vet, you've got a future in writing fortune
cookies," Stiles tells him.

Deaton just ignores him, nodding once at Derek before mysteriously slipping from the room. One of
these days Stiles is going to give up on trying to get a reaction out of him. He turns back towards to
Derek. "I guess that was your cue to leave," he says. "Sort of hard to tell, what with it being Deaton
and all, but I'm pretty sure he's going to de-materialize into the ether if you don't hurry after him."

Derek glares at him, and it's awkward, because Stiles can practically feel everything he isn't saying,
but it's not like they can have a heart-to-heart in front of his father and Melissa and Scott. "This isn't
finished," Derek says finally, and then gets to his feet.

Stiles watches him carefully for any sign of his previous injuries, but Derek moves with his typical threatening grace. There's no sign of what happened to him. He swallows hard, wondering if that makes it better or worse. At least when someone human is hurt, they have time to come to terms with it as they heal. Derek heals almost instantly physically, but mental scars are a whole other thing.

"Come on, Derek," John says softly. "I'll walk you out."

It's only then that Stiles realizes he'd been making things all awkward again by staring into Derek's eyes like some kind of lovesick schoolboy. Melissa ushers Scott out after them, ostensibly to give him a moment to get himself together. There's a reason Melissa has always been his favorite.

But before he can even take a steadying breath, Isaac comes barreling straight into the room in their wake. There's a reason Isaac has always been his least favorite.

"Oh, what the hell are you doing here?" Stiles demands.

"Good to see you too, Stiles," Isaac says, apparently unfazed by the hostility. Then again, Isaac had managed to live with Derek for months, he'd probably developed an immunity.

"Don't take this the wrong way or anything," Stiles says, "But except for Gerard, you're really the last person I want to deal with right now."


"That certainly explains the rest of your friends," Stiles tells him.

Isaac laughs, but he looks away. "That's not what I mean. Everyone that knows what happened to me, they're always so careful, so nice. Even my old pack. But not you, Stilinski—you've never pitied me."

"Pity's never done anyone any good," Stiles agrees. "But mostly I just really don't like you."

"Yeah, I know," Isaac says wryly. "I just never really got why. You know I'm not trying to take him from you, right? Scott, I mean. I'm not trying to replace you."

Stiles snorts disdainfully. "As if you could."

"Whether I could or not, I'm not trying, okay?" Isaac assures him. "I know I can't compete with what you and Scott have. It's just that Scott is pretty much all I've got."

"Great, now I feel bad for you," Stiles snaps. "I thought you didn't want me to feel sorry for you? Then you have to go and be all...you, and everything, and what am I supposed to say to that? Even I'm not that much an asshole."

"We could try something radical, like hanging out, all three of us?" Isaac suggests. "I've heard there are people out there that actually have more than one friend. Maybe we ought to try it out."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Stiles says. "I can barely manage Scott."

" Probably shouldn't have joined a pack then," Isaac says.

Stiles can't really argue with that logic, so he just narrows his eyes. "Did you actually need something? Or are you just here to annoy me?"
"I'm going to head home with Derek, make sure he's okay," Isaac says. "Just wanted to make sure you were okay, too. And to thank you."

"I guess you're welcome," Stiles says, and then frowns. "I'm not sure I really know how to handle you being nice to me."

"I know, that's why I thought it might be fun," Isaac says, before turning with a laugh and heading out to catch up to Derek and Deaton before they leave without him. Stiles figures his chances probably aren't great. Deaton is patient—Derek is not.

The thought of Isaac chasing after the car like some German Shepard cheers him up a bit though. He probably still has a ways to go with the whole being nice to him thing.

"You ready to go?" Scott asks, as he appears back in the doorway. "Need any help?"

"I can walk, I'm not an invalid," Stiles says, and stands up. He stays upright for about a fraction of a second, before collapsing straight to the floor like a marionette with its strings cut. "Ow."

"Stiles!" Scott shouts, and rushes to kneel beside him. "You okay?"

"I think I mostly just hurt my pride," Stiles says with a wince, pushing himself up carefully. Scott drags him to his feet and pulls one of his arms over his shoulders. Stiles doesn’t protest. It's embarrassing to get dragged around by his super-powered friend, but it's more embarrassing to do a face-plant into the grimy rug of a one-star motel.

"I've got you," Scott assures him.

"I think my legs have turned to Jello," Stiles whines. "That's not a thing, right? Jello legs? Deaton didn't mention that."

"He said you just need to sleep it off," Scott assures him. "We wouldn't move you, but—"

"Yeah, probably not a good idea to be here when the police show up to search Gerard's room," Stiles says. "Did you guys clean it up, by the way?"

"Didn't have to," Scott says reluctantly, as he pulls them out of the room towards his mom's car. "We're pretty sure Peter took care of it before he disappeared. Anything that could be traced back to the supernatural was gone, except for the mountain ash line, and Lydia took care of that."

"Any idea how he got out?" Stiles asks.

"The bathroom window wasn't big enough for him to get out. I guess someone must have helped him," Scott frowns. "But the mountain ash line wasn't broken."

"Should we be more worried about this?" Stiles asks, as Scott helps him into the backseat of the car.

"Probably," Scott says. He pushes Stiles across the seat to the other side and then drops down beside him.

John walks over and taps on the window by Stiles' side. Stiles rolls it down quickly. "Deaton said you need about ten more hours of sleep," he says. "Think you can handle that?"

"Make it twelve and you've got a deal," Stiles says.

His father grins, but it looks a little forced. "Try to stay out of trouble, okay? I just need to talk to Melissa for a minute and then she'll take you home."
Stiles nods and watches John walk back over to Melissa. His father looks tense, strained, and Stiles knows it's his fault. He wishes his dad had never had to see this side of him.

"You okay, Stiles?" Scott asks quietly.

"When I said I didn't really remember," Stiles says. "I was lying."

"I know," Scott says. "It doesn't matter. You did what you had to. You stopped him. I'm proud of you."

"You really shouldn't be," Stiles says quietly. "If I had any mercy at all I'd have killed him."

"Stiles—"

"I want him to suffer, Scott," he says, turning to meet his friend's eyes. "I want him to spend the rest of his miserable life locked in a cage and I don't want to ever have to think of him again. I didn't kill him because I'm selfish, not because I'm a good person."

"I don't believe that," Scott says.

"It would have haunted me," Stiles says, glancing away. "It would have upset you and my dad. That's the only thing that kept me from it. God, don't you get it? You worried you were a monster, but you never were. I'm the monster. And now I have all this power, and I'm terrified what I'm going to do with it."

"And that's why you're a good person," Scott whispers. "You're not like Gerard, Stiles. You're not like Peter. No. Hey, look at me! You're not!" Stiles reluctantly faces him again. "He didn't protect his family, he killed Laura, remember? Only thing he cared about was revenge. You said it yourself, you gave up revenge for me, for your father—you put us first, so how can you think you're a monster?"

"Because I almost didn't," Stiles tells him.

Scott opens his mouth to respond, but falls silent as Melissa pulls open the door and drops into the driver's seat. Stiles tries to turn away, but Scott grabs his arm and tugs him back.

"It'll be okay," he whispers.

"You always say that," Stiles says.

"Yeah, and it's always true," Scott counters.

Scott says it with absolute faith, the eternal optimist. Stiles nods so he won't worry, but his faith is not nearly so strong. Gerard is still alive, and even locked up that means he's still a threat. Stiles won't make the mistake of underestimating him again.

He doesn't know if he's done the right thing by letting him live. Scott is always so certain about what needs to be done, but it's never been that black and white for Stiles.

It might be the standard hero thing—to let the villain live, to be the bigger person—but he can't shake the feeling he should have put an end to this, while he'd still had the chance.

The worst part is that he doesn't regret almost killing Gerard nearly as much as he regrets not finishing the job.

* * * * *
Stiles passes out in Scott's bed the moment he reaches it. He doesn't know where Scott sleeps. He wonders for maybe half a second and thinks he should probably offer to move over a bit so he'll have room, but unconsciousness claims him before he can. Magical exhaustion has a lot in common with run-of-the-mill exhaustion, as far as Stiles can tell.

He sleeps like the dead for the promised twelve hours before he's jarred awake by the ringing of his phone. He pushes himself up sleepily, feeling a bit stronger, and blinks blurrily at his Caller ID. It just says: Restricted. It could be the station house, so he picks it up anyway.

"Hello?" he asks, as he collapses back down on the pillow.

"Stiles, so good to hear you're still alive," Peter says. "Have you been as worried about me as I have been about you?"

Stiles pushes himself back up, and swallows hard. "Actually yeah, but not so much worried about your well-being as worried you're going to materialize out of the shadows. Just how the hell did you get out of that room?"

"That would be telling," Peter says. "And not why I called."

"Well don't keep me in suspense," he says dryly.

"I've been thinking about that book I gave you," Peter says. "About the secrets it holds, that only someone like you can unlock."

"I get enough of the cryptic Yoda stuff from Deaton, Peter, and I'm really not in the mood," Stiles says, frowning as he glances at the clock. It's halfway through the day. He wonders where Scott is. "If you have something to say, say it, otherwise I'm hanging up and going back to sleep."

Peter laughs brightly in his ear, psychotic and amused. "Ostende mihi furta meo," he says. "It was her favorite phrase. I used to hear her whisper it in the night, while she slaved over that damn book. I didn't understand, then, what it meant. I thought it was just the words she liked."

"That's your idea of less cryptic?" Stiles demands. "You're literally speaking Latin to me now."

"Goodbye, Stiles," Peter says, and the bastard's laughing again.

Stiles drops his phone in disgust, but then sits down at Scott's laptop to bring up Google translate, because it's marginally quicker than Lydia, if not quite as accurate.

Google says: *Show me your secrets.*

Peter said he hadn't understood it at first, but Stiles gets it right away.

It's a spell.

He's hit with a rush of adrenaline like he's just downed a Red Bull, and he pushes up from Scott's desk, lunging towards his backpack to pull out Emily's book. He drops to sit on the floor and places it carefully in front of him.

"Ostende mihi furta meo," he says.

He feels an angry pull beneath his skin, his body protesting the use of magic again so soon. Still, it works. He can feel the air around him change and grow slightly colder, the cover of the book beginning to vibrate for a moment before it flips open. The pages follow quickly, one after another,
until it comes to an abrupt stop about a quarter through the book.

The page it stops on is blank. The number on the bottom right corner reads 94 ½, and smack dab in the middle of it there's an old fashioned key held in place by a piece of yellowed scotch tape. Stiles is sure this page wasn't there before.

He reaches out and pulls the key off the page, and then the paper just melts away until the book is back to going from page 94 to 95 like nothing had ever been between them. Not for the first time, Stiles wishes he could have met Emily, whose delicate grasp of magic is like nothing he has ever seen.

Deaton's approach to magic is clinical, but Emily was an artist at her trade.

He looks down to study the key in his hand. It looks antique, and there's a number etched along the back: 238.

The door opens and Melissa leans up against the doorjamb. "Hey, kiddo," she says. "Sounded like there was a tornado in here, so I figured you were up."

"Sorry," Stiles says, dropping the key into his pocket and then shoving the book back into his backpack. "You heard from my dad?"

"He got back into Beacon Hills a couple of hours ago," she says. "He's been checking in about every fifteen minutes. Why don't you call him and come get some breakfast?"

Stiles grabs his phone and follows Melissa out. Melissa knows how to deal with him, so she doesn't ask what he wants to eat, just pours some cereal and raises an eyebrow that implies there will be trouble if he has any complaints.

"Where's Scott?" Stiles asks. He pulls out his phone and hits his dad-speed-dial.

Melissa pauses for a minute, her lips pursed. "He went to update Allison about what's happened," she admits.

Stiles wishes he could be surprised, but he's really not. He can't quite bring himself to be bitter about it, either. Allison deserves to know what's going on, and no one else is going to want to tell her.

"Stiles?" his father answers.

Stiles grins at hearing his voice. "Hey, dad. You okay?"

"I'm fine," he says. "You sound better."

"I feel better," Stiles says. "Melissa says you're back in Beacon Hills?"

"Yeah, got in this morning," he says. "Still dealing with the paperwork and trying to keep Gerard under wraps. He hasn't asked for a lawyer yet, but…"

His dad trails off, but Stiles knows what he's not saying. "You don't think you can hold him?" he demands.

"I'll make sure we can, but this whole situation is a clusterf—" his dad breaks off, "well, it's a mess, anyway, but he's not going anywhere, kid, I promise."

He can tell his dad isn't as sure of that as he'd like to be. Gerard had been all but caught red-handed, but there were so many circumstances that couldn't be explained, and the fact that his father was so
far out of his jurisdiction was never going to read well.

"I was hoping I'd be able to head home," Stiles says.

"I don't think that's a good idea," his dad says quickly. "Why don't you stick around with Melissa and Scott? I can pick you up later when I'm heading home."

"I really just want to be in my own room," Stiles says. "And Derek can drive me."

"He's probably resting, Stiles, I don't think—"

"He's not," Stiles says, leaning across the table to get a better look out the window and the sleek black car sitting beside the curb. "Pretty sure he's been parked out in front of Scott's house all night like the creeper he is," he says. "And anyway, I need to talk to him."

His dad goes quiet, and Stiles knows he's probably holding back the urge to say no. Stiles knows exactly how hard it is to let go.

"Please, dad," Stiles says. "This is something I need to do."

"If you're not home, alone, by the time I'm off shift, Stiles, I swear—"

"I will be," Stiles assures him.

"Let me talk to Melissa," John says.

Stiles sighs but holds out the phone to Melissa. She grabs it from him, and he turns his attention to his cereal. He just needs to eat enough that he won't have to fight her to get out the door.

A moment later Melissa drops his phone back on the table. "Your dad's letting Derek take you home," she says, sounding surprised.

"Yeah, my dad has often told me he hopes I never become a lawyer and use my powers of persuasion for evil," Stiles says.

Melissa just shakes her head at him, looking resigned. Stiles uses her preoccupation to go back and grab his backpack from Scott's room. "See you later!" he calls.

"Stiles," Melissa yells, trailing him to the door. "Don't forget what I said before, okay? You can talk to me."

"I know," he says, before heading out the door. He jogs up to the Camaro, and hops into the passenger side without waiting for an invitation. Derek doesn't even bother trying to look surprised to see him.

"I told my dad you were going to take me home. Your stalker tendencies might as well be good for something." Stiles motions vaguely in front of them. "Home, James, and don't spare the horses."

Derek just looks at him in that way that means he has no idea how to respond. Sort of like a startled feral puppy.

"You seem back to normal," Derek finally decides on. "Your version of it, anyway."

"Yes, my regeneration cycle is complete," Stiles says, flipping the key between his fingers. "Now are you actually going to take me home or do I need to walk?"
Derek's hand darts out and grabs the key before Stiles can stop him. He frowns down at it. "Where did you get this?"

"You recognize it?" Stiles asks excitedly. "Do you know what it opens?"

"Yeah, it's from Merchant Bank," Derek says. "My family used to have safe-deposit boxes there. Where did you get it?"

Stiles ignores his question. "Change of plans. We're not going to my house." he says, and reaches out to grab the key back. "We're going to Merchant Bank."

"Stiles, you said you told your father—" Derek breaks off in frustration. "You're still lying to him. After everything. You never learn, do you?"

"I don't know about that," Stiles says. "I learned this from you."

"I thought I was a terrible liar," Derek snaps.

"I didn't say I hadn't already surpassed you," Stiles says. "Look, my dad has to work within the law, and he doesn't have much to work with. He's worried, I can tell, and I am not letting Gerard get away with this. Not after what he did to your family, not after all he's done to us."

"You don't have to worry about Gerard," Derek says.

"I think I do," Stiles insists.

"Stiles—" Derek says in irritation. "Peter escaped from the motel room. No one's heard from him."

Stiles figures this is probably not a good time to bring up the phone call, but he does get where Derek's going with this. "Right. Peter's gonna kill him."

Derek nods. "It doesn't matter if Gerard gets life, a cell won't save him, and if your dad does have to release him, all the better for Peter to get his hands on him," he says. "Either way, Gerard's on borrowed time. Stay out of it."

"This belonged to Emily," Stiles says, holding up the key. "She had to have a safe-deposit box at your bank. Aren't you the least bit curious what she might have put there?"

"No," Derek says.

"Well, too bad, you're going," Stiles says. "I saved your life. It now belongs to me."

Derek snorts. "You need to read up on your werewolf lore, because that's not remotely true."

"Okay, let's try this then," Stiles says. "You're gonna do it, or I'm going to tell my dad you put me in the trunk of your car and drove me to Arnold. Your decision."

"You wouldn't," Derek says, but he sounds uncertain.

"Probably best you don't risk it," Stile says.

"You said I was your Alpha," Derek reminds him. "As your Alpha, I'm ordering you to stay out of this."

"I guess you missed Deaton's whole 'balance of power,' spiel, huh?" Stiles says. "Basically he said I don't have to do what you say."
"I think you're the one that missed the point," Derek growls.

"You can do this with me or I can do it alone," Stiles says.

Derek snarls but starts the Camaro, and pulls out into the street. "I will drive you to the bank, I will get you in to the box, but that's all. That's it. After that, you let this go. Promise me."

Stiles has learned a lot about Derek these last few days. A couple of weeks ago he wouldn't have thought twice about dismissing Derek's command, but now he can see beneath the surface. Derek's not being dismissive, and he's not being controlling.

He's terrified.

"You know what happened is not your fault, right?" Stiles asks.

"You almost died," Derek snaps. "Because you can't let anything go. You should have—"

"What? Let you go?" Stiles demands.

"Yes," he snaps. "That's exactly what you should have done."

"I'm your emissary," Stiles protests. "I couldn't let you go even if I'd wanted to."

"And that's exactly the problem," Derek says. "I won't have you bound to me."

"You said you wanted me in your pack," Stiles says. "Well, here I am. What's your problem?"

Derek slows and pulls abruptly off to the side of the road. Stiles looks out the window, and is startled to realize they've already arrived at the bank. The joys of small towns.

"I didn't count on you being an emissary," Derek says.

"It doesn't change anything," he says.

"It changes everything," Derek says, and pushes out of the car.

Stiles struggles with his seat belt and then spills from the seat, stumbling to catch up to him on the steps to the bank. "Will you stop for a second?" he calls.

"You want to see what's in the box, let's see what's in the box," Derek says, and grabs the key back from Stiles. "I'm the next of kin. They wouldn't even let you in."

Stiles glares at him but lets Derek take the lead. It turns out to be the right decision, because he's apparently something of a celebrity inside of Merchant Bank. A manager rushes over to them before they can take more than three steps inside.

"Mr. Hale," the man says, smiling in a way that has Stiles thinking he was probably a car salesman in another life. "What can I help you with today? Would you like some coffee? Do you want to sit down? We can go to my office, I can—"

"Typically," Stiles breaks in wryly, "one pauses after a question so they can receive a response."

The man turns to look him over with disinterest. "And you are?" he sniffs.

"You can just call me Vivian," Stiles says.
Derek shoots him a look and then turns on the charm for the manager. Stiles doesn't know how Derek can be so nice to other people when he never bothers with the effort for his friends. "I'd like to access my aunt's safe-deposit box, actually. I'm not sure if it's under her name or my uncle's. I just had the key returned to me, it was found at the house."

"Oh, oh of course," he says quickly, and Stiles actually gives him a little more credit when he sees his sympathy looks genuine. "Your uncle kept a number of boxes with us. May I see the key?" He flips it over and reads the small number inscribed on the head of the key. "Ah, yes. This is one of Peter's."

"You have them all memorized?" Stiles asks in disbelief.

"Peter Hale reserved all the safe-deposit boxes in the 200-250 range," the manager tells him.

"Of course he did," Stiles says.

"Mr. Hale, if you'll follow me," the manager says. "Your friend can wait here."

"My friend can come with me," Derek says easily.

The manager flushes. "Yes, yes, of course, I only thought—" he trails off awkwardly. He turns on his heel. "Follow me."

The vault looks as old as the key, and Stiles wonders again just how rich the Hales had been. It was funny the way scale of wealth worked—run down old bank: every day people, fancy modern bank: upper class rich people, ancient bank with good upkeep: super rich, Rockefeller type people.

Stiles didn't even know Beacon Hills had places like this.

The manager efficiently takes out a key and puts it in one keyhole on the corner of the box. Derek takes his and puts it in the other corner, and it unlocks with a loud click. The manager steps away. "I'll leave you alone," he says. "Let me know when you are finished."

Derek drops the box down on the table and then looks at Stiles expectantly. Stiles doesn't have to be told twice, or at all, as the case might be. He pushes forward and opens the box.

It's empty, except for a small plastic turtle sitting in the center.

Derek snorts. "I told you this was a waste of time," he says. "Peter's probably already been here."

"This bank thinks Peter's brain-dead," Stiles protests. "He can't exactly stroll in to collect on his stuff." Stiles gets a sudden suspicion, and reaches in to pull the turtle out. "Anyway, looks can be deceiving. This might be exactly what we need."

"What are you talking about?" Derek asks.

Stiles pulls the turtle into two, and holds it up triumphantly. "It's a flash drive."

"Right," Derek says, unimpressed. He picks up the box and slams it back into place. "Let's go."

Stiles follows after him. "Do you know what this means?"

Derek approaches the manager and gives a quicksilver grin. "Thank you for your help. We're done."

"Derek," Stiles calls, as he follows after him.
Derek doesn't stop until he's out the door of the bank and halfway down the steps, then he turns around to face him, his frustration clear. "Just get in the car, Stiles. I'd like to get you home before you father realizes you're not there."

"We need to see what's on here," Stiles insists.

"You can have it," Derek says, and starts back towards the car. "I don't care what's on it."

"This is your family!" Stiles says, as he chases after him. "Don't you even—"

"It doesn't matter, Stiles," Derek snarls, as he spins around to face him again.

"Of course it matters!" he protests.

"No, it doesn't, because my family is dead," Derek says, and then turns around to climb into the driver's seat.

"You still have Peter," Stiles says lamely, as he gets into the car beside him.

"He doesn't count," Derek says. "And Gerard is as good as dead. He's not getting out of it this time. Why can't you leave this alone?"

"Because it's not enough," Stiles says. "It's not enough if he's in prison forever. It's not even enough if Peter slits his throat. All these horrible things that have happened, they can all be traced back to Gerard. We can't let him get away with it."

"It won't bring them back," Derek says as he pulls back onto the road, "so what's the point? Maybe I don't want to relive this again, Stiles, did you think of that?"

Derek keeps his eyes on the road, sullenly silent, and Stiles swallows hard and fights not to say anything himself. He hadn't actually thought of that. He had been so wrapped up in stopping Gerard and making sure he paid for his crimes that he hadn't realized what it must be like for Derek to go through this all again.

He'd already had this all rehashed with Kate and now he was being forced to go through it again.

Stiles resolves right then that he isn't going to drag Derek into this. This is Stiles' arena, anyway, with flash drives and magic books—he can figure this out on his own.

"You're right, I'm sorry," he says quietly, when they pull up in front of his house. "It's over, and I'll leave it alone."

He grabs his backpack and gets out of the car without waiting for a response, but he's only made it halfway to the door when he hears Derek follow him out.

"Do you think I'm stupid, Stiles?" Derek calls after him. "You're just telling me what I want to hear! I know you're not going to just drop this."

Stiles doesn't stop until he gets to his front door. "Well, yeah," he admits. "But that is what you want, right? I'll leave you out of it. It's not a problem."

"It's not a problem," Derek says with a derisive laugh. He's already made it up the steps, and corners Stiles back against the door. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"No, I really don't. What is wrong with you?" Stiles asks. "I thought, when I woke up, and you—I thought—"
"You were dying," Derek snaps. "Contact kept you alive. Don't read into it."

"Right, don't read into it," Stiles says. "You would have done it for any of us."

"That's right," Derek says.

"Never mind that you were willing to die for me," he says.

"That's not new, Stiles," Derek says.

"Of course not," Stiles says. "You'd die for almost anyone, wouldn't you? You're like the biggest wannabe martyr there ever was, but it's not working, because even more than that you're a survivor."

"Maybe I'm sick of just surviving," Derek says.

"So start living!" Stiles shouts. "You're taking chances with all the wrong things. You keep risking your life but you won't ever stop and just let someone—"

"What? Let someone what?" he demands.

"Get close," Stiles says.

"And who should that be, Stiles, you?" Derek asks, and his voice is parody of the patently cordial tone he'd turned on the bank manager, all falsely sweet and poisonous underneath.

"I thought that was what you wanted," Stiles says quietly.

"It was, when I thought you were the one person that actually—well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" he asks. "Come to find out, I was binding you to me without even realizing it. You never even had a choice."

"That's not how it works," Stiles protests. "Listen to me, okay, you can't force this bond, this isn't something you did. Deaton told me that himself, no werewolf could force a bond. I'd probably be Peter's little henchman right now if it worked that way."

"I can't take the risk that's not true," he says quietly, pushing forward until Stiles is flush against the door, with Derek's hands trapping him in. "I can't risk believing you. Because I can't get a handle on you, Stiles, and it scares the hell out of me. It's like you're always lying, even when you're telling the truth. Even when you say your own name."

"Stiles isn't really my name," he reminds him.

"Yes, exactly," Derek says in frustration. "One minute you're helpless, the next you're the most dangerous one of us all. You're so damn loyal it's almost blinding, but you're ruthless when it comes to anyone outside the circle of people you care about."

Stiles sucks in a breath. "Derek, I—"

"I can't figure out who you really are," Derek admits. "Because you don't know who you are yet."

"That's not fair," he protests.

"That's life," Derek says. "You're sixteen years old. You're a kid."

"So all that stuff you said to me before, after everything you've done to get me to join you, you're just gonna run now that I'm trying to do what you want?" Stiles asks.
"This isn't what I wanted for you," Derek says, and pushes away from him. He jams his hands into his pockets and turns his eyes towards the street. "I was talking to Deaton on the ride back, he said you're bonded to Scott, too."

"What does that have to do with anything?" he asks.

"It means you might not have to be stuck with me," Derek says. "You could still choose him."

"Do you have some kind of clinical aversion to being happy or something?" Stiles demands. "You wanted me in your pack! I'm in it!"

"I wanted you to want it!" Derek snarls, before stepping further away from Stiles, looking startled at his own outburst. "I didn't want to drag you into this with some magical bond. I wanted you to have a choice."

"Is that what's wrong with you, what, you think I didn't have a choice?" Stiles asks. "Derek, that's not what happened. *This* was my choice!"

"Deaton told me what happened," Derek says with a shake of his head. "You had no idea what you were getting into."

"And what about you?" he asks. "What's your choice?"

"This isn't my decision," Derek says.

"The hell it isn't!" Stiles protests. "You tell me you don't want me, and I'll see how to break this. But you're going to have to say it, Derek, because it's not what I want. I've already made my decision. I thought that was clear."

"You still don't get it, but you will. You're smart, and I know you'll figure it out eventually. I don't deserve you," Derek says. "Maybe I was wrong about Scott, maybe he'll come through and be the Alpha you all need. It's like you said: I wouldn't want the world left to the two of us."

"No," Stiles decides. "No, you don't get to do this to me after everything—"

"You can't save me," Derek says. "So stop trying."

Then Derek turns away from him and gets into his car. Stiles slams the flat of his hand against the door, before resting his forehead against it. He drags in a deep breath and tries to tell himself he should have expected this.

He should have known better than to think some mystical bond would fix everything. Nothing was ever that easy, and he was pretty sure the bond wouldn't even hold if it was one-way.

Derek had to want it, or it was going to break.
First off, I just want to say that I am constantly floored by how amazing and supportive everyone's comments have been. I'm so thankful that you guys have not given up on me as I try to get this thing finished once and for all. I know it's taking me for-freakin-ever, and it's hard to believe I started this story THREE YEARS ago. I think this is the longest a story has ever taken me, but it's also the longest story I've ever written, so there's that.

This is only about one half of what I had originally planned for chapter twenty-eight, but it was getting fairly long and it's been so long since I posted, I decided to go ahead and put it up. As such, I've added an extra chapter for the epilogue even though I said I wasn't going to do that. But I promise the story will still be wrapped up by the next chapter! The epilogue will just be like an optional sort-of post-credits scene. Sorry for switching that on you guys, but I want to keep the epilogue as its own chapter. I don't know what is with long stories, that the chapters get longer and longer with each one, too. This one ended up 9K, and I didn't even manage everything in the chapter twenty-eight outline.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"If you're watching this, then I'm probably dead."

The mp4 is the grainy texture of the early iPhone days, but Emily is easy to make out. She's lit up with an artificial halo as she sits between the trees in the preserve, and Stiles recognizes the area. This was shot somewhere along the running trail, about a mile from the Hale house.

"Sorry for the dramatics," she continues, grinning slightly, her eyes skittering away from the camera. "You can blame my darling husband's influence for that, but it's also probably true. I've accepted it, I guess. That this is probably where my life ends."

She blows out a breath, and faces the camera again. "So I guess you can consider this my deathbed confession, because I am responsible for many sins. I have been made to do terrible things." Emily's hair is pulled back into a loose ponytail, and her tom girl good looks have been refined into something sophisticated. She's that kind of beautiful that looks effortless.

"I was taken when I was fifteen years old by a teacher at my school. He offered me a ride, then drove me three states away and chained me up in his basement. He was delusional. He claimed to be performing some sort of ritual that would bind me to him. In a way, I guess it worked. It wasn't long before I was too terrified of what he might do to me to defy him."

Emily's eyes are wide and sincere, despite the fact that her story is only half the truth. Stiles figures Peter must have met his match in her. Not for the first time, he wishes he could have met her himself.

"His name was Gerard Argent. He dragged me all around the country for years. I believe he was some kind of mercenary or hit man, though I cannot be certain there was ever reason for what he did. I just know he killed people, and he enjoyed doing it. I helped him do it, sometimes. Played lookout, or cleaned up after. Sometimes he made me help hold them down, just so I would be complicit. If I
tried to defy him he only made it worse on his victims, and then beat me after. So after awhile, I stopped defying him."

"I lost count of the number of people he killed after about the first month. so that's when I started to write down their names. You'll find the list of names attached in a text document, along with any articles I was able to locate regarding their deaths. If the bodies were disposed of by Gerard, I've also listed the location of three of his burial grounds. There are no less than one dozen bodies buried at each of them. You might even find something on the bodies to tie him to them, because he wasn't careful. He was careless in that way men who think themselves a God always are. You'll also find a secondary list of witnesses that will be able to substantiate my claims, if any of them have managed to survive."

"I am ashamed to say I never truly fought against Gerard. I never tried to escape. He had me bound, well and truly, and I was never able to fight against him," she falters for a moment, before raising her chin, newly defiant. "It wasn't until his daughter Katherine showed up that I thought I might get free. She did not…approve…of me. To appease her, Gerard sold me to a pair of his cousins like I was chattel. It was only then that I was able to escape."

Emily looks away for a moment. "For years I turned away from the things that he did, the things he made me do, but I—I got free, and I met my beautiful husband, and I realized that I needed to do something about it. Because it's people like Peter that Gerard Argent is still out there killing, and I can't live with myself anymore if I don't try to stop it." She takes a deep breath, the sound of it reverberating strangely through speakers, and shuffles her hands in her lap. "Gerard has found out I'm gathering evidence against him. I don't know how, but he has. I don't have enough to come forward yet, so this is my insurance policy in case anything happens to me before I can bring him down."

She turns back to face the screen steadily. "So if I am dead," she says calmly, "then you can be sure he's the one that killed me."

The screen froze in place, with Emily reaching forward, her hand poised to shut the camera down. Stiles just stares at the image for a moment, everything having already clicked into place with sickening clarity.

He's never really understood why the Argents would kill the Hales. It didn't make much sense, really, even for obsessed werewolf killers. Not all the Hales were werewolves, after all, and every last one of the Hales was considered high profile in a town as small Beacon Hills. Hunters, by definition, kept a low profile. So Stiles had just written Kate off as a psychopath: the fire as a blind act of hate.

Except it had been calculated and planned, right from the start.

He turns away from the video. He's watched it five times already, anyway. He's printed all the evidence Emily had left on the flash drive: the victim lists, the witness lists. The maps with the burial locations. All together, it looks like something from a Thomas Harris novel—and that had been exactly the point.

Emily could never have told anyone that werewolves were real. She could never had convinced anyone of what Gerard Argent really was, of what he's really done to her, so she found another way to show the world he was a monster.

It wasn't even a lie, really. Though the supernatural elements had been censored, everything she said was the truth. Gerard had forced her to use her power for him, he had killed people, and it was irrelevant that these people were also were werewolves. Gerard Argent was, for all intents and
purposes, one of the most prolific serial killers to ever live.

"What are you doing here?"

Stiles glances up at the voice, frowning when he sees Lydia in the doorway, watching him with narrow eyes and crossed arms. "What?" he asks. "This is my bedroom, I live here. What are you doing here?"

She purses her lips. "Jackson said Derek's left town," she snaps.

Stiles goes still, feeling a chill ripple through him that he only just barely manages to suppress. He anxiously licks his lips, and wishes he could be surprised. But Derek is good at running, and Stiles is tired of having to fight for every friendship that he has. Just once, it would be nice if someone would come chasing after him.

"Yeah, well, Derek's a big boy," he says, after a moment. "He wants to run away, I'm not gonna stop him. This isn't one of your Nicolas Sparks films, Lydia."

"No," she agrees coolly, as she assesses the mess he's made of his room. He has the print outs spread out across the floor, and the only space left clear is the space he's sitting on. "I would say it's all a little more *A Beautiful Mind*."

"Don't look at me like that," he says, and glances back at one of the maps. "I ran out of wall space."

"What is all of this?" Lydia asks, leaning forward to examine Emily's frozen image on his computer screen.

"This is all from Emily DeWitt," Stiles explains. "She was brilliant, Lydia. She rewrote a history people could believe. There's nothing about anything supernatural in here, not one mention of werewolves or magic or hunters. Just cold hard facts, and lists of where the bodies were buried."

He pushes up on his knees and leans forward, restarting the video for her, but he's too impatient to wait for it to finish and starts talking over it almost at once. He knows Lydia is good at multitasking, anyway.

"She made Gerard Argent out to be a run of the mill serial killer. Sort of like what happened with Kate, only this goes back way further, and she has tons of evidence to back her story up."

Lydia watches the video, seemingly impassive. As it nears the end, she glances down at Stiles. "So she's the reason Gerard ordered Kate to set the fire," she says.

"Yeah, I mean, Deaton tried to tell me, and I knew she was part of it, but now I think she was all of it," Stiles says. "We always thought they were trying to kill the Hales, but they were just the collateral damage. They were waiting for the whole family to be there because they wanted to be sure Emily was there too. Peter and Emily had been in hiding, and they couldn't find them. But they knew they'd be there that night, because the whole family was meeting."

It was a scary theory, but Stiles was pretty sure it was spot on. Somehow it made it worse that Kate wasn't even trying to kill the Hales, she just wanted to make sure she got the one she was after, and she didn't care who else got in the way. Emily's death wasn't justified, but there had been a motive there—there hadn't been any reason for the Hales to die, except that they'd taken her in.

"It makes a horrifying kind of sense," Lydia allows after a moment. She glances back at the video just in time to see Emily reach forward to shut down the camera. "But you know what doesn't make sense? Derek leaving town."
Stiles gapes at her. "Really? I thought we—come on, there's a mystery here! We live for this stuff! And you want to talk about my non-existent relationship with my erstwhile kidnapper?"

"Yes, it's all quite intriguing," she says casually. "But it was also solved by Emily Hale several years ago, which rather makes any insights I have in the matter rather obsolete. As such, instead of dwelling on the past, maybe we can discuss the present? What are you going to do about your bond with Derek?"

"How do you even—" Stiles began.

"You don't have any secrets from me," Lydia explains. "Stiles. Stop avoiding the question."

"Who says it's my choice?" Stiles asks bitterly.

"He rejected you?" Lydia asks softly, looking surprised.

"You could say that. He pretty much started running full out in the opposite direction," Stiles says. "I'm trying not to take that personally, I know his issues have issues. But it is what it is. It's not like I'm going to take a page from his book, and kidnap him just so he'll talk to me. Not really my style. I quit when I'm ahead."

"You never quit while you're ahead. You quit when you're done," Lydia says wryly. "And why shouldn't you give him back a bit of his own? He forced this on you, Stiles. I'm not sure how much consideration he deserves."

Stiles frowns over at her. "He didn't force anything on me, that's what I've been—"

"No, hear me out," she interrupts. "Because he did, whether he meant to or not, he did. He caused the rift between you and Scott—"

"Pretty sure that was Scott—" Stiles tries half-heartedly.

"He held you against your will," Lydia snaps, ignoring his interruption. "Maybe it was a joke. Maybe it was a lesson. Maybe he had all the best intentions in the world. But you were already isolated, and he made it worse. He took away your choice, he took away all your other allies, and he linked you to his pack."

"Okay, you can stop right there," Stiles protests. "You think the bond is a result of Stockholm Syndrome? I was there less than a day!"

"I think it's a factor," she breaks in sharply. "And if you want to convince me that it's not a serious one, then surprise me: admit that it's a factor. Because self-awareness is something of a necessity here. You go into this blind, you might regret it for the rest of your life."

"Okay, fine," Stiles says, impatient. "So it's a factor, and Scott forgetting my existence for days at a time, that's a factor. Almost dying semi-annually, that's a bit of a factor, too. And while we're at it, so are you."

Lydia goes momentarily still, the only sign that the words have hit their target. "We've moved past your little crush," she says calmly.

"Yeah, and it's one of the hardest things I've ever had to do," Stiles says. "I—you were it for me, Lydia, for the longest time. It was a daydream, I get that now, but it doesn't mean it was easy to let it go."
Lydia stares him down, her eyes narrowed and calculating. He swallows hard, sure she's about to rip into him for daring to bring up the topic they have an unspoken vow to avoid.

"I was stupid, not to see you for who you are," Lydia says instead of the lecture he was expecting. "We should have been friends years ago, but we were never going to be more than that. It's for the best, you know." She tosses him a wry grin, her confidence restored. "I don't think the world would have survived us."

He grins back at her. "I know, but it doesn't mean I don't still wonder, sometimes. Things would have been a lot easier if you'd just gone along with my ten-year plan."

"If you think I'm easy, you haven't been paying close enough attention," she says, and Stiles snorts. "It took Jackson's transformation for you to finally let me go. Why are you willing to let Derek off this lightly?"

"Maybe I'm not chasing after Derek because I'm not really convinced he's wrong to run," Stiles says, and scrubs a hand through his hair. "I mean, I know it's not his fault, but this bond, it's turned everything on its head. It's like, we were going along, and I think we were headed here anyway, but someone flipped a switch in my brain and bang—he's the most important thing in my headspace all the sudden."

Lydia sweeps aside a pile of papers, and gracefully drops to sit beside him. "Then maybe you should let him break the bond," she says.

"What, and then I'm stuck with Scott as my Alpha for the rest of my life?" he asks incredulously. "I mean, I love the guy, but it took me two years to convince him that Law & Order wasn't a reality TV show."

"Stiles," Lydia sighs, like she thinks he's being difficult on purpose.

"It's too soon for this, I can't—" he breaks off again, glancing down at his hands. "Maybe Derek's right, maybe I'm not ready."

"And maybe you're thinking about it all the wrong way," she counters. "I spoke to Deaton when you were unconscious, about the nature of these bonds. He explained it to me."

"Yeah, but Deaton's explanations usually just add to the confusion," he says.

"I put a stop to that right away," Lydia huffs, unconcerned. "Essentially, it's like becoming a werewolf, without the claws and teeth. It's becoming part of the pack. You're not getting married eternally to Derek Hale, and you're not signing on to be his forever. You'll still be you, you'll just have a pack. And that can be as much or as little as you want it to be. Just look at Deaton, he's supposedly an emissary, and he does hardly anything at all. In any case, it's not as though you haven't been acting as emissary to Scott and Derek all along. Really, how much will actually change, except that you'll be a bit better equipped to help them out?"

Stiles frowns. "I guess I hadn't really thought about it like that."

"That's because you're overanalyzing. Don't think of it as choosing between Derek and Scott, think of it as choosing between their packs," she continues.

Stiles bites his lip, because that might actually make it more complicated. Scott's pack wouldn't even really be a pack without Stiles, it would just be Scott and Isaac, which is sort of sad. Scott may have abandoned him, but it had been unintentional. If Stiles signs on with Derek's pack, that will be a calculated move, and it might be the end of him and Scott.
"I can't do this now," Stiles decides, pushing up to his feet. "I need to get Gerard taken care of before I make any decisions, and it's probably for the best that Derek's not here for it. I don't want to put him through this all again."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Lydia says. "There's enough evidence here to put him away for good."

"Yeah," Stiles agrees, glancing around at everything he's managed to piece together, "but it's not like I can just stroll into the Sheriff's station and hand it over."

"Why is that?" she asks, as she carefully gets back to her feet.

"Consider the source," Stiles says, and waves his hand over himself dramatically. "I mean, everyone at the station still loves me, but I'm kinda the boy who cried serial killer. It's not gonna look good if this all comes from me."

"What if it came from the family?" Lydia asks casually.

Stiles turns to glare at her. "I said I want to keep Derek out of this."

Lydia rolls her eyes. "Wrong family, Stiles," she says. "I didn't mean the Hales."

"You want me to give it to Allison?" he asks in disbelief. "Last time we went against her family she started using our lycanthropic classmates as pin-cushions."

"Stiles," Lydia glares.

"What? It's a valid concern!" he cries. "You want me to ask her and her trigger-happy dad to get Gerard put away for life? He's still their family. Even if I thought they'd do it—"

"They'll do it," Lydia insists.

"Even if," he continues pointedly, "is that even fair? They may not be my favorite people at the moment, but no one should have to turn on their own family. Allison's already a pariah because of Kate, this might send them over the edge."

"Or it might just pull them back," Lydia counters easily. "Gerard is like a disease in the Argent family tree. He's got them all twisted up and complicit, and maybe what they really need is to finally stand up against him. You can't protect someone from their own mistakes, they have to learn to face them if they ever want to move on."

"Fine," Stiles agrees reluctantly. "We'll ask. But you're going with me, and you're driving. My Jeep is still a little torn up, and also my dad has the keys hidden somewhere. I'm ashamed to admit I haven't managed to find them yet. He's getting wily in his old age."

Lydia raises an eyebrow. "Fair enough."

Stiles regrets suggesting Lydia drive about five minutes later, but by then it's too late. Anyway, despite the near breakneck speeds, he feels strangely confident they aren't going to crash. Lydia has all the skill of a professional racecar driver, and she seems amused when he tells her so.

"Funny you should say that. Daddy taught me to drive at a race track," she explains, and shifts gears, turning onto Allison's street and pulling to a flawless stop just an inch from the curb. Lydia glances over at him. "My parents decided my 'breakdown' was a result of a neglect, so they've been competing against each other for parent of the year. So far I've received this car, and an entirely new
wardrobe from Bloomingdale's. I'm currently in negotiations to spend my summer vacation in Paris with Jackson's family."

"When my dad feels like he's neglecting me, he makes me pancakes," Stiles complains.

"Yes, well, having parents wanting to buy my affections certainly has its advantages, but don't pretend you would trade your father or that stupid beat up Jeep of yours for anything."

"Yeah, okay," Stiles agrees. "But still. An entire wardrobe from Bloomingdale's. I'm so jealous."

Lydia flashes an evil grin. "I wouldn't joke about that, Stiles," she says. "I do still owe you a makeover. I'm just dying to get you into a button-down shirt that doesn't look like you should be having a picnic on it."

Stiles opens his mouth to respond, when there's a sharp tap on the passenger window. He turns in surprise to see Chris Argent standing serenely beside the car. His eyes widen, and he reluctantly rolls down the window. "Uh, hi, Mr. Argent."

Chris leans down, glancing in at them. "You kids planning to sit outside my house all day?" he asks.

"That depends," Stiles says. "Are you going to chain us up in the basement if we ask to come inside? Cause the once was enough."

"No, but I am going to call your father if you don't tell me why you're here," Chris said. "You tell him you were coming? Or is this little visit going to come as a surprise to him too?"

Lydia leans forward and elbows him before he can respond. She knows him well, because Stile's plan to counter-threaten Chris with telling his father that Chris had been there when Erica and Boyd were taken probably wouldn't have been conductive to getting the man to do them a favor.

"We would love to come inside and talk, Mr. Argent, if it wouldn't inconvenience you," Lydia says sweetly.

Chris's expression softens slightly as he looks at Lydia, and he gives a sharp nod. "Come on," he agrees. "Allison will be glad to see you."

They follow Chris inside, and Allison greets them warily from the doorway. "Why don't we all sit down?" Chris asks, sounding tired and worn. Stiles would feel bad for him, except that Chris has had about a hundred chances to try and stop things before they got this far.

Stiles reluctantly heads further into the house, and sits beside Lydia on one of the couches. Allison and Chris settle down across from them, and he has the strangest feeling that they're about to hold some kind of peace talk.

"Stiles, did you bring it?" Lydia asks calmly, even though she knows he did.

He reaches into his hoodie pocket and pulls out the flash drive. He sets it down on the coffee table and then pushes it to the other side.

"What is this?" Chris asked quietly.

"Evidence," Stiles says. "Enough to have your father put away for at least two lifetimes."

"And you're just handing it over to me?" Chris asks warily, one eyebrow slightly raised.

"I want you to give it to my father," Stiles explains. "This will make Gerard culpable for everything
on that drive as well as provide motive for the massacre of the Hales. He'll never see the light of day again."

"You say that like it's something I'd want," Chris answers tightly. Beside him Allison just sits quietly, her wide eyes trained on the flash drive. Stiles isn't quite sure what to make of her silence, but he's glad the first thing he'd done when he got home with that drive was to make multiple copies.

"Of course it's something you want," Lydia breaks in easily, meeting Chris's gaze without flinching. "Your father is a deranged serial killer. This is the proof, in case there's any remaining uncertainty about that. It won't do you any good to suppress it, but if you volunteer it? Well, maybe the tattered remains of your own reputation might just be salvaged."

"Lydia," Allison whispers, sounding betrayed.

"I'm sorry, Allison," Lydia says. "But every bad thing that has happened in this town can be traced back to Gerard Argent, and I'm only looking out for your best interests in trying to get him put away for good. Personally, I'd like to see him dead, but I'm prepared to settle."

"You have the evidence, why don't you just turn it in?" Chris demands, looking back at Stiles. "Why come here to us?"

"I could," Stiles says. "And I will, if you don't. But this is all murky enough without the Sheriff's son being the one to provide critical evidence that I can't easily explain how I got."

"And me?" Chris asks.

"He's your father," Stiles says, and shrugs. "It makes sense you might have found it in his things. They won't question it, if it's from you."

"They'll give him the death penalty," Chris says, which means he's got a better idea about what Gerard has been up to all these years than Stiles would have liked. He wants to think Chris would have stopped his father if he'd known, but Stiles can't exactly forget what he said to his own. He'd do anything for his father; he can't understand why Chris still has that same loyalty to Gerard, but it doesn't make it any less valid.

"If he's lucky," Stiles agrees. "All things considered, lethal injection is probably a lot kinder than what Peter would do to him. I know it's better than what I'd had planned."

Chris purses his lips, looking angry and resigned at the same time. Allison just looks resigned, and after a moment, she reaches out to grab up the small turtle drive.

"We'll do it," she says. She glances up at Stiles, meeting his eyes steadily, her lips thinned. "Are we even now, Stiles? Does this make us even?"

"It's a start," Stiles says simply, and gets to his feet. "You ready?"

"What, now?" Allison asks in surprise.

"The lawyer is showing up today," Stiles says. "If they're any good, they'll have Gerard out on bail within a few hours. We need to make sure that doesn't happen."

"He's right," Chris agrees, unexpectedly. "Gerard gets out on bail, and he's a dead man walking. Word has already spread about what he's done. He gets out, and he'll be hunted by hunters and wolves alike. Prison's the best place for him."
"Look at that," Stiles says. "We finally agree on something."

* * * * *

"Why are we hiding back here again?" Lydia hisses impatiently in his ear.

Allison and Chris had gone into the station about five minutes before them to hand off the flash drive to his father. Lydia had expected, probably naively, that they were going to leave them to it.

"Plausible deniability," Stiles explains, as he keeps them both pressed against the wall in the entranceway to the station. "It's best my father not realize my involvement, I don't want him to know I'm here."

"I thought you and your father weren't lying to each other anymore," Lydia frowns.

"We aren't," Stiles agrees. "This is different! Plausibility deniability, Lydia, that's a completely valid reason for omission. He might think he wants to know everything, but trust me, he really doesn't."

"Then why exactly are we here at all?" she demands. "You still think they're going to back out?"

"No," Stiles says, slipping further inside when his father disappears into his office with Allison and Chris. "I need to see Gerard."

"Are you out of your mind?" she snaps, reaching out to snag his hood and drag him back. He falters, half-falling into the wall when she pulls him off balance. For someone so tiny, she's surprisingly strong.

He pulls a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and hands it to Lydia. "That's the URL and sign in for the security cameras. You can access them from any of the computers here. I just need ten minute."

Lydia spins him back around, meeting his eyes unflinchingly. "Is there a reason for this, or do you just want to gloat?" she demands.

"I need him to understand that it's over," Stiles says after a moment. "I need to make sure he knows if he tries to take anyone down with him, he's only going to make it worse for himself. I don't want him thinking he can get his claws back in Chris and Allison or make this go away."

"Nice speech," Lydia says, clearly unimpressed. "What's your real reason?"

Stiles glares at her, but relents. "Derek doesn't blame Gerard for what happened, he blames himself. He needs to know who really set that fire up, that it's Gerard's fault. It's not enough to just send him away, I want him to confess. Derek needs closure."

"And finally, the truth. Good boy," Lydia says, and taps him on the cheek. "Go ahead and go gloat. I'll put the cameras on loop."

"You can do that?" he asks in surprise.

"Danny and I get bored when Jackson isn't around, so to pass the time he teaches me to hack government websites and write Python code," she shrugs. "Trust me, this is child's play."

"I'm so glad you're on our side," Stiles says fervently, before sneaking around the corner towards the cells. He manages to make it unseen by any of the deputies that know him, and when he glances back he sees a now sobbing Lydia being led to a desk by a flustered Deputy Crispin. She glances up
and winks at Stiles when the deputy rushes off to get her a glass of water.

The cells at the Beacon's Hills Sheriff's Station are a bit sturdier than they used to be; the last few years, they've been retrofitted with better locks and the walls reinforced. With good reason, considering that serial killers were as common as jaywalkers these days and that lanky Isaac Lahey, of all people, had apparently managed an escape.

They'd put Gerard Argent in the one dead center, but the rest of the cells are empty, so Stiles won't have to worry about witnesses. He thinks about the terror he felt that night Gerard grabbed him, when he was dragged into that house, and steps closer. He doesn't feel that fear anymore, not of him. Instead, it's Gerard that looks terrified when he glances up and sees exactly who's standing in front of his cell.

Stiles doesn't really like how much he likes it.

"Come to finish me off?" Gerard asks, though Stiles can see through the bravado. Gerard really does think that's why he's here.

Stiles can't exactly say he hasn't thought about it, but Scott and Derek had been right, that isn't really his style. Stiles has never been all that fond of brute force.

That doesn't mean he wouldn't beam someone in the head with a baseball bat if they'd threatened what was his, but still, given time to plan, Stiles prefers a more elegant solution. He prefers trapping someone with their own mistakes.

He hears the security camera click, and even though he doesn't turn to look he knows the recording light has blinked out. Gerard's eyes flicker to it in unease. "Did you—?"

"You think I did that with my mind?" Stiles laughs. "Ah, should have let you think that. Would have probably increased my mystique. But no, that's due to the other advantage I have over you. My friends. Lydia's got the footage on a loop right now. Far as anyone will ever be able to tell, you're just sitting there, twiddling your thumbs."

"Why are you here, Stiles?" Gerard demands.

"I came to get you to confess," he explains.

Gerard barks out a startled laugh of his own. "Always the comedian, aren't you?" he asks. "Why would I confess? You have nothing."

"We have two bodies shot in the head with your gun, in your warehouse," Stiles says. "I think there's plenty. But I don't need you to confess to that, I was there. They may or may not even charge you with what happened down at the Wharf. I mean, how much difference is another life sentence really going to make?"

"What are you talking about?" he asks tightly.

"You're going to be charged with the kidnap of a minor," Stiles explains. "And that's going to turn this into a federal case, so they're probably going to tack on all sorts of other charges. Exploitation. Abuse. Conspiracy."

"You even try to bring up what happened, and I'll take Chris and Allison down with me," he snarls.

"You could try, but that's gonna be a tough sell, considering they weren't even the same state at the time and Allison was about three years old. Cause see, I'm not talking about when you kidnapped
me, or even Erica or Boyd. You've got a pretty extensive resume of kidnapping children, so I can see why you're confused," Stiles says. "Allow me to clarify, I'm talking about Emily Dewitt."

Stiles sticks his hands in his pockets, tilting his head to watch as Gerard's expression starts to crack. "Oh, and yeah, they're going to get you for her murder, too. And the rest of the Hales. Can't let Kate have all the glory, now that we know you were the one giving the orders."

"You have nothing," Gerard says uneasily. "That was years ago. You can't prove anything."

"You're right, I can't, but she can," Stiles tells him. "Emily was clever. Cleverer than you. She kept records of every single thing you did the entire time you had her."

"It will read like a fairy tale," he sneers. "No one believes in magic."

"Who said anything about magic?" Stiles says. "Emily certainly didn't. Instead she just gave a list of where you'd buried the bodies. Of all the many terrible things you'd done. Of all the people you killed."

"They were monsters!" Gerard shouts, reaching forward to clasp the bars. "You know that, Stiles, you've seen exactly what they are."

"Tell it to the jury," Stiles says. "You've actually got a pretty solid case for insanity, when you think about it. You've just got to decide how you want to die. Drugged to the gills in a straight jacket in Eichen House, or making license plates down at San Quentin."

"You evil child. You've got the same demon inside you Emily did," Gerard tells him bitterly. "I tried to save her, that's what I did. I was trying to keep her contained."

"What? Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live? That argument is a little bit old," Stiles says. "I thought you'd be more original."

"Even you do not realize what you're capable of, not yet," Gerard says.

"Do you?" Stiles asks calmly, taking a step closer to the bars. "Do you realize what I am? What you started, when you went after my friends? After me?"

"You won't kill me," Gerard says with certainty, though he takes a step back.

"Only because I don't have to," Stiles says. "It's a fine distinction, but I want to make sure you're aware of it. I will absolutely kill you, if I have to, and I can. You've got a timebomb in your blood. I could trigger that mountain ash any time I like."

Gerard glares at him. "Had I known you were a druid—"

"What? You would have locked me up and used my powers for evil?" Stiles asks. "Let's just be happy you never figured it out, because it would not have ended well for either of us."

"I think with a little discipline you could have been rather useful," Gerard counters. "I could have trained you. I could have—"

"A little late for could haves, don't you think?" Stiles says. "You didn't, and now you never will. I don't know if you've noticed, but you're not exactly your fighting best."

Gerard glares at him, but it doesn't work quite like it had before. He still looks sickly, his limp, longish hair making him look a little like the Cryptkeeper. "What exactly did you do to me?"
"I cured you. Sort of," Stiles explains. "Congratulations, you're not a werewolf! You'll never shift again, and I wouldn't recommend trying it. Deaton says it'll be rather unpleasant. But hey, the cancer's gone, and you're all human again. Just what you always wanted, right? I've actually kind of done you a favor."

"You shouldn't have tried to do me any 'favors.' It was stupid to leave me alive, boy," Gerard says. "I still have connections."

"Really?" Stiles asks, grinning slightly. "Such faith in your friends. Alas, all your little fellow hunters have been gossiping harder than teenage girls. Looks like everyone knows exactly what you've been up to, and it turns out they're not too impressed about the fact that you not only went and got yourself purposely turned into a werewolf, but then killed two of your men just to stay that way."

Stiles shrugs. "Guess killing off your employees wasn't a real great long-term strategy, huh? No one's coming for you, Gerard. No one's gonna help you. Chris and Allison just handed over a mountain of evidence against you to my father, so I wouldn't count on them visiting for Christmas or stopping by to bring you cigarettes. You've got nothing. You've got no one."

"You think I should have killed you?" Stiles asks as he leans forward, just shy of the bars. "Give it a few more weeks. You'll be wishing I had."

"You act like you have me dead to rights," Gerard says, his eyes narrowing, "but if that were true you wouldn't have bothered to come here. You want something."

"I already told you," Stiles says casually. "I want you to confess."

"No, you don't want a trial, that's what this is," Gerard says shrewdly, grinning slyly. "You don't want your precious Derek to have to take the stand, to have to face me—"

"You're not getting it, are you?" Stiles asks. "One way or another, there's not going to be a trial. You take a plea and get yourself locked up real quick, and you might just survive. You try and drag this out…let's just say you've pissed off the wrong werewolf."

"I'm not scared of Derek Hale," Gerard sneers.

"And I'm not talking about Derek," Stiles says. "I'm talking about Peter. You remember Peter, right? Emily's husband? His hobbies include ripping out your daughter's throat and coming back from the dead. Ringing any bells?"

Gerard glares at him, but gives a slight nod as he acknowledges he really doesn't have much choice. "What do you want from me?"

"I told you, I want you to confess, at least try to keep up," he says. "I'll make it easy for you. It's simple what you need to say. You kidnapped Emily, and made her help you kill people—here, you can either claim you killed them because you were some sort of hit man, or just a psycho, Emily left that up to you—and then when she escaped, you found out she was living with the Hales, and you ordered your daughter to kill them all to cover up what you'd done."

"That's not what happened!" Gerard snarls, stepping forward again, close enough to the bars he could reach out and grab Stiles. Stiles watches him carefully, but he doesn't get closer.

"I know it's not exactly what happened," Stiles agrees. "But it's a lot more believable than what really did."

"How much evidence do they actually have?" Gerard asks.
"Enough that if you go to trial you'll probably end up with the death penalty, if Peter doesn't get to you first, which for the record, he would," Stiles says, before pausing, and running his eyes over Gerard curiously. "All those people Emily listed out, all those lives you took—did you really always follow the code, did you kill them to stop them from hurting others, or just because you could?"

"At this point, does it really make a difference?" he asks.

Stiles watches him carefully a moment longer, then shrugs. "Guess not," he agrees. "It's not like I can think any worse of you. So, do we have an agreement? Will you confess?"

"Yes," Gerard snaps. "I'll confess to your imaginary little crimes, if you keep that werewolf of yours leashed."

"Not actually part of the deal," Stiles says. "I can't promise to protect you from Peter. That would take a lot of time and effort, and honestly, you're not worth it. If he does manage to get through security and kill you, it's not like that doesn't work just as well for me, if we're being honest."

"Then why should I confess?" he demands angrily.

"Because it's the only chance you've got," Stiles says. "I'll try to talk Peter out of killing you. That's the best I can do. He's unpredictable, so that conversation could go either way." Stiles straightens, and meets Gerard's eyes. "Do we have a deal?"

"Yes," Gerard answers through gritted teeth, his eyes burning brightly. Stiles wonders if the man will take him at his word, or try to shift anyway and suffer the consequences. Probably the latter.

"Well, that's everything then," Stiles says. "Enjoy prison."

He turns to start down the hall, and Gerard leans up against the bars. "Why are you doing this?" he calls after him, frustrated. "You're not even one of them."

"That's where you're wrong," Stiles says, glancing back. "You messed with the wrong werewolf pack."

"Pack?" Gerard asks snidely. "You're a disorganized group of teenagers with an alpha that's out of his depth. You're not a pack."

"I guess we were. I mean, really, maybe I should be thanking you." Stiles laughs slightly and starts heading back towards the exit. "You're actually the one that brought us all together. How's that for irony?"

"This isn't over, Mr. Stilinski," Gerard shouts after him.

"It is for you," Stiles says, and turns the corner. He's so wound up from the conversation that he doesn't even see his father until he's almost slamming into his chest.

Stiles stumbles a step back and his father crosses his arms as he looks him over. Then his dad gives a resigned sort of sigh, and glances down at his feet. "Please tell me Gerard is still in one piece back there."

"The only wounds I've left are psychological," Stiles promises.

His dad is not impressed by that answer, if the raised eyebrow is anything to go by, but he does seem to accept it. "Hrm," he huffs. "Well, I just had a visit of my own, from the Argents."
"Really," Stiles asks, voice falsely casual.

"Yeah, they just dropped all the evidence I could ever want right into my lap," he says. "Pretty convenient, huh? Don't suppose you had anything at all to do with that?"

"Plausible deniability," Stiles tells him quickly, and his father's expression somehow gets even more resigned.

"You're supposed to be home in bed," John says. "Instead you're out solving seven year old murder cases. I really don't know where I went wrong with you. Or right with you, I guess. Honestly, sometimes it's hard to tell."

"It could be worse. I could be a meth-addict, or a binge-drinker," Stiles points out. "Or a Justin Bieber fan."

"It worries me that that's the bar you've set for yourself," John tells him.

"We've all got to draw the line somewhere," Stiles says with false cheer, before trying to make his escape. He doesn't make it far before his dad grabs the back of his hood, and drags him back.

"Aht, hold it right there—" his dad says. "I want you going right home."

"Dad—" Stiles begins.

"Really wasn't a suggestion, Stiles. I saw Lydia sneak out of here earlier, I'm assuming she's waiting to take you home," he says. "I want you to have her drive you straight home, and then I want you to stay there, are we clear? You need to get some more rest. Maybe hold off on solving the Kennedy assassination for a week or so? Think you can handle that?"

"Please, I solved that in fourth grade," Stiles says. "It was obviously a CIA plot—"

"Jesus, kid," John says, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Please just go get some rest."

"Cross my heart," Stiles says, tugging his hood from his dad's grip with one hand and crossing his heart with the other, before fleeing towards the door.

In his own defense, Stiles really had intended to do as his father asked. The trouble is that his intentions rarely seem to get him very far, and he's grabbed the moment he steps out into the parking lot and dragged behind the building. He wishes he could be surprised when he sees Peter's eerily lit blue eyes shining out from the darkening sky, but he's really not.

"So how much of that did you actually hear?" Stiles asks, as he tries to disentangle his hoodie from Peter's claws. That's the last straw—he's not wearing hoodies anymore, they make him too easy to drag around.

Peter raises an eyebrow at his lack of fear, but it's not that he's indifferent to the fact that Peter is a dangerous, sociopath of a werewolf, he's just resigned.

"All of it," Peter finally admits, smiling charmingly as he lets Stiles go. Derek could probably learn a lot from Peter about how to appear like a normal guy: Peter was scarly good at going from looking like he was going to kill someone, to looking like a Congressman on a campaign trail, all in about zero seconds flat. "I came here to kill him, you realize."

"I figured," Stiles frowns. "But you're not going to."
"Why is that?" he asks silkily.

"Because my father is in there, and if anything happens to him because of you, and I do mean anything, from bad press to a hangnail, I'll destroy you," he promises. "So if you're dead-set on killing Gerard, you're going to wait until he gets handed off to someone else."

"I'm disappointed in you, Stiles. Sometimes I think Scott is more fun than you are," Peter says sweetly. "He'd have tried to win me over with moralistic speeches about the injustice of revenge."

"Scott still thinks you might make up for the things you've done. But Scott also still believes Ms. McCall really sent his dog Mr. Muggles to live on a farm," Stiles says wryly. "I know better."

"Hmm, I suppose you do," Peter agrees. "I'll leave him alone, for now. If you'd sent him to prison for anything other than taking Emily, for the fire, I would have killed him anyway. But I like poetic justice of this. It's what she would have wanted. It's…closure, even more than seeing him in the ground—but then, you knew it would be, didn't you? You really are brilliant, Stiles. And wasted on my nephew. He won't know what to do with you."

"Maybe I'll know what to do with him," Stiles counters.

"You'd have to find him first," Peter reminds him. "He packed up a few hours ago and turned tail, as I'm sure you're aware. Commitment terrifies him. He thinks he's cursed. I can't say I blame him. He has a lot of evidence to support his case."

"But you know where he is," Stiles says, narrowing his eyes. "Where did he go?"

Peter sighs. "You really are set on him, aren't you?" he asks. "He's broken, you know. Worse than me. I just killed Laura. He killed the rest of us."

"It wasn't his fault," Stiles insists at once.

"How much do you know?" Peter asks. "Do you know that Emily and I were living in hiding? That we knew the Argents might be after us? And all the time we were planning our reunion in secret, he was fucking Kate Argent and telling her anything she wanted to know."

"Yeah, I know," Stiles shrugs. "His mistake was trusting the wrong person. You don't have that sort of excuse. You are the wrong person."

Peter rolls his eyes, but steps back, looking almost secretly pleased at Stiles' response. "I'd guess he's at the cabin," he says. "He likes to go there to make himself suffer. Nothing like big empty spaces to remind someone of what they've lost. He'll never be able to give you what you deserve, you know. He's not ambitious enough."

"You honestly think I should have chosen you, don't you?" Stiles asks incredulously. "Say what you want about Derek's track record as an alpha, it's still better than yours."

"I had a plan," Peter explains. "Things might have gone a lot better, if I'd been allowed to fulfill it."

"I know exactly what your plan was. You were grooming me to be your emissary. Giving me the book, your little bits of advice. You would have waited for an opportunity to become an Alpha, and then you would have waited a bit longer…until the helpless pack human needed something extra to help his friends. Until I was practically begging you to help me become an emissary."

"Is that what you think?" Peter asks, his mouth tilting into a smirk.
"Yes," Stiles says. "But that's not how it would have happened. I'd never have begged you, Peter. I always would have chosen Derek over you."

"So stupid, for being the smart one," he tsks. "Still, nothing to be done about it now, I suppose. I don't relish the idea of killing my nephew to sever the bond—though it would get me everything I want, all at once."

"You so much as think about it—" Stiles snarls.

"I choose power over family once," Peter interrupts calmly. "It's not a choice I can afford to make again, not when Derek is all the family I have left."

The werewolf turns to walk away and Stiles wonders if Peter isn't as displeased with the way things turned out as he'd like to pretend. Stiles might not be as gullible as Scott—he knows Mr. Muggles' real forwarding address is six feet under in the McCall backyard—but that doesn't mean he can't recognize there had to be more to Peter than the monster he'd become.

"You used to be a good person, didn't you?" Stiles calls softly after him. "I know how much Emily loved you, and she didn't seem the type to be easily taken in."

"What makes a person good?" Peter asks wryly, stopping without turning around. "I followed the laws. I did not kill. I paid my taxes." He grins slyly, his head half-tilted to the side. "But I knew, even then, just what lengths I would go to, if it meant protecting what was mine. With everything gone and nothing left to protect—well, it only stands to reason that there was pretty much nothing that I wouldn't do."

Stiles can see the subtext beneath Peter's words, the subtle little inference that he's not just talking about himself. He tightens his jaw. "I'm not like you," he insists.

Peter moves faster than he can follow, and the next thing he knows the werewolf has him pressed back against the wall.

"You're not, not yet," Peter agrees. "That's the only difference, Stiles. You, like Emily, like me—we can become anything. We can become better, and we can become worse. It all depends on circumstance."

"I don't believe that," he says. "Derek went through everything you did, and he's still good. You said Emily saved you, with her very last breath, even after everything she'd been through." Stiles faces him down. "It's not circumstances that make us, it's how we handle them as they come."

"In that case, I very much look forward to seeing what you make of the circumstances yet to come," Peter answers. "I truly hope you're not proven wrong."

There's the distinct click of a gun's hammer, and Peter and Stiles both glance to the side. Lydia stands with a small revolver aimed at Peter's head with both hands.

"Let him go," she says, her voice quiet but firm.

"Do you go anywhere without an armed escort?" Peter asks dryly, turning back to Stiles.

"It wouldn't be an issue if anyone trusted me with a gun of my own," Stiles tells him easily. "I'd do as she says, by the way."

Peter lets go and places his hands up in the air, his sly little grin making a mockery of his apparent surrender. "Of course," he agrees. "I think we've said all that was needed."
Stiles slides away from him and goes to stand beside Lydia, checking carefully behind them to make sure none of the deputies have caught sight of them. It's a little worrying how little Peter worries about the authorities, and he doesn't want anyone hurt in the crossfire of their little standoff.

"You can put away the gun," Peter says. "Your hands are shaking, I know you won't shoot me."

"Oh, Peter," Lydia says, and her voice sounds strange; still calm on the surface, but Stiles can hear the terror lurking beneath it, and he knows Peter can too. "You've been in my head, you should know me better. I don't bluff."

"Touché, my dear," Peter says amicably, and tilts his head before shooting off an irreverent salute. "I'll be seeing you both again soon, I'm sure."

He turns and melts into the shadows with an ease that's probably going to give Stiles a phobia about the dark. He turns back to Lydia, and carefully pulls the gun from her shaking hands. He switches the safety back on, and then quickly slips it out of sight in her purse. The last thing he needs is to get caught with a probably ill-gotten gun right in front of the Sheriff's station. His father already has enough dirt on him to keep him on restriction until he's thirty.

"Thanks for that," he tells her. "I think that guy talks even more than I do."

He turns to grin at Lydia, but his smile falters when he catches sight of her frozen expression. Her hands are still shaking, held in front of her, like she hasn't realized he's taken away the gun.

"Hey, Lyds, you alright?" Stiles asks, leaning down to meet her eyes. "It's okay. He's gone."

"No, he's not." She looks up at him. "You got to lock your monster away today, Stiles," she says, tilting her chin up, all trace of fear effectively hidden from view. "I still have to live with mine."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, sorry about dragging this out so much! I promise there will finally be a Sterek confrontation/resolution in the next chapter! I've only made you wait three years and 130,000 words. Everyone's reviews have been such a part of the writing process, that I would love to hear how you would all like to see them end up? Kissing? Alpha/Emissary bite? Actual sexin'? Or with them deciding to start something at the snail's pace I've already set? ;)


Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Well, I've finally finished writing this thing. The final chapter is just in the editing stages, but it is done and will be up in 1-2 weeks depending on how fast my edits go (the last one is a loooonnng one, or it would be sooner). I'm a very strange combination of happy and sad. Writing this story has been such a learning experience for me. I'm definitely going to miss it, but even though the Stiles narrative has been such fun to write, I'm a little afraid it's kind of taken over my own internal monologue. I almost used "creep" in a sentence the other day. Also, fun fact: I use "kind of" 90 times in this story, and "sort of" 163 times. In case you ever want to get very, very drunk, this would make for a killer drinking game.

Many MANY thanks to Keldjinfae, who helped me get through some major hurdles to finally figure out how this thing should end, offered amazing suggestions that were stolen shamelessly, and was an all around awesome beta/sounding board.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lydia convinces him she'll be alright and drops him off at home, promising that she's going to head to Jackson's so she won't be alone. Part of Stiles wants to stop her, but he suspects she needs something he can't give her. Jackson had better take care of her, though, or he'll be dealing with Stiles.

The BMW disappears around the corner and he pushes inside, trudging up the stairs. He opens his bedroom door, carelessly walking over his printouts, and stops to examine the sleeping werewolf on his bed. Scott is splayed across the bed horizontally, his sneakers off the side, his face smashed into the pillow. It's so familiar, and at the same time so very strange.

Stiles made a copy of the key to Scott's house when he was twelve years old, and he's put it to better use than Melissa really approves of, but he can't remember the last time Scott came here to wait for him. He contemplates him for a moment, wondering how to wake him. A year ago he would wake him by pulling the bedspread out from beneath him and dragging him to the floor. Two months ago he would wake him by shoving a hand against his shoulder or hitting him with a pillow.

"Scott," he says, now, keeping his distance. He leans against the wall, smirking as Scott frowns, pushing himself further into the pillow. "Scott!"

Scott pushes himself up, his eyes widening in alarm that he manages to blink away the moment he sees Stiles. He runs a hand awkwardly through his hair. "Stiles," he says, grinning hesitantly. "I was waiting for you."

"I can see that," Stiles says.

"You were gone when I got home," Scott explains, frowning slightly. "My mom told me you came home to rest, but then Allison texted me that you were at the station, and I figured that I would just wait here for you."

"Allison already told you everything?" Stiles asks. He's beginning to suspect that Lydia is right, as
"Yeah," Scott says, looking momentarily subdued. "I can't believe what he did to that girl. But, it's
great that Allison went to the police with it, right? I mean, can you even imagine what it took for her
to do that, after all she's been through?" His eyes go slightly unfocused. "She's just so—"

"Yep, she's a saint," Stiles deadpans.

"I know, right?" Scott agrees, the sarcasm going right over his head, as he blinks back dreamily. "I
think she's in such a better place now. Maybe with Gerard out of their lives, they can finally move
on."

"I didn't actually do this to give the Argents' peace of mind, Scott," he snaps.

Scott glances at Stiles in surprise. "I know," he says. "I didn't mean—I just meant, this is good for
everyone, right? We can all move on now. Gerard is going away for the rest of his life."

"However long that may be," Stiles agrees wryly, pushing off the wall. He notices that Scott's smile
has completely disappeared, and he's watching him warily. "What?"

"Were you ever going to tell me?" he asks.

"Tell you what?" Stiles frowns.

"Lydia interrogated Deaton while you were out," Scott says, his eyes glancing away guiltily. "And
well, it's sort of hard not to eavesdrop when you're a werewolf."

"Right," Stiles says. The bond. He supposes doctor/patient confidentiality doesn't really count when
the doctor in question is a vet. He should have known. "So. Yeah. Turns out I'm an Emissary."

Scott scrunches up his face. "I'm not sure what that means," he says. "I looked it up on my phone,
and it says it's some kind of diplomat. And no offense, Stiles, but—"

"Yeah, yeah," Stiles breaks in, dropping down to sit on the bed beside him. "It's not that kind of
emissary, not exactly. It's more like, I don't know, Pack Advisor?"

"It seemed a little more than that," Scott says. "Deaton mentioned that you couldn't be the emissary
to both me and Derek. He said you had to pick, and I—I don't want to lose you, but I—"

"I don't have to pick, not really, that would imply I had a choice," Stiles shrugs. "Derek doesn't want
me, so I'm up for grabs if you're interested."

Scott purses his lips shut. "I don't believe that."

"Lydia thinks I should go after him," Stiles continues. "Even Peter thinks I should go after him, even
if he said the complete opposite because that's just the kind of manipulative asshole that he is. But
I'm tired of fighting all the time. I'm tired of fighting for something I don't think I'm ever going to
have. You're the one with the epic love story, Scott. I'm just the comic relief."

"That's not true." Scott pulls Stiles around to look at him. "Stiles, if you did have a choice, would
you pick me or would you pick Derek?"

"Derek," Stiles says, before he even means to, and he doesn't even realize it's the truth until it's
already been said. Scott's eyes widen, but they look more surprised than hurt. "No, I mean, it's not
that—"
"You really care about him, don't you?" Scott asks in surprise.

"It's like I've been trying to get all the wrong pieces to fit together," Stiles says, his eyes skittering away as he nervously scrubs a hand over his hair. "I've been looking for something perfect, some picture-perfect romance like my mom and dad. I can't see me and Derek like that. I can't picture us together going to see Marvel movies or out for some fancy dinner. I can't see us together that way." He looks over at Scott. "But when I think about not seeing him at all, it's like I can't even breathe."

Stiles glances down at his wrists, running the fingers of one hand along the faintly glowing veins. "And I don't know if that's because of this bond or if it's just him."

"Deaton said you had a bond to me, too," Scott says, eyeing Stiles' wrist with faint unease.

"Yeah," Stiles agrees. "I guess we should have taken my dad's warning about becoming blood brothers a little more seriously, though in our defense, becoming mystically bonded wasn't really included on his list of reasons why it wasn't a good idea."

"Wait, that's what did it?" Scott asks, laughing brightly. "So we've been bonded for most of our lives then, really, or at least, you've been my emissary since I was turned."

"I guess, yeah," Stiles agrees. "Deaton's not sure exactly when it happened. It kind of just formed gradually, and because we know each other so well we didn't even notice."

"It's got to be strong then, right?" Scott asks.

"Yeah," Stiles agrees, glancing over at Scott warily, unsure where he was going with this.

"Well, I mean, we've known each other over a decade longer than you've known Derek," Scott continues. "We practically grew up like brothers. That bond has got to be strong."

"It is," Stiles agrees.

Scott nods then, before glancing back at Stiles with a very un-Scott-like sly expression. "Okay, so if we've been bonded that long, and we're that close, but it's still him that you want, I don't think you can really say it's the bond that's to blame. Can you?"

Stiles eyes widen as he watches Scott. "Who are you, and what have you done with Scott?"

"I'm not allowed to be insightful?" Scott asks wryly.

"I didn't even know you could use 'insightful' in a sentence," Stiles says.

"Okay, so maybe I was coached," Scott admits, and gives a shrug.

"Lydia?" Stiles guesses.

Scott shakes his head. "My mom," he says. "I didn't take the news that you might be leaving for Derek's pack too well at first. She was able to explain that it wasn't really about me, and that I needed to grow up."

"Dude, your mom is awesome, you know that, right?" Stiles asks.

"Yeah," Scott agrees, glancing at him. "She's also usually right."

"I wish she'd give one of her famous lectures to Derek," Stiles says.
"She'd probably do it, but it might be better coming from you," Scott says.

Stiles knows that Scott is right—wonders never cease—but it doesn't make what he needs to do any clearer. Derek is still such an unknown. Stiles wouldn't be surprised if he just disappeared, never to be seen again, because he always kind of half-looked like he was thinking of heading to the horizon. Stiles doesn't think he has any right to ask him to stay, but is it any better to let him go without even trying?

"Alright, well, you seem to have it all figured out," Stiles says, pushing up from the bed before turning back to Scott. "So what do you suggest? Borrow your boombox, and stand out in his driveway serenading him until he'll talk to me?"

"If that's what it takes," Scott agrees, before frowning. "But what's a boombox?"

"I worry for you, Scott, I really do," Stiles tells him. "Don't you remember the brat pack?"

"The Alphas?" Scott frowns. "What have they got to do with anything?"

"And now I'm ashamed to even know you," Stiles says.

Scott breaks into a huge grin. "You really have forgiven me, haven't you?"

"I don't know what it says about our relationship that that's what you get from that, but yeah, I guess we're back to normal, aren't we?" Stiles agrees, breaking out into a wide grin. "You do realize I'm going to make you watch everything from [Sixteen Candles] to [Betsey's Wedding]?"

"Those are those Tom Cruise movies, right?" Scott asks, with a just a bit too much innocence for it to be genuine.

"That's it," Stiles says. "Just get out of my house. I don't even know why we're friends."

"Yes you do," Scott tells him, flashing him a crooked grin.

"Yes, I do," Stiles agrees, sobering slightly at the thought of not being in Scott's pack anymore. He's known he might lose Scott for awhile now, but he always thought Scott would be the one cutting ties. "If I do this, and Derek takes me into the pack…what about you? Are you and Isaac going to be alright?"

Scott looks over at him with a furrowed brow. "What? We'll be fine," he says dismissively, and for a moment Stiles feels that same anxiety return. Here he is agonizing over their lost connection, and Scott couldn't care less. "I mean, I'm sure Derek will take us back. And Isaac talks about how much he misses Erica and Boyd all the time, so he'll probably be thrilled." Scott pauses, frowning slightly. "I guess we'll get used to Jackson eventually."

Stiles pauses, sure he's misheard something. "Wait, what?" he asks. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you didn't think I'd let you be in a pack without me, did you?" Scott asks, glancing up innocently. "Anyway, Derek's been after me to join up forever, I'm sure he'll forgive me eventually and let me back in."

"But—but you've been fighting against Derek since the start," Stiles protests, wondering how this is even happening. "You've done everything you could to avoid being his pack. I can't just let you—"

"I'm not stupid, I do know everything you've done for me," Scott says quietly, his voice that same stubborn, sincere tone that always meant he'd already made up his mind. "Did you think I wouldn't
follow you, if you switched packs?"

Stiles just gapes at him, because the truth is he never even considered it. It had always been about the choice: Derek, or Scott. The thought of them all being in a pack together had really seemed too outlandish to hope for.

"I mean, come on, Stiles," Scott continues. "You're supposed to be the smart one."

Stiles throws himself forward, pulling Scott into a hug. "I love you, man."

"I know," Scott says easily, and Stiles never should have told him to watch Star Wars, he should have known it was asking for trouble.

* * * * *

Stiles' grand plan to rush off and confront Derek at his cabin came to a screeching halt about five minutes after Scott left, when Stiles realized disappearing on his dad again was probably not one of his better ideas.

Stiles can't leave without telling him where he's going, and if his dad knows where he's going and wants to stop him, he's more than capable of doing it. Stiles knows this better than most—he's been pulled over by his father more than once for surprise car searches he's pretty sure weren't strictly legal.

Which means the only way this ends well is if his dad lets him go.

Stiles has faith in his talents with the spoken word, but convincing his father to let him rush off in the middle of the night to ask a twenty-something werewolf to 'bond' with him is probably pushing his luck.

He's still pacing in the entryway trying to find the right thing to say when his dad opens the door. John pauses for a moment in the doorway, before letting the door latch behind him. He raises an eyebrow. "This your idea of rest?"

"I need to see Derek," Stiles blurs out, which isn't anything as eloquent as he'd intended. His dad stares at him in surprise, but Stiles doesn't give him a chance to protest. "I know what you're thinking. I know you don't really like him, and you don't like me being involved in this, and you wish it would all just go away. But it's not going away, and we have to deal with it, and I can't do it alone. I need him. We all need him. And the only one that doesn't get that is him, so I've got to tell him. And it can't wait. Not even until morning. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but it can't."

His dad just stares at him, eyes a little wide, mouth slightly open, and for a moment Stiles worries that he's broken him. Then he looks down. "You really do sound just like her," he says after a moment, but he still won't meet his eyes.

Stiles lets out a startled breath, the her hitting him right in the chest. They spoke of his mother so rarely, that it had never really stopped hurting. "I don't remember her giving us any impassioned speeches about werewolves," he says, but his attempt at sarcasm falls flat. He's never really managed to joke about her since she's been gone.

His dad's lips quirk up though. "No," he agrees. "But every speech she gave was impassioned."

"I need to do this, dad. He's hiding out at his family's cabin in Arnold, and I don't know where he's planning to go from there, if he's coming back, or leaving for good," Stiles says. "I know it isn't fair to you, but I—"
"Okay," his dad says quietly.

"—just know that if I don't go now... wait, what, really?" Stiles asks, his eyes widening. He'd been certain he'd have to go to Plan B, which mostly consisted of waiting for his dad to turn his back so he could run like hell. After all, it wasn't lying if it was just a matter of outrunning him.

"Yes, really," his dad says, before reaching into his pocket and tossing Stiles the keys to his Jeep, because of course he'd kept them with him, the devious— "But I want a call when you get there. And then again when you're coming home. It's going to be dark soon, I don't want you staying there the whole night. Christ. This is a bad idea. How about I come with you?"

"I don't need a chaperone, dad, nothing untoward is going to happen," Stiles assures him. "This is serious. It isn't a booty call."

John looks pained at hearing the words 'booty call' coming from his son's mouth. "I'm waiting up. You've got two hours until I want you headed back home. Or I'm going to send the whole pack after you."

The thought of fending off Erica again is beyond frightening, so Stiles nods and lets his father pull him into a hug. "Be good, kiddo," he says.

"I will," he assures him.

"I know," John says, pressing a quick kiss to his temple. "I trust you."

Stiles turns and heads out the door, his father's words reverberating through his mind. He doesn't think he realized how much he had missed his father's trust until he finally got it back.

Somehow, he doesn't think trust is going to come as easily for him and Derek. Neither of them is all that trusting naturally. Stiles can count the people he trusts on one hand, and he's pretty sure Derek doesn't even trust himself.

Stiles climbs into his Jeep, relishing the feel of being behind the wheel of it again. He glances at the dash, but the damage he'd caused has been fixed. He's not sure when his dad had the time to do it, but he starts to feel like himself again as he starts the car up and hears the familiar hum.

He mostly knows how to get to Arnold, because he and his dad spent the Christmas after they lost his mom there with his friend Heather's family, and he visited their cabin there a few more times before they grew apart. But he'd been a little too preoccupied the last time he was at Derek's cabin to remember all the turns, and he doubts the Hales are listed.

Instead he searches for Mike's Place, the diner with the curly fries, and maps it on his phone. He'll be able to backtrack to Derek's cabin from there, and it calms him to have a plan. He doesn't even start to get nervous until he's about fifteen minutes away, and he begins recognizing some of the turns. It seems like it's been years since Derek dragged him out here, and so much has changed since then.

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Stiles slows as he recognizes the space he and Derek had kissed, before flipping a u-turn and heading down to a small turn off he'd missed half a mile back. The private road to Derek's cabin is half-hidden and unpaved, and he almost misses it the second time, too. This might be one of Derek's classier hideouts, but it's even more secluded than the others.

He pulls to a stop on the side of the road and fumbles for his phone, before hitting 'Dad' in his contacts. He hopes he's far enough out not to give Derek a head's up that he's here. It would be just like him to try and make a getaway before Stiles can talk some sense into him.
"Dad, I'm here," Stiles says. His father doesn't reply right away, which Stiles guesses means he's probably regretting his decision to let him go. "I'm fine," he adds. "Safe and sound."

"In the middle of nowhere with a werewolf," his father says wryly.

"Well, yeah," Stiles says. "It's all going to work out, you know. I've got faith."

"Uh huh," John says. "That Scott talking or you?"

"Well, to be fair, he got his pep talk from Melissa," Stiles says. "It's kind of optimism by three degrees, but I'll take it."

"Just be careful," his dad says. "Call me the second you need anything."

Stiles lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding, settled a little by his father's way of giving his blessing. "You'll be my first call, dad."

"Love you, kiddo," he says, and disconnects.

Stiles puts the phone back in his pocket and starts driving down the rest of the road. The Camaro is parked beside the cabin haphazardly, and he can feel his heart pick up as he pulls to a stop beside it. It's beating loud enough that he's sure Derek can already hear it as he stumbles out of the Jeep. He still doesn't know what he's going to say. He'd been kidding about the boombox and the serenade, but maybe he should have gone for it. At least he'd have a plan.

The front door has been left open, and Stiles slips inside. The sun is almost set, and none of the lights inside are on, so he can't see Derek at first. He finally catches a glint of red from the corner of the room, and he doesn't come further in as he presses the door gently shut behind him.

"Hey," he says cautiously.

"Get out of here, Stiles," Derek snaps.

It's so typical of him that Stiles doesn't bother to take it personally, and he certainly doesn't bother to actually leave. "Gerard confessed," he says instead.

Derek surges to his feet, stalking closer. It's not like Stiles expects or even wants him to be grateful—he's not deluded, and Derek has made his feelings on the situation perfectly clear—but he isn't expecting him to look quite so angry. "I told you to get out!"

"Yeah, I heard you," Stiles says. "But I didn't drive my ass all the way out here just to turn right back around."

"Fine," Derek snarls. "Then I'll leave."

Stiles reaches into his back pocket, letting a handful of ash spill from his hand and snap to the doorway. He doesn't even need to look anymore, to do it. Derek narrows his eyes, coming closer, leaning forward with his hands on either side of the door to pin Stiles against it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Derek asks him dangerously.

Stiles presses himself further against the door, resisting the instinct to tug the barrier a bit closer and throw Derek off. He knows this is a battle, but it's not the kind he can win with a physical fight.

"Consider it protective custody," he answers calmly.
Derek slams his hands angrily against the wall on either side of him, but Stiles doesn't flinch. The werewolf lets out a sound of frustration, and pushes off the door.

"Open this now," he commands, pointing back at the door.

"Like you did for me?" Stiles asked. "Way I remember it, I had to find my own way out. So let's see what you've got, big guy. You really want out of here, we both know I can't actually stop you."

"You—" Derek begins, before breaking off with an incredulous laugh. "You are the only one that stops me, Stiles." He stomps forward, coming closer again, his eyes flashing red. "Open the damn door."

"That voice doesn't actually work on me," Stiles reminds him. "Little perk of being an Emissary and not your Beta. You don't scare me."

"Well, maybe I should," he snaps.

"Because you're the big bad wolf?" Stiles asks.

"Because everyone that I have ever loved is dead!" Derek yells.

"So what, you think you're cursed?" he asks, shrugging as he stays leaning against the door. "Cause if that's the case, I'm pretty sure I could make a talisman for that."

Derek goes very still, watching him warily. "Is everything a joke to you?"

Stiles could have shrugged it off if he'd asked it angrily, but Derek looks honestly bewildered and a little too close to falling apart. Stiles knows how to psychoanalyze with all the expertise of someone that grew up watching *Criminal Minds*, but put him in a room with someone that's upset and he'll choke. Stiles knows his own limitations, and he's never been all that great with feelings. He's always had a little trouble relating to people that aren't his father or Scott.

He's got a bit of an indifferent streak he's never quite been able to shake; he's the sort of the person that will go out into the woods to find a body without ever really thinking about who it might belong to.

"I'm sorry," Stiles says after a moment, though he makes no move to bring the mountain ash barrier down. "I know it's not a joke, I do, it's just—"

"It's your superpower," Derek allows softly. "Yeah, I remember." He takes a deep breath and looks back at Stiles. "Why is this so important to you?"

"What isn't it important to you?" he counters.

"You think you've solved it, right?" Derek asks sharply. "You think you've got it figured all out, all tied up nicely. But I already know who got my family killed, and it wasn't Gerard."

"I know, Kate's the one that started the fire, but he—" Stiles starts, breaking off when Derek makes an angry sound of frustration.

"You really think it's that simple?" he yells. "You had no right—"

"How do you figure?" Stiles demands. "He took me, you remember that? He tortured Erica and Boyd, he threatened Scott and his mom. He tried to kill you, right in front of me. I had *every right* to stop him. I'm sorry you have to go through this all again, but I won't apologize for making it happen.
And it is over now, Derek. He confessed. It's done."

"I don't care if he confessed!" Derek shouts. "They're dead because of me! I'm the one to blame! Me!"

"No, you're not," Stiles says calmly.

"You don't know—" Derek begins.

"Yes I do," Stiles breaks in quietly. "And no, you're not."

"Stiles, I slept with her," Derek whispers.

"I sort of figured. I mean, even before Peter confirmed it," Stiles says. "It doesn't change anything except that it makes me hate her even more."

"Peter," Derek repeats, going deathly pale. "Peter knows?"

"Yeah, he—" Stiles breaks off as Derek turns unsteadily, before the werewolf falls to sit down on the sofa. "Right… I'm guessing you guys have never sat down and had a heart-to-heart?"

"I thought I'd be dead if he knew," Derek says quietly.

"Say what you want about Peter, but he's not stupid," Stiles says, seeing an opening. "Also, he's pretty big on the revenge thing. But he's not coming after you. Doesn't that tell you something? If you don't believe me, maybe you'll believe him."

"I told her my family was coming for the reunion," Derek admits, glancing back up, "– and I'm the one that—"

"You're the one that was terrorized both mentally and sexually by a psychopath that wanted to kill your entire family," Stiles interrupts. "Kate's the one that set the fire. This is all on her, and her lackeys for following her lead, and Gerard for giving the order. You were innocent. Misled, but innocent."

"I trusted her," he confesses softly.

"I know," Stiles answers. "She betrayed you. You're not to blame for that. You didn't know."

"They died because of me," he insists.

"They died because of her!" Stiles counters, running his hands through his hair as he tries to calm himself down. He takes a deep breath. "It's called Survivor's Guilt, Derek. I got it when my mother died. I know it's not the same, but I do know about it."

Derek's eyes widen in surprise. "Stiles, you had nothing to do with her death,"

"Yeah, I know, that's sort of what Survivor's Guilt is," Stiles says wryly. "You feel guilty just because you survived." He hesitates for a moment. "I mean, I know,rationally, her death wasn't my fault. I know my dad doesn't blame me, that he never has. But sometimes I still wake up unable to breathe, because I dream that he hates me, or because I'm suddenly absolutely certain that she's only dead because I wasn't good enough. Because I couldn't stop it. I used to wish it had been me, instead."

"Stiles—" Derek says, sounding distraught. He looks like he wants to reach out, but aborts the move before his hand hardly lifts up.
"Eventually, I stopped wishing that. I realized it was the last thing she would have wanted for me," Stiles says. "And you have to forgive yourself, too. The people responsible are already paying for what happened, so stop trying to punish yourself." He glances around the beautiful cabin. "I mean, that is why you're squatting in abandoned buildings and your burned out house instead of staying here, or renting an actual apartment, right? You're punishing yourself?" Stiles demands. "Well, that stops now."

"Stiles—" he growls.

"You don't get it, do you? You don't get to hurt yourself anymore," Stiles snaps. "Because when you do, it hurts all of us. You have a pack now, and I want to be part of it, but you have to want it too."

"I don't deserve to get what I want," Derek insists, his eyes blazing.

"Yes, you do," Stiles insists. "I think you deserve a little happiness more than anyone else I know."

"And what about what you deserve, Stiles?" he asks. "I—it was a mistake, ever letting you get involved in this. You need to stay away from me."

"You know, you haven't had anything to do with why I've been in danger probably 80% of the time," Stiles points out. "But you're always there, trying to save me, anyway."

"80%," Derek echoes dubiously.

"Well, maybe 95%," Stiles allows with a small grin.

Derek fights off a grin of his own, glancing away. "I'm broken, okay?" he says. "That's why you need to choose Scott."

"Do you remember what you said to me? When you kidnapped me?" Stiles asks. "You said I deserved more than being at the bottom of Scott's priority list. I thought you were pretty nuts to kidnap me. I mean, I thought you were legitimately losing your mind. But the truth is, it sort of worked. Message received."

Derek frowns at him. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Probably not, no," Stiles agrees. "But I'm actually sort of glad you did. Okay. No, I'm really not. I wish you would have actually just talked to me instead, but I'm too much of a realist to bother factoring something that outlandish in."

Derek glances up at him, looking simultaneously irritated and guilty—which was actually pretty much the standard Derek expression. "I talk."

"You speak, you don't talk," Stiles corrects. "Everything I know about you, I've read online or in your police file."

"Why the hell were you reading my police file?" Derek demands.

"You're actually surprised by that?" Stiles asks in bemusement. "I know the records of everyone in Beacon Hills. Don't think you're special." He pauses. "Also, don't tell my dad, cause I'm not actually supposed to be spending my free time in his records room."

"Stiles," Derek huffs out in disbelief.

"We're getting sidetracked," he interrupts. "The point is I need you to actually talk to me. Talking is a
thing that's going to need to happen if this is going to work.

"Don't you talk enough for the both of us?" Derek asks softly.

"Ha," Stiles says, laughing overly loud. "A sense of humor. Good. Knew it had to be hiding in there somewhere. But for once, I was being serious."

"What do you want me to say?" Derek demands, pushing back to his feet. "That I want you in my life? In my pack? Okay, I want you. I've told you that all along."

"We remember things very differently," Stiles says.

"Well…okay," Derek says lamely. "Maybe not those words exactly."

"Or any actual words at all, really," Stiles says.

"I told you that I liked you," Derek snaps.

"Yes, yes you did, and you used the same exact tone you're using now," Stiles says. "You do realize, that's the same tone you use when you threaten to rip out my throat?"

Derek crosses his arms and glances away. "What were you expecting?"

Stiles opens his mouth, but he realizes this was pretty much Derek's style. It's not like he had been expecting or even wanted flowers or chocolates. He didn't expect them to be anything like Scott and Allison, and really they were so nauseatingly cute at the beginning that Stiles would rather have himself committed than allow them to become Scallison 2.0.

"I don't know," he decides. "I've never really—I never expected you at all."

Derek nods. "I didn't either," he says, falling back to the couch. "Expect you, I mean. I thought you were just some idiot kid. I only tolerated you because of Scott. But you weren't at all what I thought. That's never really happened to me, before. I'm so used to people disappointing me, I didn't know how to react when you impressed me instead."

Stiles drops down to kneel in front of Derek, glancing up at him with an awe-struck wariness. He'd wanted Derek to talk, but he hadn't really expected him to admit to something like that. "I thought you were an idiot when I first met you too," he admits. "Also, I thought you were an idiot last week when you kidnapped me—"

"Stiles—" Derek snaps.

"—but," he breaks in, grinning slightly, "I've realized you're a lot more than you pretend. I never understood, before, your random heroic acts. You acted so cold, I didn't know why you'd even bother. But you can't help yourself, because you're a good person. I know you don't think so, but you are. You make bad choices, okay, like really bad choices sometimes—"

"Is there a point to this?" Derek breaks in.

"—but you are a good person," he finishes. "I said I'd worry if the world was left to the two of us, but I didn't get it yet. Because you're the one with heart, Derek. It's just that it's been a little battered."

Derek glances away, and Stiles twists, trying to hold his gaze. "Look, I don't expect you to trust me," he says. "But I want you to know that you can trust me."
"The problem isn't that I don't trust you, Stiles," Derek whispers. "The problem is that I do, and it terrifies me."

Stiles carefully lifts one of Derek's hands, pushing their palms together and entwining their fingers. He lifts their hands together, watching as his blood begins to glow a light gold. Derek's veins pulse where they meet, the glow traveling to his arm as well, lighting them both up from the inside, sort of like a reverse of the werewolf process to take pain.

"This binds us together," Stiles says, glancing at him. "I don't know exactly what that means, but I do know it's our choice. You can still stop it."

"No, I can't," Derek admits, leaning forward to rest his forehead against Stiles'. He lifts his free hand to place it on Stiles' neck and kisses him gently. Stiles feels a strange pull as their lips touch, a warmth spreading through them both, cresting against them like a wave before dissipating once again. The glow fades from their veins, blinking out after a bright flare pulses across them both, but even as the glow disappears, the connection it sparks remains.

It's nothing like their last kiss at all. The last kiss was desperate, Derek acting out because he couldn't find the words to explain what he wanted. It had been messy and inelegant and it had left Stiles adrift, caught between warring impulses to follow and to run.

The ground isn't so uneven sitting here together, panting lightly in sync as they hang onto each other and try to regain their equilibrium. This is less Newton's Third Law and more a kind of synthesis.

Stiles shifts slightly, reluctantly pulling them apart. "Does this mean we're werewolf married?" he asks, his bravado somewhat undermined by the fact that the kiss has left him breathless.

"That's not a thing," Derek says, barely bothering to sound exasperated as he caresses his cheek with his thumb. "Also, Deaton was my mom's Emissary, and that's not—we're not going there, okay? So I don't think what we have is normal."

"Yeah, probably not," Stiles agrees. "Normal's never really been my thing, anyway."

"We do have to decide what this does mean for us," Derek admits. "What about Scott? I don't want to come between you anymore than I already have."

"I've forgiven Scott, because I get it now," he shrugs. "I get how he could choose Allison over me. Maybe he still went about it all wrong, but I get it. I get it because if I had to choose, I'd choose you."

"If you had to choose?" Derek asks. "Didn't—"

"I chose you," Stiles agrees. "But Scott has too, if you'll take him. He wants to join your pack. Unfortunately that means we'll also get Isaac, but I guess we can't have it all."

"You're serious?" Derek asks. "He'd really—you think he'll actually follow me?"

"Well, he'll be your beta," Stiles says. "But it's Scott, so I can't promise good behavior or that he'll actually listen when you tell him to do things."

"Is it okay if I think it over?" Derek asks warily. "I haven't exactly forgiven him yet."

"Sure, but we both know you won't turn them away," Stiles says, pulling their hands apart so he can reach up and frame Derek's face instead. "We're stronger as a pack. We've spent so much time trying to work around each other, when we should have been working together."
"Maybe," Derek agrees. "But I think taking one trouble-maker into my pack is enough for tonight. We can worry about the rest tomorrow."

"Okay, firstly, I don't think I'm so much a trouble-maker, as a trouble-expert, and secondly, that brings me to my next question. Does that mean you want me as your Emissary?" Stiles lets his hands fall back to his sides, watching Derek's expression closely.

"Yes, Stiles," Derek says, half fondly, and half in exasperation. "I thought that was implied."

"Okay," Stiles breathes. "Okay, good. In that case, I think you should bite me."

"We're already bonded," Derek reminds him. "There's no reason for that."

"It's symbolic," he points out stubbornly. "And tradition. Who are we to fight tradition?"

"I don't even know how to respond to that, it's so ridiculous," Derek says. "But fine. Give me your wrist."

Stiles turns his right hand up, offering it to Derek with some trepidation. Derek runs his eyes over it, before lightly drawing his thumb across his veins to trace the path left by his gaze. He lifts the wrist to his lips, and then gently bites down, before abruptly letting go.

Stiles catches himself before he stumbles forward, and turns to glare at his wrist in disbelief. "Are you serious?" he demands. "You didn't even break the skin! I'm supposed to have a super-cool scar like Deaton. I'm pretty sure it's how Emissaries get street-cred."

"You said it was symbolic," Derek reminds him, before running his fingers across the shallow indentations he left on Stiles' skin. "Don't ask me to hurt you, Stiles, because I won't."

"Since when?" Stiles snorts.

Derek frames his face, tugging him back for another kiss. "Starting now."

"That—that was...a ridiculous thing to say, and probably impractical, given our respective track records," Stiles says, grinning into another kiss. "Please don't tell me you're secretly a romantic."

"What if I want to be a romantic?" Derek asks.

"That's certainly your prerogative, but expect to be mocked," Stiles tells him.

"I've known you almost a year now, Stiles, I pretty much always expect to be mocked," Derek says. "It doesn't mean we can't do the unexpected every once and awhile."

"Okay, that's a point. But we don't have to do things the normal way, either," Stiles insists. "You don't have to pretend with me, I already know you're an asshole. I'm an asshole, too. We can be assholes together."

"And you say I'm the romantic," Derek says dryly. "How do I refuse an offer like that?"

"That's not—" Stiles breaks off. "Look, I just mean that we've already seen each other at our worst. I don't want to be like Allison and Scott, because as far as I can tell, that kind of love makes you stupid instead of strong. I mean, I can literally see Scott's IQ drop about thirty-five points the moment Allison steps into the same room." He pauses for a breath. "Anyway, you like that I'm honest."

"You lie about everything, pretty much all the time," Derek says.
"But not to you," Stiles reminds him. "I can't lie to you."

"I can think of about a dozen examples, just off the top of my head," he snorts.

"I said I can't lie to you," Stiles smirks. "I didn't say I'd never tried."

"Speaking of your bad habits," Derek says, frowning suddenly, "does your father know you're here?"

"Of course," Stiles says, then rolls his eyes at Derek's dubious look. "Seriously! I told him. Mostly just because I was pretty sure I couldn't get away with coming out here if I didn't, but still, it's progress. He said he trusts me."

"Do you trust him?" Derek asks softly.

Stiles pauses at the question, a little caught off guard. There are things he's always trusted his father with, certainly. But he'd also cut his father out of a huge part of his life for nearly a year, and he'd be lying if he said the absolute only reason he kept his father in the dark was to keep him safe. It was the biggest reason, but Stiles also had just that little bit of doubt that maybe his father wouldn't believe him, that his father wouldn't trust him. And it was hard to trust someone that didn't trust you.

"We're getting there," Stiles says finally. "But I probably should head back. He threatened to send the wolves after us if I wasn't headed home within two hours."

"You should be getting some rest anyway, you still look tired," Derek frowns.

"I'm not the one that was used for target practice," Stiles reminds him. "What is your plan, anyway? Are you staying here?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd try sleeping in an actual bed," Derek says with a shrug. "I'll be heading back to Beacon Hills in the morning. I started looking for an apartment."

Stiles eyes widen. "What? Really? I thought maybe you were getting ready to flee the country."

Derek rolls his eyes as he stands, tugging Stiles up with him. "This is my home, Stiles. I'm not going anywhere."

"So you were just here to sulk then," Stiles says.

"I don't sulk," he snaps.

"Sure," Stiles says amiably. "Brood then." Derek narrows his eyes, so Stiles starts talking again before he can say anything else. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah," Derek says.

Stiles awkwardly stands by the door, not sure how to act. Should he go for the goodbye kiss? Should he try a bro-hug? Maybe a fist-bump?

He reaches out and playfully punches Derek on the shoulder before grinning at him. Derek just stares at him like he can't believe he knows him, so Stiles decides that was definitely the right choice. He's going to have to remember to do that in public. PDAs, Stilinski style. There's probably something wrong with him that he finally gets a boyfriend and his first thought is how much fun he's going to have embarrassing him.

"I'm a little terrified by the look you're giving me right now," Derek says after a moment.
"I'm going to be the best boyfriend ever." Stiles just grins, before spinning on his heel. He waves a hand to dispel the mountain ash, and pushes out the door. "Just wait. You'll see."

"Hey, Stiles," Derek calls after him.

"Yeah?" Stiles asks, glancing back.

"I want you to know, when you call, I'll answer," he says. "Every time."

Stiles stays rooted to the front step for a moment, watching as Derek gently shuts the door. Stiles has always been the one that's there for everyone else.

What might it be like, to have someone always there for him?

He's still not sure of the answer by the time he gets home and sidesteps his dad's interrogation before falling into bed, but he's definitely looking forward to finding out.

Chapter End Notes

And….the end! Ha. Just kidding, like this story would let me off that easy. No, there is still my 'short' epilogue to come, which ended up being more of an 18K monstrosity of a last chapter than an epilogue, if we're being honest, and possibly a couple little 'post-credit' scenes because even when it was over it still wasn't over.

I will have the last chapter up before the end of the month though, so luckily I will actually finish this thing before we hit the four-year mark. Thank you so much again to everyone that's been sticking with me this far!
And here is the end! I'm so sorry that it took me so long, but I promised I would finish it, and I have managed it by the skin of my teeth!

I just want to thank everyone that's read, left kudos, and especially for the comments, which were the driving force behind this entire story. It was supposed to be a short little crack fill: it's thanks to comments calling me out on the actual repercussions (i.e. what Derek is doing is actually really not okay) that it turned into this. I admit at first I was worried because this was supposed to be humor and I was like omg you're obvs doing it wrong, but then I was like challenge accepted! and decided I was going to deal with the feelings of everyone all the time. Which is probably why it took me three years—because that was pretty much mission impossible, but I still gave it my best shot.

AND THANK YOU to Keldjinfae for helping me figure out how to end this story.

Stiles wakes up the next morning to the sound of cursing. He blinks himself awake slowly, before turning his head to find Derek glaring back at him. He scrambles upwards with a yelp, pulling his sheets up over his chest like the heroine in a Victorian novel, before he remembers that he went to bed still fully clothed.

"Stiles," Derek snaps impatiently, motioning at the window. "Do you mind?"

It takes Stiles a minute to realize his window is open, but the mountain ash line is undisturbed, so Derek is hovering on the other side of it like the well-balanced creeper that he is. Stiles just stares at it for a moment, before spotting the small, empty little holes where the nails had been. He exhales, feeling almost shaky with relief. His father had told him he trusted him, but Stiles hadn't entirely believed him until now.

"Unless you want someone to call your father and let him know there's a man hanging out on his roof, you might want to let me in," Derek says dryly.

"Right," Stiles says, waving a hand to dispel the ash. Derek comes tumbling right in after it. "But we really do need to have a discussion about boundaries. You can't just be crawling through my window whenever you want to anymore."

Derek frowns at him. "Why not?"

"Because...we're...and...you just can't," he sputters. He's not really sure why it was okay for Derek to come sneaking into his window when he was just a shady werewolf alpha leader hiding out from the police, and it's not okay now that they're maybe sort of a couple. But it just isn't. Boyfriends use doors; all the literature says so.

"I needed to talk to you," Derek explains, like coming through his window is a perfectly logical first step.

"You could have called," Stiles insists. "I answer, too, you know! I am the best at answering. I'm
everyone's one phone call."

"I tried to call you like five times," he says. "I was starting to worry."

"What?" Stiles asks, dropping his useless sheet-shield and diving for his phone. It's about three hours later than he thought it was at half past noon, and he has about twelve missed calls. Five from Derek, two from Scott, one from Lydia, and the rest from his father. "Okay, well, we all have our off days. This isn't a good sign, what the hell happened? Can't I even take one little nap without the whole world imploding?"

Stiles' phone starts buzzing in his hand before Derek can respond, and his dad's picture flashes on the screen. "It's my dad, he's probably freaking because I haven't called yet," he explains quickly, before picking up the call. "Sorry, sorry, I slept in, I'm fine, I just—"

"Stiles," his dad breaks in firmly. "That's not why I'm calling. Have you seen the news?"

"Dad, no one watches the news," Stiles tells him. "We have the internet now."

His father ignores him with the ease of long practice, and gets right to the point. "Gerard was taken into custody by the Feds today."

Stiles feels his heart drop. "Oh, please don't tell me—"

"He didn't make it there," his dad continues tightly. "The transport crashed before they got three miles out of town. The driver's claiming a wolf was in the road. They glanced off it and spiraled into a tree. They got out to investigate, left Gerard locked up in the back."

Stiles presses his eyes shut. He can imagine how the rest of this story is going to go.

"They don't know how it happened. One minute he was in the van, next he was laid out in the middle of the street, cut straight in half. Someone had drawn a spiral on the road beneath him in his blood." His dad pauses to let out a breath, and Stiles can imagine him pacing his office. "I've got my list of suspects narrowed down to about one, Stiles."

"Don't—" Stiles starts, glancing back towards Derek, taking a deep breath. "Don't go after him."

"You want me to let this go?" his dad demands. "More than just Gerard could have been killed. The driver broke his arm, and his partner was hospitalized with a concussion."

"But they're gonna be fine right?" he asks. "Except for Gerard, obviously, but it's not like he didn't deserve it."

"Stiles," he snaps. "You said Hale was better. This isn't better. If he can do this to Gerard, what's going to happen to the next person that pisses him off?"

"Someone else burns an entire family alive, I say we pat Peter on the head and tell him to go have fun," he says with a shrug.

His dad goes eerily silent, so Stiles figures his humor isn't appreciated. Probably mostly because his dad knows Stiles isn't entirely joking.

"I won't stand for murderers roaming around free in my town," John says finally.

Stiles' heartbeat starts picking up, quickening at the thought of his dad and Peter facing off. Peter respects Stiles, or at least is amused by him, and that respect extends to his father. But Stiles isn't
stupid, and he knows Peter would slaughter one or both of them if he ever thought he had to.

"I'll take care of it," Stiles decides.

"Stiles—" his dad starts. "I don't want you anywhere near him, you understand me?"

"I know what I'm doing, and I know how to handle him," Stiles says. "You said you trusted me, well, time to prove it."

Stiles pauses, glancing back at Derek, who was watching him so intensely it bordered on creepy. "If it's any consolation, Derek already stopped by, probably to tell me the same news, and I can tell from the look he's giving me right now that I'm not going to be alone with Peter any time soon. Or, you know, ever again."

"You have four hours to give me a better option," his dad says. "Then I'm calling Chris Argent and we're going to take care of this ourselves."

"By 'take care of this,' you mean what, exactly?" Stiles demands.

"He shredded through the back of that prison van like it was made of paper," John says. "I'm not naive enough to think the prison system can hold him. I only see this ending one way, kiddo. I really hope you can prove me wrong."

Stiles swallows hard. He knows it goes against everything his dad believes in to go outside the law. He's on the verge of becoming a vigilante himself, and Stiles never wanted that for him. It's why he kept him from this life for so long—it made you do things you never would have done before you'd known.

"Four hours, okay, that's more than enough time," Stiles allows. "I only really needed three."

"I hope you're right," John says. "And if you try to go after Peter alone, I will find out, and you'll be right back to being grounded for life."

"Why would I go after him alone?" Stiles asks, meeting Derek's eyes. "I've got a pack." He clicks off the call, stuffing the phone in his pocket without breaking Derek's gaze. "Derek—"

"Don't," he snaps. "I get it, and I'll stop him. For good, this time. I won't let your father get hurt, but I'm not going to stand by and let an Argent kill the last of my family either. I'll take care of Peter myself."

"You think I want you to kill him?" Stiles asks incredulously. "Look, not that I—Peter's not my favorite person, okay, he doesn't even make the top 500 list, but he's still your family. And if I found a way to get rid of Gerard without killing him, we can do the same with Peter."

"Gerard's dead," Derek deadpans. "He was killed, like an hour ago."

"Okay, so that's maybe not the best example," Stiles allows. "But that wasn't us, right? We've been trying to do the right thing, and I've got to believe that counts for something."

"The right thing isn't always pretty," Derek says, stepping closer.

"You think Peter was right to kill him," Stiles realizes.

"I blame him for a lot," Derek shrugs. "I just can't say I'll be losing any sleep over Gerard. But none of that matters, because what matters is what's at stake right now. And I won't let him hurt you or
your father. So whatever you need, I'll back you."

"You are allowed to have an opinion. You get to have a say," Stiles insists. "He's your family, and I know I forget that sometimes, but I would never take that from you if I could help it. And I wouldn't blame you for stopping me if I tried."

"How much do you know about Peter?" Derek asks quietly, glancing away.

"I know he's diabolical, and overly concerned with fashion," Stiles says. "And he likes to bite my friends and then sometimes date their moms."

Derek gave a quicksilver grin, gone so fast Stiles couldn't be sure it had been real. "I meant from before," he explains. "He was my favorite uncle, you know. I adored him. He was the family's trouble-maker, always up to something, but harmless. It was always, 'what has Peter done now?' And it would be that he'd gone and bought a houseboat he didn't know how to drive, or that he'd disappeared for three months in Chile, not that he'd gone on a murder spree.

"He was the one that let us stay up late and snuck us extra cake. He was the one we could call if we'd been out drinking when we shouldn't have been. He was pretty much everything you'd want in an Uncle."

Derek drops down to sit on the bed, his slightly fond expression disappearing and smoothing over until he looks like he's been carved from marble. "I didn't want to leave him, after, I didn't want to go to New York, I just—" he breaks off. "He looked so helpless, in that hospital, and I didn't understand why he wasn't healing. Laura said it was a trick of the brain, that the part that told his body to heal just wasn't working right anymore. She said he wasn't ever going to get any better, and she was so desperate to leave, and I couldn't tell her why we had to stay. I couldn't explain it was my fault he was hurt. So we left him."

"Derek—" Stiles starts, stepping forward.

"I'm not telling you this to get your sympathy, or to try and save him now. I just want you to understand—that man you know as Peter? That's not him. He's not my uncle. He's barely even like him. Laura was right, when she said he wasn't ever getting better. My uncle died with the rest of them, he died with Emily. So if it comes to a choice between what's left of him and you, I choose you. It's not like I haven't already killed him once. Second time has got to be easier, right?"

"Okay, but all that means is that we've already tried it your way," Stiles reminds him. "You killed him. He came back. Been there, done that. But it's like you said, he's not your uncle anymore, he's not the person you knew. He's a new person, and you're no longer the one that knows him best."

Derek frowns at him. "What are you talking about?"

"No offense, but if I was going to take down Peter Hale, you wouldn't be the one I'd call," Stiles explains, picking his phone back up. "I'd call Lydia."

"Lydia?" Derek frowns. "No, Stiles, we can't drag her into this. He's dangerous, and he's hurt her so much already."

Stiles ignores him. It's not that Derek isn't right, but Lydia's a lot stronger than he knows, and sheltering her from things has never been all that productive in the past. Anyway, if he's going to pull this off, he knows he needs her.

Lydia picks up on the second ring, and Stiles doesn't give Derek time to change his mind. "I need help with Peter," he says. "He's gone rogue again, and he took out Gerard last night."
"Oh, Stiles, I thought you'd never ask. Do you want him dead, maimed, or just under our control?"
Lydia asks, with all the emotion of someone wanting to know if he wanted his chicken old fashioned or extra crispy.

"I'd rather not kill Derek's only relative if I can help it," Stiles says. "At least, not over killing Gerard. I mean, who didn't want to kill Gerard?"

"Hmm," Lydia hums. "I can think of a few other reasons to kill him, but fine, we'll try it your way. I'll need three things: an ounce of mountain ash, a medical-grade syringe, and Jennifer Arden's laptop."

He should probably be a bit more concerned about the syringe, but it's the last one that stumps him.

"Who the hell is Jennifer Arden?" Stiles asks.

"Peter's nurse at the Long Term Care Facility," Lydia says. "Stiles, you should know this."

"I knew her as that crazy nurse that tried to kill me," Stiles says. "Forgive me if we were never formally introduced."

"Just get me the laptop," Lydia says. "It's in the evidence lock up at the station. She didn't have any family to release her items to, so it's still filed under the Kate Argent murder spree case."

"How do you know all this?" Stiles asks in astonishment. It's not that he hasn't been through the case files, because he has printed copies in a lock box hidden beneath a floor board in Scott's attic—his dad would find it, if he put it in his own—but he certainly couldn't recite off-hand everything that was still held in evidence.

"I've been investigating Peter Hale for months, did you think I'd have nothing to show for it?" she asks coolly. "You want to know what I've learned about Peter Hale? I know that he played Oliver Twist when he was in the fourth grade, apparently to great acclaim, and that he named his first dog 'Dali' after the Surrealist artist. He received a 2346 on his SATs, but turned down every Ivy League offer that he received. Instead he went to Berkeley to stay close to his pack, and received a BA in Psychology with a minor in Computer Science. The Hales were old money, and Peter and his sister both had trust funds large enough to last the next three generations, so he didn't need to work, but he was employed by nearly every major business in Beacon Hills as a cyber security consultant right up until the fire."

Stiles pauses for a moment, just basking in the wonder that is Lydia. "You astound me, Lydia," he tells her honestly.

"You're not the only one that knows how to do research," Lydia replies primly. "Though I admit, I never would have found out about Emily on my own. There's no record of their marriage, or really, of her existence after her abduction at all."

"There wasn't a paper trail, they had to keep her hidden. So don't beat yourself up, there was nothing to find," Stiles explains. "Okay. We'll get what you need. Let's plan to meet up at Derek's lair in an hour."

"See you then," Lydia says simply, and ends the call.

"I think she's even scarier than you are," Derek says, watching with wide eyes as Stiles hangs up the phone. "I didn't even know half of that, and I've known him all my life."

"Oh, she's terrifying," Stiles agrees. "In sixth grade this girl that transferred mid-year tried to bully
Lydia because she didn't know any better. Like, she just kind of poked Lydia in the chest once and told her to stay out of her way, so Lydia decided to destroy her. She somehow arranged to have the girl's parents send her to military school, and no one ever saw her again."

Derek looks contemplative. "And she's on our side now?"

"Down, boy," Stiles says. "No using Lydia's powers to get ill-gotten gains. She's strictly working defense." He grins suddenly. "You can use me for the rest."

"Why do you always seem to think I'm planning world domination?" Derek asks.

"Maybe because you pretty much meet all the other basic requirements for a super villain," Stiles says. "Lives in an underground lair? Check. Has a pack of obedient foot-soldiers? Check—but please don't tell Erica I said that. Scowl practiced to perfection? Check, though you lose points for not also having the manic laugh. Also, you always think Scott is your archenemy, and he's a total goody-goody. So. Check."

"I'm going to try not to take that personally," Derek says dryly.

"Don't worry about it," Stiles reassures him. "Scott wants you to take him and Isaac back anyway, so I guess that'll throw a wrench in your super villain status."

"I haven't actually said yes to that yet," Derek reminds him.

"Look, I know Scott isn't your favorite person at the moment, but he's trying. I think he'd do better with us than off on his own. I mean—can you imagine it, a pack with just Scott and Isaac?" he asks, frowning in concern. "Really, you owe it to Beacon Hills to let them come back."

"He used me, Stiles," Derek says. "He played me, and betrayed me, and then used me like I was nothing. I know you've never minded when he does the same to you, but I—"

"Woah, hey, wow, slow down," Stiles interrupts. "You're giving Scott way too much credit here. He screwed up, yeah, but he had no idea what he was really doing. He doesn't think things through, okay, but trust me, he did not come up with that plan on his own."

Derek glares at him. "You think it was Deaton."

"Mountain ash ground up into little pills, dramatic ending in which you're forced to bite Gerard? I know it was Deaton, because none of the rest of us even knew mountain ash could be used that way, and there's no way Scott could have pulled that solution out of thin air," Stiles sighs. "That said, Scott's not actually stupid, and I'm sure he played more than a small part. But he's not manipulative enough to have realized what he was really doing to you. He was being manipulated, too."

"Even if I can forgive him," Derek says after a moment, "I don't trust him."

"I don't either, not…not like I used to, anyway," Stiles says, though it still hurts to admit it. He loves Scott, and if the last days have taught him anything, it's that he doesn't want to be without him. But love and trust aren't always a package deal. "But I want to."

"If he comes back, it's on my terms," Derek decides.

"Of course," Stiles agrees easily. "Within reason, though. I reserve the right to object."

"Stiles—" Derek growls.
"What? It's my job now, right? To advise you?" he asks.

"God help us all," Derek mutters. "But yes."

"Then it's your terms, so long as you agree to listen to me," Stiles says. "Because making him an outcast within the pack isn't going to help any of us. We've still got to work together."

"It might make me feel better," Derek protests lamely.

Stiles ignores him, focusing back at the more immediate problem. He pulls out his phone to call Scott. "Stiles!" Scott greets brightly. "How did the boombox work?"

"Nevermind that, I need a favor," Stiles says. "Consider it initiation into the Hale pack."

"Should I be worried?" Scott asks warily.

"I need you to get a medical-grade syringe from your mom," he says. "Preferably without her knowing about, I'd rather not risk making her an accessory."

"I'm definitely worried," Scott decides. "Can't I just get one from Deaton?"

Stiles pauses, before frowning. "Are veterinary and hospital medical-grade syringes the same thing?" he asks.

"Uh, pretty sure medical-grade is medical-grade, Stiles," Scott says.

"Okay, fine, whatever, just make sure it has a werewolf-strength needle and is ready to go," Stiles says. "Not sure what we're using it for, but I am pretty sure the participant is not going to be a volunteer."

"What? Hold on a sec—" Scott starts.

"And while you're at it, can you see if you can squeeze some more mountain ash out of Deaton? He told me I'm at my quota. Like I wasted it on escaping from hostage situations and bunyips, or something." Stiles glances over at Derek at this, expecting a commiserative eyebrow raise or something. Derek just stares back blankly, but Stiles knows he's trying not roll his eyes.

"But, Stiles—" Scott tries to break in.

"I need you to get it to Derek's lair within the next hour, we'll be there just as soon as we pick something up from the station," he explains quickly, before hanging up over Scott's protests. He looks back to Derek. "We'd better leave. Who's driving?"

"I have the Camaro," Derek says, taking out the keys and lithely getting to his feet.

"Why do you say that like you think that decides everything?" Stiles demands, tripping after him. "I'll have you know, my Jeep has soul."

"The Camaro goes 0 to 60 in less than five seconds," Derek says, as they head down the stairs and towards the door.

"Yeah, good choice if you want my dad to arrest to you," Stiles says. "We're headed to a police station, Derek, remember? And everyone still sort of thinks you're a criminal. I'm pretty sure my dad left standing orders for the deputies to keep an eye out for the Derek-mobile. We're taking the Jeep."

"Is this what it's going to be like now?" Derek asks. "You're just going to boss me around?"
"Why are you acting like this is new?" Stiles asks.

Derek sighs, but when they make it to the street, he climbs into the passenger side of the Jeep. Stiles glances at him briefly before he pulls out, but their banter has reached a sort of standstill and even he doesn't know what to say for once.

On the one hand, there's still so much they need to talk about. On the other, it's kind of hard to sit down and honestly discuss your feelings when you're in the middle of trying to reign in a psychopath. Stiles likes to think of himself as a good multitasker, but even he has limits. Still, it's probably best to start this conversation when Derek can't easily escape. It's just too bad the Jeep didn't come equipped with child locks.

"So..." Stiles says. "This probably isn't the time—"

"Then let's wait," Derek says, his face looking pinched.

"Right. Right, sure," Stiles says. "Except that I'm not great with waiting, actually. So, this thing between us, are we like, gonna be open about it? Or are you thinking we're going to be secret? Are we supposed to be sneaking around? Oh my god, am I your dirty little secret? I am, aren't I? You utter bastard."

"Stiles—" Derek interrupts, his eyes widening. "I don't want us to be a secret, okay? I mean, it's probably not a great plan to go around announcing to the entire town that I'm planning to date a sixteen year old, but I'm not saying we should hide it. Anyway, I already told Erica, so there's no way the whole pack doesn't already know."

"Oh," Stiles says. "Okay. Alright. Good. So we're on the same page. And did you say date? Are we actually gonna date?"

"You don't want to date?" Derek asks, scowling at the dashboard like it's the one responsible for offending him. "I thought—"

"No, I mean, I just kind of pictured us out slaying zombies together or something, maybe picking up some Chinese take-out after we burn the bodies," he explains. "But, dating. I've never actually, you know, done that. Ever."

"I'm not going to take you out to slay zombies for our first date," Derek says, looking entirely bewildered. "Stiles, zombies aren't even a thing."

"We can argue over the nomenclature if you want, but zombies are absolutely a thing," Stiles insists. "They're in the bestiary under 'the undead'."

"I really hope you're kidding," Derek says.

"Look, zombies are not the point!" Stiles insists, as he pulls into a visitor parking slot at the station. "You seriously want to date me? I mean, I've been mentally calling you my boyfriend since you kissed me last night, but I guess I figured we'd just sort of do things like always, except now with bonus sexin'."

"We are not having sex," Derek says tightly.

"What, like ever?" Stiles asks, aghast, as Derek slips out of the car. "Hey, wait, we need to talk about this! What if I promise to try the date thing?!"

Derek just raises an eyebrow at him as he stumbles to catch up. "Let's just take it slow, okay?" he
"It's been slow," Stiles insists, stepping closer. "It's been glacial."

"You were attacked by a bunyip and then I kidnapped you, Stiles. Then I was attacked by a bunyip, and you had to deal with your dad finding everything out and being grounded. To top it all off, I got kidnapped too, and you managed to save me with a magical bond," he says, raising an eyebrow. "That's just this month so far."

"I think the couple of days I was grounded should actually count for two months," Stiles says lamely. "At least."

"Stiles—" Derek sighs.

"I know you think I'm not ready," he says, reaching up to rest his hands on Derek's neck, "that I'm too young, or something, but I don't want that to hold us back."

"I'm not holding back," Derek promises. He leans down and captures Stiles lips gently, and Stiles feels himself open up to him, his blood tingling as it starts to light beneath his skin. He draws out a low moan as Derek finally pulls away just far enough to let Stiles breathe. Derek exhales against him, letting his forehead drop to rest against Stiles'. "I promise I'm not holding back, okay? But I always rush in, and I always screw things up. This time I'm going to do it right."

"I can do slow," Stiles decides, letting himself rest against Derek, like balanced counter-weights, mostly because he seems to have lost the sensation in his knees. He's become a cliché: god help him, but Scott's insane babblings about the wonders of the glorious Allison Argent are starting to make a lot more sense. He could write entire sonnets about Derek's kisses, and Stiles despises sonnets and the people who write them. "Seriously, keep kissing me like that, and I will be the best at slow."

Derek snorts, then steps away abruptly. "Whaa—" Stiles protests, grasping after him.

"Shhh," Derek hisses, before turning to look up with a wide, vacant smile. Stiles glances behind him to realize the act is for the benefit of a couple walking past them to their car. They looks suspicious of the two of them lurking in front of the police station, and Derek is obviously trying to reassure them. Mostly, he just sends them scurrying by even faster, because Derek's smile, while gorgeous, is rather appropriately reminiscent of a wolf, and doesn’t actually provide much in the way of reassurance.

Stiles waits until the couple gets in their car to turn back to Derek with a frown. "I can't believe you shushed me," he snaps, before tugging at Derek's arm to drag him around the back of the station. It's probably best they don't risk anymore witnesses. Stiles knows his dad would let him get away with murder, but if one of the deputies catches him breaking in, he'll probably end up spending the night in jail. He knows that Derek will.

Stiles flips through the numerous keys on his key ring, and then quickly opens the back door, showing no obvious regard for the bright red lettering announcing 'Authorized Entrance Only.'

The empty hallway inside is a mixed blessing. It makes snooping super convenient, but it's hard not to recall why the station is so short staffed. "This way," he whispers, letting his hand slide down Derek's arm to grip his hand. He tugs him along behind him as he carefully makes his way to the evidence room.

The Beacon Hills Sheriff's department had an off-site evidence lock-up for their archived cases, but the town was small enough that they could keep the evidence for all cases that took place within the better part of this decade right on site. Jennifer Arden's murder will be archived, attributed...
posthumously to Kate Argent, but is still recent enough Stiles is sure anything from her case will still be stored here.

He pulls out a different key when they reach the evidence lock-up, and opens the door. Derek just watches him in disbelief. "Do you have copies of all the keys to this place?" he demands.

"Of course," Stiles shrugs, as he pushes the door open and tugs Derek inside. "I also have copies of the keys for pretty much all of Beacon Hills High, and Deaton's offices." He runs his eyes across the evidence shelves, quickly figuring out the sorting system and skipping over two rows. "Deaton's wasn't easy, let me tell you, but it helps that most of his security measures are meant for those a little bit more hirsute than myself."

"I don't know why this sort of thing continues to surprise me," Derek sighs, following after Stiles resignedly as he scans the evidence boxes. "I don't think you can call me a super villain anymore, when you're obviously the evil mastermind."

"I prefer to think of myself as morally neutral," Stiles explains, as he spots the box for the Arden murder. He grins and pulls it down. "Gotcha."

He sets the box on the ground and kneels beside it. Derek drops down beside him, flipping one hand to bring out his claws. "Let me."

Stiles reaches out quickly to grab his wrist. "Wait," he says. "I'm not sure what Lydia has planned, but I'm pretty sure it's going to involve putting this all back how we found it."

Derek narrows his eyes as he sits back to let Stiles work. "You say you don't know what she's planning, but you've got an idea."

Stiles carefully lifts the edge of the taped seal to peel it back without breaking it. "I don't think Jennifer Arden was smart enough or involved enough to have anything of real importance on her laptop."

Derek scrubs a hand through his hair. "Lydia's planning to plant something on it."

"That'd be my guess," Stiles agrees, pulling back the lid. Sure enough, the laptop is there right on top just like Lydia said it would be. Stiles ignores the sealed bags with the bloodied nurse's uniform and lifts it out. "Kate got blamed for this murder because she was convenient, but my dad was never satisfied with it."

"If she's planning to get him on a murder rap, it won't work," Derek says with a frown. "Prison won't hold Peter."

"Lydia knows what Peter is capable of," Stiles says, lifting the box back to the shelf before grabbing up the laptop. "She'll have thought of that, too. Come on, let's get back to your lair."

"I really wish you'd stop calling it that," Derek sighs, but follows him dutifully.

Stiles carefully pulls open the door, and there's his dad, leaning up against the doorway with crossed arms and a frown. "Stiles," he greets warily. "Fancy seeing you here, in this restricted area. Want to tell me what you think you're doing?"

Stiles slides the laptop behind his back, before blinking innocently at his dad. "I didn't want you to find out this way, but you caught me," he says. "Derek's my boyfriend now. I dragged him in here so we could make out."
"That's what you choose as a cover story?" Derek whispers in horror, his eyes going wide and panicked.

John narrows his eyes, obviously not buying it. "What's that behind your back, then?"

"Plausible deniability, dad," Stiles says instantly.

"I don't think that means what you think it means," John tells him, as he straightens up. "I thought you weren't going to lie to me anymore."

"I'm lying at least seventy-five percent less than last week, that's got to count for something!" Stiles cries. "Just let us sneak out the back, and we can pretend this never happened. We can start fresh with the no lying thing again on Monday."

"Neither of you are going anywhere until I know what you're up to," John snaps, deliberately staying in the doorway.

Stiles narrows his eyes. "Should you even be here?" he asks. "Are you supposed to be walking this much on your foot? What did the doctor say? I want their contact information."

"Don't change the subject," John says, pointing at Stiles.

"I'm honestly concerned!" Stiles protests, glancing down at his father's braced foot with a frown. "Don't you have rules about injured officers not being allowed in the field? I'd really hate to have to report you."

"I'm not in the field," his dad says patiently. "I'm in a restricted area of the station, where my delinquent teenage son has apparently just been breaking into the records room with his ex-con boyfriend. You want to worry about something, worry about my blood pressure."

"Don't be so dramatic," Stiles says. "Derek's never actually been convicted of anything."

"Stiles, so help me—" John starts.

"Fine," Stiles breaks in quickly. "It's nothing, okay? I'm pretty sure we're just going to blackmail Peter Hale. I haven't actually been briefed on the specifics, but Lydia is a certified genius, and I have faith in her plans." Stiles pauses. "But in all honesty, we could also be plotting his murder. I'm not quite sure."

John drops his head, lifting a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. Stiles frowns in concern. "Are you okay?" he asks anxiously.

"I'm fine. Just sort of wishing I'd let you get away with that plausible deniability excuse," he says tiredly. "Alright. So, blackmail. Wonderful. Where are we headed?"

"Dad, no—" Stiles protests.

"We're either in this together or not at all," John says firmly.

It's so similar to what Stiles had told Derek the night before that he can't really think of an argument against it. His dad is pack, too. Maybe it's time he started believing his own rhetoric.

"Derek's lair," Stiles tells him resignedly. "I mean, it's not a lair. It's Derek's—" He glances at Derek apologetically. "Seriously, what else can I call it but a lair? I want to be supportive, but I've got nothing."
"It's my...headquarters," Derek says lamely.

"You're right. You would totally fail as a super-villain," Stiles decides, leaning up against Derek's side to give him a playful nudge. He glances back at his dad, pleased with himself, and then the smile drops when he sees his father's expression. He's taking in his closeness to Derek with his detective mind, and obviously coming to conclusions Stiles would be happy to avoid. "What?"

"Please tell me you weren't actually serious about making out in there," John says, looking wane.


"Oh, Jesus," his dad says, reaching up with a hand to cover his eyes, pressing down hard enough he's likely trying to banish whatever images Stiles' babble has managed to create. "Stop talking." He reluctantly lowers his hand, and then points them. "Are you or are you not actually together now, as in more than just in the same pack?"

"We've just agreed to date," Stiles admits. "Apparently in some mythical, zombie-free venue, but whatever, I'm willing to give it a shot."

"Zombies aren't—" John starts, trailing off with a grimace. "Are they?"

"No," Derek reassures him.

"I'm telling you, they're real. I looked them up after Chris Argent's little crack about how to kill them," Stiles insists. "I thought he wasn't serious, either, but then I remembered he doesn't have a sense of humor. They're in the bestiary."

"I really hope you don't mean bestiality—" John begins, looking a little pale.

"Oh my god, no!" Stiles shouts. "It's a book! It's a book about supernatural creatures! What is wrong with you people? Learn to differentiate!"


Stiles flashes him a dubious look, but lets it go. On the list of things he never wants to talk to his father about, bestiality ranks right near the top. "Let's just get to the lai—headquarters."

"Good idea," the Sheriff nods. "I'm driving."

So that's how Stiles and Derek end up in the back of his father's patrol car, despite Stiles' ignored protests that his father shouldn't be driving with a foot brace (apparently his doctor said it was 'fine,' but Stiles is planning to track this doctor down later to verify). Despite his entirely valid concerns around his father's injury, the car ride would be another great opportunity to pin Derek down and make him do the talking thing if his father wasn't sitting right there—criminal proof locks are even better than child locks.

"So. Dating," his dad says, and Stiles goes pale. It's then that he remembers pretty much all he knows about interrogation he learned from his father, and maneuvering people somewhere they couldn't easily jump ship was step one. He'd been had.

"You said I'm allowed to date," Stiles reminds him quickly.

"Yes, I did," John responds. "But that's when you asked if you could date Lydia Martin."
"Are we back to this? Is this because he's a guy? Because that's sexist, or something," Stiles insists. "Anyway, I'm pretty sure Lydia is scarier than Derek, if we're being completely honest. So if you approve of Lydia, then you have to approve of Derek."

"I didn't say I didn't approve," John says. "I'm reserving judgment for now. I'm willing to put aside the fact that he's bitten most of your friends—"

"Okay, well, that's just out of context—" Stiles tries to interrupt, glancing at Derek sympathetically when the werewolf flinches like he's been struck.

"—and gotten you involved with who knows what, but only so long as we all start with a clean slate. You want to date, okay. But I want you home by nine on school nights. Ten on weekends."

"That's like prime crime-fighting time!" Stiles protests.

"And that's the other thing, no more crime fighting!" John insists. "You need to keep me in the loop with this stuff. I thought you were getting there, and then you do it again and try to handle Peter on your own."

"I think that's very reasonable, sir," Derek breaks in quickly, reaching out to put a gentle but restraining hand on Stiles arm before he can start flailing around in protest.

Stiles gapes at him. "Seriously? And after I backed you up on the whole, 'my creepy hide-out isn't a lair it's headquarters'?"

"Look, I'm not trying to be a hard-ass," John insists, before Derek can respond. "I don't think what I'm asking for is crazy, Stiles. You're sixteen years old."

"If you'll recall, I was like two weeks overdue. So really, I'm practically seventeen already," Stiles says.

"What, so you're not really sixteen, you're sixteen and three quarters?" John asks dryly, raising an eyebrow. "That's toddler logic. You're not helping your case."

"It's more like sixteen and seven eighths," Stiles says dejectedly. "But I concede your point."

"Stiles will be safe with me," Derek says quietly, voice level. "We look out for each other, and I'd die before I'd ever hurt him."

Stiles narrows his eyes. "You ever die on me and I'll kill you myself."

As much as Derek's easy declaration annoys him, his father, on the other hand, seems to find the sentiment reassuring. "That's what I needed to hear," he says, looking smug, and Stiles glares at him.

"Don't encourage him," Stiles insists. "He's already got a martyr complex."

He's luckily saved from more awkward conversation by their arrival at Derek's 'Headquarters.' Boyd and Erica are already standing out in front of the entrance. Boyd has a dark blue leather jacket on with work boots, and Erica is wearing a black leather mini-dress with her favorite pair of leopard print stilettos. Stiles pales as a thought occurred to him.

"I don't have to wear leather all the time now, do I?" he asks. "Seriously, black is not even my color. With this complexion, are you kidding me? People will think I'm a Goth. Not that there's anything wrong with Goth. It's just weird. And so not me."
"We don't have a dress code, Stiles," Derek assures him, and even though he looks exasperated, Stiles can tell he's amused.

"How did they even know we were coming?" John asks, as he pulls the key out of the ignition.

"I asked them to come when we started heading over," Derek explains.

"That some pack thing?" John asks, frowning a little. "Like, some kind of telepathy?"

"No," Derek says, drawing the word out lowly. "I texted them."

"Right," the Sheriff says, looking half-way between bewildered and embarrassed as he gets out of the car. He reaches back to open the door for Derek, and Stiles slides across to exit behind him, toting Arden's laptop.

Erica steps up to meet them, and jerks her head back towards the entrance. "Scooby and Scrappy Doo are already inside," she says. "You planning to tell us what this is all about?"

"Yes," Derek says, and then continues inside without explaining further. His father limps after him with a shrug, but Boyd hangs back warily, and when Stiles starts to step forward Erica blocks his way.

She watches him contemplatively for a moment, tapping one high-heeled foot against the pavement. "So," she says. "You and Derek."

Stiles sighs. His relationship with Erica has gotten awkward enough without adding this to the mix. He knows she used to have a crush on him, but believed her that she was over it. Still, he was over Lydia. It didn't mean he enjoyed watching her with Jackson the idiot.

"Yeah, about that," he says cautiously, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "I know that you, well, I just hope that this doesn't make things awkward between us."

"I don't care about that," Erica says, poking him in the chest with one dangerously manicured nail. "Consider this a warning, Stilinski. Break his heart, and I'll destroy you."

"Wait!" Stiles says, his eyes widening in realization. "Are you giving me the Shovel Talk right now?"

"Oh, I won't need a shovel," she says, stepping closer, her lashes nearly touching as she narrows her eyes to slits. "Cause if you hurt him, there won't be enough of you left to bury."

"Okay, that's enough," Boyd says calmly, gently reaching out to snag Erica's hand and tug her a step back. He glances at Stiles. "What Erica is trying to say, is that Derek's been through a lot. But we know you know that. So we know you'd never hurt him. I'm sure you don't need us to threaten you into treating him right."

Stiles thinks of Derek laid out with those gunshots littering his entire his body, thinks of the power that had surged through him, that single-minded notion of fix fix fix. And so he'd fixed him.

But that's the easy part, and not what Boyd's talking about.

"I can't promise I won't screw up," Stiles says after a moment. "I probably will. But then, so will he. Best I can do is promise I'll never stop trying, and you know me, so you know I'm good for it. I don't give up."

"That's good enough for us," Boyd says, though Erica's eyes flash with real menace, and she makes
no such promises. Boyd tugs Erica after him then, and they disappear inside.

Stiles decides he's never going to stop trying with her, either. He's glad that Derek has someone else looking out for him, but he does wonder about her motives. She's been running so much on instinct ever since she's been turned, and he's not sure she even remembers how to recognize the emotions running through her.

He suspects they've all been running on instinct for a bit too long. Derek probably doesn't even have any idea how much his pack actually cares for him, considering that collectively, the Hale pack pretty much fails at communication. Forget his skills with mountain ash, they needed Stiles in their pack to get them to actually talk to one another. Well, mission accepted.

He rushes forward to catch up to everyone, taking the steps leading down to Hale Headquarters two at a time. Derek is being adorably over attentive to his father, and arranging his sad set of chairs in the middle of the room to give him a place to sit and rest his foot. There isn't much in the way of guest seating available, but they did have one large round patio table and matching chair set. Stiles had always suspected it was liberated from someone's back yard patio, but based on the high quality, he wonders now if Derek had retrieved the set from his own parent's cabin.

Still, it would probably look classier if he wasn't deliberately trying to use the furniture to cover up the leftover bloodstains.

Stiles stores the laptop under one arm and claps hands together to try and get everyone's attention. He grins at them when they all stop and look his way, running his eyes over Scott and Isaac where they stand awkwardly in the corner. "Thanks for coming everyone, welcome to Hale Headquarters!"

"I've always thought of it more as a lair," Isaac counters wryly.

"Careful, Isaac," Stiles warns. "I might actually start to like you." He steps closer and turns his attention to Scott. "Did you get it?"

Scott holds up a small brown paper bag. "Yes," he says. "But are you going to tell me what it's for?"

"I have my theories, but we better wait for Lydia to get briefed," Stiles explains, reaching out to snag the bag from Scott. He drops the laptop on the table before opening the bag to glance inside. There's a sealed syringe and a small packet of mountain ash. There isn't as much of it as he'd like, but it's still more than Lydia asked for.

Derek steps up beside him, hovering half-way menacingly, watching Scott. "So you came."

"Yeah, of course. Didn't Stiles tell you—" Scott starts.

"That you want to join my pack?" Derek asks calmly. "Yeah, he did. But it's not up to him, you've got to ask me."

"Derek," Stiles starts, trying to step between them, but Derek throws out an arm like he's a soccer mom and they've just made an abrupt stop. It's insulting, but effective, and Stiles rolls his eyes but stays where he is.

"This is between me and Scott," Derek says.

Stiles holds up his hands in surrender, moving to drop into an empty chair beside his father with a helpless shrug at Scott. Stiles knows he can't actually fix everything for everyone. As much as he'd like to control, well, *everything*, the thing about learning how to trust is that it only works if you also learn when to let go.
"I used to want you to be my second," Derek says, watching Scott calmly. "That's not gonna happen now. Boyd's my second. Erica, Jackson, and even Isaac, they've all earned a place in my pack. You still have to earn yours. Are you ready for that?"

"Yes," Scott answers, keeping his head up as he meets Derek's eyes. "I'm ready. This time it's for good."

"Good, then it's settled," Derek says simply, before glancing around at the others. "Any questions?"

"Ah yeah," Stiles breaks in, raising up his hand. "Just where do Lydia and I fall in this pack structure?"

"You're the emissary," Derek says patiently. "And I guess you could say that you and Lydia are our strategists."

"Naturally," Lydia agrees dryly, as she appears at the top of the steps, Jackson trailing in behind her. "Your pack could certainly benefit from some planners, but I feel obligated to remind you that I haven't actually agreed to enlist."

Stiles presses the palm of his hand to his heart. "Lydia, my beautiful strawberry goddess, will you please join Derek's pack with me?"

Derek turns to glare at him, either touchy about the fact that Stiles has apparently taken up recruitment for his pack or out of jealousy, he can't quite be sure.

"Don't look at me like that, sourwolf," Stiles tells him. "Trust me, we need her. I'll get down on my knees and beg if I have to."

Lydia tosses her hair behind her, watching Stiles with amusement. "You do always know just how to treat me, Stiles. Fine. I'm in."

"What?" Jackson snaps, coming to stand huffily between them. "I've been trying to get you to join for months."

"Yes, but you never asked nicely," Lydia says primly, before returning her attention to Stiles. "Did you get everything I asked for?"

Stiles nods towards the table. "Yep," he says. "Are you planning what we think you're planning?"

"That depends," she answers, as she pulls a small bottle of Evian water from her purse. "Do you think I plan to incapacitate Peter with mountain ash and then blackmail him into being on his best behavior?"

"Lydia, if you're thinking of setting him up for Jennifer Arden's murder, it's not going to work," Derek tells her, his voice almost gentle, if one was being generous and comparing it against his baseline. "He won't stay in prison."

"That's what this is about?" the Sheriff demands, sitting up straighter in the chair. "We're framing people for murder, now?"

"Dad, it's okay!" Stiles protests. "Peter actually did kill her. So it's not exactly framing? More like, re-framing?"

"You didn't tell me about that," John snaps.
"I can't be expected to remember everyone Peter's murdered," Stiles says.

"I don't like this," he says. "We should be locking him up."

"That's certainly an option," Lydia says. "Little would please me more." She glances over at him. "But I've been following Peter for weeks now, and he hasn't hurt anyone since he came back until Gerard. He is different, and he is an invaluable resource. As much as it pains me to admit it, it would be wasteful to get rid of him entirely."

"You really think you can get him under control?" the Sheriff asks dubiously.

"To a point." Lydia takes out the small bag of mountain ash and unseals the syringe. She pours the Evian into the bag of mountain ash before Stiles can protest at its destruction, and then lightly shakes the bag to mix it all together. She submerges the needle in the mountain ash serum and then pulls back the plunger to fill it. "Peter has wants. We can use that."

She depresses the plunger slightly, flicking the needle to make sure the liquid has reached the tip. "And if he fails to take my ultimatum, well, this will make him easy to subdue."

Scott frowns over at her, stepping forward in concern. "Uh, shouldn't you be using saline?" he asks hesitantly.

Lydia looks unconcerned. "The water's purified, and he's a werewolf. If a little Evian ends up taking him out, well, lesson learned, and we'll have a brand new weapon in the fight against the supernatural."

Scott frowns at her, but Stiles is with Lydia on this. Werewolves are fairly indestructible as it is, and Peter's pretty much as resilient as they come.

"Okay then," Stiles says, getting to his feet and clapping Scott supportively on the shoulder. "So now we just need to find Peter."

"Oh, right," Lydia hums. "Scott, would you be a dear and help Jackson go and get him? He's in my trunk. Best we retrieve him before he comes to."

"How did you—?" Scott starts, his eyes widening.

"I borrowed one of Allison's tasers," Lydia explains, as she pulls it from her pocket to set it on the table. "They have five times the strength of police issue. Peter went down in about three seconds flat." She glances up at Stiles and rolls her eyes. "Don't look at me like that, it's not like I went after him alone. I took Jackson with me. I knew I wouldn't be able to lift him into the trunk on my own."

Derek turns to glare at Jackson, and the beta just shrugs helplessly in response. "You try saying no to Lydia," he says. "Anyway, it worked. Peter was out like a light. I just zip-tied him and tossed him in the trunk."

"Fine," Derek says. "Just go get him. But we will be talking about this."

Jackson and Scott are only gone a minute before they come back, dragging Peter between them. His hands are tied in front of him and there is a thick black pillowcase over his head with pretty, delicate white flowers embroidered diagonally across the front. They drop him down dismissively onto one of the patio chairs.

Lydia steps forward with the syringe, jamming it into the side of Peter's neck and pressing it in. By some weird pack communication, Boyd, Erica, Jackson, Isaac and Scott all move off in different
directions, creating a loose circle barrier around the others, and covering all of the exits. That's when Derek finally reaches forward and pulls the hood off Peter's head.

Peter blinks at them blearily for a moment, shaking his head to clear it before turning to examine Lydia, who has moved to sit calmly across from him.

"Ms. Martin," he greets hoarsely. "I honestly don't know whether to be furious or impressed."

"You can be both if you want, just don't even think of touching her," Derek snarls lowly, watching his uncle carefully. Peter just glances at him dismissively, before assessing his surroundings, complete with blood-stained floors.

"So this is home, Derek?" he asks. "You continue to have appalling taste. I do have an interior designer I could refer you to. Very reasonable rates."

"Enough," John snaps, leaning forward on the table to watch Peter.

"Well, well," Peter says, a small smirk appearing as he gets his bearings back. "You're certainly not the Stilinski I was expecting."

"Oh, I'm here too," Stiles tells him, and he drops down into the seat beside Peter. Derek steps closer, leaning against the side of his chair, halfway between them.

"Consider this an intervention," Stiles continues, his tone falsely gentle, as he leans forward. "You keep killing people, Peter, and it really needs to stop."

Peter glances at Stiles sideways. "This is about Gerard? You all but gave me your blessing."

John glares over at Stiles. "Stiles—"

"What? I was being realistic!" Stiles cries, looking up at his dad with wide eyes. "Like we didn't all know this was going to happen. If I'd told Peter not to do it, he would have just killed Gerard while he was still at the station."

"You told him to wait until he was no longer in my custody," John says, looking somewhere between horrified and resigned. "Jesus, Stiles, why didn't you warn me—"

"We'd have to have killed Peter to stop it," Stiles says. "And I'm sorry, but if it's a toss up between Gerard and Peter, I'm going with Peter." He turns to Peter. "Don't look so smug. Putting you up against a psychotic child-napping mass-murderer is pretty much the only time you're coming out on top."

"There is no time he comes out on top, Stiles," his dad snaps, glaring at Peter. "I've got a mind to end this right now."

"You think you can take me out?" Peter asks, watching him with smirking eyes.

"I may still be in training for all this supernatural crap," John says tightly, "but one little call to Chris Argent, and—"

Peter's eyes flash vivid blue, and he slams his tied hands down on the table. "The Argents," he snarls, before glancing at Stiles. "You haven't told him, have you?"

Stiles opens his mouth to protest, but his dad beats him to the punch. "Told me what?" he demands. Peter's eyes blink back to their usual shade, and he slinks back into a slouch. "You do realize that
Chris Argent has been less than solicitous of your precious son?"

John turns to Stiles. "What's he talking about?"

"It's not like I made it a secret that we aren't exactly besties," Stiles protests. "He's creepy. And a liar. I've told you all this!"

"Did you also tell him that he was upstairs sipping on a coffee while his father dragged you down to his basement to torture along with Erica and Boyd?" Peter asks casually.

"What." John snaps, his back stiffening in surprise.

"What about all the times he threatened you, or slammed you into walls?" Peter asks, keeping his eyes attentively on Stiles, though his words are obviously for John.

"Okay, that was once!" Stiles protests, his eyes flashing to his father in concern before returning to Peter. "How do you even know about that?"

"I may have told him a few things when he offered to take me shopping," Erica admits, slinking briefly out of the shadows of her perimeter walk. "I can't remember everything I said after the second pair of shoes."

"Suffice it to say, Sheriff," Peter says dryly, "your new best friend is more of a danger to these kids than I ever was. You might want to think about that the next time you plan to team up."

His father crosses his arms, his eyes narrowing, preparing a rebuttal, but Lydia lifts a hand up in his direction. It's a subtle call for silence, and it's a tribute to Lydia's power that his father closes his mouth and takes her cue. Not that Stiles suspects this conversation is going to be forgotten, but his dad knows when to let someone else take the lead.

"Chris Argent is not the issue here," Lydia says, pulling her hand back to clasp it with her other delicately on top of the table. "You are."

Peter pulls his eyes from the Sheriff, looking irritated at having his conversation circumvented. Lydia pays his irritation no attention.

"I assume you've heard the expression: the truth is stranger than fiction?" she asks.

"I find it to be a fundamentally flawed sentiment, but I do understand the concept, yes," Peter says dismissively.

"It's a concept that your wife had mastered beautifully, I actually mostly got this idea from her," she says. Lydia reaches down and pulls two small flash drives from her purse. She sets one atop the laptop, and spins the other in her hand. "See, your history, the truth of it, it's not something anyone would believe. So I wrote some fiction to take its place."

She slides the flash drive in her hands across the surface of the table, before tapping it lightly. "Here for instance, we have a digital trail for a story about a patient pretending to be in a coma, leading a naïve nurse astray and plotting murders while he gets his strength back, before escaping the hospital and killing her."

"You're playing a very dangerous game, little girl," Peter warns her, his voice level.

"Yes, and I'm very good at it," Lydia agrees.
Peter leans forward, his bound hands awkwardly poised in his lap. "Why is it that you're not a
werewolf?"

"Apparently I'm immune to pompous assholes," she answers sweetly.

"My working theory is she developed the immunity after years of exposure to Jackson," Stiles offers.

"No, there's something else," Peter insists quietly.

Lydia leans forward, meeting Peter's eyes. "What I am isn't important. What's important is that I own
you, Peter Hale. I brought you back, and I can destroy you."

"You can't possibly think a cell will hold me," he says dismissively.

Lydia puts the empty syringe on the table beside the flash drive. "Do you know what was in this?"

Peter glares at it, but doesn't answer, so Lydia continues. "I can't use mountain ash like Stiles can. It's
useless in my hands. Except it's toxic, to you, without anything being done to it at all, isn't it? It was
in that syringe. That's why you're feeling weak."

Peter pales slightly, but says nothing. Lydia smiles tightly. "Deaton thinks that when applied to a
perfectly healthy werewolf, it should wear off in as little as a week. Assuming you don't receive
another dose." She watches him carefully. "You think you're too strong to be caged, but what if you
weren't?"

"And how do you plan to keep dosing me from prison?" Peter demands.

"The picture I've drawn of your plans is obviously the work of a psychopath. You wouldn't be fit to
stand trial," she says, before pausing for a moment. She watches Peter's eyes as the realization starts
to sink in. "You'd end up in Eichen House. The director there is a good friend of Deaton's, actually,
and well versed in the supernatural. You'd spend the rest of your life on a debilitating combination of
mountain ash and anti-psychotics."

"You didn't really get who you were messing with, when you chose Lydia to bring yourself back,
did you?" Stiles asks cheekily.

Peter settles back in the chair. "On the contrary, I knew exactly what I was doing." He keeps his
eyes on Lydia. "Alright, Ms. Martin, you've shown me your big stick. Where's the carrot?" He leans
forward again. "I am assuming there is a better offer? I can't imagine you would have wasted time
with the dramatics otherwise. You're too precise."

"There is another story we could tell," Lydia allows casually, watching Peter with her wide, doll-like
eyes. She looks so innocent, with her lipstick perfectly applied in a shade lighter than her usual red.
Stiles is pretty sure it's intentional. Lydia doesn't leave much to chance. "Jennifer Arden was
obviously unstable. I can get any number of witness accounts to testify to that. It wouldn't be so very
hard to paint her as the villain instead of you. She could easily have kept a patient drugged into a
comatose state, and lied about the state of his recovery, all while on the payroll of Gerard and Kate
Argent. The Argents would certainly have had a stake in wanting to keep you out of the picture, and
Kate has already been conveniently blamed for her death, this would just clarify the motive; Jennifer
failed to keep you under wraps, and they got rid of her because she was of no further use."

Lydia tosses her hair back. "I realize both stories are a bit outlandish, but people will believe either
one of them as long as it's told right. Really, anything would make more sense than the truth, and the
second story is even more believable, though it holds less of the truth. It would certainly work in
your favor. You would be the innocent victim. You could have your name back. Your money. Your
"And in return?" Peter asks wryly.

"You follow the laws, you do not kill, you pay your taxes," Stiles answers, using an imitation of Peter's wry tone, repeating his own litany on what it might mean to be good. "No more living under the radar, doing whatever the hell you want."

Peter ignores Stiles, holding Lydia's gaze. "You know, I always thought it would be Stiles that would eventually outsmart me," he says. "I didn't expect it to be you."

"You're not as clever as you think you are," Lydia tells him.

"Hmm, is that so?" he asks. "Because it sounds to me like you're offering my life back to me, and all I have to do to get it is not kill anyone else. Considering everyone I want dead is dead now, it will cost me nothing to agree to your terms. What exactly is in it for you?"

"I get to destroy you, when you fail to keep up your end of the deal," Lydia promises.

"Yes, well, you could certainly try," Peter says politely, before glancing towards Derek. "Before I agree to anything, I'd like a moment alone with my nephew."

"Not gonna happen," Stiles says instantly.

"You can stay," Peter tells him, keeping his eyes on Derek. "But no one else."

"Stiles," John starts to warn, obviously anxious about leaving them alone. He doesn't look too pleased with Peter's get out of jail free card, either. Leave it to Peter to lay everything out like they're the ones doing a favor for him.

"Please," Derek says softly, before Stiles can start spinning up excuses for his father. "We just need a few minutes."

John pauses, watching Derek for a moment before nodding sharply. "We'll be right outside," he promises, as the wolves start to trail out. The procession makes it all the way up the steps, and the doors slam behind them. The wolves might still be able to hear them if they strain enough, but Stiles doubts they will, not when it's their alpha asking for privacy.

Lydia is the last to follow, gracefully standing to leave after just a moment too long. Peter tilts his head to her, but she spins on her heel without acknowledging it, and follows the others out. Derek moves to sit in the seat she vacated, but can't quite bring himself to meet Peter's eyes himself.

"I think it's time we addressed the elephant in the room, don't you think?" Peter asks casually. "Tell me, Derek, would you like to hear how your family died?"

"Okay, that's enough of this," Stiles snaps, lunging forward to grab for the taser Lydia had left behind. Derek reaches out and catches his wrist, gently pulling him back.

"Yes," Derek answers calmly.

Stiles lets Derek hold him back, but can't keep quiet. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," he says. He looks back at Peter. "Tell me."

Peter looks more reserved than Stiles is used to seeing him. Where he had obviously relished the opportunity to tell his father about the failings of Chris Argent, Stiles can't see the same glee in him.
now at having to bring this all back to light. Instead, Peter looks almost solemn, but above all, resolved.

Stiles isn't quite sure who Peter is doing this for: Derek, or himself.

"It was the first time Emily and I had come out of hiding in weeks," he begins. "Only the family knew we were coming, so we thought it would be safe enough. We didn't realize the Argents were still watching us. Emily was so happy that night. She—" he broke off, though he did not look away. "They hit us first with the noise generators, set to a frequency of about 50 kilohertz. It's an old trick of theirs, one of their favorites, because the stronger we are, the harder we fall, and no one human hears a thing."

Derek reaches out and grips the edge of the table, holding on as though he'll fall if he doesn't. Stiles can see the edges of his fingernails nearly flickering, the change held back by a hairsbreadth.

"Of course, there were humans with us, though I never knew if the Argents knew or cared to know it. Emily tried to help when we all fell. Your cousins, Jace and Danielle, they tried to help, too, but they were both too small to hold us up. There wasn't any time for them to do anything, anyway, because the hunters only waited a moment before they lit everything up. All the doors and windows set fire at the same time, so there would be no way out of the house." Peter's voice doesn't waver, and his eyes give nothing away. Stiles can almost believe he's just telling a story on behalf of someone else, rather than recounting a personal tragedy.

It brings to mind what Derek told him: *That's not him. He's not my uncle.*

Maybe it really isn't.

But he's not sure Derek himself truly believes it. He's watching his uncle now with an expression like stone, but unlike Peter, Derek's eyes give him away. The edge of the table he holds has started to crease, molding itself to fit beneath his grip.

Peter glances at bent cast iron momentarily, a half-grin flickering so quickly across his lips that Stiles can't be sure he saw it at all. "I suppose that would have been the end of it," he continues, "except that our house wasn't exactly an ordinary home." He glances towards Stiles then, as this part of the narration is obviously for his benefit. Derek already knows this, and Peter is toying with him by dragging it out. "We had tunnels beneath it, and a secret exit. There was no way the Argents could have known about it, so we all ran down to the lower level. We would have been out and safely in the forest in moments."

Peter glances down at his tied hands as something like real regret finally takes hold of him, fighting its way up into his eyes until he has no choice but to look away to hide it. "Except that door was burning, too. That was the moment when they all realized they were going to die." He looks up then, his eyes latching onto Derek's, burning cold blue. "It was the moment I realized we'd been betrayed."

"Peter," Stiles warns.

"Emily hid that door with magic," Peter explains, leaning forward on his elbows, his bound hands clasped together like he's holding them that way by choice. "The only way to see it was if you already knew it was there." He keeps his eyes on Derek, ignoring Stiles warning glare. "I've always wondered, how did she get you to show her? Did she ask you to sneak her in?"

"Mom came home early one day," Derek says, his voice rough and strained. His fingertips are white where they grip the table, but it's the only sign that gives him away. "I snuck her out."
"Ah, of course," Peter says, sitting back, seemingly relaxed. The regret bleeds out of his eyes, leaving them empty once more. "I'll take Lydia's deal. I'll toe the line, and I won't kill except in defense of myself or of this pack. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Stiles says. He wouldn't have trusted a blanket promise to never kill again from Peter anyway.

"Then I suppose we're done here," he says, twisting his hands to cut the zip-tie with a clawed finger, just to show them he always could. Stiles will have to let Lydia know that next time they'll need to up the mountain ash dose. Peter looks up at Derek as the ties fall from his wrists. "I do hope you don't expect me to forgive you."

"No more than you should expect forgiveness from me," Derek counters quietly.

"Fair enough," Peter says, flashing a sly grin. "Stiles is good for you. It's been a long time since I've heard you stand up for yourself. For a moment there, you almost sounded like a Hale."

Peter turns to leave and then stops dead. Stiles' eyes flicker up and he frowns, about to speak when Peter steps backwards abruptly, almost crashing into him as he jumps to his feet. Derek reaches out and snags his arm, tugging Stiles back behind him, and that's when he sees her.

Allison is standing a few feet away, her bow and arrow aimed right at Peter.

"Allison, what—" Stiles starts, his eyes flicking towards the entrance. Any plans to call for help falling by the wayside as he realizes how thorough Allison has been. She must have come through the abandoned tunnels, and then locked the large, werewolf strength deadbolts that Derek had installed on the inside of the doors to keep the rest of the pack on the other side.

They can still come through the tunnels the same way she had, but the nearest access point is over a mile away.

They'll never make it in time.

Allison doesn't say anything, her fierce eyes focused on Peter to the exclusion of everything else. It's only the space of a heartbeat, and then she's letting her arrow fly.

Stiles throws up a hand, but there's no catch, no fission of friction that comes with reaching out to touch mountain ash. The arrow stays on course, embedding itself right into Peter's chest, notched tightly between his ribs.

Peter glances down at it, half starting to reach up before his legs give out, and all at once he starts sliding towards the floor. Derek pushes forward, catching him under the arms to gently lower him down, and Stiles moves in front of them, glaring as the light shifts and Allison steps forward into it.

"It's a wolfsbane arrow, not mountain ash," she says. "I've seen what you can do. I'm not stupid, Stiles."

"There are worse things to be," he tells her tightly, before dropping quickly down beside Derek to intercept him as he reaches for the arrow. "Poison, Derek."

Derek looks up at him, his eyes wide and glassy, and for a moment Stiles isn't sure he's gotten through to him, but then he nods and leans back on his heels. Stiles shoves forward into his place, closing his hands around the edge of the arrow, trying to stop the blood. Conscious even as he does that this will only hold the poison in.
"Take it out," Peter chokes out, reaching weakly for the arrow. Derek catches his hand, pulling it back down, waiting for Stiles to make a decision. Stiles might not be anything like a medic, he might be near ready to pass out just from watching someone bleed out in front of him, but Derek can't handle wolfsbane without infecting himself. Stiles doesn't need to be quite as careful. Which means this is on him.

Stiles glances back up at Allison, his eyes narrowing. "Give me one of your arrows."

"So you can heal him?" she asks. "Why would I?"

Derek starts to get to his feet, and Stiles reaches out and wraps his free hand in his jacket, tugging him back down. His grip isn't strong enough to stop him, but it still manages to stop him.

He can see Derek is barely holding himself back—he'd already been holding off a change, having to listen in detail to the deaths of his family. No matter his feelings on Peter, no matter how accepting he's been of the fact that Peter might need to be stopped, to go from that to watching him shot down right in front of him….

Stiles mutters a curse, angry beyond words at the pointlessness of all of this. "Say you don't then," he snaps, glaring up at Allison. "Say we let Peter die. No great loss, right? I know I'd probably sleep better at night."

"Charming," Peter gasps out, his head tilting back against the pavement with a pained wince.

"But what happens next?" Stiles demands. "Derek goes after you for killing his uncle? Chris goes after him for hurting you? Or maybe one of the rest of us gets caught in the crossfire, and everything starts all over again. You're like the Hatfields and the McCoys, don't you get it? There's nothing left to be fighting over! Everyone that started this war is dead!"

"He killed my grandfather!" Allison shouts. "There was no reason for it, he was paying already, he was—"

"He deserved it!" Stiles shouts.

"If that's true, then so does he," Allison snarls, pointing her bow at Peter. "He's as much responsible for all of this as my grandfather. He's the one that wouldn't let things end. So I'm ending it, Stiles. I'm ending it now!"

Stiles glances back at Derek. His eyes have bled red, but his control is commendable. Stiles isn't sure if it's because part of him agrees with Allison, or if he just has enough control to know going after her will only make the situation worse. He can't see Derek really hurting Allison, not over this, no matter how much it might hurt to lose this last broken piece of his family.

But what of Allison? What of the rest of them? They aren't any better than Peter, if they allow this. They'd be no better than Gerard. It's not self-defense, it's assassination.

"No," he says, before glancing back up. "No, you're going to give me another of your wolfsbane arrows, and I'm going to end this my way."

"You're not this virtuous, Stiles," Allison says, glancing at him. "You had no problems with Peter killing my grandfather. Don't I deserve the same consideration? You say it's over, but it's not, not while he lives. Do you really trust him? Do you trust him to not hurt anyone else?"

"And what about you?" he asks softly.
She looks startled. "What about me?"

"How is anyone supposed to trust you, after this?" he asks. "Someone has to be the one to stop first, Allison. You think you're so much better than Peter, then prove it."

"Don't bother reasoning, Stiles," Peter mutters, his sweat-slicked hair sticking to his forehead as he reaches out again to grab at the arrow in his chest. "She's a human child, Derek, just take a damn arrow from her."

Peter rips out the arrow with the last of his strength, before Stiles can turn back to stop him. He cries out, falling back against the concrete floor with a pained gasp, and the blood starts to spread further across his shirt, painting the light blue cotton red.

Allison watches Peter as he begins to bleed out, seemingly impassive. She tilts her head, the light bouncing off her eyes as though they're made of glass.

"Have you ever killed someone?" Stiles asks. "I mean really. Like this. Have you ever done this?"

"I do what's necessary," Allison says. "I hunt those that hunt us."

"There is no necessity here!" he shouts. "That's my whole point!"

"He's right." Chris Argent steps up onto the platform from the tunnel entrance, weaponless and weary. "Give Stiles one of the arrows, Allison."

She doesn't even glance at her father. "No."

"This isn't what we do," Chris says, as he cautiously comes up beside her. "Not anymore."

"He started this," Allison snarls, spinning to look at her father. "He deserves to die."

"He didn't start it, my father did," Chris says gently, reaching behind her to tug a wolfsbane arrow from her quiver. He tosses it to Stiles, never breaking his daughter's gaze. "And now it's done."

Stiles reaches out and catches it, bending the arrowhead against the ground until the shaft snaps off and he can see the powdered wolfsbane held inside.

"How can you—" Allison snaps, breaking his concentration. He glances up as she steps angrily towards her father.

"You don't really want to do this," Chris tells her calmly. "I know you don't."

"I want him dead," she insists.

"Then you would have put that arrow in his heart," he says easily. "You don't miss. Not without meaning to. You're not a killer, Allison. And you don't ever have to be. I'm asking…please, don't be like me."

Stiles tries to filter them out, glancing up to share a look with Derek. His eyes have lost their alpha shine, and he's anxiously watching Peter. "Stiles," he says quietly, a plea and an assurance all in one.

Stiles wastes no more time sprinkling the wolfsbane over Peter's wound. He may not like the man, but neither of them are going to enjoy what comes next.

"Dad," Allison says brokenly, glancing between him and the fallen Peter. "I have to, I—"
Chris springs forward, grabbing Allison into his arms before he has to watch her fall apart. "You don't," he insists. "You don't have to do anything."

"If they're quite done with their little melodrama," Peter gasps out, turning his head to the side to watch Stiles. "There's a lighter in my pocket."

"Right," Stiles says, reaching into Peter's coat pocket to pull it out. He wants to hesitate, but doesn't, instead sparking a flame and holding it close enough that it lights up the wolfsbane powder.

Peter lets out a pained howl, before pushing himself up and over, gasping half on his knees as the wound blackens and burns, before finally beginning to heal. It begins to close in on itself, stitching his skin back together. The wound doesn't close entirely, probably a result of the mountain ash still in his system fighting against him, but it heals enough that it's no longer a fatal wound.

Derek reaches out hesitantly, half holding Peter up, helping him settle back on his knees. Stiles has been keeping one eye on Peter and the other on Allison, so he doesn't realize how close the pack is to knocking the doors in until there's a thundering crash and they come flying nearly straight off.

The pack comes in ready to fight, then all pull to a startled stop as they take in the scene; Stiles and Peter on their knees, Derek half crouched in front of them, ready to protect them from an obviously distraught Allison, who's standing half collapsed in her father's arms. It's not exactly the standoff they were probably expecting.

"What the hell is going on here?" John asks, as he pushes in front of the kids and marches down the stairs. It's admirably authoritative, considering how hampered he is by the brace on his foot. He looks at Stiles first, before turning to glare at Chris.

But it's Peter that answers for them. "Just a misunderstanding," he says, his cultured, smooth voice apparently unaffected by his previous screaming. He sounds as though he's just woken well-rested from a nap. "No lasting harm done."

Peter stretches his back, looking entirely undisturbed by the events. The only sign that anything happened at all is the thick coating of blood on his otherwise pristine shirt, and the small, jagged tear that sits right in the center of it.

"Peter," Derek says awkwardly, half-reaching for his uncle, seemingly unsure if he should be comforting him or preparing to hold him back.

"It's quite alright, Derek," Peter says, rising to his feet. He pushes his sweat damp hair back out of his eyes, apparently indifferent to his near death experience. And why shouldn't he be? He's literally risen from the dead, Stiles can't image he's too worried about just another close call. "I've already agreed to the truce, haven't I? That would seemingly preclude any sort of revenge, and in any case, Stiles is quite right. Someone has to stop first. Might as well be me."

"You've agreed to a truce," Chris says dubiously, staying protectively in front of Allison.

"Yes," Lydia breaks in, stepping up to join them, though she remains on the far side of Peter, like bodies in an opposing orbit. "It might not be justice in the strictest sense, but I believe that Peter will hold to the bargain. And if he doesn't, we can draw straws to see who gets the enviable task of killing him for good."

"I really feel I ought to be offended," Peter says, as he reaches down to button up his coat. Once the bloody shirt is out of sight, he looks remarkably well put together. Stiles really does hate Peter, but as he crawls back to his own feet, looking inordinately disheveled, he can't help but envy his style.
"You can't really expect him to have any honor over anything," Allison snaps, suddenly trying to break free of her father's hold. Chris half lets her go, but keeps a hand on her bow arm. "He can't be trusted."

There's that word again: trust. Stiles wonders how many variations of the word there actually are, because it's such a strange, subjective concept. Allison has her own code of honor, certainly, and it's more rooted in her want to do the right thing than Peter's could ever be. But in this, Stiles trusts Peter more than her. Allison is a fanatic when it comes down to it, and fanatics can never be trusted entirely. Peter, for all his flirtations with evil and manipulation, straddles a line between what is good and what is not like the expert that he is. Stiles trusts him to be reasonable where it counts, not to buck the rules just out of spite when it will do him more harm than good.

Allison, if she believes something is right, will do it without considering the consequences.

Strange, to be able to trust the one with the invested self-interest rather than the one that really does just want to do good, but there it is. Because if someone is going to break this truce, it will be Allison. She just has to wait until Stiles and Derek and her father aren't around, and this time aim that little bit further to the left. It'll be easier for her the next time, she won't miss the heart again.

The only thing that might stop her is the same thing that might stop Stiles: the need to protect her father. It's not a card he wants to play, but what had Allison said? I do what's necessary.

"I trust him to do what's best for him," Stiles finally says. "I'm going to trust you the same way. You and your father were both there when Gerard tortured Boyd and Erica. My dad has your cooperation on file, so you were never charged as accessories. But that could change."

"Stiles," John says tightly. "What are you doing?"

"Mutually assured destruction," Stiles says wearily. "Peter steps out of line, we kill him. Allison kills him before he steps out of line, we arrest her and her father as accessories. Not exactly how I wanted to get us all peace, but whatever works."

"You really want to do that?" Chris asks sharply. "You want to hold us all over a barrel, watch us from all sides?"

"He's not wrong," John interrupts coldly, glancing over at Chris with new eyes. "He hasn't said anything that isn't true, has he? You were there?"

Chris holds his father's gaze somehow. Stiles dislikes the man immensely, but it's hard not to admire him. "Yes, I was there," he agrees. He doesn't even defend himself, or make excuses. He doesn't point out that he's also the one that let Boyd and Erica go. Stiles feels his admiration go up another notch.

"Then you can either try and make up for that on your own, or we can make you," John says simply. "It all depends on whether you're going to be part of this truce, or you're going to be the one that breaks it. It won't be hard for me to arrest you. I've got three witnesses that you were there when your father kidnapped these kids, and your family isn't really in the best standing at the moment. We indict you, it's gonna stick."

"We agree to the truce," Chris answers, no hesitation. Allison's grip tightens on her bow reflexively, but she doesn't disagree.

"Wonderful," Peter says, smoothing down his jacket. "Am I free to go, then?"

"Please do," Lydia answers dryly.
Peter glances at her speculatively, but says nothing. Getting shot down by one teenage girl was apparently enough for a single day, he's wise enough not to provoke another. He slips backwards into the shadows and then is gone through the tunnels. Sort of like an evil Batman.

Once he's gone, Scott steps forward towards Allison hesitantly. "Allison," he starts.

"Do you agree with this?" she asks, glancing at him sharply. "Are you just going to let Stiles threaten my father like that? Threaten me?"

"It's not like he can stop me," Stiles mutters, and earns himself a glare from his father.

Scott doesn't hear him, or pretends not to, because he doesn't take his eyes from Allison. "Do you really want revenge so badly that he has to?"

"Think of who you're protecting, Scott," she snaps. "This is the man that bit you!"

"Maybe he's not the one we're protecting," he explains. "If you'd killed him—if...could you really come back from that? Or would you just...would it get easier, would you do it again? Are you going to keep doing it? Is this really what you want? Because, I can't—"

Allison flushes, glancing away, eyes turning towards the floor. "I'm not a killer," she says. "I'm not my grandfather."

"Good," Stiles says. "So prove it." Scott turns to glare at him, but Stiles doesn't back down. "You need to pick a side. Because if you're against us, at least tell us now."

"I have nothing against the rest of you," Allison says, glancing reluctantly towards Derek. "None of you."

"Well, I have a little something against you," Erica breaks in, her eyes flashing dangerously, at odds with her forming grin. Erica, Boyd and Isaac had hung back before, waiting for a cue from Derek like good little wolf cubs, but Erica and Allison have never made for a great combination. Stiles supposes it was too much to hope for that she wouldn't push for a confrontation. "You're not welcome here."

Boyd shadows Erica's steps as she approaches the Argents, looking ready, if reluctant, to stop her if she gets out of control.

Chris steps into Erica's way before Boyd has cause to interfere, and Stiles honestly can't decide if it makes him brave or really, really stupid. In a fair fight Chris would have no trouble taking Erica down, he's far more skilled, but at the moment he's weaponless, and Erica is coiled up with all the restraint of a rabid dog.

"I never did apologize for what happened to you," Chris tells her, which is not what any of them really expected him to say. "But I am sorry."

The apology seems to knock the yellow glow right out of Erica's eyes, her change fading as she steps back and almost into Boyd, watching Chris warily. "If you were so sorry about it, maybe you should have stopped it a little sooner," she snaps.

"I know that I should have," Chris agrees, raising his hands half in surrender to calm her. "But I'll be honest, Gerard scared the hell out of me, too. It wasn't...easy, for me to go against him, and I'd failed at it before. I'm sorry for that, too."

And there's something Stiles' mind has conveniently managed to avoid thinking of until now, and
probably would have been just fine without acknowledging at all. Stiles has always understood Chris wanting to protect Gerard—he'd do anything for his father, too—but the idea that Chris might have wanted to stop him all along, but was too conditioned to go against him…it makes him remember that Chris had to actually grow up living with that psycho, not to mention a little sister that probably liked to pull the wings off butterflies and drown stray puppies in her spare time. All and all, it's making him feel a little more sympathetic than he really wants to be.

Erica seems to be in the same position, looking disgruntled even as she's backing down. "Yeah, well, don't let it happen again," she says, after a moment. "You couldn't stop your father, I'll accept that. But you'd better learn to stop her."

"Hey," Allison snaps, starting to move around her father. Chris turns and blocks her way.

"Leave it," he tells her. "Let it go. Just let it go, okay?"

Allison backs down reluctantly, but keeps a wary eye on Erica. "But, she—" she starts.

"Enough," Derek barks, stepping in front of Erica to look at Allison. He and Chris have had a sort of understanding for awhile now. Chris is by no means a perfect man, but he's never been a fanatic. He can always be made to see reason, and he follows all his own rules. He's not a wildcard.

Not like Allison.

Allison glances up, half-heartedly glaring at Derek, waiting for his decision. However he chooses to handle them, she knows the rest of the pack will follow.

"That was your last free pass," Derek tells her. "Hurt any of my pack again, and I won't be so forgiving."

"We won't," Chris says, moving further in front of Allison before she can reply. It's both a concession and an unspoken warning: they'll toe the line, but if that ever stops being the case, Derek will have to go through him to get to Allison.

Derek doesn't acknowledge Chris, this time. It isn't Chris's word that he needs. "Do you understand?" he asks again.

Allison glances up, watching him half in anger, and half in resignation. "I won't hurt your pack," she vows. "Not so long as your pack doesn't hurt anyone else."

"That's fair," Derek allows. "Now get the hell out of my sight."

Chris ushers Allison away quickly, disappearing not quite as mysteriously as Peter through the opposite end of the tunnel. Erica paces at the edge of the rail, glaring at their backs, with Boyd hovering protectively behind her. Scott just watches forlornly, caught in place like it's all he can do to keep from running after her.

His dad crosses his arms, looking worried and put upon. "Please tell me this hasn't been just a normal week for you all," he says. "I don't think I can take much more excitement."

"This is actually sort of a better week than normal," Stiles says, glancing back at them, grateful for the opening to break the tension. "Practically no one even died!"

"Um, what about all those hunters?" Scott asks, tearing his eyes away from the tunnel to look back at them. "And Gerard."
"No one we liked even died!" Stiles rephrases, grinning over at his father. "Trust me, this week counts as a win."

"I was afraid you might say that," John sighs, before steeling himself and glancing up at everyone. "Alright, go home now, all of you. I don't want to have to arrest you for loitering." He then gives another long-suffering sigh and glances towards Derek. "You got another place to stay yet, Hale?"

Stiles isn't sure if Derek being relegated back to 'Hale' is very encouraging, but at least his father seems to be displaying honest concern. Not that he thought his father would be offering up his couch again to Derek any time soon.

"Yes," Derek says, which is obviously a lie.

His father just snorts. "Right," he says. "Just be out by the end of the week. I'm going to be keeping an eye on this place. It's no place for a bunch of kids."

Hanging out at a somewhat inhospitable condemned subway car is still safer than how they spend most of their time, but it's probably not the best time to point that out. So Stiles says nothing as he gets back in his dad's patrol car to go home. His father drives them in silence, which makes Stiles fidgety. They're only about three blocks away from home when Stiles finally cracks.

"Are you alright?" he blurs out anxiously. "I mean, I know blackmail isn't really your thing."

"I'm really more concerned about the fact that it does seem to be your thing. You and that Martin girl were a little too good at this," he admits wryly. "You know what I used to do when I was in high school? I played sports, I got milkshakes with the guys, I went out on dates. The most excitement we ever had was a kegger."

Stiles chokes. "You went to keggers? You're admitting to me that you've been to keggers?"

"Stiles, you've been out battling the forces of darkness, I think I can admit to a kegger," he says wryly.

"Okay, let's not give them more credit than they deserve," Stiles says, rolling his eyes. "I'd hardly call Matt Daehler a 'force of darkness.'"

"And Peter?" he asks tightly. "What would you call him?"

"A Sassy Psychopath?" Stiles offers.

John huffs out a breath. "I'm not happy with what went down tonight."

"I know," Stiles says.

"If I could think of another way to handle this—" he breaks off with a muttered curse. "What's this about Deaton having a friend at Eichen? Maybe—"

"Yes, because Arkham Asylum worked out so well for the citizens of Gotham," Stiles breaks in. "I know it's not ideal, but Allison, even Peter, they were victims in this too. Well, sort of. The point is, they're useful, so we should use them."

"How have you gotten so mercenary?" John asks in irritation.

"Obviously you allowed me to play too many first-person shooters a child," Stiles says matter-of-factly.
"Stiles—" he starts.

"I'm kidding! Just...I need to know, are you going to be able to accept this?" Stiles asks, and it's about more than just the shoddily brokered peace: it's can you accept this life, can you accept Derek. Can you accept me.

"I'll always be there to back you up," John says, as he pulls into the driveway. He stops the car and looks at his son.

"Even for blackmail?" Stiles asks doubtfully.

"Even then, kiddo," he promises.

* * * * *

Stiles wakes up to the sound of muffled voices. He reaches out blindly for his phone and checks the display. It blinks back 8:07 AM, but he feels like he's only just collapsed into bed. It probably doesn't help that he'd spent most of the night reading through the rather impressive fictional history Lydia had created for Peter's time in long-term care. It was thorough, and at some point around 2:00 AM Stiles had started to believe it himself.

The voices continue and Stiles finally realizes that one is, of course, his father, makes sense, he lives here, but the other—

He falls out of bed, scrambling back to his feet to quickly throw off his clothes and then redress in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He flies out of his bedroom, pushing himself into his sneakers at the same time he starts stumbling down the stairs. His father is standing in the doorway, already in uniform, and Derek is standing on the other side, looking rather adorably bewildered.

"Are you about to ask for permission to court my son?" he hears his father ask. "Because if so, I feel it's relevant to point out that it's not actually the Eighteenth Century."

Derek looks so entirely caught off guard, Stiles almost feels some pity for him. Really though, it's like people think Stiles came up with his amazing sense of wit all on his own. Derek should really know better by now.

"What's going on?" he asks breathlessly, trying to stand up straight and not look like he's just crawled out of bed. Sort of hopeless, really.

"Derek here would like to 'take you out' for awhile," his dad says dryly. "Apparently on an errand of some of importance, and of a personal nature. I would be concerned but I suspect that Derek is smart enough he would come up with a better cover story if he planned something improper."

"I wouldn't take that bet," Stiles says. "He's kind of the worst liar ever." Derek glances at him in exasperation, and right, probably should not be giving his father even more reasons to mistrust his boyfriend. "I mean, he's getting better at it! I've been giving lessons."

"Of course you have," the Sheriff sighs. He glances at Stiles. "You want to go? Usually I can't get you out of bed before noon."

Stiles frowns over at Derek. He's not sure what's going on, but when it comes to spending time with Derek or not spending time with Derek, he's going to choose spending time with Derek. God. They aren't even actually dating yet and he's already pathetic. He wonders if Scott's hopeless romanticism is contagious.
"Yes," he says. "I mean sure. Of course."

His father watches him carefully then nods. "I'll be texting you the usual code phrases throughout the day. I'll expect the correct responses within fifteen minutes or I'm sending in the cavalry."

"Sir, yes, sir," Stiles says, saluting with a half-grin.

"Code phrases?" Derek asks cautiously.

John eyes him speculatively. "You never know who could be behind a text message. We have a code phrase system. Can't be too careful."

"The eagle lands at midnight, but only on one foot," Stiles intones deeply. "That one's mine."

"Right," Derek says slowly, glancing back at the Sheriff again, looking even more wary than before. "I promise to have him home before dark."

Before dark? His father's crack about Eighteenth Century Courting is starting to make a bit more sense. Stiles wonders if this is Derek's bizarre way of asking him out on a first date.

The Sheriff just makes a wary sound of assent. "Alright. But if anything dangerous, or even, you know, mildly worrying starts going on, I want you to call me. I don't care if it's werewolves or kanimas or the freakin' Easter Bunny. We all understand each other?"

"Of course," Derek says earnestly.

"Alright," Stiles says, dragging the word out slowly. "But I'm pretty sure we could handle the Easter Bunny on our own."

"Just get out of here before I change my mind," John says.

Stiles quickly slips past him, and Derek ushers him into the Camaro. "Where are we going?" he asks, when Derek slides into the driver's seat and starts driving.

Derek keeps eyes straight ahead, glaring the road in front of him into submission.

"Derek?" he tries again.

Derek sighs, glances at him, and then looks back towards the road.

"Please tell me you're not kidnapping me again," Stiles says finally, checking to see if the child locks are engaged. They are. But that's really probably for the best, since they're already going almost fifty miles per hour.

"What?" Derek asks, looking genuinely started at his statement. "How is this a kidnapping? You agreed to come."

"I'm just saying, it's setting a precedent," Stiles explains. "You can't just toss me into your car and drive me wherever you feel like it and then not even speak to me. What, I let you get away with it once, and you think you can do it whenever you want?"

Derek sighs. "Do you want me to stop and let you out?"

"We're in the middle of nowhere!" Stiles protests, glancing out to look at the forest lined roads. Wherever Derek is heading, it's somewhere out near the Preserve.
"There's just no pleasing you," Derek says wryly.

"Have you learned nothing from your previous escapades?" Stiles asks.

"I'm not kidnapping you," Derek says patiently. "I just…there's something I need to do, and I—I didn't want to go without you."

"Remember how you're supposed to use your words?" Stiles asks. "Why didn't you just say that before? But that still doesn't answer the question: what are we doing? Should I have brought weapons? Oh, god, did you find a zombie?! I can't be expected to fight zombies before 9:00 AM, it's not natural."

"And this is why I didn't tell you," he says with another sigh. "I can't…I'm trying. I will tell you. Just…"

"Right, okay, so you're obviously reverting to your non-verbal baseline, but that's okay, there's bound to be set-backs," Stiles says. "I have the opposite problem myself, as you well know. But if you don't want me to ask questions, I won't ask questions. I can be quiet."

"Really," Derek says dryly.

"Yes," Stiles says quickly. "Anyway, the fact that you won't tell me where we're going actually tells me a lot. It's not zombies, for one. You'd be embarrassed you were wrong about their existence, but you'd still admit to it and would have brought more back up. Also, you've been communicating a lot better lately, feelings and all, so it would have to be something…"

Stiles trails off as Derek pulls off on a small dirt road and comes to a stop. He feels his throat go dry.

"Something serious," he finishes dully, looking out the front window of the Camaro sadly. They're out somewhere behind the burnt out Hale mansion, but apparently still on the property line. The small grey structure is about the size of a small shed, but it looks more like something out of his history book on Ancient Rome.

There's four columns in the front, half obscuring a large, single door. And across the top side of the arched roof, it spells out 'Hale' in large, block letters. Derek gets out of the car slowly, and Stiles cautiously follows him out, watching the structure with unease.

He still remembers hearing about the tragedy of the Hale fire when he was a kid. Everyone used to talk about it, in hushed whispers, honestly sympathetic, at least, but still latched onto the gossip like leeches. Stiles had been one of them.

"Laura didn't believe in funerals," Derek explains, glancing towards the ground. "She thought they were pointless. She thought the idea of 'celebrating the life' was ridiculous. She always told me, can you imagine sitting there while everyone tells us how sorry they are? No one understands but us, so why should we suffer through that just to make them feel better?"
"Derek—" Stiles starts, trailing off when he realizes really, there's nothing he can say.

Derek glances up at him. "I agreed with her. I mean, I always agreed with her. I think I forgot how to say no to Laura, because she was all I had. So I've never actually been here before. I buried Laura in our backyard because I knew she wouldn't have wanted a funeral. Wasn't like there was anyone left to mourn her, anyway. Just me."

"So I never said goodbye to them," he continued. "I think I just didn't want to face it. It was just—I could never accept it, it was like some nightmare. Woke up one day, and almost everyone I loved was dead."

Derek drops down to sit in front of the Camaro, leaning back against it far enough that his eyes line up with the sky. "I never told Laura, you know, about Kate. I don't know if she could have forgiven it, and I couldn't lose her too…but then I did. Then there was nothing."

Stiles moves slowly to Derek's side, before dropping down beside him. It's his instinct to say something; to make another joke, to break the tension. He's been doing it for so long it almost hurts not to, but Derek's never spoken about this. Stiles knows that he hasn't—because if he never told Laura then there's been no one else for him to tell.

So Stiles says nothing, instead moving to sit close enough that their shoulders press together. "I'm sorry I dragged you out here," Derek says. "I just…I couldn't face them alone."

"You're not alone," Stiles promises. "Not anymore."

"But I was, for so long," he starts, his voice hitching though his expression remains unchanged. Derek's been hiding his pain for such a long time, it's hard to see even when he's looking for it. "I can still remember what it was like before, I can remember that morning I left like it was yesterday. Cora got to stay home, mom wrote her a note. But Laura and I weren't getting great grades, so she didn't think we could afford to miss. They were making pancakes. Emily was in the living room telling stories to the younger kids with Peter about magic. My mom and dad were sipping coffee at the counter."

Derek tears his eyes from the sky, finally looking back towards the tomb. "For so long I've hated myself, but I've hated them, too. I hated them for sending me away that morning, because I should have been there. I hated them for dying without me. I wished for years that I could have just died with them."

"I'm glad you didn't," Stiles says, and reaches out to gently thread their fingers together.

Derek keeps his eyes on the tomb. "So am I."

* * * * *

Scott liked to call it the Great Pack Divide of 2012.

Derek liked to call Scott an idiot.

As usual, Stiles falls somewhere in between. He likes to call Scott an idiot, too, but he can admit, if only to himself, that he likes to call it the Great Pack Divide. It's nice to take all the pain of the last year and file it away with a neat little moniker, to put it behind them for good without having to forget it entirely.

Don't get him wrong, it's not as though things got perfect after Gerard was gone and buried, or when Peter was legally declared un-dead to much public acclaim (and don't get him started on that, because
how they had unwittingly turned Peter into a media darling was a sore spot for them all, but it was no longer a divide. Things happened now, and they actually worked together. For the most part, anyway.

Derek and Scott still had opposing views on pretty much everything, and Stiles still had the unenviable job of mediating and bridging the gap, usually while agreeing with Derek's end goal if not necessarily his methods, and agreeing with Scott's methodology if not his idealistic expectations.

They're even on pretty good terms with the Argents, considering that Scott and Allison have resumed the off portion of their on and off relationship. Stiles figures they'll probably be back together by the time the school year starts, but can't help but feel the time apart might do them both some good. Scott needs to learn how to function in the world without Allison again, and Allison needs to learn not to kill people, so it's really for the best all around.

Derek is finally living somewhere with an actual return address, and it will never not be funny to watch him try to interact with his neighbors. He mostly just looks like a startled deer the entire time they try to make conversation, then says 'okay,' even when not appropriate, and quickly goes inside his apartment to hide.

As 'okay' is still technically a word and not a grunt, Stiles is graciously willing to consider this progress.

Erica and Boyd have finally spoken about what happened to them, Erica admittedly a little more than Boyd, and have started to move past it. Isaac, wonder of wonders, actually turns out to be halfway decent when he isn't trying to steal his best friend from him, and Stiles is annoyed to realize how much they actually have in common. If nothing else, Isaac makes the perfect straight man for Stiles' comedic routines.

Jackson and Lydia have grown even closer now that they're in the same pack, but it doesn't hurt him anymore to see it. He still thinks Lydia is way too good for Jackson, but Lydia is too good for everyone. Things are much easier with her on their side (and not just because it saves Stiles time in Latin translations to have her on hand).

His dad and Melissa have started working together to keep track of them all, which makes it impossible to play them against each other anymore, and is terribly inconvenient (he does try the 'no lying' thing, but who actually thought that would work long term?). His father does end up continuing to train with Chris Argent, which Stiles can't really blame him for. There aren't that many choices for actual adults in the know, and excluding the Hales (because Peter, and can you really call Derek an adult?), it's pretty much just Chris and Deaton. All in all, Stiles is pretty sure his dad gets the better end of the deal.

Stiles is the one that ends up stuck with Deaton, who mostly just makes him sit in a dark room staring at candle trying to get him to learn to control the bond. Or, he used to, anyway. One little incident with the wall catching on fire, and suddenly everyone thinks he needs constant supervision.

Stiles is pretty sure Deaton had been ready to write him off, until his father had sat the vet down to explain that he'd left a sixteen year old with ADHD and magical powers alone in a room with a lit candle and only the instructions to 'think of the flame,' so really Deaton was lucky the whole place didn't burn to the ground.

Suffice it to say, he's not ever going to be an expert at meditation, but he does at least stop lighting up like Tinker Bell every time he gets close to Derek. It's probably unnoticeable 90% of the time, but the energy tends to build up if he doesn't release it. Kissing actually turns out being a great outlet for the excess energy (and that's one conversation with Deaton that's never to be spoken of again). Beats
Stiles ends up getting that first date with Derek, too. The night is even mostly zombie-free (Derek insists that Peter doesn't count). Derek picks him up at the door and takes him to a restaurant so nice it doesn't even list the prices out, and all the dishes are unpronounceable (he's a little worried Derek might be getting dating advice from Peter). Still, Stiles manages to make it through the dinner without spilling anything, so counts it as a success. Really, though, it's after the date that gets his heart stuttering, when Derek kisses him goodnight at the door like they're an actual real-live couple.

Stiles takes out Derek for their second date, but due to budgetary concerns ends up dragging him to the arcade to challenge him to a virtual death match instead of dinner at a five-star restaurant, but still manages to get to second base in the back of the Camaro (his Jeep is too innocent for such things).

Somehow, it works for them, and Stiles can't help but hope now that their pack war is over, maybe they can all begin to find a little peace.

The End

Author's Note (the End notes character was too small to put this there! ) Well, that's it! THE END, everyone, FINALLY! Except I had a little trouble convincing my brain that it was over, so there are two cut/future scenes that I ended up writing even though I was supposed to be done. I kind of consider them optional further reading, they are below!

Scene 1: Scott is the worst at secrets

Derek's apartment is almost not big enough for everyone when they (they being Stiles, mostly) decide to have a pack dinner and order in Chinese, but they manage just barely. Stiles is in the oversized armchair half on Derek's lap, but his dad can't say a thing against him, because he snagged the open loveseat beside Melissa and is sitting closer than strictly necessary; and he knows his son well enough to know he'll call him out on it if he tries.

Jackson, Boyd, Isaac and Scott are all on the floor around the coffee table while Erica and Lydia take the only other chairs (Erica and Lydia's growing friendship remains a constant source of unease for them all).

Somehow the night had devolved once again to a pick-on-Stiles free for all. As usual, instigated by Jackson, after he claimed Stiles would have the lowest rating of all of them if they were ever made tributes to the Hunger Games. Stiles actually doesn't protest himself, just shrugging off Derek's annoyed huffing and the flexing of his fingers against Stiles' hip.

Stiles would be fine with a low rating: after all, it didn't mean he wouldn't still win.

"Look, my kid may have all the coordination of a newborn deer—" John starts.

"Hey!" Stiles protests half-heartedly. "I think I'm at least as graceful as a full-grown Marmot."

His father barely stops to pause. "—but he's got a memory like a steel trap and a talent for improvisation. I've taught him more than a few tricks of the trade, and he's probably improved on every single one. I can't say I don't regret teaching him some things. I was trying to raise a potential cop, and it didn't occur to me until too late that this was also basically the same skill set you'd teach a criminal."

"Like you didn't have fun with our seminars," John says. "You thought learning to get out of handcuffs was the coolest thing ever."

"Okay, yes," Stiles agrees. "But you did go a bit overboard sometimes."

John gives a faint grin. "Yeah, probably," he says. "Probably could have done without teaching you to escape from locked rooms and the trunk of my car."

"Oh, hey!" Scott cries, lighting up. Stiles can see what's about to happen, and he raises a hand, trying to signal him off, but he's too late. "Is that how you got away that time Derek threw you in his trunk?"

Everyone goes deadly silent, and his father's fork clatters forgotten to the floor as his eyes narrow dangerously. "What."

"Um..." Scott trails off, his own eyes widening impossibly as he slinks as far back as he can without resorting to a crabwalk. "Uh...not his trunk, his truck. His Chevy truck. He had it before the Camaro, you remember, it was blue...and...uh..."


The Sheriff pulls his gaze from Scott, to turn and lock it on Derek. Derek goes a little pale, because Alpha werewolf or not, he's smart enough to be more than a little wary of the elder Stilinski—almost as wary as he was of the younger, actually.

"Time to go," Stiles decides, jumping to his feet. Stiles grips Derek's hand and pulls him up from the chair, dragging him along behind him towards safety, sidestepping his dad's reflexive grab to pull him back.

"Stiles Stilinski! Hale!" his dad yells after them. "You get your asses back here!"

Stiles doesn't stop. His dad rarely gets angry, but his relationship with Derek has always been touch and go. Sometimes he's 'Derek' and 'welcome any time,' and then there will be one little incident that has Derek dragging Stiles home after curfew and a little bit blood-splattered, and suddenly he's 'Hale' again, and had 'better watch himself.' Really, it's all a bit ridiculous. They'd just worked their way back into his good graces again, earning Derek back the title of 'Derek,' and now they were going to have to start all over again.

He was going to kill Scott.

"I'm going to kill Scott," Derek tells him.

"I'll help you hide the body," he promises as they fall into his Jeep, wasting no time in taking off. "Hey, we can call this the Great Pack Divide of 2013!"

"Don't make me kill you, too," Derek scowls.

"You'd never kill me," Stiles says. "Because you could never get away with murder without my help."

"You're wrong," Derek says, and rushes to continue when Stiles' mouth falls open in outrage. "No, I mean, you're right, I wouldn't kill you, but that's not why I wouldn't kill you. I just wouldn't."
"Wait, we are speaking hypothetically, right? Because you're so serious all the sudden, I'm starting to worry you really want to kill Scott," Stiles says, glancing at Derek in concern, before looking quickly back at the road.

"No, that's not—Look, what I mean is: I love you, okay?" Derek blurts out.

Stiles almost goes off the road. "Jesus, are you trying to get us killed? You can't just...just say that, out of nowhere."

Derek glares at him. "Aren't you going to say back?"

"Aren't I—are you serious right now?" Stiles demands. "Everyone knows I love you! I haven't exactly been subtle. I sang you an unforgettable rendition of Love Will Keep Us Together on Karaoke night at the Jungle—"

"It wasn't Karaoke night, you just got up on a table—"

"I shouted out that you were my boyfriend in the middle of the school parking lot on Valentine's day, because everyone kept giving us those side-glances when you brought me chocolates like they didn't understand what you were doing with me—"

"Stiles—"

"I bought us matching 'I'm with Him' shirts, and that counts even though you refuse to wear yours—"

"Stiles, stop—just, I just want you to know I love you," Derek says. "Okay? Stop making it weird."

"Yeah, okay. I love you, too." Stiles glances over at him, breaking out in a grin. "You know, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Okay," Derek breathes. "Okay. Good."

"Yes, I'm glad we got that out of the way," Stiles says. "Because my dad's probably going to kill you."

Derek looks pale as he examines his phone. "He's texting me," he says worriedly.

Stiles glances at him. "And?"

"He says you're back to being grounded for life, and—"

"Yes?" he cries anxiously. "What?"

"And he's going to make me do 100 hours of community service," Derek says lamely. "He's volunteering me as a big brother at the local youth community."

"Oh my god, that's perfect! You'd be awesome with kids," Stiles cries, between bouts of uproarious laughter. "Just don't turn them all into baby werewolves."

"I take it back," Derek says. "I don't love you, I hate you. So much."

"It's still there," Stiles says, grinning.

"What is?" he asks.
Stiles smirks at him. "That tell you get, when you try to lie."

Derek just glares at him, but there's a little twitch in his jaw, his ever-present tell—just as sure as hearing a hitch in a heartbeat.

"You love me," Stiles decides, grinning widely. "No going back on it now. You're stuck with me."

"I plan to hold you to that," Derek tells him.

Scene 2: Stiles and Lydia take Brentwood

"Why is everyone looking at me like that?" Stiles asks, glancing behind them suspiciously as he students lining the hall paused to watch them go by.

"Well, you did arrive in style," Lydia tells him.

"I arrived in my beat up old Jeep," Stiles says. "These kids drive Range Rovers."

"Yes, well, I was more referring to the older, gorgeous, leather-wearing boyfriend riding shotgun just so he could see you off on your first day," she explains.

"Wait, are you saying they're staring because they think I'm cool? I'm cool here?" he asks, his face breaking out into a wide grin. "Is this like Bizarro-High School?"

"Assuming none of them can overhear you right now, then yes, they think you're cool," Lydia says, as she gently takes his arm to slow his pace. She smiles sweetly at their new peers. "Now calm down before you manage to ruin any good impression you've made. I would like to go, oh, at least a week before becoming an outcast again. Think you can manage it?"

Stiles snorts. "You should consider yourself lucky if I can keep up the pretense through fifth period."

Lydia sighs dramatically. "Well, I suppose we'll at least be outcasts together."

Stiles playfully bumps against her shoulder. "Always," he agrees. "Us against the world."

"And Jackson and Scott," she says wryly. "You do realize they're skulking around the building listening to every word we're saying?"

"Yeah, I spotted them before we came in," he says. "It's like they think we can't be trusted to stay out of trouble. Even Derek doesn't resort to spying anymore, not since his disastrous attempt at sending Erica to tail me."

His phone buzzes and he looks down to see a text message from Scott: *Its only cuz we care :)*

Stiles turns the phone so Lydia so she can see it. "Should we be worried they're getting along?"

Jackson and Scott had entered a strange and disturbing truce, uniting over their dislike of Stiles and Lydia leaving Beacon Hills High for Brentwood. They were weirdly convinced something was going to happen to them away from the pack. Stiles didn't exactly understand their reasoning, considering Beacon Hills High had the highest mortality rate of any school in the states. Really, there was nowhere to go but up.

"They *should* be worried we're going to call your father and report them as truants," Lydia says sharply, obviously more for their benefit than his.
Scott's reply is almost instant: *Chill were going omg*

Lydia tosses her hair back. "I will never understand boys."

"You do know I am still a guy, right?" he asks. "And not your gal pal?"

"Of course," she says, "you're my sassy gay best friend."

"I'm bisexual," he says. "And don't try to label me."

"Hmm," Lydia says, and because of course she'd still try, "You're my sassy, magical, bisexual best friend?"

Stiles phone buzzes again and he looks down to see another text from Scott: *Shes not your best frind im your best frend!!!!*

Stiles pulls to a stop. "Oh my god, Scott," he shouts, "would you please just go to school!?"

All the students around them stop dead, turning to gape in his direction.

"And there go our reputations," Lydia says, giving a cheery little finger wave to their gawking classmates. "Nicely done."

"Well, it was fun while it lasted," Stiles shrugs.

Works inspired by this one

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