These Accidents of Faith and Nature

by TheHatterTheory

Summary

Sometimes you have to tear everything down before you can start building something worthwhile. OR;
Stiles keeps showing up. Derek keeps letting him in. (And sometimes refuses to let him leave.)

Notes

This is a continuation of the first part of the series (The Lightning in Me). If you haven't read it this will only make partial sense.

Kind of Important Note: Someone asked for a coda once. Then things sort of went
downhill from there. Any chapter with codas will have it linked in the author notes. Totally non-essential reading, but fun. Maybe?

**Trigger Warnings:** There are mentions of self harm, but no descriptions or instances of the actual act itself, although there will be references to the resulting scars. There will be in depth scenes of ritual cutting and blood magic. There is medication abuse/addiction and self medicating, and there are a lot of references to nightmares. Later in the story there will be guns and body dumps, as well as body gore. There is also canon typical manipulation and violence. And this fic is generally a manic roller coaster located somewhere in the fourth circle of hell. So fluff and angst in spades.

**Other Assorted BS:** Slow burn. Seriously. Lots of OCs. So many OCs. Unreliable narration like wow. And there's a horse penis cult mentioned at the end. (But nobody joins.)
17: Winter

Chapter Notes

Coda Derek's POV

Disclaimer from here on out: I do not own the rights to Teen Wolf or it's characters. I'm messing around in (mostly) good fun.

Stiles was reading another college pamphlet he hadn't applied for when his phone dinged. It almost never dinged anymore, which was probably the only reason he decided it was a good idea to check it. God only knew what was happening now. Deaton had been vague at best about Beacon Hills becoming a beacon, and the cryptic fucker hadn't said any more than that. At least not to him, which wouldn't be saying much, considering Stiles hadn't seen him in a month.

The picture on his phone was crisp and clear, but for all the detail, he didn't actually know what he was looking at. He didn't know the number, either.

Who is this?

Derek.

Stiles felt like the 'dumbass' and the eye roll were implied. But Derek was texting him. Sure, it was a picture of...Something, but it was contact, and for some reason that-it eased something in his chest, something that had been tight and knotted and he was only just realizing it as it uncoiled.

What is it?

My new house.

'New' wasn't the word Stiles would use. It looked like it was covered in vines and about to be swallowed whole by the surrounding forest. But now that he knew it was a house, he actually had an idea of what to look for, and yeah, it looked sort of like a house. If he was being charitable. Very charitable. And, surprisingly, he sort of wanted to be, which was a 180 from how he'd been feeling towards the human (and werewolf) populace at large lately.

I thought no more squatting.

I'm not. I just closed on it today.

Congratulations.

There was no answer, and Stiles hoped the 'you lucky bastard' was also implied. He looked back at the pamphlet and tossed it at his trashcan with the last pamphlet that had arrived. They missed the mark and he leaned back into his chair, rubbed his eyes, and reached for his pill bottle.

"Dude, you need to stop," Scott hissed.
"Stop what?" Stiles asked, chewing on the tip of his pencil. He'd given up pens when one had exploded in his mouth and stained his lips and chin black for almost a week. The black running down his chin had been too similar to his dreams of black bile oozing down chins and splattering concrete floors. (And what did it say about his life that he'd seen it multiple times?)

"Every time you're even near the twins you start tugging at the vial. It's freaking everyone out."

Stiles knew he was fingering the vial around his neck that very second and forced his hand away. Dreams aside, he wasn't going to break it on Scott's face. He hadn't even realized he'd been doing it. The vial was a simple defense weapon, one he felt he'd earned the right to wear. Paranoia was, after all, nothing more than being in possession of all the facts.

"You should just stop wearing it. Lydia and Danny are getting pissed."

"Maybe if you would think objectively for a second and remember that they murdered people," Stiles muttered.

"They're different now," Scott snapped. It wasn't the first time they'd had the conversation, although Stiles was getting tired of trying to bring it up when he was stonewalled at every turn. Thank god none of them knew about the knife. Or the gun under his seat that his dad had procured for him. He couldn't begin to imagine the hell that would raise, even if Chris was aware of it. (Stiles had no idea why Allison didn't know, or if she did and just wasn't saying anything.)

"Whatever Scott. We've had enough problems with the lowly human getting kidnapped by werewolves that it stays on."

"Then stop acting like you're going to shove it down their throats," Scott demanded, expression grim. His face shifted, the lines sharpening and shadowing for a moment. Stiles imagined pouring the contents down Scott's throat, like worming a rabid dog, and shook his head to clear the image. When he blinked, Scott's face was simply Scott's angry face, which, admittedly, had gotten slightly more intimidating in the last few months. Especially when Stiles knew how easily it could change, could see the similarities between the hardened lines of a boy's face and an adult's sneer.

"Sure, whatever."

(That night he stared at the words on his computer screen rearranging themselves and looked at his almost empty pill bottle. Then he looked up ways to get his adrenaline going because the nightmares were only getting worse, and he didn't want to see Scott's face shifting into something sinister again.)
"I feel like this is a bad idea," Stiles muttered into his steering wheel.

"Come on Stiles, it's spring break," Scott reasoned. Stiles imagined bashing his head into the dashboard and spasmed violently when he felt his arm moving to follow through with the thought. Scott, damn him, was still smiling. Obviously the near seizure-like movement was in character for him. He questioned his old flailing, then decided to thank his past self for being such a fucking spazz.

"I'm not up for fun in the sun," Stiles added.

"Stop being such a spoilsport."

"Eight hours, Scott. Driving."

"I told you we could trade off. Everyone else is."

"No one drives her but me," Stiles snapped. He was on day three of no sleep and wished he could just flip a bitch and drive back to Beacon Hills. The prospect of spending five days with the pack filled him with a sense of dread. His subconscious hadn't given up the resentment and hatred, if anything the more he tried to bury it, the worse it got.

"I get it dude, chill out."

He wished his radio worked. That would make his life a little easier. But par for the course, it didn't. So he had to listen to Scott, who took the three minutes of silence as permission to bitch about how he wanted to be a good friend and a good ex, but Allison and Issac were so close, and it was obvious they wanted to bang because werewolf noses were amazing pieces of shit that let him smell everything.

At least, that's how it sounded to Stiles. There might have been something in there about a jealousy that Issac was looking to Allison for comfort and advice when it used to be Scott, but Stiles wasn't going to trigger Scott's potential sexual identity crisis when they still had two more hours to go before he could wrap himself up in the insanely expensive sheets Lydia's father was sure to have purchased for his beach house.

Hopefully the distance would do some good. Somehow he doubted it.

Beer and exhaustion weren't a good mix.

He was in the process of finding that out at least, because the woman, and she was a woman, easily in her mid twenties, over him was glaring at him like he was the problem.

He probably was, all things considered. It was his dick that was refusing to cooperate after all. Which was a problem he thought he'd have, well, never. He was a seventeen year old boy. He was supposed to get horny when a breeze blew the right way.

"I'm pretty sure I'm gay," He lied. He couldn't even remember her name to apologize. "Sorry."

Never one to be awarded for tact, he wasn't entirely surprised when she slapped him and hopped off of his lap, tugging her skirt down in the seat and looking for her panties. He was left alone in his jeep wondering when the fuck kissing and sex had turned into him going soft before he'd even blown his
He pulled the condom off and opened his door to drop it on the sidewalk. Not like the club was an especially classy establishment, it had allowed a huge group of teenagers in. He slammed it shut and worked on pulling his shorts up, lifting himself in the seat. Heat slipped down his side, chilled and immediately felt sticky.

Fuck.

He fired a quick text off to Scott saying he was heading out and he'd need to ride with Danny. They'd seen him leaving the club with the blonde, so they'd probably leave him to his 'deflowering'. After that he shut his phone off and headed for the beach house, eyes trained on the road. The beer and sleep deprivation were screwing with his depth perception, and he ignored his father's voice screaming in the back of his head, the one telling him to pull over or to call a cab.

When he got there in one piece, he thanked whatever god was listening that he hadn't got pulled over and walked inside, ignoring the overwhelming sense of 'don't touch it' that seemed to pour off of every surface in the house, including the furniture. Immediately heading for his room, he grabbed his duffel and locked himself in the bathroom. No reason to take stupid chances.

The bloodied shirt and shorts went into the sink and he turned the cold water on, flinching at the sound of it splashing in the wide marble basin. Examining his side in the mirror, he cursed again. Obviously his strenuous activities had opened the newer cuts there. Maybe that had triggered the 'what the fuck am I doing here', the flatline of his arousal and general sense of attraction. He couldn't even remember what she looked like anymore, just blonde hair and tan skin.

With an ease that he didn't want to examine, his boxers joined his clothes in the sink and he turned on the shower. His duffel had everything he needed to slowly wash the area down, to cover it with bandages. Ignoring his reflection in the mirror, he quickly dressed in new clothing. The process of soaking the gauze in alcohol before wrapping it in toilet paper and throwing it away -fucking werewolf noses-, getting his clothes into the washer, of putting away his supplies was automatic. The location of the washer was the only thing different from his pattern at home.

The exhaustion was wearing on him, grinding him down. Too tired to actually sleep, he walked through the house, felt like he was staining it with mud even though his feet were bare, clean. The bar was fully stocked. Not caring about Lydia's shaking finger or future reprimand, he poured himself a few inches of the top shelf whiskey her father kept stocked, ignoring that niggling feeling in the back of his head that sounded suspiciously like his dad. He was getting better at it with every passing day. Sometimes he was pretty sure he ignored his dad when they were together, although that was becoming more of a rarity too.

Despite being expensive mahogany or what the fuck ever, the door still stuck when he tried to open it. Some things ignored money and bent to nature, which satisfied him more than it should have. He yanked it, spilled a little whiskey over his fingers, and walked out onto the deck -'it's a veranda' Lydia's voice corrected- and slammed the door shut behind him. The lounge chairs looked inviting, and he sat back on them, aware of the bandage taped to his side folding and tugging at his skin.

The whiskey was smoother than Jack, and he drank it down like water before setting the glass on the table next to him. The sound of the water was a bass line, so blessedly different from the sound of splashing. He closed his eyes and focused on it, imagined the thudding of heartbeats.

For a minute, he let himself pretend everything was alright.
"Dude!" Scott said, voice piercing through the veil of sleep.

Stiles woke up flailing, reaching for the vial of wolfsbane he kept around his neck. Scott laughed. Fuck, Stiles didn't want to deal with Scott and his laughter. Not after the night before and it's particular scenario.

"What?"

"Dude, you came home and had a celebratory glass of whiskey instead of having a beer with us?" Scott demanded, smirk firmly in place.

"What are you even talking about?"

"You lost your virginity!" Scott crowed.Obviously it was an accomplishment. Like D-Day. Stiles didn't bother answering, just tried to force his body to relax. It was still dark, but he could feel as much as see the first beginnings of dawn.

Internally he calculated the times and realized he'd gotten four hours of sleep. Not bad. Maybe his dad was onto something with the whole whiskey thing. For the brief span of a moment he considered stealing the bottle from the bar. It probably wouldn't be missed.

"Dude!"

"Expand your vocabulary," Stiles muttered. He'd decided, the whiskey bottle was going home with him.

"You can't sleep out here."

"I have gotten laid, I have had a glass of whiskey. I will sleep where I damn well please."

"Most people are nicer after they've gotten laid."

"And most people are dicks when they're woken up from a deep sleep."

"Come on," Scott huffed, obviously exasperated as he grabbed Stiles' wrist. Stiles yanked it away, probably looked childish, except touching, touching wasn't going to fucking happen, and got up on his own. Scott was already walking inside.

Stiles followed. When they got to the room they were sharing, he opened the window, needing to hear the sound of the waves.

Ten minutes later Scott huffed again, got up, and closed it. Stiles strained to hear it, heard nothing but Scott's breathing growing deep and even.

He gave up an hour in and walked back outside. True dawn burned his eyes with colors. Stiles told himself it was better than the alternative.

Between his econ final and his chemistry final, Stiles listened to everyone at the lunch table.

With the captain of the lacrosse team and his trusted co captain, the school queen, the bad boy twins and the nicest guy in school sitting there, it was the most desirable table in the lunch room. And he was sitting at it.

Doing homework. His gpa was soaring. Lydia had good cause to be worried, but he didn't think she was checking. Her almost infallible sense of security was probably going to be her undoing. Stiles
was only slightly bitter about the emissary training she was receiving. Since it meant being emissary for a pack harboring two murderers and a sociopath, he wasn't sweating it too much anymore. He still hoped he beat her average, if only because it gave him a goal to work towards. If he managed senior year like he had the past few months, he was fairly certain he had it in the bag. (His sides looked like he'd played scratching post for a werewolf, but that was neither here nor there.)

"Dad said we could use it again this summer," Lydia's voice practically crowed. "He's trying to get in my good graces, mostly to annoy mom."

Oh. The beach house.

"All summer?"

"Most of it," Lydia reasoned. "No parents, no problems."

"But what about here? Deaton said things would start being drawn here." Scott's voice was concerned. Stiles wanted to mention the things sitting at the table and bit his cheek instead. Blood flooded his mouth and he sucked, hoping he was pulling off a thoughtful expression. No one was paying attention, he supposed, so it didn't matter.

"They can call," Lydia retorted. "Come on Scott, we've earned some time off. Especially with senior year coming up."

There were murmurs of agreement from everyone at the table. He made an affirmative noise, but there was no heart in it. Instead he focused on his homework.

When he got home that afternoon, he gave in to the urge itching just beneath his skin. Abusing the sheriff's password -'Stiles, this is in case anything weird happens again, don't make me regret this.'- he looked up the phone number that had texted him the house photos. He knew it was Derek's, but if Derek had learned anything, he wasn't using his real name.

Lo and behold, he wasn't. He was listed under Derek Valdyr. Stiles shrugged, figuring at least he'd changed his last name, and at least it didn't start with H. The phone number led to a billing address, and the bill address, which was a p.o. box, led, after some digging, to a property on the fringes of Northwest Portland.

When he tried to find it on googlemaps, he couldn't get a streetview. The only other view was of treetops. Stiles figured Derek had taken the hermit suggestion seriously.

Almost like Derek knew, a picture appeared in his texts the next day. There were no proper windows, or even doors, just holes, but there was a new facade on the house, and new plywood on the otherwise bare roof.
Seattle was a scapegoat. Not for the first time, Stiles thanked god his father wasn't a werewolf, because lying would be a lot more difficult.

He told him he needed to stretch his wings for a summer, to get some space, to see something beyond Beacon Hills. His father nodded and took the lie at face value. Stiles knew better than to take it for granted, even though his dad was accepting anything he said these days as gospel. The only other people who ranked higher on his list of trustworthiness were Deaton and Chris. Stiles didn't point out the irony.

Instead, he accepted the cash his dad gave him and promised to spend it wisely.

When he told Scott his plans, Scott nodded absently. "Do what you gotta do, man." Stiles was thankful for the reprieve, although he knew it was because Scott was still working through his Issac/Allison issue. It only bothered him a little, that Scott didn't talk about it, mostly because he was over hearing about Allison, and was only half jokingly considering killing her for the greater good.

He printed directions off and packed two duffel bags bearing the logo of the Beacon Hills Sheriff's Department. On the last day of school, he told Scott goodbye. The others were already in their cars or gone, having cut the last day.

He went home, emptied his bookbag, packed his supply kit and the bottle of dwindling whiskey into it. The duffel bags and bookbag were tossed into the floorboards of his jeep, his laptop case went into the front seat. His cellphone was on his bed, his charger in the wall. When he left his room, he didn't bother with an attempt at convincing himself it would be a good idea to take them.

He stopped by the sheriff's station and said goodbye to his dad, who was engrossed in a report. There was a nostalgic moment that he thought about the hug he gave his father in the root cellar, where it felt like they were spanning the lies and memories and excuses that had separated them. Apparently that was only good for so long. (It was his fault, he knew. There were still secrets and lies, and the more he wanted to say something, the more he pulled away.)

He muttered about routines being a bitch as he started the jeep. He told himself he wasn't bitter.

When the 'You're Leaving Beacon Hills' sign passed him by, he felt his chest slowly expand, as if he'd been holding his breath for the past several months. Whether he had been or not (and he wasn't actually sure) Stiles continued breathing a little more easily as he got father away. When he got onto I5, he felt like he was close to flying. Despite everything, he wasn't afraid of what was waiting.

What could be worse than what he left behind?

(He got pulled over by state patrol and it was only the BHSD logos that stopped the officer from
checking his bags. Stiles listened to him wax poetic about how he should know better than to speed, being a sheriff's son and all.)

"Surprise."

Derek looked at him with something possibly akin to surprise (or annoyance). Evidently he hadn't been expecting Stiles. Stiles hoped he wasn't about to be told to go home.

The house had a proper metal roof and even a front door. There were blue tarps over the windows and the front steps were nothing more than cinderblocks. Derek only looked mildly surprised to see him.

"Let me guess, I'm not welcome here?" He guessed shrewdly.

"If I didn't want you to know where I lived, you wouldn't have the new number," Derek muttered, but stepped to the side. Stiles walked in and was hit by the smell of plaster and sawdust. The floors were bare, and most of the walls were nothing but supporting studs with wiring hanging between them. The only light provided was by a couple of freestanding floodlights. Sawhorses and lumber, tools and a few crates littered the floor. He wondered where Cora was among the mess.

"Didn't know you were so handy."

"I'm not," Derek shrugged.

"But you're learning," He guessed. Derek shrugged again, as though it wasn't important. But Stiles knew better. Derek had a bank's worth of money, and he was very obviously doing everything himself. It had to mean something. Even he wasn't that obtuse. "It looks good man. A lot better than that first picture." He decided not to mention that it wouldn't have taken much.

Derek let him change in the bathroom (and there was running water, but no water heater yet). When he walked back out, he accepted the towel thrown at him and began drying his hair and asked the question that had been bothering him since he walked in.

"Where's Cora?"

"Montana. Back with her old pack," Derek told him, not looking up from where he was using a drill to screw two pieces of lumber together. Stiles decided it was easier to let that statement go than ask. It wouldn't be something Derek would be happy about, whatever else he did feel.

He decided to focus on the house instead. After a few pointed questions, Derek actually opened up a little bit about it. It was part of old farmland, family owned, and they had built a new house somewhere else on the property, he'd been sold the land and the house cheap. All of the repairs so far, barring the foundation work and digging the new well, had been done by Derek, thus the lack of progress. Apparently he had taken a few basic courses in general construction and was still going to a local tech school so he could wire the place without burning it down. (Stiles flinched when Derek said that, but by some therapeutic miracle he was unaware of, Derek didn't seem to notice what he'd said.) The lights and well were being powered by a generator until he could get the wiring done and get everything set up for gas.

While he mumbled about solar panels and a fireplace he started putting the tools up. Stiles was pretty sure that had been the longest conversation he'd ever had with Derek, and Derek had actually been doing most of the talking. He was torn between wanting to ask for the number of Derek's psychiatrist and not wanting to get kicked out.
"So what are we doing today?"

Derek rolled his eyes. "Going to grab some food, I can hear your stomach over the drill."

"Dude, I drove here, and I kept telling myself I would stop somewhere, but I kept trying to figure out how the hell to find this place," He flailed a little when he almost missed the step outside, unused to the uneven height. Derek rolled his eyes, again, and walked over to the truck in the driveway.

Stiles almost missed the camaro, remembered when Derek had picked Erica up from the high school and promptly shoved the memory back down into it's box. The truck suited the new Derek, even though Derek hadn't changed all that much, he guessed. The leather jacket was still present, but Derek wore it differently. He looked more at ease. Stiles wondered if it was the distance from Beacon Hills or because Derek had a purpose again, something that didn't have lives hinging on his decision making skills.

Over diner food and (surprisingly decent) diner coffee, Stiles listened to Derek lay out his plans. Apparently having an extra set of hands would be nice, although Derek felt the urge to redact it. "Except maybe you, you don't still trip over your own feet, do you? Tools are expensive and I don't want you destroying my house."

Any offense Stiles felt faded when Derek admitted, looking almost pleased, that they might even manage to get the house habitable before the permits had to be renewed. Stiles liked the idea of being useful and allowed himself to be excited by Derek's plans, even though he only understood about half of the things Derek was talking about.

By the time he'd finished his pie, the table was covered in napkins covered in diagrams. It was a lot of work, more than a little daunting because, hah, Derek's house. Stiles didn't want to be the reason a second one exploded. But he was ready to go back to the unfinished house and start helping, to actually do something. As they got into Derek's car, he tried remembering the last time he had been so excited. It had been when he'd heard about the dead body in the woods.

He was determined not to let that memory cast a pall over the moment, and abruptly asked Derek about table saws and cackled when Derek actually paled and started shaking his head.

It had been going well. Exceptionally well. And, Stiles told himself as he stared at the stain, he really should have known better than to take that for granted.

"Scraped," He hedged, already heading for the room that served as a bedroom. "Gonna go clean it. Be right back." The fewer things he said, the better. It was impossible to lie to a werewolf, and he'd learned the art of half truths, absolute truths, and omission within a week of Deucalion leaving. It had been the prudent thing, and it had served him well. Hopefully it would continue to do so.

There were no doors, but they respected eachother's privacy. There were a few tarps and dropcloths hung strategically to give the illusion of privacy, and it had been enough. Derek had his superhearing, and it was difficult for Stiles to miss sounds that echoed through the empty rooms.

Which was why it was so surprising when he heard Derek's snarl, not even muffled by the thin fabric of the shirt he was in the process of shucking.

He quickly tugged it down, although what that would accomplish now was beyond him. Maybe he'd be lucky. Derek didn't do feelings.

Childishly, Stiles considered crossing his fingers.
"Explain."

Of course Derek would revert to growling out one word sentences. Well, two could play that game. Stiles shrugged it off like it wasn't a big deal, and really, it wasn't. He knew he'd carried his weight the couple of weeks, never allowing himself to lag behind Derek despite the differences in strength and physique (and species).

"I don't like to sleep."

"So you cut yourself?" Derek was giving him the patented 'you are a fucking moron' look, and Stiles rolled his eyes back.

"Adrenaline, endorphins. Wakey things." And it was that simple.

Apparently Derek didn't see it that way.

"Stiles, why don't you want to sleep?" He ground out, like he was trying not to yell, trapping the volume behind his clenched teeth.

"I have dreams."

"Bad enough to resort to overdosing on adderall and cutting yourself?" Derek demanded, and he looked angry, genuinely angry. And that made Stiles angry, because Derek had no reason, no fucking right to be wearing the expression he was.

"Fuck you Derek, you have no idea what I dream about."

"And you can't talk to someone?" Derek demanded incredulously. As though he was actually concerned.

"What, like the others in the pack? Oh, I forgot, one of them can go from disney princess to legitimate evil queen in the time it takes to blink. But hey, there's still Lydia and Danny, oh, no, they jumped onto Ethan and Aiden's dicks and rode them straight into denial, because the true alpha gave his seal of approval, which means I strike out there too. Wait! At least there's Issac. Oh, nevermind, no there isn't, because if he isn't headfirst up Allison's ass, he's up Scott's, who speaks nothing but truth and wisdom, even though he nearly got me and my father killed and let not one, but two psychopaths stroll into the beautiful sunset, which, coincidentally, shines out of his asshole," Stiles snarled sarcastically. "Tell me Derek, who do I talk to when I dream about people dying and everyone is chummy with their killers? How do I explain that I see Miss Snow White smiling like a fucking shark about to give someone a blowjob? It's-'" Stiles paused, because Derek's face wasn't just stricken, he was several shades paler and looked like he was going to throw up. It reminded Stiles of bonesaws and black bile.

"Not everyone got to haul ass out of town once it was over. Some people are fucking stuck with the reminders smiling at them every day. So fuck you, Derek, I'm dealing with it."

Derek turned on his heel and left. And what needed to be said? Nothing, obviously. Almost in spite of that, Stiles felt ashamed anyway, and turned to his small corner of habitation. The few scattered items were put in their bags and he shouldered everything, keys in hand.

Really, it had been going well. It was entirely likely (and reasonable to assume) that he had violated some cosmic rule by letting himself get comfortable.

He was outside and halfway to his jeep when he heard the first snarl. It was easier to ignore it, to pretend, because he was a dick. He'd just thrown the past Derek was trying to escape in his face,
merely because Derek was trying to escape when he couldn't seem to, and god, he was an asshole. He had his keys in hand when he was spun rudely and crowded (not shoved, which was only a minor step up from Old Derek's tactics) into the jeep, forced to stop when the handle was digging into his back.

"You're not leaving."

"Yes, I am."

"And what, go back to that?" Derek demanded.

"What else am I going to do Derek, stay here and hug it out with you?"

For a brief, terrifying minute, Stiles thought Derek might say yes, and really, his world was shit enough already without Derek-'I am the king of manpain'-Hale pitying him. He knew for a fact that would be a sign he'd hit rock bottom, and he hadn't yet. He hadn't.

But then Derek's face hardened, his jaw ticked in a jump, and Stiles felt his keys yanked from his hands.

"Derek."

Derek took his bags next, easily ripping them off his shoulders, and stalked back into the house, the door hanging wide open behind him.

The sound of glass breaking broke through Stiles' daze, and he ran inside.

The whiskey he used when he did drink was a stain dripping down the unfinished wall, glass embedded in the wood and dusting the floor.

"Goddamnit Derek! Fucking stop. I'll get out your hair, just give me my fucking keys and I'll go!"

But Derek wasn't finished. The orange pill bottles with his adderall disappeared into Derek's pockets, where he could also see the uneven bulge of his keys. His kit was practically torn open and Derek pulled out the knife and the bottle of alcohol he'd been using to mask the scent. The knife was bent into an impressive angle, handle and all, and the plastic alcohol bottle imploded when it hit the same wall the whiskey had.

"Well, good for you," Stiles muttered, looking for his keys. "You get to deal with the fumes. Maybe you'll manage to get high."

Derek still didn't say anything, just grabbed the bags and walked up the creaking stairs and into what served as his bedroom. Stiles followed, shouting incoherent phrases even he couldn't understand and flailing.

Derek retrieved the sleeping bag from the other room and threw it onto the floor, in the opposite corner from his own.

"What, am I on suicide watch?" Stiles demanded.

"If that's what it takes."

"You-Fuck Derek, I'm not your responsibility. Let me go home."

Derek turned to him eyes flashing the vivid blue of a truly pissed off beta. He reached into his pocket and offered his phone.
"I'll let you go right now if you call your father and tell him what you've been doing."

Stiles threw the punch before he remembered what a monumentally bad idea it was. Unfortunately, he was reminded. Clutching the hand to his chest he glared at Derek and tried to figure out what was going on, because Derek didn't do feelings, didn't do concern.

For a second he considered the vial of wolfsbane around his neck, but it struck him as wrong on such a deep level that he couldn't actually make himself do it. Not even with Derek glaring at him and essentially threatening to hold him prisoner.

Conceding temporary and conditional defeat, he walked backward until he felt the wall and let himself slide down.

"What do you want me to do, Derek? Sit here and talk about my feelings? We can braid eachother's hair too, if you want. Maybe paint our nails."

Derek didn't say anything.

They wasted half the day that way. When day turned to night, Derek got up and left the room. Stiles wanted to ask, but refused to be the first one to talk. Sure, it was immature. But Derek was the one holding him prisoner.

The sound of the truck starting echoed outside and Stiles ran downstairs and jerked the front door open in time to see Derek pulling out of the driveway.

Well fuck him. Stiles knew how to walk, and it couldn't be that far to the nearest house. Going back upstairs, he sorted through his bags and put together everything he refused to leave behind, which was most of the clothing. He donned his hoodie (blue, because the first time Aiden had made a joke he'd trashed his red one) and shouldered his computer bag. It was easy enough to thread his arms through the single duffel like a backpack.

Derek could have his keys. He could make up any number of simple truths to explain why he had gone to Derek's for the summer. Or, even more tempting, he could just say he didn't want to talk about it and let Scott imagine his own horrorshow. As soon as he could get to a phone and call Scott, he'd be fine. Scott could pick up the spare set from the house on his way north. He'd go to Ventura if Scott asked it of him.

He started down the driveway and was tired by the time the private road that was technically the driveway turned into a normal, asphalt road. He ignored the pitiful keening in his head that said sleeping first would be a good idea. He'd only been awake for thirty six hours, a few miles would be a cakewalk.

Sometime during the second mile it started raining, because his life was a clusterfuck of dramatic cliches. His hoodie was soaked through, although the duffel was supposedly waterproof, and providing a decent cover for his laptop bag, also supposedly waterproof.

He had no idea how far he'd gotten in the dark when headlights appeared in his vision. Turning his head down, he crossed his fingers inside his pockets and prayed that maybe it was someone that was lost, or a friend of Derek's. Anyone but Derek. But seeing what his situation was, he didn't really get his hopes up.

The truck stopped next to him. He kept walking.

He didn't hear anyone coming up behind him, but Derek was pulling him up, throwing him over his shoulder and walking back to the truck. Stiles wondered how screwed his brain was that he didn't
protest the indignity. The driver's side door was open and he was shoved across the bench seat as Derek got in.

Two bags of take out from the diner they ate at every day almost got squashed in the process. He tried not to feel hungry and failed. The door slammed and they were driving back the way he came.

"My closest neighbors are miles away."

"Because you're a hermit," Stiles reasoned, managing to pull off flat and disinterested.

Derek didn't respond, and Stiles chose to look out the window for the few minutes the ride back to the house took.

Derek grabbed the take out bags and got out of the car. He didn't acknowledge Stiles, as though he just expected him to follow. Like a dog.

And dammit, he did. It was cold, he was soaked through, and Derek had food and his fucking keys.

There was more food than he normally ordered for himself, but Derek shoved the two trays at him and worked on what looked like his usual double meatlover's special. Stiles had everything from fruit to a hamburger. There was even a slice of pie like he normally ordered.

He ate without the least bit of hesitation or remorse. Sleep was food and food was sleep and all that jazz. If Derek was going to deprive him of the standards, the least Stiles could do was prepare himself.

When they finished, Derek dumped the trays in the trashbag in the corner and herded him upstairs. Stiles heaped epithets on his head and gathered dry clothes from what he'd been willing to leave behind before going to the bathroom and showering.

Even though tarps gave the illusion of privacy, he knew Derek was listening. It occurred to him that he could jerk off, make Derek uncomfortable and angry, but he couldn't actually force himself to stand to attention. Anger was just a bad motivator for his dick. At least he could cross that potential crisis off his list of possible kinks and fetishes.

After drying off he got dressed. The satan sitting on his shoulder told him he could go back shirtless, that everything was out in the open, but he couldn't. The same feeling of wrongness pervaded that thought as much as it had the temptation to use the wolfsbane. So he dressed and scrubbed his head with a towel before slinging it across his shoulders.

Derek was sitting in his nest of a sleeping bag and blankets, face highlighted in the light of his laptop. A skycard jutted out from a port.

Stiles took the time to check his own laptop. It was only half charged, but he had a spare battery. All of it appeared to be in working order. He switched into powersave mode.

For the next three hours, they were quiet. Derek didn't try an start a conversation, about the escape attempt or anything else, and Stiles didn't feel like talking to Derek, so he read through the bestiary Lydia had translated. (His skycard was missing, and he was pretty sure it was currently giving Derek internet, the fuck.)

At the fourth hour however, when he actually began to feel a little sleepy, he started singing.

It started with top 40's. It quickly devolved into 'It's a Small World'.
Derek didn't respond.

The time on his laptop said 3:27 when he checked it. He was sure it had been 3:25 the last time he'd looked at it, which had been hours ago.

"I need my adderall."

"Dose says one morning, one afternoon," Derek countered, not even looking up from his computer screen. "So that's when you'll get them."

"Wha-" Stiles sputtered. "I've been taking more than that since middle school!"

"And you've been abusing it. Welcome back to basics."

"I've been self dosing since I was thirteen."

"You shouldn't have been. And we're going to fix that."

"Dude, just-"

"If you want it so badly, you can try and get it out of my pocket." And Derek was finally looking at him, his smile all teeth. It wasn't a particularly sane smile.

"So, what? The blind leading the blind? You're going to deprive me of anything stimulating and I'll be cured?" Stiles snorted.

"It's a start."

Stiles picked up singing where he left off.

He couldn't remember falling asleep. Wouldn't have, if he could have helped it.

When he came to, Derek was leaning over him, eyes wide in the light of dawn. There was a hand hovering, and Stiles had no idea if he'd been shaken awake or woken up on his own. Derek looked ill, like he was going to throw up. All over Stiles.

"Fuck," Stiles muttered. He didn't want to think about how he'd gotten from his spot against the wall to his sleeping bag. "Good morning Derek," He added, sarcastic and saccharine.

"You were talking about Erica."

"I figured, considering I was dreaming about her," Stiles snapped, pushing himself up and scooting away from Derek. "How long was I out?"

"A little over three hours."

"Goddamnit. You shouldn't have tossed the whiskey."

Derek's expression schooled itself into it's normal, patented Hale Glare.

"Get your shoes on, we're going to breakfast," He muttered.

Stiles shrugged and reached for his shoes. They were still a little soggy, but it wasn't too bad, regardless. Derek was already outside, waiting in the truck when he finished.

If he had been smarter, if he had read a few more of his dad's books, hotwiring his jeep would have
been a viable option. Since he hadn't, it wasn't.

He got in the truck and turned towards the window, refusing to look at Derek.

After a week of patchy sleep, which were really just naps when his body decided to give out, Stiles felt like it might be worth it to call his dad and explain everything. The day before had been full of histrionics, mostly his, because he'd managed to actually scrape himself on the raw end of a two by four. Derek had been upstairs and in his face in an instant. It hadn't been pretty, and Stiles knew in any other situation he would be humiliated by his behavior. As it was, Derek had refused to back down until convinced that it hadn't been intentional, and he'd been more than a little pissed off by the behavior.

Of course, any chance of calling his dad was shot to shit the minute he walked outside to get more lumber from the back of Derek's truck and saw a woman talking to Derek. It wasn't that she was someone new that set off his internal alarm bells, but Derek's stance. He'd never seen Derek looking submissive, so vulnerable to another human being.

And fuck that. Stiles stalked over to them and immediately put himself between the two of them. Red eyes flashed in annoyance and his hand immediately reached for the vial around his neck.

"Stiles, no," Derek snapped.

"I don't know who the fuck you are, but you don't get to snap and snarl at Derek," Stiles told her, refusing to back down from the hard stare aimed at him. Red eyes were nothing new to him, and even if he'd never wanted to see another alpha as long as he lived, he wasn't going to let one try to intimidate Derek.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, oh. So how about you piss off and go bug some other werewolf."

He was temporarily stunned when the woman's eyes shifted to a human blue and she threw her head back to laugh. There was no mockery present in her tone, nothing to indicate she was making fun of him. It was weird. And that was coming from his overabundance of life experience with werewolves prone to over dramatizing everything.

"You're Stiles."

"How do you know my name?"

"She's my alpha," Derek snapped. "Go back inside."

"Dude, no. She was looming over you. Is that Alpha Lesson One or something? Because it's bullshit. You don't intimidate the people you lead."

"I wasn't intimidating him," She said, amusement fading and a serious expression tightening her features. Stiles was reminded of a swedish model he'd once wanked to. And wow, not appropriate, especially since he thought he might hate her a little.

"Caroline was offering me help with something," Derek told him stiffly.

"The intimidation you saw was nothing more than Derek's reticence to speak. Now, if you're satisfied?"
Stiles looked over his shoulder at Derek. At the sign of a tight nod, he gave Caroline one last, hard look before turning and walking back inside.

He couldn't hear them from where he stood. Not that he was trying.

Caroline left a few minutes later and Derek came back inside, hand scrubbing his face. There was sawdust in his hair. Stiles remembered why he had gone outside in the first place and was about to pass Derek to go grab the pieces he needed when Derek's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. It was the first actual contact they'd had since he'd been thrown over Derek's shoulder, and it felt foreign, almost unpleasant.

"She was impressed," Derek said, voice neutral.

"By the scrawny human?" Stiles made a rude noise. "Whatever dude. What was she offering anyway, free labor from the pack or something? Can she do that?"

"She was offering to have meals dropped off. She thinks diner food is going to kill us."

"She's probably right," Stiles shrugged, pulling his wrist free and heading out the door.

That evening someone, a man, dropped by with two brown paper bags, the big kind from the grocery store. Stiles figured they had planned for werewolf appetites, and came inside to look around the house.

Stiles tried to avoid him, mostly succeeded except for one silent, very odd encounter in the hallway that involved some fairly intense staring. He rudely excused himself and went into the bedroom to hide behind a sheet. One strange werewolf encounter a day was enough. Introductions could be made later. Or never.

When he walked out of the bedroom, the man was gone, but Derek was nowhere inside the house. A quick peep around a tarp proved they were outside talking. Stiles went back to work.

Half an hour later (maybe, his sense of time was fucked beyond all reason) Derek came in and told him it was time to eat.

Stiles didn't think anything of it until they got ready to bed down for the night. His laptop, charged at the diner that morning, promised stories of creatures more exotic than a kanima, and he was kind of hoping for nightmares involving unicorns.

Instead, Derek was talking.

"I never dream about the fire visually," He stated, as if he wasn't referencing the single most horrible event of his life. "I always dream in scents and sounds."

"Blind people dream like that," Stiles said, when it looked like Derek was going to stop, to cave to the urge to just pretend he hadn't said anything.

"I only saw it after it had been put out. But I could hear my mother's howl at school."

Stiles could only imagine the sounds, much less the smells. How long could a scent linger? He'd never thought to ask Scott. Personal experience told him years, but his little time capsule of his mother's things stashed in the back of a drawer was closed, nothing at all like a house. Then again, she hadn't literally baked into the surface either. And he was going to stop thinking about that, otherwise the dinner, which had actually been good, was going to come back up.
Derek remained quiet, and Stiles realized what was happening. Derek was trying to talk it out, by offering his own history, his own issues as fodder to start it off. And it was surreal and uncomfortable and fucking terrifying. Because it meant Derek was serious, and Stiles couldn't find any reason for him to be.

"I can't Derek."

"Why?"

"Why do you care?" He deflected, because defensive was better than cruel.

Derek didn't look angry, or even constipated, which had been the default expressions for a week.

"Cora went to Boyd. You were the only person that tried to-" Derek shrugged. "You were the only person that would touch me."

Stiles almost asked about Miss Blake. Almost. But he wasn't going to repay the admission, which looked like it been genuinely painful, by throwing Jennifer in his face. He leaned against the wall, thinking. It felt like quid pro quo and there was the urge to start calling Derek Clarice. Or Hannibal. Either would have fit really. But Derek looked serious and a little lost. It was obviously costing him something to admit anything aloud.

"Their faces change, sometimes, like out of the corner of my eye, but more. When I'm awake. I see-" Stiles shrugged. "For a second I see who they were, what's just-Like waiting, under their skin. It's like a trick of the light or something. And then they're normal highschoolers again." He didn't say that every time it happened it was like having a head on collision with a train.

Derek remained quiet, and Stiles was upset by that, in a way, although he didn't know what he'd been expecting. Maybe a psych diagnoses of some sort, or for it to be brushed off because of his adderall or overactive imagination, something psychosomatic because of PTSD. He knew, instinctively, that's what his dad would have said, if his dad had a clue what some of the people in the pack were capable of. Scott had made sure that would never happen though, told Stiles the past was over when it wasn't.

"No one else sees it, do they?" Derek finally asked. Stiles shook his head.

"Why don't they?" He asked quietly, feeling small and alone inside of his own skin. It was the feeling he'd been suppressing for months, sitting at lunch tables and in class, hanging out after school. Why didn't anyone else see their faces change, why couldn't anyone else remember?

"I don't know," Derek admitted, sounding as disappointed as Stiles felt.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm the one that's wrong," Stiles admitted. "Like I'm being too harsh, because if everyone else can forgive and forget, why can't I? But-" He drew his knees up to his chest. "But I can't-I see the people that aren't there, and I know why."

Derek looked as exhausted as Stiles felt. When there was nothing else forthcoming, Stiles didn't try to read. Instead, he curled up in his sleeping bag and closed his eyes. Nightmares couldn't be as bad as what he was feeling awake.

(He came to four hours later with Derek behind him, arms wrapped tight around his chest to pin his flailing limbs. His throat was sore and his cheeks were wet. He'd been dreaming about Erica and Boyd in the basement, the arrow wounds in their bodies pumping out blood in time with the generator.)
For the next several days, they took turns waking each other up. Because Stiles had obviously been Stalin in a past life, his nightmares triggered Derek's. All in all, it was shitty to sleep. But he slept, a little. And so did Derek. And they talked. Sometimes about Beacon Hills and it's colorful history, and sometimes about the house. It was never anything in depth, but it was-Stiles would be lying to himself if he said he wasn't grateful that someone got it, that someone wasn't telling him he was wrong for being so angry, so bitter over how the dice had fallen.

Wake up, go to the diner for breakfast, go to work, eat dinner, work some more, shower, talk, sleep, dream, wake up. It was a cycle, but Stiles was finding a comfort in all of it, in the mundaneess of construction, in working until he was exhausted. It didn't stop anything, but it felt like someone actually gave a shit about him, saw him, and he felt needy for needing it, childish and stupid for being so grateful for it. (That didn't stop him from clinging to it.)

They were winding down for the night. It had been almost a week since Caroline's visit, two since he'd been barred from keeping himself awake, and he knew what was coming. It wasn't that he'd given up, but it had gotten a little easier to shower at the end of the day, to walk back to the bedroom and head for his corner. Mostly because he knew Derek was waiting. And, even if he wasn't sure he'd ever actually understand why Derek talked with him, it was still happening. It helped.

He'd given up on sulking when Derek had woken him from a nightmare. Instead of the normal rapid shaking and whispering, a keening sound, high pitched and terrified, had startled him awake. Stiles had almost gotten claws in his gut, but he couldn't let Derek sit there in the throes of a nightmare, especially not since her heard sorry whispered over and over in shamed tones. They'd lain there while Derek's breathing slowed.

Since then, things had changed, gotten better, a little easier, during the day. And talking came a little more easily at night.

"Why did you get between me and Caroline?" Derek asked quietly.

"Because I thought she was intimidating you."

"You were mad at me," Derek pointed out calmly.

"Yeah but-" Stiles paused. "I know I can be a shit human being, but you were trying to do what you thought was right for me. And-" He shrugged. "And you don't deserve anyone trying to loom over you, or anything. Not even me."

"I'm taller than you."

"You know what I mean," Stiles snorted. "I'm sorry." It was blurted, rushed. He couldn't take it back, but he didn't want to, was glad he didn't, hopeful that some grain of decency remained. When Derek tilted his head, he felt his face grow hot. "For being such a bastard. I came here, and you're letting me help with this," He said, gesturing to the walls before letting his hands fall back into his lap. "You could have let me go, and it would have been easier. You didn't. And I was a bitch about it. You didn't deserve it. So I'm sorry. And thank you."

They were breaking their pattern, but Stiles didn't mind. He wasn't actively avoiding the issues lurking in his own head, but he also didn't want to give Derek just the awful things that rolled around in his skull either. There had to be some sort of middle ground, something that would make everything more bearable, before the poison inside of him drove them both crazy.

"After my mom died, for awhile, I could only think, 'she's never coming back, and it's my fault,'" He
finally said. Derek tensed a little, but Stiles plowed on. "I was with her, in the hospital. She'd just had another surgery, car wreck, third in as many days," He explained. "For a long time I couldn't think about her without thinking of her being gone. And then I found this uh, this weird little charm. Ugly thing, really. Like a miniature potato carrot wood thing. But I remembered that she sang to it. It's on my keychain, if you don't believe me."

Derek pulled the keys out of his bag and examined them, recoiling a little at the sight of the beige root shaped keychain that was as long as his thumb. He tossed the keys to Stiles, still listening.

"It was always nonsense, but she was almost religious about singing to it, once a day, sometimes twice. I figured it was something she'd learned from her dad. Old country sort of Russian guy, apparently. But yeah, just-" He fingered the keychain. "It's really stupid, and I have other things with better stories behind them. But when I found this, it was the first time I thought about her, instead of the fact that she was gone."

"My mother loved Ovid," Derek said, almost an answer to an unspoken question. "She made us learn latin, so we could 'appreciate his works in their pure form.'" Derek said it sarcastically, but there was an air of fondness to the statement.

"Wait, you can read latin?"

"And recite it," Derek grumped, as if it was some great burden.

"Just Ovid or-

"I can remember parts, but I can read most latin."

"You're shitting me."

Derek glowered. Stiles actually felt the first beginnings of a smile.

"Oh my god, you can read and speak and probably write in latin. That's amazing. Dude! You're secretly smart."

"It's just latin, and only because of my mother." Derek actually looked embarrassed at the praise.

"No, latin is hard. I know russian and latin is difficult for me."

"That's because russian is balto-slavic while latin is italic. They're two completely different things."

"I was right, you are secretly smart. Why didn't you ever mention this?" Stiles demanded.

"I can think of several reasons. Most of them were human," Derek retorted. Stiles deflated only a little, and instead opened his laptop and booted it up.

"What are you doing?"

"I want you to recite something."

"No."

"Please?" He begged, turning wide, shining eyes to Derek. "Just, like, a stanza of something. I'll even recite something, although I'm pretty sure my accent will sound more like I'm coughing up a hairball."

Derek looked physically pained, although whether it was from the idea of reciting poetry or listening
to Stiles attempt russian, Stiles had no idea.

He turned on his microphone and the recording program before turning to Derek and staring.

"Tempore ducetur longo fortasse cicatrix, horrent admotas vulnera cruda manus."

"I have no idea what that was."

"Since you recorded it, maybe you can figure it out."

"I would try, but I'm pretty sure you used up all my bandwidth," Stiles retorted, but there was no heat behind it. He'd actually, mostly forgiven Derek for the heavy handed tactics.

"Your turn."

"Yes, Hannibal. Quid pro quo, I get it," Stiles muttered before wracking his mind. He blurted out a few lines of poetry and hid his face behind his knees. His accent was awful. His mother was probably spinning in her grave.

"What was that?"

"Baratynsky. Poetry. Seemed fair."

"What did it mean?"

"You didn't tell me," Stiles deflected mulishly.

"You recorded mine. I didn't record you."

"Maybe you should have."

"I will if you say it again."

"No."

"Then tell me."

"No."

"Stiles," Derek glowered, looking a little hurt, and that-that was strange. And made Stiles feel more like a dick than he had before. Shit, Derek made him feel guilty, that was new.

"Fine," He muttered, giving in. "It's something like, in the light of reason, childish dreams dissolve."

"Inspiring."

"Yeah well, it's a russian poet. You'd be depressing if you spent your life in the land of eternal snow too."

Derek muttered something noncommittal. They both bedded down a few minutes later, resuming their normal routine.

That night, Stiles woke up from a dream featuring Scott, forcing Derek to give the bite to Gerard. Instead of black ooze, Gerard turned into a winged werewolf, which was actually considerably less fanciful that Stiles had always imagined. He had no idea if that was the future he was in for, but seeing Derek's lifeless body was more than enough incentive to claw his way back to the waking
Derek was still sleeping peacefully, undisturbed by the noise Stiles made.

He leaned against the wall and watched, acknowledging that it was more than a little creepy, but he wanted, more than anything, for the dream not to be true, for Derek to have escaped Beacon Hills completely. Not unscathed, that was asking the impossible, but at least to something better. Maybe none of them deserved peace or a second chance, but he needed for someone to have gotten out.

Stiles stared at Rick, then switched to glaring at Derek.

"You're seriously allowing this?" Stiles demanded. Rick switched out meal duty with a few other people, but he was usually the one that showed up at the house, brown bags in hand. Stiles had gotten to know him a little. At least, he thought he had.

Now that he knew Rick was Caroline's emissary (and husband) he was willing to reevaluate his opinion. He wasn't any more fond of emissaries than he was of alphas.

"Rick won't hurt you," Derek told him.

"I won't do this without your consent," Rick said slowly. "But I think it will help."

"I thought dreaming was necessary for the human mind," Stiles retorted.

"You'll still dream, but it won't be as intense, and hopefully the subject of your dreams will shift to something more pleasant."

Stiles was determined not to feel betrayed. He'd told Derek his secrets, the things he'd been sitting on for months. And Derek had gone running to his pack. Logically, he accepted that Derek was worried and was trying to help. Emotionally, he felt sold out.

"Stiles, it's a simple sleep thorn. Derek's told me you're intelligent. If you want to research it yourself, to know exactly what it is and what it should look like, you're more than welcome to look through my library."

He felt his eyes narrow. That was more than tempting, and the man had to know it. Derek would have told him. But he didn't want to go to Rick's (Caroline's) house.

"A couple of reference sources will be fine," He conceded. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all. Derek told me you were with him during an incident with a druid. I wouldn't trust me either," Rick told him, and Stiles got the impression the bastard was smiling even though he looked serious. "I actually brought a few of my books with me, just in case."

Stiles watched Rick lean through his open window and pull out three volumes, each one visibly older than the last.

"I've marked the pages. Some of it's in old norse, but between the three volumes you should be able to piece together what it does."

Stiles accepted the books and walked back inside, not bothering to say goodbye. Rick was waiting for him to get done, and Stiles figured best to get it over with.

The books were more like journals. There was a lot of cramped handwriting and columns of old norse translated into english. The speech in the oldest was the most formal, but still easy to
comprehend. The marked pages all had the same strange symbol drawn into them. There was a lot about Sigridifa and Odin, but the books all said the same thing. Dreamless or restful sleep.

"It's not a fix it," Rick's voice warned from behind him. Stiles turned and glared, wondering how long he'd been watched.

"Then why bother?"

"It'll help ease the symptoms, but it won't stop your mind from processing what it needs to." Rick leaned against a support and sighed sadly. "Derek won't tell me what you dream, only that it relates to the events he endured before finding his way here. And that's fine. I know what he went through, and if you were there, well," Rick looked resigned, a little disappointed. He was looking at Stiles like he felt for him, not pity or even horror, just sympathy, as though he knew how hard it had been, understood it. And-Stiles surprised himself by believing that maybe he did.

"It's not surprising you would have nightmares."

Stiles nodded.

"Alright," He agreed.

"Thank you."

"For what?" Stiles asked, immediately confused.

"I wasn't sure you'd let me help. And to be frank, you project when you have trouble sleeping."

"What?" Stiles voice cracked in the middle of the word as he considered the implications.

"Not images or what you're hearing. Just a sense of rage that tends to echo. Our home is close enough that it comes to my attention."

"Oh," Stiles muttered, coloring. "Sorry." Jesus, every fucking night. He wasn't just fucking with Derek, he was probably annoying the hell out of Rick.

"Don't be. Sometimes things just are, by no fault of our own."

Stiles nodded and followed Rick downstairs and outside. Derek was sitting on his tailgate and eating a sandwich. Stiles pulled himself up over the side to sit in the truck.

"There better be some left," Stiles told him as he reached for a bag.

Rick and Derek talked about the pack and about the next full moon. Stiles didn't pay much attention, instead looking up through the break in the trees to gauge the time.

"You're expected as well, Stiles."

That got his attention. Stiles thought he might have given himself whiplash.

"What?"

"You're Derek's guest, and his friend. Our pack is open to you," Rick said casually, although the invitation was anything but. "And it would be good for you to get out. Both of you have been cooped up here for weeks."

Stiles wasn't sure about going to a full moon gathering with a bunch of werewolves. He didn't even
want to do that with his own pack, much less with one he didn't even know.

"The human members always come too. It's less about running through the woods and howling than you think," Rick added, like he could read minds. "Mostly it's dinner and reconnecting with eachother."

"I'll think about it." It was noncommittal and gave him room stay home while Derek went off and did whatever.

Rick finished a sandwich and grabbed a bag from his trunk before heading back into the house. Stiles chose to keep eating with Derek. When the air shifted, Stiles came to attention, standing in the back of the truck and looking around wildly.

"What?" Derek asked, looking around.

"The air changed."

"It's called wind currents," Derek replied, as if Stiles was an idiot.

"No, like, it's. Fuck, it feels more-" Stiles struggled to explain. "It's like, like someone's playing their radio really loud in the next car over and you- You seriously can't feel that?"

Derek shook his head, but his expression looked troubled.

"I'll ask Rick when he gets back out. Maybe he noticed something."

By the time Rick walked back outside, looking slightly worn at that, the strange charge to the air had faded. Derek asked him about it, and Rick eyed him with a smile.

"I was the one singing."

"But that wasn't, I didn't hear anything," Stiles muttered, looking over at Derek, who shook his head, lips pinched thoughtfully.

"It's my particular brand of magic, nothing more. Now, I do need to go. And I hope it helps."

"Thanks man," Stiles said, actually sounding like he meant it. And he did, it was just difficult, discussing that he had even had dreams that bad to begin with.

After Rick left, Stiles turned to Derek.

"Did you hear anything?"

"No," Derek confirmed aloud, looking surprised.

"Huh."

"Come on, we can finish the walls in the kitchen tonight."

"Slave driver," Stiles joked.

They didn't get the walls finished, but that was because Derek's measurements had been off by a few inches and the sheetrock had ended up three inches too short across. Which Stiles teased him about until he received a full blown glower the likes of which he hadn't seen in awhile.

"Dude, just a joke. Everyone messes up in diy. At least it was sheetrock and not, say, plumbing."
Derek actually looked a little relieved at that.

That night their conversation consisted of examining the sleep thorn, which Rick had drawn onto the bare subflooring. Stiles muttered and wished for the books Rick had loaned him for all of ten minutes.

"There were notes," Stiles whined, flailing a little in frustration. "Information. Lots of it."

"Maybe you can ask Rick to look at them on the full moon."

Stiles wondered when he'd decided to actually go, was surprised that he had.

"Think he'll let me?"

"Can't hurt to ask."

Stiles muttered and pulled his sleeping bag over the markings. Derek watched him, eyes tracking each movement.

"Are you seriously going to watch me sleep?" Stiles demanded as he settled on top of the open sleeping bag. "Way to be a creeper dude."

"Go to sleep, Stiles," Derek muttered, laying down.

Stiles conceded, mostly because he was exhausted.

He fell asleep and dreamed of Erica humming the batman theme.

He woke to Derek keening and tugged at his arm, pulling at him to bring him over to the sleeping bag before passing out again.

(They woke up at eight in the morning. Stiles cheered out loud when he realized he'd slept for six hours, the longest he'd managed in months.)

"Oh my god, this is such bullshit," Stiles muttered, glaring at his thumb and index finger. He could feel the angry pulsing throbbing all the way down to the bone.

"You're the one that can't use a nail gun," Derek smirked, coming over to look at the frame. It was for a closet and should have been easy, except Derek wanted to use nails instead of screws for some godawful reason, and one, one small accident with the nail gun and a couple of flying nails and he was no longer allowed near it. He maintained that Derek would have healed even if they had hit him.

"Your face," Stiles muttered darkly, waving his hand like it would actually help anything. Derek grabbed his wrist and the pain faded. Huh. He'd never seen that trick before. Obviously Scott had been holding out on him, the dick.

"You'll need better insults as a senior," Derek reminded him, letting go of his wrist and picking up the hammer to finish nailing the last corner together. "Christ, this thing is crooked as hell. How do you- Nevermind. Forgot who I was talking to."

"My dad wants me to go into criminal justice," Stiles blurted. It seemed like a decent enough segue way. Senior to graduation to college and college majors. It totally made sense. If he ignored Derek's quip, which he was.

"Do you want to?"
Stiles wasn't sure and shrugged to show his personal indecision. "Everyone else does. Dad does. It's helpful, having someone in the know in law enforcement." It was about as close as he could get to the truth without bringing his personal misgivings into the mix. Despite the new, more talkative Derek, their feelings conversations circled the past. The future had never come up before.

"Not what I asked," Derek grunted as he picked up the frame and slotted it into place.

"I don't want to be a cop. Or a deputy." It was a painful admission, because wasn't sure what his use was if he didn't follow the path everyone seemed to expect. But- But he couldn't just erase the nights he'd waited by the scanner, positive he was going to hear about his dad getting hurt, or worse. He never wanted to put someone else through that.

"Then don't."

As if it was that simple. Stiles wondered if maybe it was.

The bigger problem though, was that he didn't really have any idea what he wanted to do.

"So this is your pack now?"

" Pretty much. Caroline's family has been established here since the western expansion. It's a large pack, but they're close."

Stiles wondered if it was like Derek's family had been, and if that's why he was so much more comfortable in his own skin now. The Hale family had been a big family, but Caroline's pack easily qualified as enormous. There were three or four dozen people milling around the house and outside, eating, drinking and conversing freely as the sun began it's descent. Like the full moon was a party for everyone.

"Not everyone is a wolf, but the human members of the pack are always welcome on a full moon," Derek reminded him, his smirk obviously because Stiles knew he looked as dazed and agog as felt. Even if only half of the people present were wolves, that was still a huge number of werewolves. He was more than a little terrified of seeing Caroline again. Obviously she had to be as terrifying as Derek had always tried to be, considering the size of the pack.

"Here," A red haired girl offered, red solo cups in hand and a smile lighting up her features. "Happy moon."

Stiles accepted and smiled, lifting his glass in salute to hers and Derek's before taking a sip. Something sweet and a little tangy surprised him, the taste bursting on his tongue before he swallowed. It almost seemed to cool him off instead of warming him before he felt the slight burn of the alcohol.

"Not bad," Stiles said before taking a deeper sip. Derek rolled his eyes and sipped from his own, looking far more relaxed than he ever had around the wolves in Beacon Hills. Stiles felt good, sort of proud that Derek wasn't trying to take the mead away, like he trusted him. It felt nice, being trusted by Derek, like maybe he had made some sort of progress. (He had no clue what the yardstick was, but he supposed Derek had one.)

Over the next hour there were more new faces and names than Stiles thought he'd ever be able to remember, but no one seemed to mind. It was as if everyone was in a celebratory mood, like it was a wedding instead of just another full moon. When his cup was close to empty someone replaced it, and he was flush and laughing and happy. Derek was even smiling, speaking with people that passed by and answering questions about his house, denying offers of beds and food in turn.
"What about him? He can't tolerate a sleeping bag and cold showers all the time," Rick tried, nodding his head in Stiles' direction.

"I'm actually fine," Stiles interrupted, answering before Derek could. "It's awesome." He wasn't lying, even to himself, he realized. The past month had gotten exponentially better each day. He still dreamed, Derek still dreamed, but sharing the space over the sleep thorn helped, blurred the edges, made them a little softer, a little more tolerable. The actual act of building the house, building something worthwhile, felt better than anything he'd done in years.

"Fair enough, to each his own," Rick laughed and strolled off before two new people quickly took his place. Some of the younger betas had already shifted, and even the older wolves looked restless, excited. Derek was strange spot of stillness in it all, not shifting restlessly or even talking overly loudly, like some of the others were doing. It did make it easier to spot the werewolves though, eyes glowing mostly yellow, a few blue, like Derek's.

More and more betas started shifting, and Stiles was flush from mead and joking with people that accepted his presence as easily as anyone else's. It wasn't until a wolf ran past him that he even noticed that almost all the werewolves had shifted, and that there are several actual, true wolves among them. Derek squeezed his shoulder before taking off, blue eyes bright in the darkness.

"Come on!" A voice giggled and a girl not much older than him looped her arm through his and tugged him towards the treeline.

"But I'm not-" He wasn't even given a chance to protest that he was only human before he was running into the woods and through the darkness, pulled after the girl he recognized from before. It wasn't a problem though, not far in a barn almost grew up out of the dark, lights flickering inside. He stumbled in with the girl and laughed, breathless and a little giddy, and saw other people running in, most of them human, some of them not.

It was ritual, obviously, the way they started playing, the way werewolves drifted in and out and there was still more food and mead passed around. The children and teenagers, even some of the adults climbed into the hayloft and played, sending errant pieces drifting down onto everyone below. Stiles found himself in the middle of it somehow, trying to hide from the girl -'Cassie!' she introduced through a drunken giggle- and failing miserably.

She giggled any time someone brushed against him and he flailed, and saved him from falling out of the loft. Stiles didn't question her abrupt declaration of 'We're going to be best friends!', even if it reminded him of elementary school.

When a chorus of howls erupted from around them Stiles actually emerged and saw everyone else doing the same.


"No way, I can't." Memories of Scott's first howl haunted him. It had actually been painful to watch. Or hear. And there were werewolves in the barn with them.

"Everyone does! Tradition!" She insisted.

And he was too happy, too buzzed and too comfortable to keep denying her, so he tilted his head back and gave his approximation of a howl. It was a terrible, completely mortifying attempt at a howl, and everyone around him laughed and joked, but he wasn't the only one suffering the good natured ribbing, others blushing and promising the work on it.
What felt like hours later, Cassie left and came back with blankets. They formed a makeshift bed and Stiles passed out with her laying near his feet.

He woke up to her over his legs and Derek's back pressed against his. He could smell coffee wafting up from below and heard a few people shuffling about, although most of the people in the loft were steadfastly asleep. Sunlight was peeking in through the crack of the loft door and a few cracks between the walls of the barn itself.

He hadn't had any nightmares. At all. Stiles couldn't actually remember sleeping, besides the warmth of being surrounded, maybe Derek coming in and passing out. Smiling despite the sunbeams that had zeroed in on his eyes, he relaxed for a few minutes, savoring the feeling of peace. The heat brought out the smell of hay and warm bodies around him, and the smell of the blanket and his own musk. It was a clean, pure scent he inhaled deeply into his lungs over and over, letting it slowly motivate him.

Extracting himself from the pile was easier than he thought it would be, Derek rolling into the warm spot and Cassie shifting until Derek's legs were a blanket. It was weird but not even remotely unsettling, and for the first time since leaving it on his bed, Stiles wished for his cell phone so he could take a picture. There was even hay in Derek's hair, completely at odds with Derek of Beacon Hills but-Right. Things felt right, and even if he wanted to question it (except he didn't) he wasn't going to.

Down on the ground Caroline was pouring coffee from a carafe. She handed it to him before he could sit on one of the few free benches. He accepted it with a quiet thank you, mindful of all the people asleep around him, lumps and piles of limbs and blankets.

"Morning," She greeted. Her voice was soft and utterly commanding at the same time, at odds with the amusement of their first meeting.

"Morning."

"Your howl needs some work." Despite the laughter that laced her tone, her smile was genuine and her voice was friendly. There wasn't a hint of censure in her voice, nothing more than the laughing acceptance he'd gotten the night before. Stiles figured he would take it for what it was.

He flushed and smiled, shrugging. "I've never tried before. Was fun though."

"That's Caroline's way of saying you're welcome back," A new voice groaned around a yawn, Rick stretching and walking over to them. Then it hit him.

Caroline. The alpha. Welcoming him back. Joking about his shitty howl. **Welcoming him back.**

"Oh," He replied, dazed. The alpha. Welcoming him back. Was there some sort of etiquette he should be following? Lydia always bitched about the supernatural etiquette Deaton was shoving down her throat. "I uh, thanks. Thank you," He added, hoping it sounded a little less dazed and a bit more formal. And Jesus, he wondered a second later, where the hell had his distrust of alphas gone?

He wasn't sure what to say beyond that and he was far too aware of all the sleeping werewolves to attempt nervous rambling, so he sipped his coffee silently to keep his mouth busy as he watched people wake up, one by one and in whole groups. There were donuts and bagels to go with the coffee, and there was grumbling about early mornings and children, and then there were the morning people. Stiles was pretty sure hell is filled with demons disguised as morning people. Cassie was evidently one of them, jumping down from the loft and sitting down on the ground, leaning against his legs while she accepted and ate a donut.
Derek came down a few minutes later and sat next to him, wordless and the picture of sleepy contentment.

Despite the number of people, it felt like family. Stiles wasn't bothered by Derek maintaining a bit of distance between them, because Derek was awesome enough to snag them both a donut. He figured he could count his first inter-pack full moon as a win.

"I hate this."

"You volunteered," Derek reminded him, not for the first time.

"But this is insane. I volunteered to hammer shit together, not lay hardwood."

It was August, and it was hot and muggy in the woods. The humidity was off the charts and he felt sticky, like the dirt and sawdust were clinging to him. A cold shower was beyond sounding like a curse and had transformed into a blessing. If he could actually get the work done and get into it.

"Which is done. And no, I'm not going to return all this and use carpet instead. Carpet is disgusting," Derek muttered, the latter a now common refrain in response to Stiles' whining.

"Fine." Also a commonly uttered word in the house. Mostly by Stiles, although he was still pleased to note that he had gotten Derek to compromise every once in awhile, even though it was his house.

Derek and he fell into a routine, like they did with everything else. Stiles slid everything into place and Derek gently tapped it in, making sure it fit tight. It went more quickly than Stiles had initially thought it would, although they only had half the room done by the time it was necessary to turn on the floodlights.

"Shit, didn't realize it was so late," He yawned out. No one had dropped off food that day, the delivered meals only coming four days out of the week now. "Skipped lunch."

"Come on," Derek told him, holding his hand out to help him up. Stiles decided it was easier to fall back onto the subflooring and pretend he didn't have bones anymore. Actually, he wasn't entirely sure that they hadn't disintegrated the moment he'd stopped moving, it sort of felt like they had. And they'd left bitching, achy muscles behind. His body was an asshole.

A huff echoed through the room before he found himself pulled up into a fireman's hold. He barely had time to pick up his feet before Derek was pulling him outside.

"Gonna die on the steps," Stiles muttered and then he was over Derek's shoulder. It was awkward because he was as tall as Derek and nothing but ungainly, flailing limbs. Derek didn't seem to mind (of course he didn't) but Stiles wasn't entirely sure how he felt about being lugged around like a sack of potatoes. "This is becoming a thing."

Derek managed to open the door to the truck and tossed him in before walking around to the other side.

"Dude," He whined. Derek hadn't even been nice enough to do the no pain thing, which Stiles had been the happy recipient of far more often than he probably deserved.

"Dinner."

Stiles grumbled the whole way to the diner, and Derek grumbled back, although most of his was done telepathically, through his glares. Neither of them were mad, precisely, but Stiles felt antsy,
"So when are you heading back?" Derek asked over their coffee. The waitress knew them both and knew Derek just wanted the meat lover's special and Stiles would take anything that included hashbrowns and pickles with a slice of pie for dessert.

"So eager to get rid of me?" Stiles tried to conceal his hurt and knew he failed. But it had been almost three months, and Derek had to be getting tired of him, especially since the house was almost finished. Just about everything else could be done by a single person and with one hundred percent less bitching.

"No, but I know your birthday is coming up. I didn't know if you'd want to be back home for it."

His surprise that Derek knew when his birthday was was overshadowed by the question of going home. For his birthday. With the pack. He imagined Aiden and Ethan singing happy birthday and shuddered as cold exploded beneath his skin.

"I should," He muttered, staring down into his coffee. When had he stopped dumping creamer into it?

"Not what I asked." It had become a common refrain and Stiles smiled before taking a sip. For some reason the statement had become comforting, not that he knew why exactly. Half the time it preceded uncomfortable feelings sorts of talks, and the other half petty arguments.

"That an invitation to stick around a little longer?" He asked when he set the mug back down.

"If you want it to be."

"You just want help with the flooring," Stiles teased, already grinning and forgetting about the people he hadn't spoken to (or of, for that matter) in almost three months.

"You caught me," Derek deadpanned, just as their food was being sat on the table.

"Derek! You don't even have furniture!" Cassie shouted as she slammed the front door open. Stiles knew he wasn't the only glaring at the brand new wall with the brand new knob shaped hole in it.

"Cassie," Derek muttered, glaring at the redhead. She looked from them to the wall and had the grace to look sheepish. Derek fixed his glare on Stiles, as if silently blaming him. Which could have been a little accurate, considering Stiles had hit it off with Cassie, and Cassie had dragged Derek in through the sheer force of her personality. Which was considerable and accounted for her success.

"Sorry, I was just excited," She admitted in a quiet voice. "I can help you guys fix it? You have all the stuff for it here, right?"

"I'm not trusting you with anything resembling spackle or a knife," Derek grumbled as she walked in, a few other teenagers from the pack following her in, laden with trays of food and a few coolers.

"Where the hell did you get all that?" Stiles demanded as Cassie opened one of the coolers and passed a jug to him.

"Mom makes it, she's huge into brewing as a hobby. And don't worry, she knows it's your birthday and said I could have at. So, happy birthday, you're a legal adult!"

"So my first act as a recognized, legal adult should be to do something illegal?" Stiles asked, but he
accepted the jug anyway. Derek was already helping himself to the meat and cheese tray. It had been another day of skipping lunch in favor of laying more flooring.

"Hell yeah, start your adulthood out right. Besides, you've been responsible all day anyway. All summer actually, this place doesn't look half bad."

"Derek's doing most of it, I just hammer what he tells me to," Stiles shrugged, blushing despite himself. The house had come a long way, and he felt something that could be pride for it. It'd been awhile since he had helped in some tangible way, and despite the smaller hiccups, the house hadn't actually fallen apart or spontaneously imploded like he'd initially feared.

"You've done more than that," Derek reasoned. "And you've gotten a lot better."

"As opposed to what?" He asked, grabbing the roll of ham and roast beef out of Derek's hand and eating it in two bites. Derek made a face and then shrugged, reaching for another. Stiles was vaguely stunned he hadn't received a threat for that and figured it was because they had an audience.

"As opposed to blowing one up."

It was the first time the Old House, as Stiles had come to think of it, had been brought up in the past few months, and he had no clue how to react, so he tipped back the jug and took a long pull of the cold mead inside.

"You blew up a house?" Cassie almost shrieked, her voice bouncing off of the walls. Even Stiles flinched as he tried to figure out how to play it off.

"We both did," He finally said, looking at Derek as he did.

"Our first foray into construction," Derek said with a wry grin, accepting the jug and taking a long pull from the bottle, his Adam's apple bobbing with each gulp.

"Makes sense," Cassie said easily. "Sometimes you have to pull something down and clear out before you can start building."

Stiles watched Derek from the corner of his eye, pretending to be paying attention to Cassie as she jumped topics completely. But Derek was smiling. It wasn't anything anyone would ever recognize as a smile, but it was a Derek smile, one corner of his lips tilting up slightly and his shoulders moving minutely in agreement.

The others brought up the upcoming school year, the next full moon, movies they'd seen and actors and actresses they wanted to kidnap and keep locked in their bedrooms. Stiles relaxed, laughed and even added his own two cents, earning several approving nods and a few surprised glances when several of his selections were men. Even Derek looked a little surprised.

"Stiles just wants loving from everyone," Cassie teased. After Derek, she was the person he was most comfortable around, and they teased each other mercilessly.

"Fucking Christ Cassie! No!" Stiles shouted, picking up a piece of cheese and throwing it at her. His face was hot, and not just from the mead anymore.

"Bet you'd like to bang Jesus," She joked back, picking the cheese out of her lap and eating it.

"Crucifixes always give him the hip thing that's really hot," Stiles mused and couldn't contain his laughter at the horrified expressions on everyone's faces. Excluding Derek's, although Derek looked like he wanted to laugh as hard as Stiles was. He apparently covered it by reaching for the jug and
drinking from it. Stiles didn't entirely blame him.

"You're so evil!" Cassie finally laughed, realizing the joke. "Fuck, can you imagine getting off to a crucifix?"

"No, and don't want to," Annette piped up.

"I need to get outside, too fucking hot in here," He said, grabbing the jug from Derek and practically dancing outside with it. "Happy birthday to me!" He sang, expertly navigating the steps and jogging over to Derek's truck. It only took him a moment to scramble into the bed, and a few minutes after that Derek was in the back, sleeping bags and pillows in hand.

"Watch them come out," Stiles giggled drunkenly, eyes on the door.

True to prediction, Cassie came out, another jug in hand, and tripped, barely saving the jug as she pinwheeled and flailed wildly to keep from faceplanting in the dirt.

"You need to fix your fucking stairs!" She shouted as she walked over to the back of the truck.

They ended up making a game out of it, taking bets on who would faceplant and who would make it down.

By the time Stiles fell asleep, everyone was in the bed of Derek's truck, mumbling and slowly passing out in a tangle of limbs and blankets.

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Chapter End Notes

The lines Stiles said were from Evgeny Abramovich Baratynsky's Last Poet (first stanza)
Derek's lines of Ovid were: In the process of time the wound will perhaps, close. It shrinks however, from the touch while it is open.
A few days before he was supposed to start senior year, Stiles was trying to extract himself from Cassie's death grip of a hug. She stuffed a napkin in his pocket, one from the diner they'd just returned from, he noted, and nuzzled into his chest for the sixth time in as many minutes.

"Facebook. And call," She demanded, voice muffled by his hoodie.

"Yes ma'am," Stiles saluted awkwardly over her head.

"Smartass," She muttered into his chest, but she squeezed him tight, eliciting a squeak that made her giggle before she let go. "Now go say goodbye to Derek. He's doing the masculine thing and hiding in the kitchen so he doesn't have to see you leave."

"Whatever," He laughed, imagining Derek of all people hiding in a kitchen. Oh, for some reason it involved a yellow apron and that was appalling and amusing "Just give us some privacy," He added, walking back inside the house. Derek was leaning against one of the counters (and had that been a bitch to install) looking at the cabinets they'd finished hanging two days before.

"I think it's crooked," Stiles teased lightly.

"We checked," Derek reminded him, face set in a scowl and arms crossed over his chest. Stiles wondered if he was trying to set the cabinet on fire with the power of his mind. Neither of them were happy with it.

"I think the level was off."

"It's not crooked," Derek growled, but he looked at it more closely. Stiles knew he was itching for the level. Too bad it was hidden in the back of a closet. (Derek would find it eventually.)

"Thanks, for all this. For-" Stiles shrugged. "For helping me."

"Shouldn't I be saying that?" The werewolf asked, still not looking at him.

"Nah. I'm pretty sure you don't have to thank the dude that shattered an eight hundred dollar toilet."

"Or that almost shot me with a nail gun."

"You ever gonna let that go?"

"No."
"You ungrateful ass," He deadpanned.

Derek didn't respond to the accusation, though Stiles thought he might be smiling a little. If he squinted.

"Seriously. Thanks. I needed- this. And you didn't have to."

"Yes, I did."

"It wasn't your fault," He tried.

Derek didn't agree or disagree. Stiles knew well enough that the argument would only keep circling if he tried, and he didn't want to leave with that hanging in the air.

"Take it easy man."

There weren't any hugs, but he hadn't expected any.

"Stay safe, Stiles," Derek told him, just as he was walking out of the kitchen.

"I will." He promised himself he wasn't going to fuck up what Derek had done for him, knew Derek would just blame himself. And he refused to do that to him.

Derek didn't watch him go. Cassie waved and shouted at him as he drove down the path, epithets if he didn't call, reminders to be safe, and a long drawn out howl that made his heart clench in his chest when he realized how much he was going to miss her and Oregon, and even Derek. Knowing that Beacon Hills waited, he almost turned around, his hands moving before his mind had caught up with them, and swerved to right himself and take the turnoff to I5.

(When he got home that night, his dad was at work. The first thing he did was plug his phone in to charger and turn it on. His inbox was full of missed texts, his voicemail full from missed calls. He ignored them and took a picture of his bed and sent it to Derek and Cassie, reading off the napkin Cassie had written her number on. After that he dug through his bag and slipped the cloth covered in the sleep thorn sigil into his pillowcase.)

"You didn't even call," Scott whined, leaning against him for support. Stiles flinched back and started grinding his teeth when the werewolf only followed him, keeping the distance between them completely closed. "Just a couple of emails to let us know you were alive," He added, like it was an accusation. It probably was, Stiles thought. Scott was pouting. It sounded like he was pouting, anyway.

"Left my cell phone," He reminded him, staring at his notes. Statistics was going to make his goal of beating Lydia's gpa a nightmare. "Needed to go find myself, or whatever."

"Bet you were busy getting laid," Issac interjected with the sly confidence of someone that had regular and gratifying sex. "You look like someone that spent the summer getting laid."

Stiles wasn't sure if that was because he was sleeping better or because he'd gotten better at hiding his reactions to the moments when the faces around him would distort. Or maybe he just wasn't as restless and anxious anymore, a combination of better sleep and lower doses of adderall. Scott had commented that he smelled better when he hugged him, at least. Stiles wondered if that's how Derek had known in the first place.

"What's her name?" Lydia demanded, her tone sharp but her eyes on the magazine she was flipping
"Just had a good summer."

"Bull, Issac is right. You look like you've spent the summer kicking back with a girl," Scott tried, nudging him and smiling like they were sharing a secret. Stiles couldn't stop the long suffering sound that escaped, or keep his eyes from rolling. No one called him on it, even when he realized he was imitating Derek's 'why must you inflict yourself on me?' expression to a tee. Maybe he'd already been forgotten.

"Just worked on a house a little and hung out." And went through budget rehab and made friends that weren't going to tear him apart at the first wrong word.

"Is this like life of a house? You're suddenly mature and not full of self loathing?" Lydia asked, voice sharp. Obviously she didn't like how vague he was being, although he didn't entirely get why she was suddenly so interested in what he was doing.

"You're so sweet. I forget, why did I flee Beacon Hills for the summer?" He joked, voice saccharine and sarcastic, but it wasn't entirely a joke. He wondered if the werewolves in the room could sense that or not, but no one looked upset, or even particularly interested in the barbs he and Lydia were trading. Not even Aiden, who clung to her like an extra set of limbs, seemed to care. Scott's head had moved so his chin was on his shoulder. Stiles could feel his breath and tried not to recoil, forcefully not remembering Cassie nuzzling into him in the bed of Derek's truck.

He missed Oregon, missed Derek's quiet presence and Cassie's bombastic nature. He missed the hayloft and the woods and sleeping in sleeping bags and waking up with the sun and the sound of powertools. It hurt to realize he wouldn't be going back to the barn again for at least a year, if ever.

"Come on dude, we can still have a birthday party," Scott said, his words vibrating in Stiles' ear. "Cake and ice cream."

Stiles slammed his stats book shut. It gave him the excuse to start moving, to get some space -'fuck, at least a ruler's width, for the love of god Scott'- from the alpha. Scott continued to wheedle until he gave in.

They talked about their summer in Ventura and Stiles told them bits and pieces of his summer in 'Seattle', although he never named a specific place so he never had to lie. He didn't mention the pack or Derek. It was nice, having a secret in a group of people that couldn't seem to keep any. It should have put him on edge, but there a distinct lack of interest in Oregon, like they didn't care that he'd been gone. Only Scott demanded answers, and once satisfied, told him it was good he got to 'see the world'. Stiles wondered how small Scott's world was, if Oregon counted as experiencing something foreign.

(Lydia mentioned the twins were joining the Lacrosse team. Stiles resolved to quit.)

Deaton's call was unexpected and only mostly unwelcome. Stiles was still a little bitter that the vet had left him to the wayside, but he agreed to meet him at the clinic after it closed. When he got there, Deaton was by his car and opening his trunk, like he'd known exactly when Stiles would arrive (Stiles had petulantly arrived five minutes late). There were two boxes inside, taped shut and labeled 'fragile'.

"These are items for Derek," Deaton told him as he transferred the boxes over to the jeep. Stiles thought maybe he was getting better at the eyebrow thing, because Deaton actually explained
himself, although even that was vague. "I figure you know how to get them to him. And I have something for you," he added, and handed Stiles a few books. Stiles looked over the spines and tried to place the language, although nothing immediately jumped out at him.

"I'm sure you can figure it out," Deaton smiled at his quizzical look. He closed his trunk and got in his car, leaving Stiles alone in the parking lot. Stiles shrugged it off and headed home, glancing at the odd language on the books in his front seat and then back at road, then at the boxes in the back and back to the road again. He wasn't sure which was more intriguing, and even though he was tempted, he wouldn't open the boxes. Even though he really, really wanted to, it felt wrong to pry into Derek's past, especially given the parts Derek had shared with him. When he got home, his dad was outside staring at their front porch like he knew something was off, but he couldn't put his finger on it. And it was obviously bothering the hell out of him. Stiles left the boxes in the back seat and grabbed the books.

"Does something look different to you?"

"Rehung the screen and fixed the railing," Stiles told him as he walked past. His dad made a surprised sound and called out that he was going out to dinner with Melissa. There were several envelopes for colleges on the table. Stiles grabbed them and shuffled upstairs.

He discarded all of them after seeing that they were all for colleges in state. That night he found himself going over the grammar of old norse. He was too embroiled in the downloaded pdf to ask himself why Deaton was suddenly giving him books on scandinavian lore.

The world was monochrome, washed in shades of red that bled into one another, blurred and inky. Stiles watched the talons erupting through Boyd's back, saw the burgundy that was blood pouring out and splashing into the scarlet water on the floor, tainting it to match. When Boyd fell, his skin crumbled and he disintegrated into the water. Scott stood there, the blood dripping from his claws and his mouthed smeared with lipstick. Stiles felt the gorge rise in his throat, bile bubbling out of his mouth and nostrils. Somewhere the theme to Batman buzzed in his head as he fingered the noose in his hands.

He wasn't sure who it was for.

It's for Judas, Scott mouthed, but Stiles dimly recognized the voice as female, as Morrell's. The words boomed like a canon going off, the syllables echoing through the room and turning the water at his feet into a tidal wave that rose over his head and pulled him under.

"Stiles!" A voice shouted. He clawed at the hands shaking him and screamed, tried to get away as he fought to breathe as the bile in his lungs burned, turned to acid.

"Stiles wake up!"

His father's voice beat against the sound of the water as it thrummed and thinned into the tap tap tap of blood dripping into a puddle. Stiles keened, pushed at the hands, tried to cover his ears as the sound echoed, hammered itself into his brain.

"Stiles!"

Stiles felt his eyes snap open and for one awful moment thought he'd gone blind, his whole world pricked in whorls of red as he pushed himself and fell onto the floor. Acidic and thin, vomit forced itself up his throat and out, splashing onto his hands. His head pounded, the echo drowning out the
sound of his father, each reverberation working in dissonant counterpoint to the hand rubbing his back. Tears and snot poured down his skin until he wasn't sure which bodily fluid smeared on his face was what.

"Stiles," His dad said again. Stiles pushed at the slickness around his hands, screaming because for a moment all he saw was the water of the floor, felt the pieces of Boyd brushing against him.

Everything swam into focus, the world becoming glaringly, blessedly, vivid and colorful.

"Dad?" He whispered, voice hoarse and breaking.

"Jesus," His dad muttered, pulling him away from the puddle of vomit. Stiles shook his head, tried to clear the last remaining tinges of red in his vision. His dad's arms tightened around him and he felt his hands, still covered in bile, scrambling to cling to something substantial and root himself firmly in reality. He didn't know how long they stayed that way, but when the shaking stopped and he noticed that his throat was burning, he looked up at his dad, eleven again, alone and bewildered.

"Stiles, son, you okay?" His dad's voice asked, and Stiles saw the concern there, the fear, for him.

"No," He admitted, unable to lie in the face of that fear.

"You need to stay home from school today?"

He nodded emphatically, afraid of the words that would slip out if he tried to speak.

"Come on, you need a shower. I'll clean this up."

"I can get it," He started, but he felt more than saw his dad shaking his head as he pulled him to his feet.

"Shower. You okay, or do you need-"

"I'll be fine," He muttered, stumbling back and crashing into his dresser. Bracing himself on it, he looked at the ceiling, at his door, anywhere but at the floor, half afraid he would see that the phantom sensation of water around his feet was real after all. "Thanks," He muttered, moving away from his dresser and for the open door.

Once the bathroom door was closed behind him, he looked in the mirror, saw the uneven red splotches on his skin, the shine of snot and tears, of even worse on his mouth. He fumbled for the bottle of mouthwash, gargled and spat twice before giving in and swallowing a cap full. He washed his face, motions automatic. Then he looked at the shower.

He couldn't do it, couldn't talk himself into letting water pour over him. Instead, he took a deep breath and walked back to his room, saw his dad on his hands and knees and knelt to help him. Most of the mess was already gone, but his dad was febreezing and patting the area with a towel. His bed was stripped bare, even his pillowcase.

"You want to tell me about Boyd?" He dad asked in a quiet voice.

"No," Stiles finally whispered, clenching his eyes shut so he didn't have to see his father's disappointment.

"You know you can tell me anything, right? Nothing-I know it's hard, that-It's natural, to have problems after you experience trauma-"
"It was just a nightmare dad," he muttered, grabbing the towel and scrubbing at the spot. He heard the sigh, felt it roll through him. "I can't today," he added. "Soon," he lied.

"Alright. You up to some crackers, maybe some ginger ale?"

"Do we actually have ginger ale?" he countered.

"No, but it'll only take me a few minutes to get some."

"I'll be fine dad," he said again, praying it was true. His dad made an affirmative noise and got up, left him alone in his room with the smell of febreeze laying over the scent of vomit. Stiles got up and started shoving his pillows around, looked in the cracks between the wall and his bed, checked under it, panicked, checked between the mattresses.

The cloth with the sigil on it was gone.

"Fuck," he muttered, sitting and slumping on his bed.

He waited patiently for the wash to get done, his father keeping an eye on him as he fidgeted around in the kitchen, doing all of the chores he normally did on the weekend. The moment the washer buzzed he darted for the door to the laundry room and began shifting everything over, checking through it carefully.

It wasn't there.

Stiles only barely kept himself from breaking down in front of his dad as he closed the dryer and started it.

"Everything alright son?"

"Fine dad. I'm just gonna go work on a paper," he lied, walking away from the kitchen on stilted legs, his world dimming to a pinpoint. He'd been so fucking stupid, so careless and forgotten what the nightmares had been like. How intense, how clear everything was.

Needing something, anything to keep his hands busy, to keep from calling Derek and begging him to help him, from making himself Derek's problem again, he opened his comparative government and politics book and started reading. He was already finished with all of his homework in the class, but he might be able to talk Louis into giving him some extra credit to boost his gpa. He needed everything he could get since he'd cut his only extracurricular.

He was still reading and taking notes when his door opened hours later.

"Hey dude, didn't see you at school today," Scott murmured, slipping into his room. "Got your homework for you."

Stiles blinked at Scott once, twice, shook his head and then nodded. "Thanks."

"Everything alright? You look-Not good."

"Peachy."

Scott fidgeted, watched him as he flipped through the notes that had been taken for him, probably by Lydia. After a few minutes, he turned back to him, gaze narrowed.

"What Scott?"
"You need to stop messing with magic," Scott blurted, his shoulders hunched.

"I'm sorry, I could have sworn you said I'm messing with magic," Stiles repeated. Scott nodded, looking uncomfortable.

"That thing in your pillowcase. It smelled weird, and I just-I don't know what you were trying to do, but you need to stop."

Stiles felt his world bottom out beneath him.

"What did you do with it?"

"I got rid of it."

"Like, in the trash or-"

"I burned it. Lydia said that was best."

"Lydia-You burned it?" Stiles snarled. "What the fuck were you thinking? You couldn't have gone to Deaton and asked about it first?"

"It's not Deaton's problem!" Scott snapped. "Whatever it is you're messing with, you shouldn't. Deaton's busy teaching Lydia and the last thing we need is for you to blow yourself up or summon something here."

"I wasn't the one that made it, Scott!"

"It smelled like you," Scott accused.

"It's been in my pillowcase for over a month! Of course it smells like me you moron! You know I'm not lying. I didn't make it. I needed it."

"For what? You've been so weird lately and you had some weird magic thing-"

"Fuck you. You could have asked all of this before you fucking burned it. Get out. Get out!" Stiles shouted, furious and desperate. It was gone. The only thing standing between him and emotional immolation was gone, fucking vanished. He was so fucked he couldn't actually breathe.

The door slammed behind Scott and Stiles stared at it, the sound of water rushing up to meet him.

Each day was progressively worse. No one said anything, but he had the feeling everyone in the pack knew about the sigil, had their own thoughts and opinions on it. Lydia was sneering at him, and even Danny looked at him strangely. Stiles could barely stand to look at anyone else, their faces shuttering and changing more and more often the less sleep he got. He retreated, spending more time in the library than in the lunch room and every period with his face shoved in his books.

He resorted to buying bottles of caffeinated flavoring for water and squirting them straight into his mouth and going jogging in the middle of the night. But he didn't try to up his dose of adderall, and despite the temptation to feel adrenaline flooding his system all at once, he didn't let himself use his knives.

The dreams got worse and worse, and he wanted to call Derek, to tell Cassie to talk to her dad, but he didn't know how to tell them, was ashamed that it was still a problem. He was afraid of putting himself on them again, when Rick barely knew him and Derek needed to move on, move past the bullshit of Beacon Hills.
But after three weeks of patchy, nightmare ridden sleep, he snapped. Erica's voice begged in his head, Allison smirked at him, kept shooting at Erica and it was too fucking much.

On the night of the new moon, Stiles left his jeep parked at the entrance of the preserve and pulled the shovel out out of the back. He walked carefully through the darkness until he got to the far side, remembering exactly where the bodies were buried. Making sure his hair was safely tucked under the beanie and every part of him covered, from his face to his hands, he struck down into the soil and began to dig. He ignored the sweat building up beneath the heavy layers of clothing he'd donned, prayed the cloth soaked it up and continued, cursing werewolf strength for the depth the bodies had been buried, then himself for suggesting it in the first place. Three hours later he stepped away from the holes, gaze critical.

The bodies had probably mostly decomposed, the timing was about right for nothing but bone and some clothing to remain, hopefully enough for identification. He left some dirt still covering them, mostly because he didn't want to see the remains, wasn't sure if he could go manage to keep the area sterile if he did. Satisfied that it would be more than enough for the dogs to find, he begged whatever god was listening that it would be enough for the specters actively attacking his mind. (He knew better than to expect any indication that it was.) He dragged himself away from the graves, through the preserve to his car.

He went out of town, drove all the way to Arcata before going in to a walmart and buying a burner phone with cash. He quickly made the call to his fathers office. It didn't take much work to disguise his voice, to hide his inflections as he informed the deputy of the two bodies buried at the preserve. Then he drove back towards beacon hills. Halfway there he ran over the phone and then threw the pieces into the distance. The shovel and his clothes were tossed into a dumpster behind a pizza hut, buried under bags of filth.

When he got home, his father was out. He walked back to his bed and fell into it. Despite everything, he couldn't shake the feeling of too little, too late.

(He dreamed he was drowning in blood and Jennifer was teaching Scott how to do CPR on Heather's lifeless body.)

Everyone knew about Erica and Boyd being found the night before. Stiles didn't want to know how, didn't care. He focused on his stat textbook as he waited for first period to start, determined to ignore the whispered speculations. Wild animals don't bury their prey. Too fresh to be Argent's victims. Maybe another serial killer? Suicide pact? They were totally the type, didn't have any friends-

When he was walking for his next class he felt himself pulled into a classroom and his hand immediately reached for the vial around his neck, the books he'd been holding falling to the floor. His other hand began moving for the knife secured to his back. The door slammed shut behind him, a banging echo in the empty classroom.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Scott demanded in a furious whisper, crowding him against the door.

"Fucking don't do that," Stiles snarled, pushing at the alpha. Scott didn't even acknowledge the movement, instead getting closer so Stiles could see the red in his eyes.

"Your dad got a tip about Erica and Boyd, and I went and checked. Your scent was everywhere! Why would you do that!"
"Give their families peace?" Stiles snapped. "Give them the chance for justice?"

"This is going to cause so many problems, problems we don't need," Scott hissed. "Everything was getting better-"

"It never got better," Stiles retorted, feeling a surge of raw hatred blooming in his gut and spreading through him like poison. "It won't get better."

"You're not letting it," Scott accused.

"Fuck you," Stiles snarled, pulling the vial free and sliding his thumb over the top, the threat clear. Scott pulled back, eyes focused on the vial instead of him. "If you want to sit on top of a tower of corpses, that's your fucking prerogative. The rest of us have morals."

"So you're going to try and destroy everything? For something that's already over?"

"I'm doing the right thing. Their families have a right to a burial. They deserve more than some nameless hole out in the preserve. You're fucking lucky any physical evidence has probably rotted out."

"Probably," Scott pointed out, a clawed finger coming dangerously close to Stiles' face. "Which means it might not have."

"And who pays, huh? The only ones that touched the bodies were me and Issac when we buried them, and I made sure we were careful when we did it. Which leaves-Oh. The people that murdered them. Unless you're going to try pinning it on Derek again," He snapped. "He's not here to defend himself. Easy fix, right Scott?" He added sarcastically.

Scott glared at him, and Stiles saw his face shift, saw the darkness sliding up to contort the features into a snarl.

"I'm going to talk to your dad. Don't-Don't do anything else, Stiles. I get that you're trying to do the right thing, but you're only going to hurt everyone. So just-Stop."

Stiles watched Scott carefully, twitched violently when the alpha reached past him to open the door.

And then he was alone in the room, finger still capped over the vial, his hand slick and sweaty against the glass. Quickly tugging at the chain, he pushed the cork attached back in and gathered his things.

Throughout the rest of the day he received everything from confused glances to full out glares from the pack. By the time the bell rang and his lunch period was up, he'd decided to skip the second half of his day and just go home. Seeing Scott walking towards him in the hall, he veered off and doubled around through the building until he got to his jeep. He saw Ethan coming towards him and threw everything into the passenger seat before pulling out, mindful of the students around him.

When he got home, his dad was staring at a sheaf of papers spilling out of two different folders to cover the table.

"Got an anonymous tip last night," He dad told him, not bothering to look up.

"Really?"

"Gave us the exact location of Erica Reyes and Vernon Boyd's bodies. Looks like he even dug them up most of the way too."
"Huh. That's good though, right? Their families will know what happened to them now."

His dad nodded and then rubbed his eyes. Stiles wondered if he'd gotten any sleep the night before realizing work would have kept him busy.

"They get some closure. But," His dad stopped, eyes on the folders.

"But what?"

"Scott came to visit me at the station."

"Oh?"

"Said it was that pack of alphas that did it. That it was handled."

"Huh," Stiles muttered.

"You don't sound convinced."

"No, it was the alphas," Stiles bit out. He looked back at his dad and saw the fatigue lining his features and dragging them down. "Hey dad?"

"Yeah?"

"There's going to be an investigation, isn't there?"

"Has to be. I can't put werewolves down on paper," He dad muttered. "My life would be so much easier if I could just write werewolves."

Stiles snorted at the backhanded attempt at humor.

"Dad?"

"Yeah son?"

"They were best friends. If you could somehow let their parents know? Maybe-I mean, try to get them buried next to eachother or something?"

"I can't determine that Stiles," His dad sighed. "But I'll let the parents know that it came up, during the investigation and everything."

"Thanks," Stiles mumbled, choosing to make his escape before his dad pushed the subject any further.

The funeral was going...According to the same script every funeral seemed to go by. Stiles listened to the eulogy, to the prayers and the memories. He listened to distant parents talk about children that had gotten lost, fallen off the path. He wondered how much of their grieving had already been done, if the bodies were just simple closure.

They did have the funerals together, at least. It was closer to the woods, away from the main cemetery. Stiles wondered if the plots were cheaper or if that was the only place where they could be side by side. Still, it wasn't terrible, he guessed. Even if they were gone and their bodies were just...things, they were by the woods. Maybe eventually they plots would be forgotten and reclaimed by the growth, like older cemeteries he'd seen, where the headstones were cracked and shattered, the plots themselves barely discernible from their surroundings. The graves wouldn't be subject to the
rumors and gossip mill that was steadily grinding the pair's memories into something twisted.

Everyone else was leaving when he got up to go, the rush of people eager to get away a little sickening, even though he needed the cloak of anonymity, needed to rush so he wasn't stopped and spoken to by anyone. The pack had been told, explicitly, not to go, not with the investigation still open. The last thing he needed or wanted was news somehow getting back to Scott. Even if they hadn't spoken since the bodies had been found, he knew Scott would be pissed he'd attended, probably enough to track him down and start yelling at him again.

His heart almost stopped when he spotted the leather jacket. He'd only turned back to get one last look at the flowers and stands that mapped out the graves, but he saw black leather just beyond the treeline and spun on his heel, heart tripping and scrambling in his chest. The closer he got, the worse it got, realization slowly dawning on him when he saw who it was.

"Derek?" Stiles whispered, getting the werewolf's attention. Derek turned, his expression guarded.

"How did they find them?"

Stiles shrugged, didn't know how to say it was his fault, that he was the one that had thoughtlessly pulled up the past. He hadn't thought Derek would come back though, hadn't ever considered that he might want to attend the funerals, even from a distance. He managed a choked 'I'm sorry' before stumbling back and leaning against a tree, letting it support him.

"You don't look good," Derek said quietly, his gaze bluntly assessing.

"I haven't-I'm not doing it," He defended weakly even as his body betrayed him and hunched in, trying to make itself a smaller target, to hide the obvious. "I haven't done anything." Because he'd disappointed his dad enough for the past few weeks by waking up screaming, and Melissa by worrying his dad, and fuck, even Danny was having problems looking at him, probably for putting his boyfriend in potential danger. He couldn't stand to see Derek disappointed, knew it would shatter what was left of the tenuous grip he had on his sanity.

"Stiles," Derek said, stepping closer, the guarded expression slipping away to reveal genuine concern. Stiles shook his head. No. Derek was fucking free of Beacon Hills, was probably the only person that deserved it. He was there for a funeral, to pay his respects to his betas. Not deal with Stiles shit. Again.

"Fine," He lied. "Totally fine."

"Your heartbeat's erratic."


"No Stiles, it's not erratic just from a lie. Your body sounds like it's close to giving out," Derek informed him sharply, gaze growing intent, focused. Stiles hugged himself in response, wanting, needing to hide himself from that focus. "You haven't been sleeping." It was a statement, almost an accusation. Stiles was surprised at how quickly he was getting used to those again.

He shrugged, not able to look Derek in the eye anymore and choosing to examine the ground instead.

"Are you having nightmares?"

Stiles shrugged again. Derek moved forward and Stiles felt warmth blooming along his upper arms,
felt the grip, almost too tight, and tried not to lean into it. Derek was warm, the first warm thing in weeks, and he wanted to steal that warmth for himself.

"Did the sleep thorn stop working?" Derek asked seriously. Stiles shook his head.

"Scott found it, burned it. Thought I shouldn't be dickin' around with magic," Stiles whispered, flinching when Derek's eyes flashed cold blue.

"Have you eaten today?"

Stiles shook his head. The thought of food made his nauseous.

"When was the last time you ate?"

Stiles shrugged listlessly. He honestly couldn't remember.

"Come on, we're going to go eat. Can you wait until we get out of town?" Derek asked already walking for the parking lot. Stiles didn't want to eat at all, so it was easy to nod as he followed. There was nothing said as they got inside, and Stiles leaned against the door when Derek started the truck, imagining he could smell Derek, maybe Cassie too as they drove away from the funerals.

"Thank you," Derek finally said into the silence.

"For what?" He asked, eyes on the trees they passed.

"They deserved more than-" He paused, jaw working furiously. "They deserved more."

Stiles didn't respond. When they passed the city limits, then another's, he didn't say anything. After an hour of driving, he followed Derek into a little diner that boasted all day breakfasts. When he stared dumbly at the waitress, Derek ordered for him.

"You need to eat," Derek told him. "And I'm going to talk to Scott."


"Why? You're-"

"It'll only make it worse," Stiles interrupted. "Scott's-"

"He's your friend. He should have noticed-"

"He's pissed I dug up the bodies, alright?" Stiles snapped. Derek stared him down, eyes narrowing and mouth pinching in a frown before he shrugged and sat back in his seat. Stiles exhaled and scrubbed a hand over his face.

"I'm sorry," He tried again. "I'm always such a fucking problem-"

"Don't," Derek snapped, startling him. When he looked up Derek looked enraged, his fists clenched in his lap and his entire body tensed, ready to spring. "You made the right call, Stiles. You can't make apologies for other people."

"But-"

"Did you show him the sleep thorn?" Derek demanded.

"No-"
"Did you wish for nightmares?"

"No," Stiles snapped.

"Then this isn't your fault," Derek bit out, the waitress returning with plates stopping him from going any further into his tirade. "Eat, you need it."

Stiles ate, tasted wood in his mouth and swallowed anyway. Derek's eyes watched him, so he ate everything, forcing each bite down with a wash of coffee from his never empty cup. Once the werewolf was satisfied, he paid the bill and they walked back out to the truck. Everything was mechanical. When Stiles got in and closed the door, he leaned against the window again.

"I'm sorry," He said, because he didn't know what else to say.

"Stop saying that," Derek snarled, peeling out of the parking lot. Stiles watched the world pass in blurs and shapes. When they pulled into a walmart parking lot, he turned to Derek.

"Get in the back, take a nap. I'll wake you up if it looks bad."

Stiles didn't say they were always bad, just scrambled over the seat and into the back. He stared at the back of Derek's seat, too wired to actually sleep. He didn't know how much time passed, but eventually Derek muttered something and got out. The door next to his head opened and he sat up sliding away from Derek.

Derek pushed the console in the front seat down and threw his feet in the gap, shrugging down into the seat and crossing his arms over his chest. Stiles recognized the invitation, knew it was as much of one as he would get, and slowly slid closer, inch by hesitant inch, until his shoulder was touching Derek's. He crossed his arms, hugged himself and tilted his head back, soaking up the warmth of another body and allowing it to ward off the ever present chill that seemed to radiate from within his bones. He closed his eyes and let his breath rush out of his lungs.

It felt like only an instant had passed when he felt Derek shaking him awake with one hand, the other holding him against the seat. He could taste blood in his mouth.


"Kate too," Derek added quietly, his hands dropping to his lap.

"How long?"

"Couple of hours," Derek muttered. Stiles shrugged and got out of the truck, stretched, then got back into the front. Derek followed, his gaze locked on the world ahead of him, neck stiff.

"Thanks."

"Not a problem," Derek told him, voice tight. Stiles nodded, guilt immediately suffusing his conscience as Derek pulled out of the parking lot. Kate. Jesus. His subconscious wouldn't give Derek a break, for whatever reason. Obviously seeing his two betas being buried wasn't punishment enough, he had to have Kate thrown in his face. Bravo, Stiles thought to himself.

Derek took him back to the cemetery and parked next to his jeep.

"I'll get another sleep thorn for you."

"I'm sorry."
"Don't apologize. Just-try to take care of yourself."

He was trying. He just couldn't seem to pull it off. He nodded bleakly and watched Derek drive away, hands clenched tight around his keys before steeling himself for his return to his house, to his bed, possibly to his father's look of general dejection.

(He dreamed of Boyd turning the disembodied hand in his flesh and opening his stomach like a safe. Wolfsbane poured out.)

Stiles stared at Scott, unsure if he could actually muster the energy to tell him to fuck off.

"I'm sorry," Scott blurted, his brown eyes wide with shock.

Stiles figured he had either been awake long enough to begin having auditory hallucinations, or he had finally, truly lost his mind. Either was equally likely at that point.

"Derek said he saw you at the funeral, that you looked-bad. You do," Scott added, his gaze sweeping over him.

Sonofbitch. Stiles cursed in Derek's general direction. Sold out. Again. To fucking Scott.

"I know you were trying to do the right thing. And I get it, okay. So can we, I want us to just stop this whole not talking to eachother thing."

Stiles was positive the universe had made a mistake by making Scott an alpha. Either that or Scott was being willfully blind because he was an alpha, and Stiles-

He knew he didn't have the energy to fight it anymore.

"Sure dude," He muttered, waving his hands vaguely. "Any particular topic of discussion you want to go over?"

"You need to take better care of yourself man. Derek was right, your heart sounds-Off. Like it's not beating right."

Stiles almost barked out a laugh and just barely suppressed it. "Sure. Next?"

"What do you mean, next? Stiles, it's your heart. This is important!"

Scott was so earnest, Stiles actually wondered if he saw anything wrong with the way he was acting, with the incongruity of the picture he was creating. He knew if he examined it any closer, for any length of time at all, he would finally crack and lose it, either cave in on himself or explode out. Both options only offered promises of violence, and he was tired, too fucking tired to contemplate anything that strenuous.

"I know dude. I'm getting a handle on it, no worries," He finally said. He had no idea what Derek had told Scott, but apparently it had been just enough to cause concern without bringing a shitstorm down on his head. And that was sneaky as hell, but Stiles had to concede the point. Derek was still watching out for him the best he could. Even using Scott.

And huh, he could actually appreciate the effort a lot more, taking that into consideration. Derek had probably had more fun getting drugged by Lydia.

"Look, I need to get a nap in." It wasn't a lie, he did need to take a nap. Or sleep for a year. Either or. Whether it happened or not had absolutely no bearing on the truth. "See you tomorrow?"
"Yeah," Scott smiled, relaxing.

After the door closed, Stiles brought his browser back up and stared at the submission form he'd filled out. Without even hesitating, he clicked submit.

The box had four squares of cloth inside, each one inscribed with the same set of sigils. Despite having seen them before, Stiles examined them again, compared them against his findings on the internet, and was satisfied that they weren't hiding anything, at least not obviously.

There was no note with them, no explanation or even a reprimand or warning. Stiles shrugged it off and stuffed one in his pillowcase before folding the remaining three and heading down to his car. After a few minutes of work he had them squared away in his lockbox, feeling reasonably sure that Scott would never sense them there. (He hadn't caught the scent of the other items, after all.)

(That night Stiles went to bed early, surprising his dad. When he slept, his dreamed of Erica eating roses. Her lip caught on a thorn and bled gold.)

The group seemed to be closing ranks around him, an about face that was suffocating and disturbing in equal measures. Lydia and the twins remained distant, although the active glaring and glowering stopped. Stiles actually preferred their near silence to the almost oppressive attention Scott was raining down on him. Issac and Allison were nice to him, made a point to include him in conversations he had trouble having at all. Despite the lull in his nightmares, Allison's face continued to shift, catching him off guard and sending a cold shudder of revulsion up his spine.

For all the distress his 'lapse in judgment' had supposedly caused, the pack seemed entirely too zen about his return to them. Stiles felt like the world was crumbling beneath his feet more and more as he smiled and nodded, pretending that everything was alright.
Chapter Summary

Maybe he was welcome after all. *Holy shit.*

Chapter Notes

Update 1 of 2.

The reviews have been fucking *awesome*. I admit I'm sort of scared to reply though, because I suck at secrets and spoilers. So yeah.

Scott already had plans -'Aiden wants...-' over the long weekend. Stiles muttered a small prayer to the god looking out for him. Scott was almost manic in his need to overcompensate for the fall, and it wouldn't have been so bad if there twins weren't almost constantly present, if Scott's concerned face didn't shift into the mockery of concern Gerard had perfected time and again. The shadow selves, as Stiles thought of them, still made their brief appearances despite his nightmares lulling into something more tolerable. Every time they did, he managed to keep from flinching, from reacting even as his equilibrium was thrown entirely. (Stiles bit his tongue every time Scott tried to please him in some way. He knew Scott was trying, just not in the ways that counted.)

His bags were already in the back of his car when he left school. Taking the shortest route out of town, he stopped by the sheriff's station and told his dad goodbye, promised to call when he got to Portland safely, no matter the time.

He drove straight to Derek's, pausing at an oasis to stretch his legs before getting back on the road. Somewhere along the way it felt like the boxes began to burn a hole through the seat and into his back. With that itching in the back of his mind, he got off at an exit and grabbed a burger at the nearest drive through before getting back onto I-5, eating with one hand and driving with the other.

Despite making great time, it was still almost three in the morning when he pulled into Derek's driveway, a little nervous. He had no idea if Derek would even want him there, given what had happened last time he'd seen him. The front door opened just as he parked next to the truck and practically spilled out, trying to revive sensation in his ass and legs while fighting off the almost overpowering urge to pee.

Derek, damn him, looked completely at ease even though he was in a pair of boxers and his hair was mussed from sleep.

"You could have called," He offered in way of greeting.

"Nonsense, surprises are more fun when you don't expect them."

"Isn't that the purpose of a surprise?" Derek smirked.
Maybe he was welcome after all. *Holy shit.*

"Exactly. Now come on and help me bring these inside."

The front porch was still cinderblocks, settling into the dirt into an even more uneven pattern. Stiles navigated his way inside and looked around, surprised that the house actually looked like a house. Simple and spartan, there wasn't much in the way of furniture, but it looked good. Clean and open. The hardwood floors he'd bitched about so much actually made the rooms look bigger, oddly enough, and complimented the dark wood of the furniture.

"What is this?" Derek asked, sitting the box on the dining room table.

"Deaton gave them to me awhile back, said they were yours."

Derek opened the box and Stiles could tell from the abrupt tightening of his jaw that it was the kind of stuff Derek wanted a private moment with. Slipping away to give him some time alone with the boxes, he walked through the house and examined the items of everyday living, ignoring the pins and needles of sensation returning to his legs.

The kitchen was amazing, obviously outfitted to do some serious cooking. Stiles thought he might be drooling over the built in over in the wall and the counter top gas stove. Everything was stainless steel and beautiful, and very, very expensive. It actually looked used too, which surprised Stiles. (The cabinets had been replaced, and Stiles wondered when Derek had done that.)

The den was open, still unfinished. Derek hadn't gotten a television yet, but Stiles smiled anyway, the space felt lived in despite the fact that it hadn't been finished, a blanket and pillow stuffed against one arm of the couch. There were do it yourself books about building decks littering the coffee table in front of the couch and Stiles felt a twinge of envy, because he wanted to help and knew he probably wouldn't be around for it.

He headed up the stairs and marveled, remembering how he helped put them together. It was surreal to see it again, in a way, especially with the signs of living that had accumulated. Pictures hadn't done anything justice, hadn't given the sense of life that seemed to scatter itself here and there. The bathroom with the toilet he helped install looked barely used, there was even a coat of dust on the counter. After quickly taking care of his more pressing need, he washed his hands and resisted the twitchy, obsessive compulsive part of himself that wanted to give the bathroom a once over, cleaning wise. He ignored it in favor of looking into the other rooms, passing the master suite by completely. One room was painted a neutral blue and that was it, there wasn't even a bed. The pale green room across the hall was equally empty. The last room was a warm tan color that Stiles figured was a workspace of some kind, a desk in the corner covered with notebooks and pens. Derek appeared to be the organized chaos type, the clutter of books and crumpled paper in the wastebasket giving the desk a lived in appearance, like Derek spent hours there. Shaking his head to clear the image of the werewolf hunched over the desk, scowling at something on a paper before crumpling it, he closed the door behind him.

Walking back downstairs he paused at the entrance to the dining room, trying to figure out if Derek wanted to be alone or not.

"It's stuff saved from the fire," Derek finally said, voice hoarse. Stiles nodded silently, knowing when it was best to tread carefully. There was something depressing about Derek's whole childhood, his whole family, being summed up into two boxes. Newspaper littered the table and there were small bits and pieces of a life between them, islands of memory, some pieces marked by the fire despite obvious attempts to restore them.
"I'm sorry," Stiles said, and he meant it. He wasn't sure what he meant it for, but it could have been and probably was for any number of things.

"My mom kept this in her room," Derek said, picking up a clear glass vase that had an opalescent sheen to it. It was slightly warped, one side drooping a little. "She said she would put it back downstairs when she was sure none of us would break it. Any time we gave her flowers, we'd get to go into her room and watch as she arranged them in it."

Stiles leaned against him because he didn't know what else he should or could do. He wasn't sure if he was more worried by Derek's silence or the fact that Derek actually leaned into the contact like he needed the support.

"I can't believe you!" Cassie shouted across the college parking lot right before Stiles found his arms full of redheaded, squirming werewolf. "You didn't even call to let me know you'd be here, I had to find out from my dad!"

"I just got in last night, technically this morning," Stiles groaned as his ribs compressed in Cassie's version of a hug, which easily could qualify as some sort of illegal wrestling stranglehold. "And your dad offered to give me a tour of the campus."

"Still, you should have called. When do you have to go back?"

"Monday morning."

"Then you're having dinner with us. Derek too, I know he's around somewhere."

"He's running a mysterious errand of some sort, and the command has already been issued," Stiles told her, smiling despite himself. Rick had given Caroline's ultimatum to him the moment they'd met in the campus commons, saying his wife had implied the 'or else'. Stiles knew better than to push it. Caroline seemed fond of him, but he hadn't provoked her temper yet, and after hearing a few select stories, had no real desire to. He felt that, miracle of miracles, his self preservation instincts could actually be on the rise again.

"Awesome. I've missed you, you know," Cassie admitted, looping an arm around his waist and leaning into him. He draped an arm over her shoulder and nudged her hip gently.

"And my food," He added, remembering a phone call during his lunch hour where he'd tried to guide her through making his chicken casserole. He'd practically paced the length of the library, flailing and hysterical while Cassie, on the other end, had been equally hysterical and screaming about a fire. He still had no idea how she'd done it.

"One meal at the gathering and you've ruined me, not even aunt Marianne can cook that good," Cassie whined, nudging her hip against his. "So, looking at schools here?"

"Exploring my options," He hedged, biting back a smile.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't biased or anything, but you should totally come to school here. It'd be like summer every day." She obviously knew what buttons to push. The past few months back in Beacon Hills had been spent working on his dad's house, tiptoeing around the pack with it's constant ebb and flow of tension, translating the books Deaton had loaned him, and getting his applications sorted out.

"Except Oregon has bitter winters. I've played Oregon trail, I know what happens," Stiles joked. "I could get dysentery."
"Or drown yourself and your horses."

"I always got oxen," Stiles mused aloud. Somehow that turned into a conversation about the game neither of them had ever managed to win, and he found himself following her back to her mother's house.

Marianne greeted him warmly and he stepped around the tangle of Cassie's younger sister and a cousin wrestling in the living room before falling down into the couch, still exhausted from the night before. When Marianne asked why he looked tired, he was just sleepy enough to admit that he'd only gotten a nap before driving to the school. Somehow his feet ended up in Cassie's lap and the next thing he knew he was being gently nudged awake, the smell of food permeating the house.

Dinner that night consisted of a dozen people crammed at the table and Cassie and her sisters telling him all about the campus and the different tracks. It was an obvious attempt to sway his decision. Caroline smiled warmly throughout it and spoke in hushed tones with Derek about his house and someone named Miles while Rick and Sebastian spoke about Rick's students.

Finding their efforts cute and a little funny, Stiles let Cassie and her siblings continue on their crusade to get him to attend. He didn't bother to tell them he'd already made his choice.

(Derek never mentioned the funerals and Rick never mentioned the sleep thorn. Stiles didn't say anything at all, too afraid of shattering the illusion of ease he found himself in.)

In between applying for scholarships and a few loans (surprisingly few, his grades and test scores were apparently enough to qualify him for several scholarships and grants), midterms, essay writing, talks about the future - 'Guys I just want to spread my wings a little, Oregon isn't that far', 'Dad I'll be fine, I promise' - and reading over books Deaton had given him, Stiles received pictures from Derek and texts and calls from Cassie.

Cassie kept him up to date on the people in the pack. A baby had been born, someone had gotten into a study abroad program, her sister was engaged, there had been a minor debacle when some of the younger teens got into the mead and Caroline had been furious. They shot the shit over everything and nothing, except the 'problem' Stiles was still having. He didn't want to come off as certifiably insane, so he left it alone in favor of bitching about Scott's obsessive ex boyfriend behavior and how sick he was of everyone else making doe eyes at each other. Derek's pictures kept him updated on the house. Due to the season, most of the changes occurred indoors. The fireplace was what startled him the most. They'd worked with the chimney and Stiles knew there had been a spot for one, but the finished product was amazing, a deep, simply angled mantle surrounding it.

On Christmas he texted Cassie and Derek both a picture of him in a Santa hat. Cassie called him back immediately and talked to him for half an hour before putting her entire family on speaker to wish him a merry Christmas. Stiles knew he recognized Derek's voice among them. When the call ended he almost broke down completely, knowing that something had finally gone right, that Derek finally had something good for himself.

"Stiles has a girlfriend!" Scott teased. Stiles groaned and let his head hit the table. One very heartfelt 'I miss you' and apparently he had a girlfriend. His phone call to Cassie had been private. Supposedly. Not for the first time he cursed werewolf hearing, werewolf everything. Scott had demanded a 'study group', which was nothing but a poorly disguised attempt at getting the whole pack together in one place. The alpha had been getting more and more clingy over the past several months, and Stiles was still trying to make peace with the neediness for everyone Scott was expressing.
"Mail order bride?" Lydia asked from her spot at the counter.

"No, oh my god Lydia." He was surrounded by actual children. Annoying fucking children.

"What's her name?" Issac actually sounded interested, although Stiles couldn't figure out why. Maybe he wanted attention off of his relationship with Allison, which still caused the occasional 'hiccup' with Scott. Stiles actually kind of felt sorry for him, although that had more to do with the obvious mental health issues that had to go along with wanting to date someone that had stabbed him several times. Not that he would ever say it aloud. In a few months it probably wouldn't matter. He'd be in Oregon, away from the drama that seemed to breed in the group.

"There's-" He started.

"You know if you lie, we'll be able to tell," Scott reminded him, nudging his shoulder and grinning. Stiles considered it for a moment. They were taking his need to go north extremely well. Possibly because of a girl that didn't exist. Not as a girlfriend, anyway. And he'd had enough practice avoiding the Derek subject that he could tell the absolute truth while avoiding anything he didn't want to deal with. In another life he probably would have made an amazing politician. The realization didn't even make him squirm anymore.

"There's a girl," He said slowly, watching their expressions. Apparently his heartbeat hadn't changed. "Her name is Cassie."

"What's she look like? How did you meet?" Scott demanded.

To avoid the second question, Stiles opened his phone and flipped through the pictures until he found one of Cas. She was posing for a selfie with him, their faces crammed together at the cheek, both of them laughing. They also both had hay in their hair. It had been from his visit, the hayloft becoming less of a place to hang out and more of a sanctuary for him to be with Cassie and Derek.

"Dude, she's beautiful!" Scott gushed. "Like, wow."

Stiles wasn't offended at the surprise in Scott's tone. He wasn't.

"Another redhead?" Lydia quipped from over his shoulder. And Stiles seriously wanted to know what her damage was. Why did she even care?

"You're reddish blonde. She has real red hair. Apparently her parents are descended from vikings, whereas the banshee we all know and fear has Irish roots."

"That's an awful pun," Allison snorted, but she was smiling. "So she's the one in Seattle?"

"She's going to school in Portland."

"I knew there was a reason you applied there!" Scott was fairly bursting at the seams, obviously excited. Stiles had no idea why, exactly, but he went with it. Better they think he was basing his future around a girl than know the truth.

"She's pretty awesome," He said instead, allowing a genuine smile to stretch his features.

"Come on man, spill!"

Stiles shrugged, slightly uncomfortable. Not so much because he would be lying if he let them assume he had a girlfriend, but because he didn't want Cassie or his friendship with her under the
scrutiny of the pack. Werewolves and Derek aside, Cassie didn't belong to or in Beacon Hills, and maybe it was a little shallow of him, but that was part of the reason he loved talking to her so much. She knew bits and pieces of the truth, knew he was scarred, but she was in Oregon, a place that had become synonymous with freedom.

"It's just a thing, alright?" He said easily.

"Sure," Scott teased. "Fine dude, don't spill about your epic romance."

Stiles rolled his eyes for want of anything to say.

—
18: Spring

Chapter Summary

"Finish that and I swear on everything holy that I will mountain ash you out of your own house."

Chapter Notes

Codas Can Be Found Here

"Hey Derek," Stiles greeted, slipping past him into his house. Derek didn't bother telling him that he could have called, or mentioning that it was almost five in the morning. "Working on a new building?" He asked, referencing the vague outlines of what was looking like a garage just beyond the house.

"A workshop," Derek answered. "Couch is yours, see you in the morning."

"It is morning," Stiles yawned.

"Daylight," Derek grumbled.

"Thanks man."

Stiles shed his hoodie and shoes and dove into the couch, exhausted from driving all night. A minute later he felt a blanket dropped on his feet. It was an older quilt, one he hadn't seen before. Derek was already halfway upstairs when he called out his thanks and pulled the blanket around him.

"Morning!" A voice chirped, reaching through sleep and shattering his dream of a shirtless Tom Hardy right before a solid weight landed on his ass. Stiles took a groggy moment to wonder why Tom Hardy sounded like a teenage girl before he realized that Cassie was sitting on him like he was a cushion.

"Go'way," He muttered, burrowing further under the blanket. He was not attempting to hide his morning wood. It wasn't there. (He thought about Jack Nicholson naked and felt his groin shrivel up and die.)

"No way. You didn't call. Again. I'm missing class for you. So we're going to breakfast. I even got Derek to agree."

"W'timeissit?" He hissed from under the blanket.

"Nine. Come on, you've had enough sleep."

"I need to change."
"Nonsense, you don't even smell bad. Except your sneakers," She added as she hopped off of him.

Stiles gave in and raised a hand. Cassie tugged him to his feet, the quilt dropping onto the couch. Stiles ignored her impatient shuffling, folded the quilt and straightened the cushions before shoving his feet in his shoes. He tugged his hoodie on and finally allowed himself a stretch and another yawn as he followed her outside.

It had rained sometime while he was asleep, and the woods around him smelled like damp earth and wood. When he looked over to the structure that had been shadows the night before, tarps were covering it. Derek was already in his truck, the engine started and frowning at them impatiently. Stiles gracefully gave up the front seat and hopped in the back, legs stretching over the bench seat.

"So, spring break?" Cassie asked, looking over the back of the seat and smiling at him.

"Yeah. I need to head back next Saturday or Sunday morning."

"Plenty of time to get the garage finished," Derek said just as Cassie was opening her mouth to talk.

"I thought you said it was a workshop."

"The design is based on a garage," Derek pointed out.

"You can't keep him all to yourself. He's got a week," Cassie whined.

"He's using my couch. It's rent," Derek reasoned.

"It's his spring break. You know, break?" Cassie rebutted swiftly.

Stiles watched them haggling over his time, him, and leaned against the window to doze. Almost as if they noticed, the friendly bickering grew more quiet.

At the diner Cassie shook him awake and they strolled inside, Cassie sitting next to him and cramming him next to the wall in her attempt to nuzzle and scent mark him. It wasn't unusual, but she was doing it in a diner and earning odd looks from the waitress.

"Cas, cool it," He sighed, ruffling her red hair. "I promise we can cuddle tonight. If Derek finally decided to join the modern age, we can even watch a movie or something."

"I have a television," Derek muttered, not even bothering to look up from the menu.

"Why do you even bother?" Stiles asked. "You always get the meat lovers."

"And you always get pie. Even for breakfast," Derek returned, folding the menu and leaning back into his seat.

"I'm a growing boy."

Derek grunted in response.

"You know mom's going to demand at least one dinner," Cassie reminded them smugly.

"Oh, no!" Stiles wailed, pitching his voice a few octaves higher. "Whatever shall I -Jesus Christ!" He yelped from the simultaneous elbow to the ribs and kick to the shins. "What? It's fine. We go eat dinner, we talk. We clean up and pass out here or come back here. What's the problem?"

"Mom wants you to cook," Cassie answered simply.
"And? I helped at the gathering in August," He shrugged, still not getting what was so odd about her mom asking him to cook.

"Yeah, but you were following orders then. Mom and aunt Marianne want you to cook it yourself."

"Again, not a big deal."

Derek relaxed even as Cassie giggled and snuggled back into his side. "I knew it. Best friends."

"You are so weird," Stiles muttered affectionately, ruffling her hair again and reaching for his coffee. Cassie hummed appreciatively and Derek said something under his breath that was too low to hear.

"Fuck this, and fuck you!" Stiles shouted, stomping away from the garage and more importantly, Derek. "Fucking werewolves," He muttered, already gathering his things and shoving them in his bag. "Three fucking days of this bullshit. I'm done."

He couldn't even remember what had sparked the argument, but after being thrown against the workbench hard enough that he knew he was going to have a bruised line tattooing his back for awhile, he didn't fucking care. It had been too much like Beacon Hills, like the old Derek for comfort, and Stiles would be damned if he was going to deal with it.

His bag wouldn't zip all the way, and he gave up and shouldered it before he stalked to the front door, turned and went to the kitchen to grab his keys off of the counter. When he got to his car, he saw Derek glaring at him from the garage, arms crossed over his chest and expression pinched in a scowl.

But he didn't try to stop him, and wasn't that the thing? Derek allowed Stiles to show up, but he never encouraged it. He let Stiles volunteer but he never asked for help, although he was fucking great at giving orders once the help had been volunteered. Stiles realized how stupid he'd been for even thinking they'd become friends. Obviously they were still working with the power dynamics of before. Derek was the big, badass werewolf, Stiles was the weak, powerless human bitch. He'd probably only made it worse by allowing Derek to see him at his worst, and that stung, made him gnash his teeth because he'd trusted Derek.

Stiles waved a one finger salute as he got in his jeep and pulled out of the driveway.

Somewhere on I5 his phone started ringing and didn't stop. It cycled through several calls before he shut it off, not bothering to check the number. He was too angry to talk to anyone. The one person who deserved to be yelled at would never call, had never called. And bully for him if he thought Stiles was going to argue through text.

He stopped twice for gas and tried eating a burger, but the first bite refused to go down before he was spitting it out and throwing the burger into the bag. After driving steadily for several hours, he pulled into his dad's driveway a little after nine that evening. His dad's car was gone, probably at work or out with Melissa, taking advantage of a Scott free house.

Beginning his cursing anew, he dragged himself inside and threw his backpack on his bed before peeling off clothing stiff with dried sweat, dropping it on the floor as he walked for the shower. Every movement was mechanical despite the soreness of his body. Hot water barely helped, although it was possible he was just too impatient, climbing out the minute he was clean.

Wanting to let his dad know he'd gotten home early, he turned on his phone and was surprised to see a dozen texts and as many missed calls. All of the texts were from Cassie, demanding to know what had happened, where he was, to please pick up the phone, and similar notes. Almost all of the missed
calls were from her. One was from Derek. That was...Surprising. Shocking. Sort of terrifying, if he was being honest with himself.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he counted to ten, closed his eyes and played phone roulette, clicking on one of the missed calls to figure out who to talk to first. The odds were in his favor, after all.

"Stiles?" Cassie shrieked over the phone, voice panicked.

"Hey Cas," He groaned.

"Where the fuck is your house?"

"In Beacon Hills."

"I know that," She snapped. "I meant where."

It took a minute before Stiles realized what Cassie was implying.

"Shit."

"Directions, Stiles, or I will track you by the scent of your jeep. I swear to god. And then I will drag you back to mom so you can explain why you ran away the night you were supposed to make dinner."

"Oh my god, Cassie," He muttered into his palm, knowing she could hear him. "Where are you?"

"Next to the church with the obnoxious spotlights."

Stiles gave her directions before she hung up. For a moment he considered calling Derek and figured if he had to deal with Cassie, it was probably better to save Derek for later. Christ. Cassie. In Beacon Hills. It wasn't the spring vacation he'd envisioned at all.

He shot off a quick text to his dad saying he'd come back early and a friend was staying the night.

Five minutes later he heard banging on his front door and almost wished she had tried for the window like the other werewolves in his life had been prone to doing. Practically stumbling downstairs, he walked through the living room and paused in front of the door.

"Stiles, I swear to god, open this door right now."

He may or may not have mentally uttered an oath about redheads before opening the door to reveal a very frazzled looking Cassie.

"Christ Stiles," She muttered, shoving past him. "I get that Derek's a drama queen, but do you have to be one too?"

"Nice to see you too Cas. Come right in," He muttered. She was already stalking upstairs and into his bedroom.

Giving up on making any sense out of what the fuck was going on, he locked the door behind him and followed her upstairs only to stop at the door.

She was nesting. In his bed. With his blankets. How the hell had she gotten all of them wrapped around her that quickly?
"Did I miss something?"

"Are we just friends because of Derek?" She demanded. Stiles felt a stab of guilt because she actually sounded worried. And he knew that feeling, knew what it was like to question if people liked him just because he was Scott's best friend or was in with the 'it' group. The sting of guilt and shame pricked at his conscience while he tried to figure out what to say, especially since he'd already screwed up so spectacularly.

"Derek introduced us, but we're not friends because of him," He told her, plopping into his computer chair and spinning to face her. "We're friends because you dragged me into a barn and pretended to be the shark from Jaws. And because we talk on the phone all the time. And because you're kind of a spazz. Like showing up on my doorstep and yelling at me. Which I deserve."

"Then why did you just leave?"

"Because I wasn't thinking," He admitted. "I was pissed at Derek. Really pissed."

"He said he messed up, he didn't say how," She sighed. "He's really mad at himself though."

Great. Despite everything, he really hadn't wanted to inflate Derek's sense self loathing. Apparently he was batting a thousand.

"Derek and I weren't always friends," Stiles explained quietly. "He used to be a dick. The worst sort of dick, alright? He'd yell and bark orders and never actually talk to me. And he was fond of throwing me into walls and other assorted shit."

"And you're friends with him now?" Cassie demanded, obviously appalled on Stiles' behalf. Stiles shrugged, not sure if he was or not.

"He wasn't always just a dick. He saved my ass a few times. And things changed. Last summer, I was in rough shape Cas. Really rough. You know that. He helped me out. Kept helping me," He added, flinching. "And I thought we were friends, but I was probably wrong. He probably thought he was guilty for my head being so fucked and felt responsible enough to fix it. I just show up at his door Cas. He doesn't invite me or anything. He'd probably tell me to fuck off if I asked."

"No," Cassie rebutted swiftly, voice pitched with panic. "Derek-Stiles, he's really messed up, like he sounded just, blank. He called me because he wanted to know if you'd made it to the house alright. When you didn't show up after a couple of hours he told me how to get here."

Stiles honestly couldn't process what she was saying. Derek worried, Derek giving Cassie directions to Beacon Hills- It was too much, too big and he was just too tired to try and figure out what was going through Derek's brain.

"I need to sleep," He muttered, crawling into his bed and yanking one of the blankets from around Cassie. She gave up gracefully, unwrapping the blankets and arranging them so she was able to squirm under his and throw an arm over his waist.

"I'm sorry," He added.

"We'll fix it," She murmured into his chest. He nuzzled the top of her head and tried to soak in her sense of faith.

Stiles woke up because he could feel the weight of someone staring at him. Squinting and praying he looked like he was still asleep, he saw his dad leaning against the wall, eyes on him and the bed.
"Morning son."

"Mergngh," Stiles muttered, trying to stretch and failing because someone was wrapped around him like a piece of bizarre fetish equipment. Oh.

"Dad, Cas. Cas, I know you're awake. Cas, this is my dad."

"Hi," Cas mumbled, not turning her face from Stiles' chest. Funny, Stiles had never pegged her as shy.

"I'll make breakfast and then you can introduce me to your friend," John told them, eyes still on the shock of red hair that looked like it was growing from Stiles' chin.

"Sure thing dad. Be down in a few."

"Take your time," John smiled before turning and closing the door behind him. Stiles groaned, slowly attempting to extract himself from Cassie's grip. She clung and nuzzled determinedly before he gave up and let her cuddle.

"I think I may have insinuated that you're my girlfriend," He admitted. Cassie snorted against his chest before she stilled.

"What?"

"It was an assumption I let perpetuate? For reasons?"

"Stiles!" She hissed.

"It's complicated, alright?" Stiles muttered, not willing to go into the details. "He also thinks you're the person I'm visiting in Seattle."

"Seattle?"

"Derek isn't dad's favorite person. He may have arrested him. And uh, huh, yeah. It's a long story. For another day." Maybe when he was forty, if he made it that far, and could look back on everything and laugh.

Cassie hummed thoughtfully. "I'll go along with it, but you should tell him."

"I will. Eventually," He added, hoping it was enough to keep his heart from upticking in a lie.

"Your dad's making bacon," She hummed, and he could practically hear her salivating.

"Oh hell no," Stiles muttered, trying to get free and succeeding in falling off the bed in a tangle of blankets with Cassie landing on his back. "Just because we have a guest doesn't mean- That shithead bought bacon while I was gone!"

Cassie giggled as she followed Stiles down the stairs, keeping him from falling twice by grabbing the back of his shirt and steadying him. They both stumbled into the kitchen and Stiles was about to go into full lecture mode until he saw his father's eyes widen on Cassie before shooting to Stiles, obviously some sort of fatherly pride there. Stiles refused to feel offended. It was his dad.


Cassie sat down and smirked as Stiles went to the cabinets for plates. "Two pieces dad. And don't think we're not going to have a talk about this. I will tell Melissa to start watching you while I'm
“Stiles, you really want to talk about this now?” John smiled, looking absolutely pleased with himself. Stiles smiled back just as widely, possibly baring his teeth. It couldn't have been considered a ‘nice’ smile. He'd been taking lessons from Derek.

"Sure. I'm not ashamed that I love my father so much I want him to be healthy."

John's grin flattened and he rolled his eyes. "Four pieces."

"Three or I'll let Cassie have it all. And she would totally eat it, so don't comment about her girlish figure. She's a vicious carnivore."

"Not even I'm that stupid, son," John sighed. "Fine. Three pieces."

Breakfast went smoothly after that. Stiles could feel his father's question and fended it off with a simple 'change of plans, dad, showing Cas around Beacon Hills today'. Cassie in turn asked John questions about his work, talked about her family in 'Seattle' and other light topics. Somehow, werewolves never came up, not once, and Stiles was so, so grateful the pack was in Ventura.

"Well, I'm going to head to bed for a few hours. Stiles, don't forget to clean up before you head out."

"Sure thing dad."

"It was nice meeting you Cassie."

"Nice to meet you too."

Cassie helped him clean up the dishes before leaning against the counter.

"So are we going to talk about it yet?"

"Not here."

"Fine."

She gave him a chance to change, although she was staring at him the whole time. He'd gotten over any body shyness he had with her once she'd seen the scars in an attempt to prank him in the shower. She'd looked so sad for him that he'd told her a bit of the truth, though not everything. PTSD had covered it. She'd touch them through his shirt sometimes and nuzzle him, as though she was sad for him, sad that she hadn't been there. (Some days he let himself wonder what that might have been like.)

"They're fading a little."

"Time heals all wounds. Too bad it can't cure asshole," Stiles muttered through his hoodie before tugging it down. He pulled on socks and stuffed his feet into the workboots he'd shed the day before. That done, he grabbed his keys and let Cassie lead the way downstairs.

He drove aimlessly for awhile before he found himself heading for the highschool. Thankfully no one else was around, and he parked and walked to the bleachers on the lacrosse field.

"So," He started, laying across one.

"So. What do you need for things to be right again?" Cassie asked.
Good question, and he didn't know the answer. Well, that wasn't quite true. He knew what he wanted, but he wasn't entirely sure he needed it.

"I dunno, Cas. I want-" He paused, licked his lips and allowed Cassie to lift his head before she slid closer and let it drop in her lap. Her fingers scratching his scalp eased the tension, made him feel a little less childish for what he was about to say. "I want for Derek and I to be friends, real friends. I can't go back to him yelling at me and throwing me into shit after-" After he'd acted like he gave a fuck about him.

Cassie hummed, neither agreeing or disagreeing, just letting him talk. And he did, the initial statement paving the way for others, rants and then secrets and personal fears. He'd talked to her before, about the things he'd felt, but shallowly, never quite admitting to the depth of anything, just glossing over it. Now things were coming out that he'd held in for months.

"My friends here, they're...okay. But they're changing, right? And that's fine. It's natural, I get that. Some of it, anyway. But it feels like I'm not changing in the same way, like last year, I just veered away and now I see everything differently from the rest of them. And I thought maybe Derek saw at least some things the same way. It felt like we were friends, like working on the house actually, I dunno, helped us or something."

"He's always happy when you visit," Cassie told him a few minutes later. "He doesn't talk about this place at all, or anything before he moved to Oregon. I know he told mom and dad everything when he first started courting the pack, but he hasn't said anything to anybody else. I think it's why I was so interested in you at first. We didn't think he had friends here, and then you showed up. You made him different, you know? He relaxed a little more. Mom thinks you're part of the reason he was able to adjust to us so quickly."

"He was with you guys for months," Stiles reminded her.

"He was, but he was still adjusting, and not all that quickly either. And he wasn't friends with me until you sort of bridged us, to be honest. It wasn't until you left that we noticed how much more comfortable he was around us, at the gatherings. Like you accepting us was some sort of test."

"It wasn't."

"Maybe not consciously. It just looked that way from our perspective. Like he placed a lot of faith in your judgment."

Stiles honestly had nothing to say to that, mostly because it sounded like the psychobabble Morrell would spout. Until he remembered how he had asked Derek about college, about becoming a deputy, and realized he had allowed Derek to give him the same sort of permission Cassie was talking about. Had actually taken Derek's trust in Rick as permission to trust, his ease with the pack as a silent go ahead to relax around them. Christ, he was dysfunctional. And Derek was-Derek was equally dysfunctional. Maybe there was something to what she was saying, after all. Shit.

"I think you two should talk. Like really talk, about all of this. Figure out where you both stand and what you both want out of the relationship."

"You're telling me to have a relationship talk."

"Yeah."

"With Derek Hale."

Cassie snorted around a laugh and gave up, giggling in his face as she smiled at him. "I promise, you
won't actually rupture anything or feel the urge to braid pigtails into your hair. It'll be fine. Just call him."

"He hates phones."

"Stiles, he's not the easiest guy to get on with, but neither are you. You're both emotionally distant. Funny, witty, sarcastic, and generally fun as hell to harass or watch, but still seriously screwed up. You have to meet him halfway and tell him what's wrong, what you need. Or else you're being just as stubborn as he is."

She had a point. Why did she have to have a point? Why couldn't it all be aimless speculation? And where the hell had she been hiding her secretly wise side?

"Fine," He muttered. She leaned down and kissed him on his forehead, offering a beaming smile.

"I'm proud of you cupcake. Now I can go home and actually go to school."

"I think it's bullshit how spring breaks are staggered between schools," Stiles offered, sitting up. He was choosing to ignore the cupcake comment.

"Me too. I was looking forward to showing you around Portland."

"Next time," He promised. Even if everything with Derek blew up in his face (and it probably would), Cassie was his friend. He'd just have to crash with her instead of Derek. And possibly find an apartment a few months earlier than he'd anticipated. But that's what loans were for.

"So, promise you'll call him?"

"Derek hates phones," Stiles reminded her. She frowned at him and saw his easy smile before grinning.

"Fucker owes me gas money," Stiles added easily.

Cassie wouldn't stop cackling.

Stiles knocked once. Derek's truck was in the driveway, but that didn't mean anything. He knew the werewolf liked heading into the surrounding forest for a run every couple of days, and it was entirely possible the house was empty.

But the door opened, Derek's expression guarded and his posture completely rigid.

"You're back."

"Looks that way."

"I thought you went home."

"I did," Stiles told him, sliding past him and into the house. "Is there any coffee?" He didn't bother waiting for an answer before he was in the kitchen and checking the coffee pot. Cold coffee. Too tired to actually care, he poured some in a mug and microwaved it.

Derek leaned against the counter at the other end of the room.

"So. He took a sip of coffee and almost choked. "Good god that's rancid." He dumped it in the sink and went to make another pot, dumping the old grounds and replacing them, trying to figure out
what to say. "Cassie said we're both emotionally constipated and suck at talking, which, she's probably right. But I got the impression she'd lock us in a room together if we didn't. Talk, that is."

"You drove eight hours to talk?"

"Pretty much."

Derek sat down at the table and folded his arms over his chest. His expression looked like he needed more fiber in his diet. Maybe Cassie was right. Once the coffee started he sat across from Derek and inhaled, readying himself for a volley of words. He'd prepared his speech, edited it, scrapped it, started over and practiced it several times during his eight hour drive.

"Derek, are we friends?"

That- that wasn't what he had been planning to say. At all.

He stared down at the table, fascinated by the grain. The old fear of rejection was back, or hadn't ever really left him. The disconnect from Scott, the utter lack of connection to anyone in Scott's pack, in high school in general, only made the sensation that much more intense. Why would Derek want to be his friend? He'd shown up on his doorstep strung out and halfway to psychotic break. Even if they'd shared stories, it had almost always been about the past. Maybe Derek didn't want a future he featured in in any way, especially since every time he turned up he just made everything worse. Maybe he just wanted to forget. And Stiles knew if that was it, he owed Derek that much, that Derek deserved that chance.

"I think so," Derek answered quietly, his eyes looking at the wall in the distance. It was unsure enough to actually sound honest, and surprisingly, it was so much more trustworthy than a direct yes would have been.

"Friends don't throw each other into workbenches when they're pissed."

Derek didn't answer, and Stiles wasn't sure he would have accepted one. But at least he didn't try to make an excuse, and for that, Stiles was grateful. He was so tired of excuses.

"Look. I know we're going to yell at each other. It's us. But you can't- Don't treat me like I'm just just some human idiot. It was too much like-" He paused, swallowed. "Like back then. And I can't maintain a friendship like that. I don't deserve to be treated like that."

Derek shuffled in his seat before nodding. "You're right. My behavior was- I was out of line."

"So why did you do it?" Stiles demanded. "We've taken potshots at each other before, but this week, you've been in terminator mode. It was like you were back there," He referenced quietly.

Derek looked like Stiles was attempting to pull his teeth out as he shrugged, shoulders tight.

"Laura's birthday was yesterday."

And Stiles felt like the worst sort of asshole.

"Shit. Why didn't you say anything?"

Derek shrugged again, looking anywhere but at him.

"Derek- Look. It doesn't excuse treating me like a ragdoll. Just- Shit, say something to somebody. That's what friends do, they talk about shit. You know you helped me. It's not a one way street."
"You've got enough-"

"Finish that and I swear on everything holy that I will mountain ash you out of your own house."

Derek's expression turned downright surly and Stiles flailed, huffing in exasperation. "Dude, I managed to keep a four point oh while dealing with Gerard and the alphas. I listened to Scott moon over Allison and kept my sanity. Seriously. Don't- Christ," Stiles muttered, cradling his face in his palms. "Did it occur to you that I might want to help you?"

When Derek didn't answer Stiles dared to look up and saw such an arrested expression that he actually felt bad for him. Obviously being friends was going to take some work. Leave it to Derek Hale to trust someone with build his house, but not with his feelings.

He got up and checked the coffee maker, poured himself a mug and started for the den. "Come on." On the way he paused at the linen closet to grab a quilt and threw it over his shoulder. Derek followed a few steps behind him, pausing when Stiles sat his coffee down on the end table and dropped onto the sofa.

"I know you cuddle. You practically smothered me in my sleep last July. Unless it was an assassination attempt, which, very poorly executed if it was, by the way. Your snoring gives you away."

He knew he was being pushy, maybe overstepping his bounds, but Derek obeyed, sitting down on the couch, stiff as a plank. Stiles turned on the television and muted it before throwing one end of the quilt over the werewolf. The coffee sat, completely forgotten, as he arranged himself comfortably next to Derek, who was still doing his best impression of a corpse in rigor.

Deciding on silence, even though he wanted to push, to ask questions, he kept his gaze on the television. Derek relaxed in increments.

He was almost asleep when Derek started talking. Keeping still, he listened as Derek talked about New York, about living in a shitty apartment before the insurance money came in, about Laura being an alpha when she was barely eighteen. How it had almost gone sideways when the local alpha challenged her, and the pity on the alpha's face when they'd realized that they were the last of the known and respected Hales. He talked about the insurance money, how much Laura and he had both hated it, had hated that they were using money from their family's destruction to pay for a decent place to live, for school. How it had always been a joke in the family, that the policies had been for appearances, because well off people had those sorts of things.

It blurred, jumped back and forth. Stiles knew there was no logical order to Derek's memories, but Derek was talking. And most of it was bitter, angry. All of that anger and bitterness was directed at himself. Obviously he was still shouldering more than he let on. Stiles wanted to yell at Derek when he admitted he still felt like Laura's death was his fault, because Peter had gone crazy in the fire that was his fault, because he'd never told Laura the truth, because he hadn't gotten there in time. He felt responsible for the deaths, for Lydia, for Scott and the alphas. He said he knew Laura would have hated the alpha he'd been, how he'd let his fear tear so many people apart. Stiles wasn't sure the guilt from the fire, from Laura's death, from everything that happened after, would ever go away. He had no idea how to make it go away, even though he really wished he did.

When Derek went quiet, Stiles burrowed deeper into Derek's side. After everything Derek had bared, he didn't know what to say, and hated himself a little for not knowing. But Derek had an arm over his shoulder, and Stiles wiggled one behind Derek's back and slipped the other over his stomach.
"I miss her."

Stiles knew that feeling, knew platitudes about 'always in your heart' or 'watching over you' didn't help, never helped, so he didn't offer them. Derek didn't seem to mind the silence though, and he didn't push Stiles away, so Stiles figured maybe it was okay.

They completed the garage, mostly silent aside from asking for tools or relaying measurements. The normal quips and bitching were conspicuously absent as they arranged panels and walls, nailed down plywood and metal sheeting. The exhaust fans were the last thing to go in, and it was Sunday evening when they did. Derek didn't mention that Stiles had school the next day, or an eight hour drive ahead of him. Stiles didn't mention the text to his dad saying he'd be skipping school for a couple of days.

It wasn't until they were collapsed on the couch, too tired to try and attempt making dinner or even driving to it, that Stiles approached the subject.

"She taught you this."

Derek stilled, body tensing next to him.

"How to keep going, I mean. Even when it feels like you don't have anything solid under your feet."

He could feel the shudder that passed through Derek's form and left the statement hanging. Derek didn't say anything, and Stiles squeezed his shoulder once before dragging himself upstairs for a shower.

When he finished he walked back to the den. There was no sign of Derek, so he burrowed under the quilt and hoped he hadn't said the wrong thing.

(He left the next morning. Derek didn't say anything, certainly nothing sentimental, but he did lean against his truck and watch as he pulled out of the diner parking lot.)

"Your dad said you brought your girlfriend here for like, a day," Scott said as he sat down next to him. "And his words were 'she's gorgeous and sweet'. Dude, why didn't you guys just meet us in Ventura?"

"Weird situation. It involved feelings," Stiles answered easily, eyes on the notes he'd written. "We went back that night."

"She chased you all the way back here?" Issac asked, obviously surprised.

"What can I say, I inspire pursuit in all of god's creatures," He muttered, voice flat. He refused to look at anyone, especially since he could feel the inquisitive gazes bearing down on him.

"Did you get her pregnant?" Lydia asked, not looking up from her tablet.

"No, Lydia. I didn't get her pregnant," He snapped, looking up at her.

"Sounds like trouble in paradise," Lydia quipped, eyes finally coming to rest on him. "Maybe it'll teach you not to pick a college based on a girl."

"Oh my god. Is that a game you really want to start with me?" Stiles snapped, finally losing his temper. "Just because you're fucking-" He stopped, took a deep breath and ignored the startled looks
from everyone at the table. "I don't give two shits for your attitude Lydia. I know it must be hard on your ego not to have the school spazz panting after you anymore, but get the fuck over yourself. Just because I can be happy elsewhere doesn't mean you get to try and shit all over it." Evidently, expecting better of Derek had given him the testicular fortitude to demand better of people that actually called him 'friend'.

Lydia's smirk, which had remained firmly in place the entire time he'd been talking, faded abruptly as the last few words stumbled out of his mouth. Her entire face tightened, her jaw ticked and she was glaring at him like he'd called her something unforgivable. (And oh, the temptation was certainly there. So much for his self preservation instincts.)

"Dude," Scott hissed. Stiles turned to look at his friend, who was looking at him like he was a monster. And fuck that line of thought, because Stiles felt his tongue moving to form the words. No. Not after he'd managed to keep the peace for over a year, not when he only had a few more weeks to go before he could pack his shit and get away from them all.

"You know what, screw this. I'm going to study without the school harpy breathing down my neck," Stiles muttered, grabbing the notes and his bag. He didn't bother with his lunch or with trying to hear the whispers behind him as he made way for the library.

Ten minutes later he got a stern glare from the librarian when his phone buzzed, clattering against his keys. He pulled it out of his pocket and checked it. A text. From Derek of all people.

He opened it up and almost smiled. It was actual text and not just a picture.

_Need a lathe. Second hand or new?_

Stiles thought about it for a minute. He'd purchased almost all of his tools second hand, but none of them were as complicated as a lathe, and Derek was apprenticing to a wood aritsan.

_Why do you need a lathe?_

_Miles said it was time I got my own._

_Scale of one to ten, how often will you use it?_

8-9.

_Research and get a new one._

There was no thank you or anything, but it was more than he'd expected, and he grinned down at his phone before stuffing it back in his pocket.

It wasn't until he was heading for his jeep that his mood took a dive. Aiden was leaning against it, arms crossed over his chest.

"What?" Stiles asked, noting the glare the alpha was sending in his general direction. He was inured to glares though, having survived the Hale Family Bootcamp of Black Looks and Varied Scowls.

"Apologize to Lydia."

"No."

"She's-"

"How about you stop right there," Stiles snapped, pissed that his mood had been shot down so
completely. "I don't care if she's being bitchy to you, or denying you sex, or screaming in your ear. She's been a total bitch to me lately. And I'm done letting her get by with it. Just because she's a banshee dating an alpha doesn't mean she gets to critique my fucking life. So when she decides she can actually talk to me like a human being, then we'll figure it out. Until then, wear earplugs, enjoy your hand. Go hunt rabbits. Kill another one of my friends. Whatever gets you off."

He didn't bother waiting for an answer, getting into his jeep and pulling out, completely unfazed by Aiden's continued glare. He figured he might actually have to thank Derek at some point. If nothing else, than for making him realize he could demand better of people, that he might actually deserve better.

(Lydia didn't talk to him for a week, and the only reason that changed was because she had to tell him what herbs to get to cure Scott of a spell the local fairies had put on him. The talk never happened. But no one brought up Portland or Cassie again.)
On graduation day, Stiles stood at the podium and talked about the future, making no mention of the past. He ignored Lydia's tense smile and narrowed eyes for the duration of it, although he was self-aware enough to admit he was patting himself on the back with vindictive pleasure. He sent a picture of himself in his cap and gown to Cassie and Derek. Derek responded with a 'congratulations' and nothing more, which didn't bother Stiles at all. They texted occasionally and Derek sent pictures, but he'd accepted Derek would never be a man of many words (but he was trying, and that really was enough for Stiles), and Cassie called him back a second later and started screaming in his ear about how awesome he was and did he have any clue where he was going to school yet?

Stiles avoided the question and told her he'd call her back soon, but 'picture time Cas, dad looks like he's going to strangle me!'-. He hung up with a quick goodbye and thanked the werewolf gods that they couldn't pick up heartbeats over the phone. Since spring break they'd gotten a lot closer, and he wanted to surprise her. Her dad must have guessed, because Rick knew he'd gotten in.

There were tons of pictures taken, including of the pack as a whole. That night Lydia hosted a huge party at her mother's house. It felt strange, to relax with his friends and reminisce about high school. Knowing he was about to leave made it easier to look back, to be around everyone and talk about the nightmare of highschool. They glossed over the worst of it all, although even Danny, ever the nice guy, admitted he was glad when Harris disappeared. When Scott looked horrified, Stiles reminded him of Harris' involvement in the Hale fire and it dropped, like saying the Hale name would invoke one of them. The subject moved on to Finstock and equilibrium reasserted itself.

He stayed in Beacon Hills for two more days. When the pack departed for Ventura, he was finishing packing his jeep to the brim with clothes, books, his computer and laptop, blankets and a few mementos, and things Deaton wanted him to deliver to Rick, although how Deaton even knew about Rick was still beyond him. As long as the vet didn't say anything though, Stiles didn't bother with worrying. Maybe Deaton understood the need for privacy, for secrets, after being an emissary for so long. He was certainly closemouthed about everything else.

At the city line blinking lights flashed in his mirrors and a siren made his heart trip over itself. His dad pulled him out of the jeep and hugged him, extracting all sorts of promises Stiles would normally never consider and making several Stiles had never thought he'd hear. They would both lie if anyone said there were tears involved.

He pulled into Derek's driveway at two in the morning, a strange mix of excited and afraid. Derek didn't even bother rolling his eyes, but he did mention calling first. Stiles muttered about Derek hating cell phones and passed out on the couch.

"Hey Stiles, Derek!" Cassie greeted loudly, her voice echoing through the barn. Stiles switched his attention from the support he was holding while Derek pulled nails free. Stiles had been more than slightly pleased to find out that the picture Derek had sent had been a 'warning' about working on the barn. The moment he'd woken up Derek had said they needed to go, considering he was splitting time between the barn and work.

"Hey Cas," He greeted as casually as he could, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning.

"You never tell me when you're coming up here," She pouted, wrapping her arms around his middle and squeezing once before stepping back and punching him lightly in the arm.
"Surprise," He deadpanned, trying to imitate Derek and pulling it off, all things considered. At least he thought so.

"So, is this just for the summer or-" She wheedled, batting her eyelashes up at him and smiling. It was a terrible, over the top expression, nothing at all like her actual puppy dog face, which was a thousand times more effective than Scott's and probably the reason he and Derek never resisted her overmuch.

"Dunno yet," He lied, earning another punch.

"You jerk!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Stop toying with my emotions! Dad's been smiling since I came in!" She wailed dramatically.

"If you two don't stop, you'll pull the support free and cave in part of the loft," Derek muttered, jumping from the top of the ladder and landing gracefully on the packed earth. Stiles stepped away from the support and, satisfied it wasn't going to shift free, turned to Cassie.

"I start in August," He told her, lifting his arms in preparation for what was coming.

Cassie didn't let go for five solid minutes, babbling about how amazing everything was going to be now that he didn't have to leave.

They didn't have the option of crashing in the hayloft that night, but they did end up sprawled all over the biggest couch in the living room halfway through a movie.

"Why can't I go upstairs?" Stiles whined. "I'm tired."

"Two minutes," Derek growled from behind him, shucking off his boots.

"You said that two minutes ago."

"Fine," Derek huffed, obviously at the end of his rope. It had been a long day, an unexpected summer shower catching them in the middle of reroofing the barn and forcing them to scramble for tarps. Between having never roofed anything and Derek's terse directions, the heat and both of them being incredibly impatient and short tempered people (at least with each other), the rain had been the last straw. Almost breaking his neck had just been an added bonus. Stiles tried to be thankful Derek hadn't thrown him off of the roof, although the temptation had to have been there. He'd certainly felt the compulsion more than once.

"Fine," Stiles muttered back, stalking up the stairs and heading for the bathroom. He slogged his wet clothes off and into the hamper and turned on the shower. After a cursory scrubbing where he considered shaving his head again, he wrapped and towel around his waist and went to the guest room, already scrolling through a list of movies he had on his hard drive. It crossed his mind that he could just pass out face first in his pillow and possibly smother himself, saving himself from the next day.

Except nothing was in the guestroom, not even his sleeping bag.

"Shit." He turned on his heel and walked down the hall, fist ready to bang on Derek's door when it opened, revealing a damp Derek in a pair of boxers.
"Did you throw my stuff in the rain?" He demanded, voice cracking on a note of hysteria.

Derek gave him a look that implied he had been dropped on his head as a child and walked past him to the middle bedroom.

"Your room," Derek muttered and opened the door.

There were boxes against the walls, but his laptop and desktop computer were set up on a desk in one corner, and there was a dresser made out of a light wood against another.

And there was a bed. An actual, honest to god bed with drawers underneath and a mattress and actual linens and pillows and blankets.

"What?" He asked dumbly, eyes still on the bed. A real bed. After three weeks on hardwood with nothing but a sleeping bag it looked like heaven. Obviously he'd been a good person in one of his previous lives and god had finally decided to take mercy on him.

"Your room," Derek said again, turning and walking back to his room.

"Dude!"

"Don't call me dude," Derek said before closing his door behind him.

Stiles took a moment to appreciate the room, the boxes that Derek had let him store in the attic, the bed and desk, and spun and ran for the closed door. Ignoring the instincts that normally told him entering Derek's room was asking to be maimed, he yanked the door open and rushed in, arms wrapping around Derek before the werewolf could punch him. Hugs were still something they generally avoided, and Stiles couldn't remember the last time he'd even attempted giving Derek one.

"I'm a dick. I'm sorry," He blurted.

Derek sighed and relaxed, like all of his tension bled out during the exhale. "It's been a long day."

"Is that a 'get the fuck out before I kill you, Stiles' or a 'we've both been dicks but now everything is okay' long day?"

"It's a 'let go of me so I can go make dinner' long day," Derek corrected. Stiles let go and stepped back, not really caring that he was smiling so widely it was hurting his face.

"Oh no way dude, you've made a huge mistake and let me feel at home," Stiles told him, smirking at the sudden look of alarm that crossed over Derek's features before it disappeared behind his normal mask of apathy. "I'm totally cooking from now on."

"This' turned into a stuffed eggplant dinner with seared beef on the side. Stiles danced around the kitchen in his boxers and an old shirt he'd found in his laundry. When Derek came down he didn't bother calming his movements and instead started humming.

"How'd you get it all done anyway?" Stiles asked as he began plating dinner. "I mean, I'm not complaining, I just- We left and all my stuff was in the attic or the guest room. And the bed's new."

"Miles and Cassie," Derek admitted, eyes tracking the food from the pans to the plates. "Rick too,
The bed was for practicing some new joint techniques Miles has been teaching me," He added defensively.

"I'm still not used to that," Stiles huffed, walking over to the dinner table. "Being able to tell who was around by scent."

"It was actually harder, back when we were still working on the renovations," Derek admitted. "All the sawdust and chemicals. For awhile all I could smell was hot metal, even after we'd finished for the day."

"Huh, didn't think of that. Painting must have been a nightmare. Dude! That's- You sneaky bastard. How long have you been planning this?" Stiles asked, a thought suddenly occurring to him.

"Hmm?" It was almost cute, Derek looking confused with his mouth full. Stiles resisted the compulsion to take a picture with his phone. He had the feeling if he managed it, Derek would destroy the evidence, and his phone along with it.

"You asked my opinion on the colors of the room," Stiles pointed out, deciding to let his food cool so he didn't scorch his mouth. Werewolves didn't seem to have that problem. He hoped Derek was at least tasting the food.

Derek swallowed and looked uneasy. "I knew you'd end up here after you toured the campus," He shrugged. "At dinner that night, you were lying every time you told them you had other schools to look at. It only makes sense for you to live here, at least until school starts." He looked uncomfortable enough that Stiles couldn't make himself point out that Derek had asked the summer before, when he hadn't had a clue what the hell he'd be doing after high school.

"I could have crashed in the guest room," Stiles said instead.

"You'll be here a couple of years at least," Derek pointed out. "And if you get a dorm or apartment, you never know when you'll need to get away."

"Fair enough," Stiles murmured, deciding to give in gracefully. "How's dinner? Regretting your decision yet?"

Derek rolled his eyes. "If you have anything in mind, just write a list and put it on the fridge." It was as much of a compliment and permission as he was ever going to get, and Stiles decided he could deal with that. More than, if he was being completely honest with himself.

"You might regret it."

"I already do," Derek deadpanned before taking another bite. Stiles mimed him silently and ignored the growl the echoed across the table.

Stiles checked the rice again and glared at Cassie, who kept poking her head into the kitchen to check on him.

"Do you need anything?" She offered.

"It's fine, Cas. It's easy to make this for a lot of people. And don't remind me again. I know how much werewolves eat. If you want to help, come back when I actually have to get everything out to the table."

"How much longer?" She whined, looking so nervous and pathetic Stiles actually felt sort of sorry
for her, which was almost funny considering he was the one cooking for her family.

"Ten minutes, tops."

"I'll go set the table then," She murmured before fleeing. She'd been acting strangely all night and even Derek was edgier than normal. Cassie was probably worried he'd poison her mom, which was a legitimate fear, he supposed, since he'd made the mistake of telling her about the pressure cooker incident of '09. Derek's behavior could only be attributed to his general moodiness. Stiles idly wondered if mood stabilizers could even work on werewolves.

When reminded he hadn't made dinner in the spring - "Mom wants you to make dinner, come on!" - he'd buckled down and picked out something simple. But it was still weird, and Stiles had no idea why.

Giving in to the nervous impulse, he checked the freezer again and assured him that he'd made enough ice cream for everyone. And he tried not to ask himself why he was making Indian food for people with honest to god vikings (viking werewolves) in their family tree. People that liked hearty stews and chewy breads and mead and oh god, what if they hated spicy food?

He wasn't panicking. Nope. He just wanted to make sure everything was tasty so they didn't turn on him and eat him instead.

"Are you okay?" Derek asked from behind him. Stiles turned and then rushed over to the rice. The basmati was the perfect texture, and he quickly moved it from the pan to the blue crockery dishes Cassie had pulled down earlier.

"Perfect. Just feeding Indian food to the descendants of vikings," Stiles muttered, a little resentful that Derek hadn't stopped him when he'd mentioned it before. They were friends, he was supposed to point out when he was doing something dumb.

"Rick likes thai and Cassie claims she should have been born in Italy," Derek offered. As though that helped.

Actually, it did, a little bit.

"Okay," Stiles told himself, not even bothering to look at Derek. The werewolf was probably rolling his eyes and inwardly howling with laughter. Or something. Ignoring that completely, he dished everything and called for Cassie, who was there so quickly he was sure she had been waiting just outside the door. They carried the dishes out, two of each for the long table, and Stiles panicked again because he had planned for nine werewolves and himself and he had been sure he'd made enough, but what if he hadn't?

"It smells wonderful," Marianne said from her spot as he sat down. The seating positions had changed for the night, and for some ungodly reason he was at the end, facing Caroline. He wished for his usual spot wedged between Cassie and Derek. Everyone served themselves from the bowls that were passed around, and Stiles studied his plate.

It didn't look pretty, precisely, and he wondered why that mattered. Caroline and Marianne rarely made anything pretty. They obviously preferred taste and heartiness over anything artistic. But he sort of wished it looked better. Michelin Star better.

He, and everyone else it seemed, watched Caroline take the first bite. He silently congratulated himself when she didn't immediately spit it out.

She hummed.
Everyone else relaxed. So he supposed it was a good hum. (Prayed it was a good hum.)

"Why did you learn to make Indian food, Stiles?" She asked. The table was eerily quiet compared to the other dinners he'd been invited to.

"My dad, actually."

"He cooks?"

"No, uh, cholesterol problems. He wouldn't eat tofu and refused to give up meat, so I made a lot of chicken. It can get boring pretty fast if you don't try anything new, so I started looking up different recipes."

Caroline nodded approvingly. "Taking care of your father. You're a good son, Stiles. Not many would be so conscientious of a parent's health. Normally they just tell them to take medication."

"I don't want him to get to that point," He admitted bluntly. Caroline nodded again, smiling as she ate.

"How did you and Derek meet? I know you were friends before he moved here, but I don't think I've heard the story of how you came to know about us."

Stiles wondered what was up with the game of twenty questions. Chancing a quick glance at Derek, he got nothing but an oblique stare in return.

"Derek found us after my friend was bitten by a rogue alpha."

"So Derek wasn't the one-" Cassie started, quieting when her father gave her a sharp look.

"We thought Derek was the alpha at first. I may have accused him of murder," Stiles added, blushing hotly under Caroline's considering gaze. "It was a weird time."

"Stiles helped McCall gain control," Derek added. Stiles wondered when Scott had become just 'McCall'.

"Oh?" She asked, and Stiles felt like he was under a microscope that was slowly bearing down on him, intent on closer and closer examination. Christ, was he being interviewed now that he was officially living with Derek? Wouldn't it have been easier to interrogate him before Derek had given him a room?

"I borrowed some gym equipment to track his heartbeat. And uh, started lobbing lacrosse balls at him," He blurted, the intensity of Caroline's focus effectively destroying what little tact he did have. Merciful god, her stare was worse than his dad's.

"Not entirely unlike our methods, although we usually stick to physical training that appeals to the beta," Caroline smiled.

"Like martial arts?" Stiles asked, not waiting for a response. "That makes more sense. There uh, might have been a revenge factor involved. With the lacrosse balls." He flinched and immediately berated himself, realizing how bad that must have sounded to everyone at the table.

"Revenge?"

Stiles remained quiet, trying not to think about the night his father had gotten hurt, about how Scott was so oblivious to everything he didn't want to see, or about how he was probably making it so that
Caroline would never allow him near her house (or the gatherings) again.

"The sheriff was injured. Scott wasn't where he should have been," Derek answered, not backing down from Caroline's gaze when it swung to him.

"It was a weird time," Stiles repeated.

"And the rogue alpha?"

"He died," Stiles said flatly. He didn't mention that Peter had come back. Or that he had been there, had seen Peter dying. Had seen Peter dead. Had helped kill Peter. Knew that Peter was still skulking somewhere.

"Your animosity for Peter Hale seems personal."

Stiles tried not to twitch at the sound of someone saying Peter's name aloud. "We had a few encounters before he died."

Even Derek frowned.

"I'm curious." It was nothing less than a command, and the dinner was suddenly so much more uncomfortable. When the hell had the dynamic changed? And why?

"He forced me to track Derek down with a gps and tried to talk me into the bite. Then he bent the keys to my jeep and sassed himself all the way to the big boss battle."

"Peter offered you the bite?" Derek demanded, face etched with shock.

"I didn't accept, obviously," Stiles shrugged.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because an hour later I was helping flambe him," Stiles snapped. "Didn't seem like the right time to mention it."

"What about when he came back?"

"It never came up. He wasn't an alpha anymore and I figured he was doing a good enough job of making everyone else hate him that I didn't need to bother."

"Boys," Caroline interrupted, voice pitched and reverberating. Stiles recognized the notes of the alpha seeping through and backed down, remembering that he was at Caroline's table. Probably pissing her off.

"So yeah. Uncle Badtouch is a sore subject. Any final questions before we find something else to talk about?" Cassie made a dismayed sound and her younger sister gasped at the show of blatant disrespect. He was obviously in a go big or go home sort of mood, although he was probably going to get both. And his ass kicked by Derek.

"Derek said humans helped him weaken his uncle. I take it you were one of them."

"I lobbed a molotov cocktail at him. He caught it. Allison hit it with an incendiary round. He stayed lit for awhile and then went out. Derek killed him," Stiles replied flatly.

"You were young. It's not the sort of experience a teenager should have," She added, voice edged with either pity or concern, Stiles couldn't tell.
"No one should have it. Some people just get put in that position and do the best they can." Multiple times, he added within the privacy of his own mind.

"Well said," Caroline replied softly. "I apologize for bringing up the subject. Perhaps something less supernaturally inclined? Derek was rather closemouthed about your arrival last summer."

"I sort of just, uh, showed up," Stiles hedged, fingers tightening around his fork. "He didn't know until I was on his doorstep."

Caroline's chuckle echoed through the room. Stiles' fist clenched around his fork.

"You take chances and follow your instincts. It's an admirable quality, Stiles."

Everyone relaxed at once, and they began to actually talk. Mostly to ask Stiles questions about his werewolf friends in Beacon Hills, amusing anecdotes, very light stuff. The alphas weren't brought up, or the kanima thing, or the darach. Finally feeling at ease again, he kept an eye on everyone's plates and was gratified to see people going back for seconds and Marianne asked him about cooking dates after the barn was finished. Which was surreal, but not frightening, and he knew it probably should have been since Caroline and Marianne loved to cook together.

He briefly wondered what had happened to his wariness of alphas.

When the food was gone he walked back to the kitchen, Derek following to help him with the ice cream. Derek stopped him as he was pulling the dishes out of the freezer, brows furrowed and lips pinched in a frown.

"Why didn't you say yes?"

Stiles sat the ice cream on the counter and turned to look at Derek, completely thrown off guard by the question.

"Why would I?" Stiles asked dumbly. Derek tensed and he hurried before the werewolf could say anything. "Not that being a werewolf is bad, but it would have made me Peter's beta. Dude, he was insane. Five minutes before that he opened his trunk and his nurse, his dead nurse, was in there. He thought, and I quote, 'I got better' was a reasonable explanation for killing her."

"But you never wanted the bite?" It came out as more of a question than a statement, and he realized no one had ever actually asked him about it, not after Peter had offered.

"I did, sometimes," He admitted. "It had a lot of advantages. But then Scott's life imploded. Jackson became a kanima and fucking Gerard happened. Christ. If I had taken the bite, it would have pulled my dad into the middle of that. No. No fucking way."

"But after Jennifer-"

"It wasn't worth it by then. I stopped wanting to be Batman a long time ago." After Erica had died, that want had gone with her. He still had issues even watching Batman, engaged in self flagellation sometimes by watching it and remembering her.

"Erica used to call you that," Derek murmured.

"Inside joke. She was Catwoman."

Derek actually smiled a little at that, though it was the sort of smile Stiles would see on his dad's face when they remembered something good about his mom. He didn't know if he was happy that Derek
"You aren't going to get in trouble, are you?" Stiles asked abruptly. Derek looked confused, brows actually shooting up in surprise. "Because I was mouthing off to Caroline."

"I-No. What you're doing won't get me in trouble," Derek sighed. "But me interrupting might."

"No, dude! That would be totally unfair. I sprang intel that was relevant to you. You shouldn't get in trouble for wanting an explanation."

Derek shrugged and grabbed one of the bowls of ice cream. Stiles grabbed the other and followed him out. The table had gone quiet again, with Cassie watching him with the first genuine smile he'd seen from her all evening. He allowed himself to relax and sat back down.

"Rose? In ice cream?" Rick asked, staring down at the bowl with something akin to mistrust before giving Stiles a betrayed glance. Caroline tugged a lock of his hair and frowned, some silent communication passing before he nodded. Caroline rolled her eyes and let go of his hair.

"Saffron and cardamom too," Stiles blushed. "It's actually one of my mom's recipes tweaked a little."

Everyone dug in, Caroline watching them, a soft smile on her face. Normal conversation resumed and it felt like the dinners he'd been to before, a bit busy, a little too crowded, but warm. It wasn't until Stiles was halfway through his own bowl that she spoke again.

"I was always a fan of Alfred, personally. Batman would be nothing without him."

Stiles dropped his spoon in his lap and actually laughed.

When the others went to clean the kitchen up, Caroline and Rick both gave him warm smiles. Stiles was pretty sure he was about to be eaten.

"Is this what dinner with the parents is like?" He blurted, then blushed so hotly he could feel the uneven splotches on his skin. Caroline looked stunned for a moment before bursting into laughter, the kind that made her face red and her eyes tear up. Stiles stared, surprised because he knew she was capable of laughter, but seeing her, the alpha, laughing like that was more than a little surreal.

"I think you reminded her of the first time I had dinner with her parents," Rick observed. His tone suggested that he didn't find the memory nearly as humorous.

"You're perfect," Caroline finally said, wiping her eyes. "Thank you for dinner. It was delicious."

Most of the family disappeared after that, and Cassie gave him one last, bonecrushing hug before she flounced upstairs, humming.

Derek was quiet when they got in his truck a few minutes, eyes glancing over to Stiles every few minutes, as if he was trying to figure out what to say and couldn't.

"Spit it out," Stiles commanded around a yawn as he burrowed deeper into his hoodie and slumped in his seat at the same time.

"Are you happy? Here?" Derek asked.

"Yeah dude, of course."

"Don't you have your own bed?" Stiles joked as Cassie bounced into his and started snuggling into
"Yeah, but this one is better."

It was the seventh or eighth time Cassie had come over specifically to crash in his bed. If it had been anyone else, Stiles would have questioned her intentions, but it was Cassie. They'd crashed together in the hayloft and on the couch often enough, especially recently while he worked on the barn with Derek, that it was normal. And decidedly asexual, especially given how she shrugged at the sight of morning wood like it was nothing different than having to pee in the morning. (And it wasn't, because he could see that Cassie was attractive, but he also didn't feel any odd or suspicious flickerings of want when he saw her half naked either.)

He slept shirtless most nights, although he'd started wearing them again when she started showing up. It never seemed to matter though, her hand usually slipped under his shirt to touch on his bare skin. On the few nights he had nightmares, dull compared to the old ones but still sharp enough to remind him of the past, he'd woken to her running her fingers over the scars and murmuring to him. She never asked what he saw and he never explained, but he didn't mind her touching the marks he'd made on himself. It felt like acceptance, and she was the only person that had (or probably ever would) give it.

"Someday you're going to find a great guy and have to explain why we have to sleep in the same bed," He muttered, changing into a pair of pajama bottoms, noting they were getting a little worn. There was a hole in the leg from the last washing, nickel sized.

"I'll just tell him we get separation anxiety if we don't get to cuddle," She shrugged. "Where's Derek?"

"First, you'll run a guy off with that. Second, creepy, what if he wants to share the bed and you guys start banging while I'm there, asleep? Yeah, no. And you're the one with werewolf senses, can't you tell?" Stiles griped tossing the blankets aside and taking one for himself. He'd quickly learned two things. One, he liked having something covering him while he slept, something besides sprawling werewolf. And two, Cassie had the annoying tendency of annexing blankets and pillows in her sleep. Not hogging them, pushing them to her other side so they couldn't be used.

"I know, he's in his room," She grumped.

"Then why?" Stiles yawned. His entire body ached.

Cassie huffed and got up. Stiles let himself sprawl out in the bed and inhaled, wishing Derek would go ahead and install a much needed hot tub. Or at the very least, a whirlpool tub. Huh. He wondered how long he had to wait before suggesting a bathroom renovation without getting a wrench thrown at his head.

He only shifted to the side when he felt the mattress dip, but when Cassie climbed over him and he felt another warm body still sitting on his left, he picked his head up and stared at Derek. Who looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Cas?" Stiles asked her, more than a little bewildered by the sight of Derek sitting on his bed. It felt suspiciously like they were going to have some sort of 'talk', the awkward kind. Stiles flashed back to his dad trying to tell him about sex and felt his stomach bottom out.

"Night guys," She said, arranging herself. And dammit, she was already sneaking his blanket from over him, tugging the corner over her.
"At least wait until I'm asleep, blanket hog," He muttered, deciding it was better not to question it. They all slept next to each other in the hayloft, and even if it was his bed, it wasn't that much different. Really. "Night."

Derek slowly, stiffly laid down next to him. The bed was a full, so it was a tight fit for three people. Stiles could feel Derek trying not to touch him, the sense radiating from every tensed muscle.

"Dude, relax. Go to sleep. She'll just annoy us until we do," He muttered into his pillow.

"Damn right," Cassie giggled, already sounding half asleep. "Want both my guys with me."

"Someday you're going to say that and I'm going to laugh while you try to explain that you are not, in fact, polyandrous."

"Whatever. Go to sleep Stiles. Night Derek."

"Night Cas, night Derek."

Derek didn't say anything, but Stiles could feel him begin to relax.

He woke up in the middle of the night burning up because half of his body was trapped under two snoring werewolves. Despite the almost overbearing heat, he could feel a sleepy, goofy sort of grin stretching his features before he fell back asleep.

(When he questioned Derek later, Derek's only response was that werewolves liked sleeping with others, that it reinforced their bonds, made them feel safe. Cassie obviously wanted that from both of them. Stiles didn't complain and let it go at that, not willing to admit that it was nice, to be needed and wanted on such a basic level.)

Stiles ignored Cassie's snickering when they were introduced to Miles. The rhymes wrote themselves, and he knew he'd be dealing with them later. Cassie sometimes regressed to five years old when she thought she could get away with it. Miles seemed nice enough, and when he explained that he was a skinwalker Stiles relaxed, surprised that he felt more at ease around the supernatural than mundane.

"So why were we meeting you here?" Stiles asked as Derek led them to the corner of the small warehouse that served as Miles' workshop.

"Mom and dad's anniversary is coming up and we need a third opinion," Cassie said. "Because we can't agree. At all."

The item in question turned out to be a chest of light colored wood. Aside from that, it looked fairly plain.

"What do you need an opinion on?"

Derek opened a binder full of papers, each an apparent design for the chest.

"And the stain," Cassie added, looking back at the plain wood.

Stiles looked through the designs, eschewing each one.

"Your parents tend to go for less is more," He explained. "I'd probably do some simple scroll work as a sort of border on the top and leave it at that. And I haven't seen much of their personal stuff, but most of the house favors lighter woods. Maybe just a natural stain, instead of any color, or something
kind of warm, gold toned, you know? And accent the lines of the scroll work somehow, like a darker stain or burning or something?"

"That-That actually works," Cassie admitted slowly, looking back to the chest. Derek was nodding thoughtfully.

"I've got some books back at the house with scroll work designs in the art, we could look through those for inspiration."

"You're cooking, right?" Cassie wheedled.

"Sure. Didn't have a chance to pick up groceries though, since you had to have me this very second," Stiles teased. Cassie elbowed him with a smile and Derek closed the binder, tossing back onto the workbench.

"I'll meet you guys at the house. Red meat, Stiles," He reminded him, expression serious even though Stiles made sure Derek had red meat at least three nights a week.

"Sir, yes sir!" Stiles mocked as he walked through the workshop and out the side door. The humidity had gotten worse and he immediately wished for the air conditioned warehouse.

"Thanks. It's their thirtieth, you know? And I love Derek, but he's so adamant sometimes."

"Like you?" Stiles teased.

"Like me," She agreed seriously. "And neither of us really thought about who the gift was for, I guess, just working on what we thought would look nice."

"Sometimes it just takes a different perspective," Stiles shrugged, determined not to show just how pleased he felt at being included.

"Either way, thanks."

"Not a problem. Besides, this way I can claim it's from me too, because not only am I broke, but I would have no idea what to get them."

"Stiles!" Cassie shouted, obviously offended.

"What? I was joking, I'm not trying to shoulder in on your present," He tried, hands coming up in a placating gesture.

"No, you've already- seriously? The barn! They were afraid they'd have to tear it down and start over. You and Derek fixed it."

He hadn't thought of that. Renovating the barn had just been a fun, well, mostly fun project.

"So why are you making Derek do your dirty work?" He asked, changing the subject slightly.

"I'm paying him for his time," Cassie muttered. "I trust him to do it right, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it. Hey, how do stuffed peppers sound? I think we can get Derek to forgive the lack of beef if we use lamb or sausage. Oh, spicy sausage."

"Sounds awesome," Cassie told him, hopping in his jeep. "Speaking of broke, once you're done with the barn, there's an opening at the bookstore I work at. It's owned by a selkie. She gets pulled to the water more often than not these days and needs an extra set of hands. You interested?"
"That sounds awesome," He agreed, wondering what a selkie would be like.

(He was surprised when Jane turned out to be a middle aged brunette with soulful brown eyes. There was nothing to mark her as different except for the scent of brine that seemed to cling to her hair.)

His nineteenth birthday was held at Derek's. Instead of just the few pack members from before, Stiles walked in on what looked like half the pack crammed into Derek's house. He stuttered on the words he was saying to his dad as Cassie and her sisters shouted out a 'Surprise' - 'oh holy mother of god! No dad, no strippers, totally fine and not amusing!' - and his dad started laughing on the other end of the line.

Derek and Miles were smirking as Stiles, dazed, was passed from person to person for hugs. Stiles was suddenly, very forcefully reminded that wolves were very tactile creatures. And obviously Cassie got her stranglehold hug from Marianne. And oh, wow. Caroline hugged him. That wasn't at all strange.

When it came time to open his gifts, he was pleased to note that there were only a few, and that people he barely knew hadn't felt the need to buy anything. Despite being a typical greedy teenager, being put on the spot that way after already being surprised just wasn't his idea of a good time. Marianne and Sebastian's gift was a cookbook of greek recipes, Lynn and Annette's a cookbook of italian recipes, and Nat's a giftcard for iTunes. "I see how it is. You guys just love me for my food," He joked.

"We can't cook," Lynn muttered. And it was true, Marianne and Caroline were the only women in the household allowed to mess with anything more complicated than a toaster. Even the toaster oven itself was off limits, especially to Lynn. (Stiles had a sneaking suspicion none of the girls liked to cook, so they intentionally blew stuff up or set something on fire every once in awhile, just to remind their mother and aunt of their command.)

"I take it I'm to try these out on you guys?" He asked with an arched brow.

"Duh," Annette snorted. Despite the presumption, it felt good to know that they wanted him there, to cook with him. The ever increasing feeling of solidarity, of inclusion made it easier to ignore that not even Scott was calling as often anymore.

Cassie was practically vibrating in her skin so he teased her, reaching for the box with her name on it and then switching to the one from Caroline and Rick, smirking at her half screeched 'jerk!'. There were three books inside, the same runic language on the spines as the books Deaton had given him. He thanked them profusely, reading the titles aloud in english and obviously impressing Rick. He didn't preen. Much.

Cassie's glare made him give in and reach for the box. He ripped it open and failed to muffle the screech of joy that erupted as he practically slammed into her in his flailing attempt to hug her.

"Cas, wow, this-" He babbled, looking from her to the toolbox. It was metal, definitely better than the plastic budget one he'd gotten for himself before he'd left Beacon Hills. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," She smiled, returning his hug.

The last box was from Derek. Stiles ripped open the paper and smiled at the small, light wooden box with the dark, almost delicate triskele inlay. He traced his fingers over the outline, surprised Derek had used the design at all.

"This is awesome," He smiled, looking over to Derek, who looked amused. Miles rolled his eyes.
"Open it," Miles prompted, voice gruff.

Stiles opened the box and saw a small stack of photographs.

Of random furniture, all in the same color of dark stained wood. A small desk, a plain trunk, and a simple bed, void of anything terribly fancy, but beautiful for all their spartan functionality.

"Uh-" He mumbled, not quite understanding. He looked to Derek for an explanation.

"You're determined to get an apartment," Derek told him, shrugging.

"Dude!" Stiles yelled, understanding finally dawning on him. "Holy shit! This is huge!" He continued babbling and flailing for another minute before forcing Derek into a hug, which Derek resisted, even though Stiles held on and pinned his arms to his sides while effusive thanks babbled out of his mouth.

"Miles helped," Derek pointed out, and Stiles turned to Miles to thank him, but the skinwalker had both hands up in front of him.

"No hugs," He muttered. "I am not a werewolf or cuddle friendly. And he needed the practice," Miles quipped, pointing at Derek.

"Thanks man," Stiles offered instead. Miles nodded and Rick mentioned getting meat on the barbecue. Groups fragmented off, one taking Derek and Miles to talk about the house, leaving him in the kitchen with Cassie, who was sitting on a counter, grin still firmly in place.

"I didn't expect this," Stiles admitted, feeling oddly lightheaded.

"Why not? It's your birthday," Cassie told him, as if the statement was obvious and explained everything.

"But, I've never been, like-People don't-" He tried, unsure how to explain that his seventeenth birthday had been celebrated by dinner with his dad and then a night of Halo with Scott, that it had been a repeat of every birthday he'd had since his mom died, with the only thing changing being the games. "People don't throw me surprise parties, Cas." Even the year before had been a major break from the standards, and it had just been their small group hanging out, getting drunk and passing out in the bed of Derek's truck. The 'party' when he'd gone home had consisted of dairy queen and then heading off on his own to study.

Her face grew shuttered for a moment before she shrugged. "They should. You're fun, and awesome. And you're a good person, Stiles. You don't-You act like it's all normal. And you know it isn't. You don't tiptoe around me and the girls because mom's the alpha. And Tim almost broke your hand last month and you didn't even freak out."

"Okay, one, I am so over the alpha mystique. I've met and fought like, half a dozen. Seriously, I can count them off if you want. And Tim didn't do it on purpose. He's still learning control," Stiles shrugged, thinking about the newly turned beta that Caroline had found and taken in. He was almost completely inoffensive, aside from his lack of control, and a genuinely nice person. "It's not his fault he's not used to the moon influencing his temper, and I made a crack about pms, so I was to blame anyway."

"Yeah, but you could have been afraid, or any number of things, and you weren't. You just stayed calm and helped bring him back instead of yelling or something."

"My best friend tried to kill me when we were sixteen. I've had practice," He tried, blushing under
the intensity of her praise.

"But that was Scott. You've only known Tim for a couple of months."

"Still not his fault. Shit happens."

Cassie looked ready to say something but shrugged and thought for a moment. "Just take the compliment for what it is, Stiles. We like you. You know we love celebrating for pretty much any reason. But birthdays? They're about celebrating that a person is in your life, for showing them that it makes you happy that they're around."

"Did you throw Derek a surprise party?"

"I tried," Cassie muttered flatly. "I couldn't find him."

Stiles choked on his laugh, Cassie's glare stopping it in his throat. He had to beat on his chest a couple of times before he could cough and breath properly again.

"You know, extra help never hurts," He tried, grinning at her. "And we've got a few months to plan."

When they heard the disapproving sound from the living room, they both peered around the corner and saw Derek glaring daggers at them, his head shaking in a resounding, very threatening no. Stiles grinned and began nodding his head, almost burst into laughter when Cassie started snickering. He saved himself, but just barely, by hiding behind the corner and smothering the sounds in his hands.

(That night Derek and Cassie fell asleep before him. He stayed awake as long as he could, silently basking in their presence and wondering when he'd stopped feeling so alone.)
"It smells awful, like mold," Derek muttered as the super waited for them to tour the small apartment.

"I can afford this place," Stiles muttered back, smiling gamely at the super when the woman frowned.

"I can help-" Derek started, not for the first time. Stiles had already been forced to reject several apartments when Derek threatened to tell Cassie and Caroline about the substandard conditions.

"You are not my sugar daddy, Derek," Stiles retorted, voice sharp before sighing and reining in his temper, making an effort to soften his tone a little. "I need to start figuring out this whole adult thing, and I can't do that if you're paying my rent. This is close to campus and it's affordable."

"You're coming home on weekends," Derek groused. Stiles bit back the grin that wanted to erupt at the word 'home'. It was the first time Derek had ever called it that.

"And you'll visit me when you're in the city," Stiles nudged, and knew his smile was impudent, which everything considered was better than the alternative. Derek blew out a breath that screamed annoyance and rolled his eyes in the way that meant he was mentally counting to ten. Not for the first time Stiles wondered when he had started understanding Derek's nonverbal cues.

"I've got a few dining room pieces from practicing that'll fit here," Derek finally said, eyeing the room critically. It was probably the closest to amenable he had been all day.

Stiles figured being an adult meant knowing how to accept free shit gracefully, so he did. Mostly. He knew it was a failure when he looped his arms around Derek and cried out 'you do care' and gave up on comprehending the meaning of grace entirely.

Derek just extracted the promise of letting Rick visit and ward it. Stiles agreed easily.

"You are seriously a lifesaver," Mark said for the umpteenth time as Stiles screwed the knob into place. "The super here is fucking nuts."

"Not a problem," Stiles said, flushing under the praise, a little taken with the soft twang of Mark's accent. "Glad to help."

"At least let me take you out for coffee. You're seriously saving my ass and my security deposit."

Stiles tried not to be obvious, but he figured he was failing pretty spectacularly if Mark's smile was anything to go by. "Sure, sounds good."

By the time he had the strikeplate secured he was practically vibrating in his skin. Mark was gorgeous, and Stiles was more than a little curious to see what dating a guy would be like. He made the quick excuse to go put his toolbox away and dashed to his apartment, practically slamming the door behind him. He gave in to the urge to do a flailing approximation of a victory dance before going and getting dressed in something besides his ripped, worn jeans and muscle tee.

When he met Mark at his apartment, he easily agreed to walk to one of the many local coffee shops
to get to know one another. Stiles felt something akin to victorious when he got a handle on his mouth and only asked a few normal questions and mostly listened to Mark ramble.

Mark was working on his bachelor's, he was from Mississippi, and he'd fled his home and ultra conservative family before finding out the love of his life (he'd said it with air quotations and a rueful smile) had been having a longstanding affair and fled the state entirely.

Stiles couldn't help but admire Mark, and told him as they walked into the coffee shop. Mark's answering blank stare made him feel more than a little defensive.

"You stood up for who you are, came all the way to Oregon to do it." He shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant when Mark's intense green eyed stare made him want to blush. "It can't be easy, starting over."

"What about you? Family close by?" Mark deflected, blushing slightly. Stiles wasn't sure if it was because he was embarrassed or because the topic had gotten a little too serious for a first- for coffee.

"In California. I came here to, I dunno, it seemed like the right place."

"Well, you've come a ways too then," Mark reasoned while they waited in line. "New school, no family, no friends-"

"I have friends here," Stiles protested, unable to stop himself from chuckling. "My friend Derek lives outside of the city, and my friend Cassie lives a few miles away from me."

"Did you know them before you came here?"

"Well yeah. Derek moved here a couple of years ago and I came up to help him with his house. I met Cassie and her family through him."

"So you've always been a handyman?"

"Oh, no way. It was mostly trial and error. On his house," Stiles laughed. Mark placed his order and Stiles did the same, getting a danish to go with his latte.

"Sounds like a good friend," Mark smiled.

"We work at it," Stiles admitted. "We used to hate eachother."

"What happened?"

Stiles thought about his answer for a moment. Any and all supernatural related shenanigans and revelations were a definite no no, but he wasn't sure how else to explain the change in their relationship. Christ, he wouldn't know how to explain it to his dad if he ever asked, and his dad knew all about the supernatural craziness.

"Ever have one of those crazy, life changing experiences that alters your perception of the world forever?" He asked, not thinking about the words that spilled out.

"Duh," Mark chuckled. "I'm here aren't I?"

"Yeah," Stiles laughed, although it felt a little forced. "It was just, one of those situations."

"You'll have to tell me about it sometime, it sounds like an adventure."

After that the topics jumped from majors to professors, and somewhere in there, Mark asked him to a movie. The discomfort of before had faded enough that he said yes.

(The first time Mark ran his hands under his shirt and over his ribs, Stiles shook his head and explained that the scars were from the loss of a friend. Mark never pushed it and Stiles flinched every time his boyfriend touched them, thinking about the secrets he was hiding.)

When he walked into the apartment, he was limping and desperate for a shower. Which could have accounted for the fact that he didn't notice Derek and Cassie sleeping in his bed as he stripped and headed straight for the shower. Ignoring the normal feeling of his own morning breath combined with the lovely addition of chewy spit, he turned the shower on and held his hand under the spray, shuddering as the cold water hit his palm and over his wrist.

"You alright?" Cassie's voice came from behind him, making him jump. He turned, giving her a shy sort of smile and a nod. He knew she would be able to smell everything on him, and for the first time it was a little awkward.

"Oh. Oh," She repeated more slowly. "You-

"Yeah," He admitted, flushing and shrugging.

"And was it your first-" She started, stopping herself.

"With a guy, yeah."

Cassie grinned and nodded. "See you when you get out."

Stiles watched the door close and hopped into the shower.

It was still surreal, he realized. His first time had been-less than ideal. But the night before had been fantastic. Mark was one of the most considerate people he'd ever met, and he grinned when he thought about waking up and scrambling for clothes when Mark's roommate had come in. Walk of shame his ass, he felt amazing.

Humming under his breath, he toweled off before wrapping the towel around his waist and walked back to his room. Cassie and Derek were both still asleep in his bed, and he quickly changed into a pair of pajama pants and an old shirt of Derek's, soft from washing, before crawling in between them.

"So?" Cassie prompted. Stiles blushed again and buried his face in his pillow. "Did you at least have a good time?" She demanded. He nodded into his pillow. "Good," She finished before snuggling into him and nuzzling his chest.

"I have got to be the only person in the world that goes from sleeping in one dude's bed into his own with two other people," Stiles huffed.

"Probably not," Cassie giggled.

"Sleep," Derek groaned, throwing an arm over his stomach and nosing the spot between his shoulder blades.

He really couldn't help himself. "I had sex that didn't end with me getting slapped."

"What kind of women have you been having sex with?" Cassie snorted.
"One. And uh-Yeah. I didn't really count it or anything since-Yeah. But anyway. I'm not a virgin anymore," He added lamely, but he was grinning. Derek muttered something unintelligible but probably, most likely uncomplimentary into his back.

"Strut later," Cassie giggled. "It's not even eight yet and it's Sunday."

Stiles relaxed, allowed himself the goofy smile he knew was still on his face, and let Cassie tuck her head under his chin.

"I've got confirmation from Miles," Stiles cheered.

"This feels more like an ambush than a surprise party," Annette said.

"Pipe down, this is nothing like an ambush. That would require leading him somewhere. He went there all on his own."

"For work," Annette quipped. Stiles ignored her halfhearted protests in favor of navigating traffic. Stiles suspected Annette was harboring a bit of a crush on Derek. He hadn't asked Cassie about it yet, but he was fairly certain there was something there. But ever since she'd gotten in the car she'd been a nervous, twitchy mess, and she was checking her makeup and hair every five minutes and driving him a little batshit with it.

"So what did you get him?" Stiles asked.

"A subscription to Woodsmith," She mumbled, flushing. "I asked and Cassie said she's never seen it around the house, so I figured it was okay. It is okay, right?"

That answered that question. Stiles nodded and silently sent a prayer to the heavens. Derek dating could be a good thing, especially Annette, who was about as sweet and lovable (and sane) as they came.

"Yeah, it's fine," He told her through a smile.

"Cas said you and her pitched in for Derek's."

"Yeah," Stiles nodded, turning into the parking lot. He intentionally parked behind Derek's truck, effectively blocking it in. Derek would have to hope a curb and drive over the sidewalk if he wanted to escape. The others were already arriving, and Stiles was counting on all of the noise inside, and the mixture of sawdust and chemicals to cover their arrival.

Cassie hopped out of her car and pulled out a few grocery bags and Tim and Lynn were carrying the cake and boxes of pizza, and Nathalie was carrying bags filled with bottles of soda. Stiles reached into the back of his jeep and pulled out Derek's present, tucking it carefully under his arm so he didn't mess up the wrapping paper before closing the door quietly and walking over to meet the others. Annette was fidgeting at his side even as she walked, and he tried not to laugh, he really did, but the amused snort came out anyway.

When she looked at him askance, he covered his amusement at her antics by nodding at the workshop ahead. She grinned back at him, her smile completely adorable, and hoped for the best. She was a year younger than him, in her senior year, but age gaps didn't seem to matter as much to werewolves, apparently. (God, he hoped not, because if Caroline was terrifying when she was pissed, Rick was downright disturbing, made all the more unsettling because of his normal sanguine attitude.)
"Ready?" Cassie murmured quietly. Everyone nodded and filtered inside in single file. Stiles made sure to keep his footsteps light as they moved beyond the office and into the small break room. Quickly they set up the food and cake, and Stiles and Cassie both started sticking candles in to try and get it done quickly. It wasn't until Cassie squeaked about not having a lighter that Stiles realized they'd forgotten something.

A cursory glance around the room showed only shaking heads.

"Fuck," He muttered, scrambling for his phone to text Miles and ask if he had one.

"What are you doing?" Derek asked from behind him. He and Cassie both whirled and stared at Derek, who didn't look the least bit impressed.

"Happy birthday?" Stiles offered, smiling gamely.

"I don't want-"

"Come on man," Miles said, striding into the room with an air of easy authority. "They went to all this trouble just for you. Sit back and enjoy."

"You're just saying that because they brought food," Derek muttered as the other guys he worked with began to file into the room. Stiles felt bad for it, but he was thankful that the 'party' was low key. Anymore people and there would be elbows digging into ribs, and that would just be unpleasant.

"Anyone got a lighter?" Cassie asked bluntly, ignoring the surly look Derek cast in her direction. Again, nothing. Stiles wished he could bang his head into something.

So the candles on the cake weren't lit, and the moment Cassie tried to start singing happy birthday she came down with a strange case of yelping. Stiles ignored that in favor of handing Derek a knife to cut the cake. (He did think about it for a moment before he let go, his instincts asking him if it was really a good idea to hand a pissed off Derek something sharp, but then he reminded himself that Derek was naturally sharp and pointy.)

Cake and pizza were passed around, and Stiles sat on a table next to the coffee pot and listened to everyone, laughing and joking with Tim and Payton, one of Derek's coworkers that had a very earthy sense of humor.

When it came time to open gifts, he watched Derek stare down at the wrapped gifts with something that resembled constipation. Huh. That would make for an interesting Christmas. He wondered if he could get Cassie to record it for him since he'd be in Beacon Hills.

There were giftcards to the local hardware chain, and a few birthday cards, most of them in very poor taste. When Derek opened the card from Annette with the subscription card he nodded and said a polite but stiff thank you. Stiles saw Annette practically wilt and frowned, surprised at the distance he could see Derek asserting even as he smiled mechanically at her.

The last box was the one from him and Cassie. Stiles pushed himself back against the wall, suddenly unsure about it. Any sympathy for Annette promptly evaporated as he watched Derek carefully ripping the disco themed birthday paper.

Derek's face when he opened the box and saw the leather jacket was- Expressionless. Blank.

Shit. He should have thought about it more. He hadn't even told Cassie why it was so important. She hadn't been privy to all of Derek's memories, especially of New York. Stiles had remembered Derek
talking about how the jacket had been bought with the insurance money from his family's deaths, and it had struck Stiles as a sort of physical reminder, a constant form of self flagellation made all the worse for the betas that had emulated his style. He almost wished he had told Cassie, maybe she would have stopped him.

"Thank you," Derek finally murmured, eyes moving up to acknowledge Cassie and then rest on him. There was a small nod, an understanding there. Stiles hoped that meant Derek got what he was trying to say.

The 'party' continued for another two hours before Miles kicked them all out. He gave Derek the rest of the day off, although it sounded more like Derek was getting kicked out with them. The food had been demolished, the cake too, and Miles growled that he was keeping the soda.

"I'm going to get a ride with Cas," Annette told him quietly. Stiles nodded, watched the girl gravitate to her sister. Cassie nuzzled her little sister's forehead gently and walked out with her. Lynn and Nathalie followed, Tim hot on their heels. He waited for Derek to gather his presents into a bag.

"You noticed?" He finally asked.

"It's difficult not to," Derek sighed. They walked past the office and outside. The other cars were already pulling out. Derek glared at the jeep parked behind his truck and Stiles shrugged.

"Didn't know if you'd try to crawl through a window or something."

Derek rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath.

"What's that?"

"It's just a birthday, Jesus."

"Cas said you ran last year."

"I went to the movies and had dinner."

"Oh. By yourself?"

"Yes, Stiles. By myself."

"Is that a thing? I mean, did we screw up today or something? Because I can go, if you want-"

"I was gonna catch Dracula, but I have time for a couple of movies."

"Sounds like you have a plan."

"You can come if you want," Derek shrugged. "The new Frankenstein is showing in half an hour. Dracula is on after that."

"Double creature feature? Sitting next to the Wolf Man?" Stiles teased, smirking when Derek glared at him. "I'm so there."

Stiles followed Derek's truck as they wove through traffic. His thoughts gravitated back to Annette. The poor girl had obviously been embarrassed, although, now that he thought about it, Derek had seemed highly uncomfortable too. He resolved to talk about it, but when they got there Derek looked-

He actually looked-Not happy, he wasn't bursting with a smile, which would have been
unreasonable, regardless of the day, because Derek just didn't seem comfortable expressing himself that way. But he did look content, maybe. Relaxed. Stiles didn't have the heart to upset that, especially on Derek's birthday. So he sniped and elbowed Derek out of the way and paid for their tickets at the admissions booth and ran to the concessions counter so he could pay for the giant popcorn and sodas. Derek huffed and sniped back, but let it go once they were actually in the theater taking their seats.

It was a weekday and the matinee at that, so there were only a few other people scattered in the seats. Stiles propped his feet on the seat in front of him to relax, and was surprised when Derek mimicked the pose, shrugging into the seat and grabbing the bucket of popcorn.

By the time they were getting out of the first movie, making fun of one thing or another, Stiles had forgotten about Annette entirely.

"Mark thinks I'm 'seeing other people'," Stiles groaned, burying his face in Cassie's stomach. She was scratching his scalp lightly and watching the television. At his statement her fingers stilled for a moment before resuming scratching.

"Why does he care?" She asked.

"He said he wouldn't, but he's mad that I'm lying about it," He muttered. "We've only been seeing each other for like, six weeks or something. But he saw Derek leaving my apartment and Derek gave him the normal blank faced stare he gives to anyone he doesn't know when Mark said hi."

"Derek isn't that bad," Cassie hedged. Stiles could tell she was smiling though, knowing the lie even as she said it.

"He is, and you know it. And he thinks I'm sleeping with you too."

"Me?" She actually sounded shocked, although Stiles wasn't entirely sure why. She was at the apartment at least once a week, and he'd occasionally crash at hers if he didn't have an early class.

"He probably thinks I'm sleeping with the whole pack," Stiles whimpered. Not that Mark knew about the pack, aside from the occasional mention of them. He was under the impression Cassie's family were pagans that expected family get togethers on the full moon. Stiles hadn't corrected him.

"What would be wrong with that? It's not like you guys are exclusive, unless-"

"I don't know what we are. I mean, the sex is awesome and cuddling him is great, but he's so set on this whole idea that I'm seeing other people. It's weird Cas. I've never had a boyfriend before. Are they always so territorial?"

"Yes. I've dated human men and other supes, and they were all super territorial. No clue why. Have you told him we're just your friends?"

"Several times."

"You didn't tell him we all crash in the same bed did you?"

"Do I look like an idiot? No one outside of a pack would understand that," He replied sourly. Although he'd had sex in his bed, Derek and Cassie had both preferred to crash in the living room. He'd stopped once he'd noticed the pattern, but Mark had perceived his reluctance to fuck in his own bed as yet another red flag. Stiles couldn't tell him that it felt wrong to force his friends out of his bed, especially since Derek had been the one that had built it.
"Maybe we could all go to dinner together? We haven't really gotten to know each other, and maybe it would help him see that we're just friends?" She offered.

"You'd do that?" He couldn't help but feel hopeful. Mark was a great guy, aside from his insistence, which Stiles could actually understand, logically. He just didn't feel like being logical after having had the discussion for the fifth time.

"Sure. And I bet Derek will too."

Stiles couldn't stop the rude sound that came out, muffled by Cassie's shirt.

"Don't be like that, and don't get your drool all over my shirt. We can ask him tomorrow at dinner, alright? I'm sure he'd love to help."

Stiles made another rude sound and got whacked in the back of the head with a pillow for his efforts.

Stiles couldn't remember a more awkward dinner. Ever. And that included the time he'd been subjected to an awkward 'date' his dad had, in a fit of desperation, brought him on as a meat shield from a woman that was so nice he hadn't known how to say no. It had been the one and only time his father had encouraged him to talk. About anything. (He was still rather proud of the baculum discussion that had ended it all.)

"So, Derek? What do you do?" Mark asked, obviously ill at ease.

"I'm apprenticing to a local artisan," Derek answered stiffly, staring straight at Mark. Stiles figured it was Derek's version of 'polite interest' in lieu of staring down at his plate, but he'd prefer it if Derek would turn his far too intense stare down to his food. Mark was tense enough to snap in two if poked too forcefully.

"Artisan?"

"A wood artisan," Stiles supplied when it looked like Derek wasn't going to answer. "Derek's awesome. All my bedroom furniture, and the desk? He did that. And most of the stuff in the rest of the apartment. He made this really gorgeous chest for Caroline and Rick's anniversary," Stiles said, latching onto the topic and pulling out his phone. Screw politeness, he told himself, scrolling through his albums and finding the pictures of the finished chest.

"Stiles helped us with it," Cassie added. "We actually couldn't figure out the design or the stain."

"It's beautiful," Mark said carefully. "From what Stiles had told me, I figured you would be in construction?"

"What did Stiles tell you?" Derek asked, gaze flicking to Stiles like an accusation before resting on Mark again.

"That he helped you with your house, and a barn somewhere?" Mark supplied faintly, once again the focus of Derek's intense stare. Stiles contemplated stabbing Derek with his fork. It would heal.

"My parent's barn," Cassie said when the silence stretched on a beat too long. "Although the house is better by far, I think. I remember what it used to look like-

"I've got a picture," Stiles added helpfully, going back to the old album and finding the picture he'd saved of the house. Mark made a noise, although what it signified, Stiles had no idea. But he scrolled through pictures he'd taken as they'd worked on the house, and then the ones Derek had sent him.
Cassie brought up his eighteenth birthday party and watching everyone tripping and falling trying to navigate the stairs, and Stiles reminded her that she'd almost faceplanted in the dirt. It eased the tension as they chatted back and forth. For what little Derek and Mark said, he and Cassie made up for. Soon he was relaxed and talking about his classes and professors, and Cassie was adding her two cents and her own experiences.

When dinner concluded, Derek insisted on paying and he and Cassie parted ways with them at the door.

The whole drive back to the apartment complex was quiet. Stiles tried to start a conversation and practically felt the doors getting slammed in his face. Unsure of what had gone wrong, he finally gave in to the silence and parked.

"I guess that didn't go well."

"What were you trying to accomplish?" Mark asked, voice tight. His arms were crossed over his chest and his knees were pressed together, like he was trying not to explode.

"I wanted you to see that they're just my friends," Stiles admitted. "We aren't having sex or dating or whatever."

"I'm supposed to believe that? After the way you acted at dinner?" Mark demanded, the decibel level growing with every syllable. "Why can't you just tell me the truth? I won't be angry Stiles, just stop lying!"

"I'm not sleeping with them!" Stiles shouted, finally losing his temper. "I don't know why you think I am, but I'm not. We're friends. End of story."

"Bullshit. Derek looked like he wanted to stab me with his steak knife and Cassie was totally overcompensating. And you didn't even try to get Derek to be nice, you just let him-"

"He's not some puppy I can tell to roll over!"

"You were stealing food from his plate!"

"That's just how we are. Christ, have you ever had friends you were close to?"

"Not like that," Mark muttered. "And I could tell you guys were hiding something. Like every time it came up you veered off subject."

Stiles started to protest until he realized they had, any time the pack or anything pack related came up. It was enough of an omission to raise red flags, and Stiles didn't know what to do. He couldn't tell Mark the truth, it wasn't his secret to share and he would sound crazy, not to mention he just didn't trust Mark that much. And saying it was a secret would only make it worse, could go wrong in so many myriad, fucked up ways.

"Fine. You think whatever you want to think. I'm not going to change how I act with my best friends just so you can feel better."

"Stiles," Mark tried, expression softening. Obviously Stiles had finally gotten through to him, at least a little. If he had known that, he would have done so earlier, before the dinner. Before the possibility of the Secret even coming into play.

"No. You obviously don't trust me. Fine. I understand. Just-I guess the whole, can we be friends thing is stupid. But whatever."
"Stiles," Mark sighed, then slumped. "I'm sorry. It just feels like you're hiding something. And I can't do that again."

"I get it. It's alright," He lied. For some reason, he felt like he was going to cry.

"Alright," Mark murmured, and then he was getting out of the jeep and closing the door behind him. He didn't slam it, for whatever that was worth, although it didn't feel like much, if anything.

He had no idea why he was crying. It wasn't like he had fallen in love with Mark. Yeah, he'd lost his virginity to Mark, and he'd liked Mark, had liked cuddling with him and joking with him. It had been nice, having someone to kiss and tangle himself up in.

He was texting Cassie before he even realized what he was doing, sending it off before he could delete it. When Derek and Cassie pulled him out of his jeep he was still crying.

"I'm sorry, I'm being such a girl," He muttered, wiping at his face.

"I resent that," Cassie needled gently, shoving an elbow in his ribs to punctuate the statement.

Once they were inside his apartment he headed straight for his bed and fell facefirst into it. Someone tugged off his shoes and he felt the bed dip on one side, then the other. The reassuring weight of Cassie's arm over his waist and Derek's leg over his grounded him, pushed away the second wave of tears that threatened.

"If he can't see how awesome you are, he doesn't deserve you," Cassie whispered into his ear.

"I think I broke up with him," Stiles admitted a moment later. He actually wasn't sure.

"Why?" It was Cassie that asked. Stiles didn't think Derek would talk at all. After all, feelings talks still weren't his forte, probably never would be. Especially not breakup talks. Christ, he must look so immature. Derek had been through way worse and here he was, crying like a fourteen year old girl.

"He said it felt like we were hiding something. And we are," He chuckled wetly. "Just not what he thinks."

"Oh Stiles," Cassie sighed, scooting closer to him. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I wouldn't trade you guys for anything. You're my best friends. I don't want that to change."

Cassie nuzzled his shoulder, offering comfort the best way she knew how.

"It won't." Surprisingly, it was Derek to make the promise. Stiles allowed himself to relax between them. He couldn't remember falling asleep, but when he woke up Cassie was attempting to cook pancakes and the smoke alarm was going off.

Even though he'd been putting it off, Stiles still didn't feel ready for the conversation about to happen. But the sound of the call connecting forced him to keep the computer open. His dad's face appeared on the screen and Stiles waved.

"Evening son," John greeted, smiling warmly. Stiles felt a pang of homesickness for his father. The lines on his face had eased a little more, and he was dressed casually. Not even sheriff casual, but casual casual. He looked comfortable.

"Hey dad. How's the Hill?"
"Pretty quiet, nothing exciting. Unless you count Scott and Chris actually being nice to each other exciting."

"Sounds like a master achievement," Stiles chuckled. Even after Scott had given up on Allison and earned the alpha status, Chris had never been more than civil to him. Stiles wondered what had changed that.

"What about you? How's Portland? Your classes going okay?"

"All three point five or higher," Stiles told him. The proud smile on his dad's face was something he would never get tired of seeing. "Job at the bookstore is still going good. I think Jane might be setting it up for Cassie and I to take on more responsibilities while she travels."

"Don't take on too much son."

"I'm not dad, no worries."

"What about Cassie? You two doing alright?"

Not a conversation he was willing to have over skype, no matter how tempting it was to have some physical distance between himself and his dad when he dropped that particular bombshell.

"Great," He said, ignoring how wrong the half truth felt.

"She seems like a great gal. I'd like to have dinner with her sometime, actually get to know her."

"Yeah, dad."

"Alright, what is it?"

"Huh?"

"You're avoiding something. You're never this quiet."

Stiles smiled awkwardly and fidgeted in his chair. "I can't make it back for Thanksgiving. Jane needs all hands on deck for Black Friday and I've got three papers to write on top of it." There, he'd said it and it was out there. Now if only it didn't feel like he was stabbing his father over the internet.

John was quiet, his face falling in increments.

"I'm sorry dad," He mumbled. He wasn't sure the microphone had even caught it until his dad sighed and nodded.

"It's alright. We'll miss you. But as long as you come for Christmas-"

"I will. I'll murder my professors if I have to," He vowed. His dad laughed and shook his head.

"Don't go that far. Unless you've already found good dump sites." It was a macabre joke, especially for his father to make. But there was no awkward pause.

"We have the Williamette. And Cassie would help me," Stiles vowed, hand over his heart.

"Good," John chuckled, smiling again.

Stiles relaxed at the sound of his father's laugh and launched into a rant about his econ professor, who was just as demented as Finstock had been, only ten times more sadistic and a thousand times
less funny. By the time he signed off, he'd almost forgotten that he'd told his dad he'd be missing the first Thanksgiving ever.

Stiles stared at Derek, refusing to back down. Derek obviously knew he was being stared at and was making a point of not looking up.

"Dude, far be it from me to tell you what to do," Stiles started, pausing when Derek made a snorting without even looking at him. "But you could at least give her a chance."

Derek glared from over the top of the drafting book he was reading. He was remaining determinedly silent, and had been ever since he'd literally 'polited' Annette out of the apartment. Stiles hadn't even thought that was possible, much less for Derek.

"She's a great girl, really sweet. And we know she doesn't have, uh-A history of violence or anything. And she's a wolf, so, you know. No problems there."

Derek was studying his book and scowling. Stiles knew he was listening, because Derek's eyebrows were making a deep V shape that meant he was inwardly growling.

"For the love of god, Derek. Why not?" Stiles finally snapped.

"You called her a 'girl'. And she is. She's still in highschool, Stiles. I just turned twenty five."

"Yeah, but she's eighteen in a few weeks," Stiles reasoned. "And I've seen a lot of werewolf couples with age discrepancies."

"But they didn't start that young," Derek growled, snapping his book shut. "And anyway, I'm not interested in dating."

"Seriously? Still?"

Derek's glare conveyed 'fuck you' quite eloquently for not actually articulating anything.

"Is it a 'not now' or a 'not ever again' not interested?" Stiles asked.

Derek shrugged. "I don't see why it matters. I know I'm not interested now."

Stiles sighed. He could understand it, he really could. After the trifecta of hell that highlighted Derek's history of romantic entanglements, Stiles could understand why Derek didn't want to date, wanted some time. But it had been two years since Jennifer, and granted, she'd been a real piece of work, Stiles was worried Derek had given up altogether. And Derek-He obviously enjoyed being with someone. With Cassie in the throes of a new romance and blissfully happy, he sort of wanted that for Derek. Maybe with less detail about his sex life, because Cassie had a terrible habit of oversharing. (Stiles might have been a tiny bit jealous, mostly of the borderline awe inspiring shit a werewolf could apparently pull off in the sack.)

"Look, I'm not telling you to jump Annette. But maybe, try being open to the possibility of being with someone."

Derek continued to glare.

"And at least tell Annette instead of being so painfully civil about it. It's fucking awkward and painful to watch," He quipped. "She'll understand and be a little embarrassed, and then she'll find some other werewolf to pine for."
"Fine. Now can we stop talking about this?" Derek growled.

"Sure. What are you making for dinner next Thursday? Because I am not getting stuck in the kitchen cooking for a dozen werewolves with just Caroline and Marianne."

"This is so good," Cassie groaned as she stole a taste of the potato chowder on the stove. Stiles resisted the urge to smack her hand with a wooden spoon and settled for glaring at her, mostly because all of the spoons were either in the sink or being used.

"Out," he commanded imperiously when she didn’t budge. She tossed an unrepentant wink in his direction before flouncing out, leaving him with her mother and aunt.

"That does smell delicious Stiles. I might have to get the recipe," Marianne told him, sniffing at the pot.

"If I gave away all my secrets, you guys would have no reason to keep me around," Stiles joked, working on mixing the mashed cauliflower. Werewolves or no, he hadn't entirely given up on the concept of eating healthy.

"Of course we would. You keep Cassie in line," Caroline joked.

"I heard that!" Cassie shouted from the living room.

"And you keep Derek civilized," Marianne added in a mock whisper. A loud growl echoed from the other room and Stiles burst into laughter.

"Whatever Sourwolf, you know you’d be squatting in a cave if it weren't for me," Stiles teased.

The only answer was another growl, although Cassie's laughter carried over it.

"Hey, all you lazy ones, set the table!" Rick called out, coming up behind his wife to wrap his arms around her waist and nuzzle her ear.

"You're one of the lazy ones, aren't you?" Caroline quipped, although there was no heat to her words and she was smirking.

"I thought we raised the slave labor to be my replacements," Rick murmured, then whispered something that made Marianne choke on laughter and Caroline turn and smack her husband with a dishtowel.

"None of that in here. Start taking the food out. And make sure they don't eat it all before we sit down!" Caroline commanded, voice filled with laughter as Rick grabbed the platter that had the turkey on it before spinning gracefully on his toes. Stiles finished the cauliflower and dished it into one of the blue glazed pottery dishes Caroline seemed to have in abundance. Marianne was spooning the chowder into another of the blue pottery bowls and Caroline had the rolls on a plate.

Derek wove past them to grab the bowl of stuffing and the bowl of cranberries, following them out to the table.

Another trip and the table barely had room for the plates as they sat down. He was crammed in between Cassie and Derek, across from Cassie's older sister, Lynn. While Rick made a mockery of traditional grace and earned a few chortled giggles, Stiles glanced over at Derek, who was biting his lower lip in an attempt at appearing solemn.
"Amen," Rick boomed, making him jump. Amens echoed around the table and then plates and bowls were passed around.

It was too loud to actually have a conversation, what with there being over a dozen people present, but Stiles answered when he could and listened to Cassie rant about being forced to open at four the next day.

He couldn't remember ever being part of a family gathering so big and loud and colorful, and he realized with a pang that it was the sort of thing he'd always hoped to be a part of, but his dad was missing. Obviously he'd drawn Derek's attention, the werewolf's gaze curious as he tried to shake his dolor.

"It's nothing," Stiles lied. Derek frowned but let it go. After that it almost felt the others had caught on to his homesickness and made a concentrated effort to pull him into conversation. Between stuffing himself until he felt fit to burst and a glass of Caroline's mead, he was nodding off at three in the afternoon. It was just as well. Several family members had already drifted away, either to their rooms or the living room where a game was on.

Derek tugged him into the living room to sit on the couch.

"I'll wake you up in time for work," Derek promised.

"Thanks," Stiles mumbled into his shoulder, already giving up any pretense of staying awake. Cassie drifted in a few minutes later and he felt her laying down, her head resting in his lap.

"I want to die," Stiles groaned, face pressed against the counter.

"Not yet. We still have four hours before we get off," Cassie reminded him. Stiles groaned again, a wordless sound that fogged up the counter with moisture.

"But the crowds are already gone. Everyone is somewhere else. Probably the mall or walmart, beating other customers to death. Jane is a dick. She should be here."

"She's relieving us, remember?"

"I'm not like you guys though," He whined petulantly. "I don't have crazy stamina and endurance."

"You should have rolled higher before being born," Cassie teased.

"Was that- You totally just made a rpg reference. How did I not know you were a nerd?"

"Because."

"Because why? Dude, we could have nerded out together. Maybe some online gaming, even going oldschool and playing tabletop."

"It was a phase," Cassie told him, shrugging lightly. "Dad hates rpgs, he's always-"

"Correcting them," Stiles finished. "Yeah, I made the mistake of mentioning world of warcraft, as a joke, mind you, I can't play that unless I want to lose any semblance of a life and sanity. I got a three hour lecture on dwarves. I didn't even know dwarves were really a thing. Like, the lore books I've got talk about them, but, dwarves? Seriously?"

"He's from a long line of seiðmenn. He takes dwarves very seriously," Cassie answered, and Stiles applauded her for managing to keep a straight face while saying it. A second later her expression
blossomed into one of pure joy as the door opened and Derek walked in, two bags in one hand and holding a tray of coffee cups in the other.

"Your mother kicked me out and told me to bring you food," He muttered, setting the tray and bags on the counter. Stiles grabbed one of the coffee cups and popped the tab before taking a deep whiff, feeling vaguely more awake just from the smell.

"You are a god amongst werewolves," Stiles crooned, not even looking up from the coffee.

"You are," Cassie giggled, already digging into her hashbrowns.

"Thanks," Stiles murmured before sipping the hot coffee. "This is exactly what I needed."

Derek rolled his eyes and promised to meet they got off to grab a late lunch.

"He takes good care of us," Cassie sighed into her coffee.

Stiles smiled into his coffee and nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Movie Insider had Dracula and Frankenstein listed as coming out in October 2014, and I couldn't resist, even if it's not correct timeline wise. ::kicks at TW sense of time which is screwy anyway::
"The train would be cheaper," Stiles muttered, staring at his laptop. It had been a passing thought, mostly to save money so he could buy decent presents without decimating his savings account. "Friggin' gas is expensive."

"Then take the train," Derek told him.

"But it's like, ten hours," Stiles whined. So much for backup. He'd been hopeful Derek would tell him to driving would be better, safer.

"Study."

"On the train? Are you serious?"

Derek gave him a flat look and Stiles glared back. "I am immune to your werewolf jedi tricks."

"Stiles, gas or ten hours, which is only two more hours than the drive," Derek reminded him.

"You and your logic," Stiles muttered. "And you better pick me up," He added a few minutes later as he pulled out his bank card and began paying for his ticket.

Cassie was hugging him tightly, like he might not be coming back.

"Chill Cas, I promise, your mom made me promise. Back before New Years." And the extracting of that promise still freaked him out. Caroline apparently took New Years very seriously.

"You better," Cassie mumbled into his chest. Stiles smiled and squeezed her one more time.

"And you better wait until Christmas to open your present. Your mom knows to make you wait, by the way."

"Jerk." She still hadn't let go.

"Nerd. Same goes for you Derek," He added, looking over Cassie's hair to smile at Derek. The werewolf looked nonplussed, probably because he didn't want anyone to know he'd been curious
about his presents. Stiles knew better, he’d noticed the small signs of his closet being poked through a few times, and one of them Cassie had been at her boyfriend’s apartment for the night. Derek ignored his smirk and tugged on a lock of Cassie’s hair. Cassie stuck her tongue out at Derek, but she did release him and step back.

"Here," She said, pulling a small package from her pocket. "It's from the whole family."

Stiles took it and looked at the small box, resisting the urge to shake it before putting it in the vest pocket of his jacket. Derek stared Cassie down and Cassie made a small, surprised noise before reaching into her messenger bag and pulling out a bigger box, this one wrapped sloppily.

"And that's from us."

Stiles accepted it and slipped it into his own messenger bag, careful of his laptop and the book Rick had given him after Thanksgiving.

"Not until Christmas," Cassie told him, shaking a finger in his face before leaning forward to hug him again. "Now get out of here, or you'll miss your train."

"Yes ma'am!" Stiles said with a salute, then softened. "You guys have a merry Christmas, alright? See you soon."

He waved his ticket at the door and boarded, finding his seat easily. When he looked out the window, Cassie and Derek were staring. He waved, feeling oddly weepy all of a sudden. Ten minutes later the trained pulled out of the station and Cassie was waving and shouting, not that he could hear her. But he smiled anyway, waving back and mouthing goodbye through the window.

Time passed quickly as he immersed himself in the book Rick had given him. It was another lore book, similar to the Argent's bestiary, only in old norse. It was definitely updated though, still new enough that it didn’t make him feel like he was touching something borderline sacred, even if it was handwritten. Stiles marveled at the work that had gone into it even as he made notes in his journal. The illustrations were enough to make him wish he could draw. He dozed a little, bag clutched to his chest even though he wasn't seated near anyone, and woke when the train came to a stop.

It was dark out, and when he got off he stumbled, his legs prickling with slowly returning sensation. After finding the baggage handler he showed him his claim tickets and grabbed both his bags before heading for the exit.

His dad was waiting for him outside, the cruiser lights flashing and drawing the attention of everyone around him. Stiles rolled his eyes and waved, finally getting his father's attention. The lights shuttered off just before Stiles threw his arms around his dad.

"Missed you."

"Missed you too, son."

"So I get the official ride back to Beacon Hills?"

"Only if you want to sit in the back seat."

There was a burger and curly fries waiting for him, and he didn't bitch about it, allowing his dad the one meal since he hadn't seen him in months. After they ate, he saw his dad fidgeting, as much as he ever fidgeted, and tapping his fingers on the wheel.

"Dad?"
"Yeah, Stiles?"

"You're nervous. Stop it, it's making me nervous."

"I'm not nervous," He dad protested, and because it was pitched slightly instead of grumbled, Stiles pursued it.

"You're twitchy," He accused.

"I haven't- I'm not-"

"How do you even work in an interrogation room?" Stiles asked. "Just spit it out."

"What do you even think of Melissa?" His dad blurted.

For a minute he was tempted to respond flippantly, because it wasn't as if he was unaware of his dad and Melissa's relationship, even if they had never called it that. Until he realized what his father was implying. The first wave of betrayal was so fierce he nearly told his dad to turn around and take him back to the station. But after a deep breath he forced himself to think logically.

He liked Melissa. His dad had been seeing her for almost two years. And she made his dad happy. Even if- Even if it was like his mom had (a part of him screamed that no one could make his dad as happy as she did), it was still happiness. His dad deserved that, and more. And he wasn't in Beacon Hills anymore. His dad needed someone to watch out for him.

"I think you should marry her, if that's what you want. She's awesome, and you're awesome. But don't have any babies. I'm one in a million and Scott needs to stay one in a million."

John relaxed and smiled. "M'not going to have any more children Stiles."

"Accidents happen. Look at me."

"You weren't an accident, Stiles," His dad groaned.

"Oh, right. I was a surprise," Stiles chortled. But his dad was smiling and the tension was gone. "Just don't do it on Christmas. That's seriously tacky. Or New Year's Eve. That's when-"

"Her first husband proposed, I know, Stiles," John muttered. "And don't say Valentine's Day because it's not happening then either."

"Do you even have a ring yet?"

"No. Do you?"

Stiles sputtered and flailed. "What?" It was a squawk and he wasn't even going to try and save face by covering for it.

"You've been with Cassie longer than I've been with Melissa-"

"I'm too young! Two years isn't that long for someone my a-" He stopped, saw his dad's stern glare and flailed his hands, let his anxiety take them over as they fluttered and twitched in the air. He could come clean. He could come out. It would be an end to the lie. Cassie could go back to being just his friend.

But he didn't, because his dad was smiling again. Grinning even. And shit. Christmas.
"No, do not make wedding plans for my wedding when you have your own!" Stiles demanded.

He hated himself a little.

(It kept him up that night, after answering questions about Portland and Cassie and the sly remarks of New Year's kisses.)

Christmas Eve was simple, for the most part. It was just the four of them opening their presents to one another. There was a gift card to Ikea from Melissa, and Stiles did his best to nod and not grin at the thought of showing his to Derek. Who would probably shit cinderblocks before setting the card on fire with the power of his mind. He could even wait until he was at the workshop, of course, he'd have to find an excuse to be there, but he dropped in with food for Derek a couple of times a week (and sometimes everyone, when he was trying out a new recipe on his own). Regardless, he could show it to Derek in front of Miles. And watch them both lose it. He knew Miles would be more vocal about it, but he was positive Derek would have the more extreme reaction.

He thanked Melissa, although he was thanking her more for the entertainment opportunity she'd given him than the potential new furniture. She didn't have to know that.

Scott's present was the new Captain America movie. It came in a box with a light up shield on it. Stiles convinced everyone in the room he was a ferret by constantly pressing it so it flashed.

The present from his dad was a blank, leather bound journal. Stiles remembered mentioning that he'd been doing a lot of writing, and that he felt childish for still using composition notebooks like he was in highschool. His initials were tooled in the inner cover, and it smelled strangely delicious, all fresh, crisp paper and new leather. Stiles wondered if he was learning werewolf senses by osmosis alone, the tactile pleasure of the slightly textured leather under his fingertips almost sensual as he looked down at it.

After they shared hot chocolate he and his dad went home. Stiles did not lean on the horn when the kiss between his dad and Melissa shared hit the three minute mark. He would never in a million years have accused his father of acting like a teenager either. (Not where he could hear it, anyway.)

He was getting ready for bed when his dad knocked on his door. In his hand was a smaller box, much smaller. Jewelry sized.

"I think it's time for you to have these," His dad said as he handed him the box. Stiles opened it and almost dropped it, scrambling at the last minute to keep it and it's contents from hitting the floor even as it felt like he was about to fall on his ass.

"Dad-" He actually had no clue what to say. The simple diamond engagement ring and the gold wedding bands were- He wasn't sure if his dad was giving them to him in trust for his future wedding or because he was going to ask Melissa to marry him.

"She would have wanted you to pass it on to someone you loved," John told him, giving him a tight hug. Stiles would always maintain that he didn't sniffle or tear up. And then he was sitting on his bed, alone and staring at his parents rings.

He was still sitting, staring, when his phone chirped loudly, announcing a call. He picked it up and answered quietly.

"You okay?" Cassie asked. "You sound sad. Derek chill-damnit, those are my toes!"

"Just uh, sentimental moment sort of thing," Stiles told her, sitting the box on the bed in front of him.
"I'm fine, Derek," He added. "Nothing bad."

She hummed quietly, a habit she'd picked up from her mother. "It's after midnight. Christmas."

Stiles almost choked on the laugh that escaped. She was worse than Scott. "Yes, you can open your present. Derek too, if he wants."

"He is, right Derek?" Cassie asked sweetly, the threat clear. Stiles huffed out a laugh, imagining them both glaring at each other. "You can open yours too," She added, the offer sounding more like a 'please'.

Stiles fumbled through his messenger bag and pulled out the two boxes. He heard the crackling of wrapping paper and listened to Cassie berating Derek - *stealth, you suck at it Hale. If mom catches us*. Then a door closed in the background and he heard cloth rustling before Cassie announced that they were ready.

He opened the one from them first, because they were opening his. While Cassie gasped in delight at the seraphinite pendant he'd found in the city, Derek didn't make any sound at all. But Stiles heard the sound of the book being opened even as he stared down at the small wooden frame and the picture inside.

It was from Thanksgiving, and whoever had taken it had caught all three of them asleep on the couch. Derek's arm was tucked behind Stiles' back, head tipped back, and Stiles was practically curled into his side, one leg behind Cassie and the other hanging off the couch, Cassie lay so that her head was in his lap and her knees bent over the arm of the sofa, feet dangling.

"This is awesome guys," Stiles told them, fingers skimming over the simple twining lines patterned into the light wood, reminiscent of the box Derek had given him for his birthday. "Merry Christmas."

"Did you open both of them?" And Cassie sounded almost shy.

"Just the picture."

"The other one Stiles, come on," She whined. Stiles sniffed and tried to cover the sound with a cough, although he was pretty sure he failed. He tore the paper away and almost laughed. Another jewelry box. He opened it and stared at the metal pendant. Either it was old or it was expertly antiqued. Picking it up by the chain, he examined the round shield, recognizing the design as the same sort of shield Caroline kept in her office on her wall. He'd only seen it the once, but it had been a fascinating thing for it's contrast to the otherwise very modern office.

When it turned, he saw writing on the back and squinted to translate the inscription.

"Ást hrafn er vargr hjart-" He paused, struggling with the word. "Hjartarótum," He murmured, translating the words. Most of them were familiar, except for hjartarótum. Going through syntax he mumbled the translation. "The raven's love is the wolf's heart something? I don't know the word."

"The raven's devotion is the heartroot of wolves," Cassie corrected quietly, voice soft.

"It's beautiful," Stiles told her. "Thank you. And- Thanks, I mean. Thanks guys. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas Stiles," Cassie whispered. There was the sound of air huffed out and Derek's voice filtered over the phone.

"Thank you Stiles. Merry Christmas."
"Night guys. Miss you."

"We miss you too," Cassie chirruped, sounding a little off, like she was sniffling. Stiles smiled into his phone and listened to their goodnights before hanging up.

He looked down at the pendant and realized it was old, was probably one of the heirlooms Rick mentioned occasionally. Smiling, he grabbed his parents rings and slipped them over the chain to rest above the pendant, topping the old, age darkened metal with three links of gold. Then he slipped it over his head and pushed it under his shirt to rest against his skin.

It felt right there. Solid, reassuring.

"You rang?" Stiles asked, slipping into the clinic.

"Good to see you again Stiles," Deaton greeted, eyes zeroing in on the spot where the necklace tented his shirt a little. "You seem to be doing well."

"Yeah," Stiles shrugged, mostly over his grudge towards the vet. "Portland's been good for me."

"So I see. I had a few things to send to Rickard, if you didn't mind. It seems safer than trying to ship them."

"Not a problem, as long as it's nothing too big. I took the train here."

"It's just a few items, although I'd ask you don't try to examine them without him."

"I don't go rifling through Rick's stuff," Stiles muttered stiffly, offended at the insinuation.

"These are a little different, Stiles. They call to people, so the compulsion could be difficult to ignore."

"Wait, they call to people? What- How am I supposed to hand it off to the baggage guy then? Unless I can carry on it'll probably end badly."

Deaton actually blinked once, as if that thought hadn't occurred to him. Stiles knocked ten points off of Deaton's house, which was probably Ravenclaw and- That thought immediately reminded him of the pendant, and he had no idea how to be angry anymore.

"Do you think you could get someone to pick you up?" Deaton asked carefully. Stiles noticed Deaton wasn't big on names. At all. He didn't say Derek, even though Stiles was pretty sure that was who Deaton was talking about. And that wasn't happening. Derek didn't come to Beacon Hills, was actually happy outside of Beacon Hills. He wasn't going to screw that up by dragging him back.

"How big is all of it? I might be able to carry it on."

There were two knives, an ax and a sword. An actual sword and ax. Stiles wanted to stab Deaton, mostly because he was so expectant, like Stiles would have absolutely no problem trying to get the items to Oregon. But he didn't actually feel a pull to the items, like Deaton had suggested. And according to the vet, they really needed to get to Rick.

"You're going to pay Derek or Cassie for gas," Stiles muttered, glaring at Deaton.

"That sounds reasonable," Deaton agreed easily.

"Derek drives a truck. Pray it's Cassie, she's got a hybrid."
"I'll keep my fingers crossed," Deaton smiled. "When are you leaving?"

"My ticket's for Tuesday. I can return it, but I can probably wing the same day, if Cassie isn't working."

"I can do that," Deaton nodded, not volunteering any further information. "Just call and let me know."

"Sure thing," Stiles said in way of farewell before exiting the clinic and getting in Melissa's car. He was already on his cell phone when he pulled onto the road.

"Hey," Cassie greeted.

"I need a ride home," He muttered. "And it's not my fault."

"Stiles, what's wrong?" Cassie demanded.

"Not- Nothing's wrong, per se. But Deaton wants me to bring some stuff back for your dad. Apparently it attracts people, and there's no way I can hold on to all of it on the train."

"Oh, that's not a problem," She replied easily.

"Seriously?" He asked.

"I can tell Jane I need the time off for dad's work. She'll get it."

"You're a life saver Cas. I owe you so big."

"No you don't. Daddy does." Stiles could hear the smirk coming over the phone. "What day do I need to come and get you?"

"Tuesday sound okay?"

"Sounds fine. I'll head down Monday night and pick you up Tuesday morning."

"Will you be okay with that? It's sort of-"

"It'll be fine, no worries Stiles."

"Thanks again. I know you didn't want to spend Christmas vacation driving."

"Daddy owes us," Cassie reminded him. "I expect something extravagant will be waiting for us when we get home."

"Sounds awesome. I've got to call Deaton back and let him know."

Cassie hummed an 'I miss you' that he returned before they hung up and he called Deaton back. Deaton told him he could pick the items up on Monday after the clinic closed for the night. Stiles figured it was all's well that ended well and drove to his house to cancel his train ticket.

Stiles stared at the truck pulling into his driveway. Derek's truck.

"Oh my god," Stiles muttered, darting from his bed and down the stairs. His dad wasn't home, and everyone else had other things to do, but Derek's truck meant Derek was there, because Derek was more possessive of his truck than he had been of his camaro. Far, far more possessive.
He yanked the front door open as Cassie's hand was raised to knock. Derek was behind her, looking supremely uncomfortable. Stiles immediately felt guilty and decided they needed to get out of there, that very second if it was possible.

"Come on, I can't carry everything by myself," He said, wanting to leave before his dad came back from Melissa's. The werewolves followed him upstairs and he quickly shouldered his messenger bag and grabbed his duffel. Cassie and Derek grabbed the boxes he nodded at, Cassie carrying the sword and Derek grabbing the ax and knife boxes.

All told it was easy getting everything in the truck. His bags went in the cab and the items, whatever else was wrong with them, went under a tarp in the back, tied to the toolbox to keep them from sliding around.

"You okay?" He asked Derek, who looked vaguely nauseous.

"Let's go."

It was enough of an answer that Stiles nodded and hopped in the front seat, ignoring Cassie huffing as she got in the back. The moment his seatbelt was on her arms slipped around his neck and a hand came to rest on the pendant under his shirt.

"That doesn't feel like-" She started, voice hitching. Stiles pulled the necklace out just as Derek got on the road.

"My dad's going to ask Melissa to marry him. He gave me these," Stiles mumbled, flushing hotly as he tried to ignore the stinging of his eyes. He hadn't actually looked at the rings after he'd put the necklace on, hadn't taken the necklace off, even in the shower because he still had issues facing the fact that his mother's rings, hell, the ring his father had worn for years after her death, were resting over it. "They're-uh, their wedding rings. And mom's engagement ring."

Cassie's arms moved around his shoulders to hug him. Derek's expression was one of careful neutrality, probably because of feelings, Stiles thought. It had to be uncomfortable for him.

"It's alright. I want dad to be happy. It's just going to take some getting used to."

"Love you," Cassie mumbled. It was the first time she'd ever said it, and Stiles smiled sadly, wishing it had been something else, something happier to evoke it for the first time.

"Love you too."

"You want me?" Stiles asked, staring at Rick as the man examined the boxes that evening. He felt the urge to point at himself, just to make sure.

"That's what I said. I need someone to maintain the boundaries while I pull the spells out. Otherwise they might find something else to cling to before I can nullify them."

"What kind of spells?"

"Bloodlust, berserker rage, that sort of thing."

"Sounds like something we should totally do in a house full of werewolves," Stiles reasoned sarcastically.

"Thus the boundaries," Rick told him, brow arched in amusement, as though the idea of a rage spell
attached to a viking battle ax wasn't all that serious. "It will be easier to work on exorcise the compulsions if I don't have to maintain the shields, and the shields will keep them from being released onto anyone nearby."

"What about us?"

"We will be as protected as we can be."

"Your recruitment tactics suck," Stiles muttered, lifting the boxes containing the sword and knives while Rick carried the box containing the ax. Stiles followed, noting that Cassie and Derek both were speaking to Caroline and didn't follow. Rick led him through the house and to a door he had never really paid attention to before and down a flight of stairs into the basement. It looked almost like a workshop, the sort of place a man worked on his airplane figures of whatever else, except for the signs of what Stiles generally thought of as 'woo' stuff, having gotten his head bitten off by Lydia one too many times calling it 'magic'. There were shelves filled with books and wooden boxes covered in runic inscriptions. Stiles was reminded of the curse boxes from Supernatural. It wasn't particularly comforting.

"Set them on the bench over there," Rick said, adding the ax to the top of the pile in Stiles' arms before walking over to the wall and pulling down various boxes.

The next few minutes were quiet. He observed Rick as he opened boxes and began arranging objects. After five minutes passed, he started shuffling, unsure of what he was supposed to be doing.

"Alan tells me you affect change in your environment," Rick finally said as he took up a piece of chalk and began drawing on the smooth concrete floor.

"Doesn't everyone?" Stiles asked, eyes on the runes being drawn onto the floor, some basic and some combinations that he didn't recognize.

"True. But there's a spark of power, a will, behind yours that drives it, allows you to bend things that remain rigid to others."

"I made a handful of mountain ash extend to thirty feet?" Stiles offered, unsure if that counted. Rick nodded.

"Anything else?"

He thought about it. "During the final, I kept making goals, and I actually suck at lacrosse. Um, I used an aluminum bat to hold up a support beam and a shit ton of dirt." He examined the extraordinary moments of his life, and he wondered if it had been that 'spark' inside of him or pure dumb luck. "I managed to keep a paralyzed werewolf above water for two hours?" He added, completely unsure. But Rick was nodding, accepting what he said and not saying 'perfectly mundane explanations for all of that Stiles'.

"It's a raw gift," Rick told him as he continued writing on the floor. Stiles was a little awed that he was watching Rick, someone he respected and who commanded respect, on his hands and knees. It was a little surreal, and he felt like he should offer to help, except he had no idea what Rick was doing. "The girl Alan is training, her gift is a kind of cognition. It's initially very specific, but eventually she'll be able to expand it, although it's difficult to actually tell how much she'll be capable of outside of that skill."

Stiles hadn't actually thought of that. Huh. So Lydia could see dead people, sort of. He didn't envy her.
"While your gift is less specific, it means there is potentially a broader range of what you'll be capable of at first."

"So I might learn to see the future?" He asked.

"Perhaps, although that will be a long time in coming, if at all. But it's that ability to affect change, to nudge things into a certain direction that's important tonight."

"How so?"

"I would like it if you would create a shield around us."

"Like the mountain ash?" Stiles asked after a moment.

"I prefer true ash, though they can be used similarly. Ash has many properties," Rick smiled. "One of them can be protection. I know you've read the books I gave you. What else?"

"It's supposed to be a good conductor for magic. Yggdrasil is an ash tree and vikings were called aescling, men of ash. Weapons were typically made from it, and I know that they were said to guard springs, and if you have a stave of it over your door it wards against malicious intents. Uhm-"

"That's more than I expected you to remember," Rick laughed, obviously pleased. Stiles tried not to preen and accepted that he'd probably failed. "And more than enough to give you an idea of why I prefer it. I have some in a box up there, since it seems you're comfortable with it the concepts."

"I-"

"I trust you, Stiles. You've done this before." Rick's voice was a strange mix of sternness and warmth, and Stiles looked from him to the shelves.

Rick was trusting him with more than just himself. He was trusting him with his pack, his wife and children, his family. With Derek.

He could do it. He reminded himself of making a palm of dust trap werewolves and a kanima, of holding up hundreds of pounds with a bat that should have bent in half, of saving his dad and Derek.

"Okay," He said, going over to the shelves and perusing the boxes. Everything was labeled with runes. A lot of the words he recognized, but there were still more he didn't. He found the box of ash and pulled it down, hands shaking and he slid the lid out.

"Sawdust?" Stiles asked, looking over at Rick.

"I prefer it before it's been charred and mixed with black salt, which is more typical with mountain ash," Rick answered easily. Stiles stared, not even realizing that black salt had been in any of the mixture he'd used. And that he didn't have a clue what black salt even was.

"A lesson for another day," Rick promised. He nodded again and sat the box on the floor.

"How much room will you need?"

"About a foot outside of the runes," Rick instructed.

Feeling like the sorcerer's apprentice and praying he didn't fuck up as bad, he channeled everything, his attention, his hope, his faith into the ash as he started making a line around the chalk writing. He thought about Cassie and Derek, upstairs talking to Caroline or hanging out on the couch. About Cassie's three sisters that hugged him like he was the best thing since sliced bread, about Marianne
and burning a pavlova with her the last time they'd cooked together, about her husband Sebastian, with his dry wit, and their children that never stopped asking embarrassing questions. He thought about how much he wanted to protect the people that had accepted him without exception. He poured his belief, his conviction into the line, imagining a wall not even Scott could cross.

When the circle connected, Rick was nodding at him, obviously pleased, although why, Stiles couldn't tell.

"Now step inside, and please focus on the boundary. And don't make any loud noises. It might be difficult, but anything too loud could disrupt the resonance," Rick instructed. Stiles bit the inside of his cheek and nodded (he was beginning to feel like a bobblehead) and stepped inside, worried about being inside of the wall when Rick began.

"Don't worry," Rick assured him, obviously sensing his trepidation. "The pendant we gave you is the protection of the pack, and those that came before."

Stiles rubbed his palm over the pendant under his shirt, comforted by the solid weight of the shield and the rings resting above it.

When Rick started chanting he could feel something. It felt like static at first, sparking along his bare arms and the back of his neck. It grew into a thrumming against his skin, soft at first, and then steadily into vibration, rising and falling.

What was startling was when the vibrations split. Rick's voice sounded louder, but Stiles knew he wasn't actually raising his voice. Logically it didn't make sense, but when the sounds began to bounce back, like the shield was a wall that kept them contained, he bit his lip, determined to stay quiet. The sensation of static turned to the shock of something stronger, something colder. Each syllable Rick uttered thrummed, vibrated around and through him until it felt like they were reaching into his bones and sticking, his entire body shaky and twitchy.

The feeling only grew, and even though he couldn't see anything physically happening, it felt like something had peaked, his bones holding together by sheer force of will alone.

And then they splintered, Rick's words echoing in his skull like thunder. He wanted to fall, to drop down to his knees as a ghost ache of his bones fracturing raced through his skeleton.

Rick's voice stopped. A few minutes later the sound of church bells in his head quieted, and his bones began to feel still inside of him, settling back into themselves. The phantom ache lingered, dull and throbbing quietly.

"That was harder than I thought it would be," Rick admitted, bracing against the small table the weapons had been arranged on. "Are you alright?"

"I feel like a nuclear reactor tried to get me pregnant," Stiles groaned, knowing the analogy made no sense. Surprisingly, he couldn't actually make himself care. Giving in, he fell to his knees first and, after feeling the faint sensation of his knees bruising on concrete, shifted until he was sitting.

"That sounds about right. I apologize. I didn't realize the compulsions were that deeply entrenched. Otherwise I would have had you remain outside the boundary."

"S'alright. We're both alive, which is always a good sign. And I don't hear werewolves trying to kill eachother upstairs. Also very encouraging."

"The compulsions are gone," Rick agreed. "You did very well."
Stiles had just enough energy to grin, but then he shifted and wow, he hadn't realized he would feel so much pain from something that hadn't actually happened in any tangible way.

"You can break the shield. I'll clean this up and meet you upstairs."

"You sure? I can get a broom and everything."

"That's waiting until tomorrow. It's the weapons I'm worried about."

"I thought you just exorcised them."

"I did, but once something is magic, it never stops being a conductor. They need to be put somewhere safe, where nothing can choose to make them a home."

That was an uncomfortable thought. Stiles pushed himself to his feet and made for the stairs, feeling like he needed to sit under a hot shower for a month.

Derek and Cassie were waiting on the couch, both obviously relieved to see him alive and in one piece. Caroline looked equally relieved, which was a new expression he filed away to examine at a later date. He gave a thumbs up before walking over to the couch and wiggling in between Cassie and Derek. Cassie's familiar warmth eased some of the chill that persisted beneath his skin, and Derek's solid presence next to him quieted the memory of his whole body resonating to Rick's words.

"You alright?" Cassie asked quietly.

"Yeah," He lied.

"Mom said it felt like a bottled storm," His friend whimpered quietly, nuzzling into his neck and inhaling.

That was a surprisingly accurate description. Stiles grunted his agreement and closed his eyes.

Derek's arm moved behind him and Stiles tilted his head back, grateful for the support and warmth, for the proof of their solidarity.

"Stiles, would you like something to eat?" Rick's voice filtered through his groggy haze.

"Do I have to move?" He groaned. It was rude, but he was tired and hurt, and felt like he'd earned a little whining.

"We can eat in the living room," Caroline told him. "This once." Because that was one of the house rules. No food in the living room. Caroline liked her carpets and made sure her family respected them.

"Food could be good," He mumbled, thinking about how nice it would be to just pass out sitting just like he was.

A few minutes later he heard random noises in the kitchen and realized he was actually hungry. Hungry and sleepy, which was a terrible combination even when he didn't feel like he'd been run over by some asshole playing dubstep.

"Dad's impressed," Cassie whispered.

"Eavesdropping is rude," Stiles muttered, not even bothering to open his eyes.
"They wouldn't talk about it if they didn't want me to hear it," Cassie retorted. "But he says your barrier was really good, nothing filtered out. And that you didn't disrupt the resonances when they got really strong." Cassie actually sounded impressed, and Stiles wondered when she'd had a chance to endure them, and why.

"He's glad," She added a few seconds later. "That you're here. That you helped."

"Me too," Stiles told her. It wasn't a lie. He regretted the current ache that was sort of what he had always imagined arthritis to be like. But he'd helped, he'd used his spark to help someone he cared about. And that mattered a lot more to him.

"Hey Cas?" He asked a minute later.

"Hmm?"

"What's your dad's gift?" He asked, using the word Rick had.

"He can see the threads of things."

"What does that even mean?" Stiles whined.

"I don't know," She admitted, huffing on a laugh. "It's just how he always explained it."

Caroline and Rick walked in a moment later carrying bowls of stew Stiles knew to be the winter favorite of the family. Probably leftovers. He didn't care. He accepted the bowl from Caroline and practically inhaled it, the warmth in his stomach spreading outward and sticking to his bones.

He didn't know how the bowl disappeared from his hands, but the next thing he knew, he was stumbling upstairs to Cassie's room and being helped into bed. There was a warm body on either side of him, and his body was still and quiet, finally. The ache had diminished into a whisper of a memory.

"Love you guys," He mumbled into a pillow. He wasn't awake long enough to hear the response.

"I am far too drunk to be around all these werewolves," Cassie mumbled as she fiddled with his necklace. Stiles snorted, only a little buzzed. He had to work the next day and didn't relish the idea of a hangover.

"We can go get some air, help you sober up."

"Sounds awesome," She sighed as he got up and held his hands out to her. Once she'd grabbed them he pulled her to her feet and slung an arm over her shoulder to help guide her outside.

"Where's Derek?"

"I think he's flirting with Nick's cousin," Stiles told her, laughing as she tried to look over her shoulder and turned her whole body, stumbling a little.

"No, he doesn't flirt. With anyone," She sputtered when she turned back, expression mutinous. "I know for a fact."

"It's New Year's Eve Cas, he might want to get laid."

Cassie made a rude sound but kept her mouth shut. He let her feet direct them. Despite how drunk she was, she was still steady, and he recognized the path to the barn immediately.
"I want to get laid," She said as they passed the treeline.

"Get a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. Or go find a one night stand. No judgment here."

"I want a boyfriend," She added, almost as though it was an afterthought. "And I want you to have a boyfriend. A nice one that trusts you, not like dumbface."

"You mean Mark."

"Dumbface," She reiterated.

"You are seriously five years old," He chuckled, hugging her regardless. Even though he was still friends with Mark, or at least friendly, her loyalty warmed a selfish, vindictive part of him he would never admit to out loud.

"I want Derek to find a boyfriend too."

"Derek's straight."

Cassie made another rude noise. "You two should date. It would be fantastic. You would both get laid and be happy. And then you could find me a boyfriend. A straight one. And I could get laid and be happy."

"How much did you have to drink?" Stiles huffed, unable to stop himself from laughing at his best friend.

"Like, a jug. That's it. I think."

"I fear for your liver, werewolf or not," He muttered as they walked into the barn. Familiar with it now, he was able to find one of the battery operated lanterns and turn it on before grabbing a few blankets.

"How's your throwing arm?"

"I could get you up there," Cassie said easily, looking from him to the hayloft.

"No. Do not even. I meant the blankets."

She took the blankets and tossed them up before pulling herself up the ladder. Stiles waited, wisely, he thought, for her to crawl into the loft and followed, hanging the lantern on one of the hooks he and Derek had strategically installed when they'd worked on renovations. Cassie was already spreading the blankets.

He repressed a shiver and ignored the cold as he flopped down next to her. Werewolves ran hot, like furnaces. Probably from their metabolisms constantly at work. He shifted a little closer and waited for her to talk. She didn't disappoint, her hand pulling his necklace from under his shirt again and fiddling with it. It was almost a nervous habit of hers, but he never stopped her. She took a strange comfort from it, and he trusted her with it, as odd as that probably was.

"I was really happy when you told me about the rings," She admitted quietly, slowly, as if it had been weighing on her mind. "I feel like a jerk for it. But that you're wearing them so close to the pendant, that you keep them together. It just feels like you treasure the pendant too, like you trust it enough to keep the rings close."

Stiles hadn't actually thought of it that way. It had been convenient at the time. He still barely looked
at the rings, too at ease with the weight around his neck to actually mess with it often, like Cassie did. It made sense now though, why she was always checking it, fiddling with it absently.

"They're both important to me," He finally said, moving his arm to pillow her head when she moved closer.

"I'm glad."

"Are we having a chick flick moment? Because you said I was emotionally constipated and I think this might actually be physically damaging me."

Two seconds later Stiles was made fully aware of how quickly his friend could move despite being a little drunk. And how warm she'd been keeping him as she rolled away and burrowed into the hay like a demented shark. A moment after that he was being rolled like a pig in a blanket and practically smothered as she growled and muttered obscenities at him. Maybe he'd overestimated her sobriety.

"Is there a point to this?" He asked, voice muffled by the blankets.

"If you don't want a chick flick, we'll just have to have one of those wacky bro movies."

"Your point?"

Her point was made clear when Stiles found himself hanging upside down from the loft, tangled and tied so securely in the blankets that he couldn't move. But he also wasn't dropping head first on the hard packed dirt below, which was sort of a plus. Mostly a plus.

"Cas, not funny."

"I'm going to sleep. Have fun."

"I am not a bat," He shouted.

"Night."

"Cas. Cassie!"

When she didn't answer, he started singing. Anything. Everything. He had an impressive mental playlist, ranging from Queen to Adam Lambert. And he intentionally threw his voice off pitch in the hopes of getting her to give up and just pull him back up.

"Stiles?" A voice asked. Stiles blinked, saw Derek coming into the barn.

"Thank god. Help me down?"

"Why are you hanging upside down?"

"Miss Thang up there decided to turn me into a burrito bat."

Derek stared a him, expression more pinched than it should have been for finding Stiles hanging upside down. He should have been smirking.

"Any reason?"

"He was being a dick," Cassie called from her spot in the loft. Derek nodded once, as though that was explanation enough, and started climbing up the ladder.
"Hey! Dude, get me down!"

"You left me with Janet. Alone." Derek didn't even bother looking at him when he made the accusation before he pulled himself into the loft, his feet disappearing.

"What-Are you serious? You wanted me to cockblock you? And what about Cassie? She was the one playing drunk wereoctopus!"

There was growling, scuffling, and hay started flying out of the loft. A few minutes and a couple of high pitched yelps later, Cassie was dropping down next to him, as firmly wrapped as he was.

"Men are assholes," She muttered, trying to get free.

"Weren't you all about finding a boyfriend earlier?"

"And yet," She retorted sourly.

"Derek, we're sorry for not saving you from Janice," Stiles called.

"Janet," Derek corrected from above them.

"Who actually cares what her name is? We're sorry we assumed you wanted some hot new year action. We'll never make that mistake again. Consider us on permanent cockblock duty. Just please get us up. I've been hanging for ten minutes and I'm pretty sure I have a migraine I can't even feel anymore."

For a minute Stiles thought maybe Derek would leave him hanging. But he pulled him up (before Cassie, Stiles noted with a sense of triumph) and helped him get free of the knots and folds of the blanket. He hauled Cassie up next, who was still working on wriggling to get free.

"Was it that bad?" Stiles asked, tempted to burrow into the hay for warmth. Derek didn't say anything, but he looked genuinely uncomfortable. Remembering the other women that had been attracted to Derek, he figured it probably had been.

"She was insistent," Derek finally said. "And you know I'm not interested in-" He waved his hands vaguely to illustrate his point.

"I thought you meant relationships, but now we know," Stiles told him, making a mental note of it. "And you are attractive Derek," Stiles pointed out. "And it is new year's eve. She was probably drunk and didn't get the signals."

"She's human," Cassie pointed out.

"See. No werewolf senses to get the whole 'fuck off' vibe."

Derek still looked perturbed, as if a woman hitting on him was on par with suffering torture. It probably was, once Stiles considered it.

"Someone's coming," Cassie whispered. Stiles peered over the edge of the loft and saw a flashlight beam entering the barn before the woman that had upset Derek strolled in.

Despite his excuses for her behavior, he felt irrationally angry. Derek had run away. Obviously he'd been uninterested. And she'd chased him. To the barn, which was essentially hallowed ground for the pack, but especially for them. She was invading, seemingly adverse to taking no for an answer. He didn't mind that he sort of jumped on hating her a little. He knew he was a lesser person and
didn't always take the high road. And he was totally fine with that on most days. And it just so happened to be one those days.

"Derek?" The woman called out, eyes on the lantern and the hay loft.

Stiles looked over to Cassie and hoped his thoughts were transferred at a glance.

"He's uh," Stiles laughed with a mirth he didn't feel. He stuck his head in hay and laughed more before leaning over the edge of the loft. "He's a little busy."

Cassie, who already had hay stuck in her mussed hair, peeked over next, lip caught between her teeth and cheeks flush. Stiles blessed her and her love for boat necked sweaters, she'd probably ruined her top by tugging the neck down to expose her shoulders. The blanket wrapped suggestively gave the illusion of nudity. Stiles didn't particularly mind. "Anything we can do for you?" She asked, her voice pitched and breathy.

"Are you sure he's up there?" Janice looked doubtful.

Stiles resisted the overwhelming need to hock a loogie near her feet. That would have been childish. And Caroline would kick his ass if she found out. (She always found out.)

Derek peered over the edge. "Hi," He greeted, voice flat. Stiles figured his surliness could be construed as being interrupted. He hoped."We're busy."

He almost felt bad for the woman, who looked genuinely shocked.

Until she practically purred a request to join them.

Stiles made a choked sound before Cassie snarled. "I don't share."

The woman, who had been inching closer to the ladder, practically fled. Stiles decided Cassie was going to be getting an amazing birthday present.

"Your mother is going to hear about this," Derek warned, but he actually sounded relieved, and Stiles hated Janet a little for getting him to that point.

"She'll know what we were doing the minute she hears," Cassie snorted as she leaned back and pulled her sweater back up over her shoulders.

"What, am I not good enough?" Stiles teased, finally relaxing as Derek began arranging the blankets.

"Oh, no, it's not that. Mom just knows us. We'll probably get a lecture about being rude to new packmates but other than that we're fine."

"How did she even get in?" Stiles whined, burrowing between the two living furnaces and shamelessly stealing body heat.

"Nick's son shifted in front of her on accident. Mom figured it would be easier to introduce her now before bringing her to a moon gathering."

Stiles made a rude sound that Cassie echoed. Derek relaxed, even throwing his arm over Stiles to rest on Cassie's side.

Stiles' phone beeped and he shuffled for it, turning it off in his pocket.

"Happy New Year," He told them.
"Best New Year," Cassie promised. Derek hummed an agreement. Stiles noted he was picking up Caroline and Cassie's habits.

(They didn't leave the hayloft until morning. When Caroline found them, she told them there were better ways to handle such situations and that Janet had been horribly embarrassed. Then she handed them a box of donuts and a thermos of fresh coffee and that was the end of it.)

Rick was in the process of explaining what he had done a few days before to Stiles, taking his time. Most of it Stiles understood, intellectually. It was just accepting it that was problematic for him. Granted, it was more elaborate than saying abracadabra, but it was still saying magic words.

"So it was galdr," He asked when Rick stopped.

"Yes. It's about sound and resonance."

"Is that why they split instead of combining?"

"You noticed?" Rick asked, looking slightly surprised and pleased at the same time.

"It was hard not to. It was like that time at the house, when you did the sleep thorn spell."

"How did they feel?"

"Like they were storing up inside of me. It felt like my bones were going to break."

Rick nodded in understanding. "You absorbed some of the resonance, which was expected. Did they feel discordant or harmonious, could you tell?"

"Not really. I mean, it felt jarring in me, but they felt like they were, I dunno, like being in a car and all the other cars around you are listening to different songs with the same bpm."

"Harmonious," Rick answered. "It will become easier to recognize over time. But your gift appears compatible with it."

"Cas said your gift is seeing the threads, but she didn't really know what it meant."

"I see the lines of everything a little differently," Rick explained. "Think of everything on an atomic level. I see that, in a way, how an object is bound within itself and how it borders other objects, or how it's tied to them, whether that be physically or magically. I can follow those lines and ties. Because I can, it's easier to manipulate them."

"Like plucking a string," Stiles guessed, thinking in the theme of sound they'd been on for the past half hour.

"Exactly. I took to galdr because it's a way of plucking the strings."

"But I can't see them," Stiles pointed out.

"Perhaps not in the way I can, but you're sensitive to them, or else you wouldn't have felt the resonances splitting, or that they were in harmony. It's that sensitivity, coupled with your belief, that allowed you to manipulate them. With training you'd be able to intuit those lines. Essentially our gifts are reversals of one another's. I had to learn how to affect change, while you'll have to learn how to see the best ways to do so, with understanding and intent instead of just faith."

"That-" Stiles said, surprised at the analogy. "Makes sense. I hadn't thought of it like that."
"Think you're ready?"

"Yeah!" Stiles said immediately. "I mean, I can help, right? It could help you and the pack?"

"It could. And it's, that that's your first thought is," Rick paused and shrugged, his smile wide and genuine. "I'm pleased, is all. But there are a few issues we'd have to figure out."

"Like what?" He was over eighteen, he had the ability. What else could there be, except maybe money, which, yeah, that would be a problem.

"Your tie to the nemeton in Beacon Hills, for one," Rick told him, as though it were the obvious answer. "I spoke to Alan about it after I first met you. It's- Unusual, especially to those that are more sensitive to such things. I was told about the incident with the druid."

"Darach," Stiles corrected, surprised when Rick rolled his eyes.

"That's a celtic distinction between good and bad, one I honestly can't understand."

"She was killing people," Stiles replied, voice flat.

"She was. But even druids made sacrifices, Stiles, no matter what they say now. And you know the history of my ancestors. Magic is neither good nor evil, it simply is. And sacrifices are a part of it's history and use."

"I'm not going to kill someone just to level up," Stiles retorted, growing angry at Rick's glib explanation.

"And you'll never be asked to. But if you pursue this-" Rick looked hesitant. "It's possible you will be put in a situation where you will have to take a life. Not because you want to, but because you have to." Stiles opened his mouth to reject the idea when Rick held his hand up in a placating gesture. "You recognized the threat Peter Hale was and you did the best you could, which was all that could be asked. But it's something to consider, Stiles. It, or worse, could happen again, and it won't be a matter of whether or not your best is asked, it will be required."

Stiles nodded, knowing that if anything like Peter ever happened again, he'd do whatever it took to get it finished. And he'd never make the mistake of not completely cremating a body ever again. His dad had almost lost his mind when he'd insisted on cremating Jennifer when they'd found her body. Thankfully some people (ie: everyone) had agreed and insisted with him.

"So, shall we discuss your tie to the nemeton?"

"Sure. I mean, I don't get why it's such a big deal. It's just there."

"And it will never go away," Rick told him. "Which is part of the reason it is so unusual. Most threads are capable of shifting or being cut, even if it takes considerable effort. Sometimes they can fade. Very few are fixed. And Alan told me that there was a darkness present that affected the other two surrogates. He was never able to observe anything in you. He did say he had a sense you were isolating yourself. To be honest we discussed the matter at great length, although without your input most of it's simple conjecture."

Oh. A feelings talk. Stiles suddenly realized he really wasn't sure about the whole discussing himself thing anymore.

"Was there anything after your sacrifice that changed? Anything you feel was linked to the darkness Alan told me about?" Rick asked gently.
"I had problems with the pack," He admitted slowly, painfully aware of who he was talking to. "It was hard, being around them. Scott-" He shrugged, looking down at the floor. "Scott's awesome. I love him," He added, voice flat and projecting how very little he wanted to talk about Scott. Scott was difficult, even from a distance. Half of the calls that came were picked up to say he was busy, and he rarely chatted with him online except for email, where he could pick and choose his words carefully.

"But?" Rick urged after several minutes of tense silence.

"After everything settled, I couldn't forget. I couldn't look at the pack and see happy teenagers. I saw-" He struggled against making accusations, against the anger that still lurked beneath the surface of his skin, waiting to flare up. "I saw people that had tortured and killed people I cared about. It was like Scott's acceptance of them forgave everything. But it didn't. Doesn't. I-" The tears started, burning at his eyes when he thought about Scott's dismissal of him. He blinked them back and took a calming breath, felt it shuddering through him as he exhaled.

"They're faces change, sometimes. I-it's like seeing it in a mirror that reflects the past, just, fucked. For a minute it's seeing Allison looking like Kate, or Scott, I don't, he's a good guy, but there's something twisted, sometimes. And the twins, it's the worst with them. Just, a distortion that's like a funhouse mirror from a horror film. There for a second and then it's just them."

"That's not all," Rick said, voice quiet, almost soothing.

"My dreams," Stiles choked. He still dreamed of the past, still had nightmares that woke him up despite the sleep thorn charms Rick had made for him, but once he'd left Beacon Hills they'd slowed, dimmed in intensity, he even had short stretches where he didn't dream of Beacon Hills at all. But they had never fully retreated. "It's-I see the people that are gone because of them, or I see them hurting Derek-" He stopped, shuddered. "It's hard to forget, when I see the twins killing people, or Allison burning down Derek's house." And that had been a hell of a nightmare, one that still made him sick to his stomach.

"And Scott?"

"He-" Stiles choked, swallowed, tried to keep speaking. "Usually I see him turning into anything other than a wolf." Like Gerard or Jennifer, both so convinced of their purpose, selfish and desperate, scrambling for power despite the casualties. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't pretend it was all okay."

Rick sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Stiles felt bad, dumping everything on the man. He looked genuinely tired, as if he had shouldered the burden for Stiles. But it didn't feel like it. Stiles could feel the anger, the sense of betrayal that lingered.

"That's the darkness Alan warned you about," Rick finally said.

"What's that mean?"

"We think it's because of what the druid did, before she died, and that she died on the center itself. A sort of taint that's stained it, and in turn affected you. According to Alan, the others were made vulnerable to themselves."

"And me?" Stiles asked, afraid of the answer.

"It appears no different. I think it has to do with your gift and the sacrifice you represented. It's my guess that the nemeton can't create a new channel, only widen existing ones."
"I don't understand."

"You were a surrogate for a guardian. And that has many meanings, a parent being the least of them. Your father is a sheriff. He speaks for those who have already been wronged, for those who can no longer speak for themselves. That quality is a part of you, was probably a part of you before you gave yourself up. But the nemeton amplified it, drew it out. What you might have been willing to overlook before, you cannot anymore. It's turned justice into blind justice."

"But that doesn't sound like something that 'dark' would do."

"Dark is neither intrinsically good or bad, and there are very few traditions that view it as inherently evil. Although, remember, what is just is not always fair, and what is fair is not always just. Instead of facing the increasing need for that justice, you left. You could have done any number of things differently."

"But it would have destroyed the pack."

"Maybe so, maybe not. It's difficult to tell. But you could have as easily taken the matter into your own hands and exacted the justice that, on some level, you felt the need for."

"You mean killed the twins and Allison." And become Jennifer, which was probably the endgame of the nemeton, if it even had one.

"Yes. But you didn't. The tie can't control you, though it can and does impose a sort of influence by forcing you to acknowledge those truths by manifesting them in different ways. Think of it as keeping a wound open and fresh, instead of letting it heal over and scar. However, it can't make you act on those perceptions, can't decide what you choose to feel about them. It doesn't infect you, but you are more susceptible to infection. It's likely you would never have been able to accept the twins, regardless of influence."

Like he hadn't been able to trust Allison. Still couldn't. Stiles nodded, understanding the tie a little bit more.

"Why the influence though? I mean, does it want me to do something to them?"

"It's not sentient, Stiles. It merely is. The vé on our land is a similar sink of currents. Not as strong, but still present. It hasn't been polluted by the energies of someone like the druid, though, which is why it ties me to the land and to the alpha, and through the alpha, the pack."

"So, it's just like a pair of sunglasses, just, tinted?" Stiles asked.

"Yes and no. It's difficult to explain, and it would take more examination of your tie to it to actually comprehend what it does. But it's only as sentient as the movements of the earth are. That's all it is, anyway, a place where those movements meet and pool."

"And apparently makes me hate everyone," Stiles muttered.

"Was there anyone you did feel comfortable around, after the sacrifice was done?"

Stiles thought about it and shrugged. "My dad, Melissa. Derek." He said the last reluctantly.

"Not surprising, considering the fact that when you chose to escape, you went straight to his home. I don't need to know why, but it is something you will have to consider. However, now that we know what the influence is, it will be easier to control it, and the tether."
That sounded good. That sounded great, actually.

"When do we start?"

"We already have. Dinner time though. Caroline will skin us both if we don't get something to eat."

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Chapter End Notes

I love Magic! Stiles. Lovelovelo. Galdr is verbal rune magic. I wanted to expand on the TW'Verse concepts of magic, because I can?

I used the aberdeen college site for the old norse, the guide can be found here: http://abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?id=422&if=teach&table=skalds&val=&view=
Hey guys! Sorry, I thought I'd have time to upload a new chapter everyday, but I haven't, because Florida is fucking awesome, and I never want to leave. An-y-who. The reviews. They are fantastic. And the questions amazing, and when I get back to my desk I'll work on the requested codas and answers to the questions posed here (I'll be posting them on tumblr under a cut in the event of spoilers and whatnot). Hope you guys have a good week!

Stiles ignored the werewolves sitting at his table when he blew into his apartment. Even when he heard Cassie call out his name he didn't stop, walking down the sort hallway to his room and closing the door behind him before locking it. It was a silent, understood request for time alone, one he didn't invoke all that often. Any time he did, it was respected without question.

He was only mindful of his laptop bag being sat on the floor gently before he threw himself down on his bed, anger pulsing, hot and venomous on the tip of his tongue. He heard the doorknob jiggle before it abruptly stopped. The sound of his front door closing echoed from the front of the apartment and he wondered if he was alone.

Reality sucked, he realized. Most of it was easy to deal with, especially in the bubble he'd cultivated for himself. But every once in awhile something intruded, and Scott's easy mention of the house being sold had been a sucker punch timed perfectly (awfully) in between his classes. The phone call to his dad right after hadn't been much better. Even knowing that his dad had been trying to figure out how to tell him didn't help all that much, despite the fact that it meant his dad knew he wouldn't take it well.

Tears burned his eyes. Scott had made it sound so obvious, and it was the obvious choice, even if it stung. His dad and Melissa were getting married in June, which he'd known. It was only logical for his dad to sell the house. Melissa had a bigger, nicer place. One she'd moved into after her divorce, so it was free of any unwelcome memories concerning divorced or dead spouses.

God. His mom. The house she'd loved, the house she'd raised him in. The wave of hysteria he'd been holding off threatened when he thought about another family moving in, painting over the soft lavender of the guest room, what had been his mother's sewing room before she'd died, her small place of sanctuary. A different family cooking in the kitchen, replacing the temperamental dishwasher and raising a child. The kid using his bedroom, completely ignorant to every memory, from his mother tucking him in to fugitive werewolves bleeding on his carpet.

It was stupid, he knew. He'd avoided Beacon Hills at every turn since he'd left. But his house, the place that had been his and his dad's-It was theirs, and he couldn't imagine not being able to go back to it. Like a safety net had been removed, he was suddenly very aware that he was walking on a thin line.

"Stiles?" Cassie asked, voice pitched with panic. "Are you okay?"

No, of course he wasn't okay. He was probably having a panic attack. And that brought back
unpleasant memories, Lydia's face right in his popping up from somewhere in the black hole of his subconscious. Sucking in a deep breath he held it, heard the ocean roaring in between his ears as he counted, determined to make it to five, to ten, to fifteen, and then exhaling in a gust.

"Fine," He croaked. It was an obvious lie, and if the sound of the forehead meeting the door meant anything, it was that Cassie didn't want to let it go.

"Stiles, do you want to talk?"

Not particularly. But he also knew she'd leave him alone, probably leave the apartment to avoid the temptation of forcing him to talk. And he didn't actually want to be alone in his apartment.

Stuck between the two, he pushed himself off the bed and stumbled over to the door, unlocking it but not opening the door before ambling back and falling into the bed, toeing off his shoes and just laying there. Cassie walked in and climbed into the bed next to him. She didn't try touching him, although she did get close, close enough that he could reach forward and pull her to him. It was tempting, but he stayed still, eyes closed.

"Dad's selling the house," He finally muttered. "He wants me to come pack up my stuff. And go through my mom's stuff to figure out what I want to keep." Which also burned like a motherfucker, because apparently his dad didn't want to keep that many things, had already picked what he wanted to take with him. Stiles tried not to rebel at the thought of his mother's things in Melissa's house, knew it was illogical because he liked Melissa, wanted his dad to marry her and be happy. But they were his mother's things, pictures and mementos being taken to another woman's house. It felt off, wrong. He couldn't imagine pictures of him, his mom and dad at Christmas hanging on the wall next to the picture of Melissa and Scott she'd had done after the divorce.

When Derek came in later, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling of his workboots and laying down in the bed, Stiles still hadn't said anything. Of everyone he knew, Derek would probably be the only one that could understand the idea of someone he loved being reduced to boxes, of not having the security of a childhood home anymore.

"Dad's selling the house," He mumbled again.

Derek remained silent for several moments, arranging himself behind Stiles, not moving to touch him. Stiles almost wished he would, needed the tactile sensation to calm the feeling of wanting to burst out of his own skin.

"Do you want to blow it up?" Derek finally asked.

Cassie's reaction was as violent as his own, although the two were so diametrically opposed that his laughter only got louder, drowning out her shriek of -'what, Derek why would you even'- until he was holding his sides, the tears he’d been holding in check smeared over his face as he choked on laughter and tried to muffle in in the blankets.

"Oh man," He whimpered, his body still shaking as he scrubbed his face. "Jesus. No, dad could use the money. But-Yeah, no, it's a bad idea."

"You two really worry me sometimes," Cassie muttered. Stiles hummed as she moved forward and cuddled into his chest, taking his relaxation as a sign that he could be touched without breaking.

"I don't know what I should do," He admitted quietly. "It feels fucked up, taking all of her things to a storage unit."

"You can keep them at the house," Derek offered several minutes later, while Stiles was still trying to
figure out whether to get a unit in Oregon or California.

"I don't know how much stuff I'll have," he shrugged.

"The attic's almost empty," Derek reminded him, and Stiles flinched, realizing his carelessness.

"Thanks man. I'd like to have it close, I guess. If that makes any sense."

"It does," Cassie murmured. "We all want to keep memories of our loved ones close."

"I get the logic of it," he admitted several minutes later, trying to sound okay and failing, his tone giving away his own ambivalence. "It makes sense. He doesn't want-" Stiles choked. "He doesn't want my mom's memory haunting his marriage. And I get that. It's okay." He wondered why he was trying to lie to werewolves, but he'd love them both forever for not calling him out on it.

"Just because you understand doesn't mean you can't be upset," Cassie reasoned.

"It's a house," he tried. "She's not there."

Derek made a sound that could have been construed as disagreement. "She might not be there, but she was there."

"And she's gone. I should stop- I need to let it go."

"You don't just let go," Cassie reminded him. "It's memories Stiles. And a place full of them. You want to keep it for the same reason your father wants to sell it."

And that was a bitch of a truth, Stiles realized. He wasn't sure what stung more, that or the fact that soon he wouldn't be able to go back, to access all of those little triggers that reminded him of his mother. The art deco mirror she'd insisted was stylish, the dent in the wall from where she had propped the laundry basket as she'd opened the door to the laundry room. A thousand little reminders of her he'd clung to.

It took him a moment to realize he was crying.

"Shit," he muttered, scrubbing his face. Cassie made shushing noises and nuzzled his chin. Even Derek shifted so that he was closer. Cassie started whispering, quietly telling him to just talk, to let it out, whatever it was in his brain, anything he felt.

He started talking, much to his mortification. About his mom, about her crash and her stay in the hospital and the endless surgeries that had only failed her in the end. He talked about how happy she'd been, how she'd loved gardening even though she'd sort of sucked at it, how it had made her so happy to be able to grow the scattered, scraggly bulbs in the backyard, bulbs that had since died from drought or being mowed into submission. Memories spilled out, of his dad drinking, of his mom burning shirts in an attempt to iron, the dishwasher that had literally exploded and spilled bubbles everywhere and the times he'd heard them arguing about his dad's hours, about his panic attacks and his separation anxiety, about crawling into his dad's bed to hold a hand under his nose just to make sure he was breathing and his love for his mother's cooking and finding her recipe box and how he couldn't cook anything from it for his dad because he'd made him cry the only time he'd tried.

It was strange to remember so much so suddenly, to just talk and talk about something he hadn't really spoken of in years.

"Her name was Claudia," he finally said. He'd never called her that, but he'd loved the name so, so much. Still loved it. "Claudia Alkaev Stilinski."
"Wow," Cassie chuckled, and even Stiles had to smile.

"Russian. Fun names. Her original middle name was a patronym of my grandad's name."

"I still don't know yours."

"Your dad does," Stiles snorted.

"And he won't tell me. Derek, do you know Stiles' name?"

Derek nodded and Stiles smirk faded. "When did you find out?" He demanded.

"You get mail at the house," Derek reminded him. Stiles muttered, hands going to cover his face.

"It's not like I can actually pronounce it to tell her, Stiles."

"Thank god."

"Come on Stiles. It's been years now," She wheedled, nuzzling his cheek.

"Fine," He muttered into his palms. "Gennadiy."

"Huh. Gennadiy Stilinski."

"Gennadiy Alkaev Stilinski," He corrected, flinching. "Mom was Claudia Ginnadyevna Alkaev before she got married. Which, you'd think she would have endured enough with that to avoid saddling me with my grandad's name. At least her first one was anglicized, although dad said he always called her Klavdiya. I'm not entirely convinced she didn't change it at some point and just didn't tell her dad."

"If you ever have a kid-" Cassie started.

"He or she will have nice, easy to pronounce names," Stiles said firmly.

"Still, it's sort of a fun family tradition," Cassie hummed. "Impossible to pronounce names. Mom said one girl of every generation in her family has a C name."

Stiles hummed, not bothering to point out the massive differences between their names. It was enough that he'd relaxed, although he felt tired, like he'd vomited up all his energy along with the memories.

After awhile he allowed himself to drift, to just sit in the moment instead of considering the future or the past. He had his best friends on either side of him. And while he acknowledged he'd have to go back to Beacon Hills, to pack up his belongings, and probably his mother's, it wasn't happening right then.

"What's your anchor?" Stiles asked Derek. They were eating thai takeout while Stiles studied. It was one of those nights Derek didn't feel like driving all the way home, and he was sprawled all over the sofa Stiles had gotten from a resident that had been in the process of moving out.

The question obviously startled Derek, who looked at him, eyes narrowed.

"Rick says I need to figure mine out," He explained.

"You need an anchor?"
"Well, sort of. It's a grounding thing, but he said it was really similar to what you guys have. He also said it's really personal, so I get if you don't want to talk about it. I just have no idea what mine would be. I know Scott's was Allison, but I don't see undying teenage love suddenly coming to me," He snorted derisively.

Derek was silent for several minutes, eyes on the television. Stiles figured that was enough explanation. Even if it only made him want to know more, it was too personal, and he didn't blame Derek for not saying anything (much). He could ask Cassie, she would probably be comfortable enough with him to share. They shared pretty much everything else, anyway.

"Duty," Derek finally said, startling Stiles. He looked up from his essay.

"Duty?"

"To my pack," Derek added, although that didn't really clarify anything for Stiles. He figured he probably looked confused, because Derek was sitting up and looking at him in bemusement. "I don't want to be a passive beta, and after everything that happened,-" He looked like he was getting menstrual cramps for the first time. Stiles thought maybe he should brush it off and ask Cassie. "I want to be someone that the pack can depend on, that's worth being trusted. I want to help build, to help maintain something stronger than just myself. Not like I was."

Stiles was a little overwhelmed, because he'd known Derek had changed, was still changing. But that- That was definitely a level of honesty had hadn't been prepared for.

"You are," He pointed out, feeling the urge to babble and strangling it before he said something stupid that would piss Derek off or shut him down.

"Not yet," Derek shrugged. "It takes time. But-" A small, genuine twitch of his lips. It could be a smile, someday, Stiles reflected. Derek didn't finish, only shrugged and began rearranging himself over the couch.

"Any clue on where I should look for mine?"

"It's highly personal," Derek reminded him, eyes back on the television. "And shouldn't be influenced by other people's opinions."

"So I can't ask Cassie for ideas."

"Isn't that what I said?"

"Jerk," Stiles muttered before taking another bite of pu cha.

"You'll figure it out," Derek told him. Stiles was almost swayed by his confidence, but threw a longan at him instead.

"You're sure you've figured it out?" Rick asked, head tilted. Stiles nodded.

"Good. Now, first step. Before you can fully influence something, you have to learn about the influences on you."

"The nemeton," Stiles groaned.

"Right. It's never going away, so you have to learn what effect it has on you, and what you can do to minimize it."
"I have to expose myself to it again?"

"You're always exposed to it, Stiles. It's just dampened right now. The pendant is something you will always have that will offer a buffer between you and it."

"Really?"

"It's very old Stiles, as are the spells that were sung to it when it was created. I don't know much more than that, although someone with more cognitive abilities than we have could probably find out."

"I'm good," Stiles said immediately, twitching at the thought of letting someone touch the pendant.

"Fair enough," Rick nodded in understanding. "There are also wards everywhere. I maintain them around my house, and there are wards around Derek's home, as well as your apartment. Many of the people in the pack have them around their home as well, it's something Caroline insists on. Derek resisted, to be honest. It wasn't until you came that he allowed it."

"He hasn't had the best experience with magic."

"That's a very kind way of saying it," Rick muttered. "But that's not our point today. Today I want you to find the thread that ties you to the nemeton. You've been doing your reading, correct?"

"Yeah, I'm a bit ahead."

"That's fine. Are you comfortable with what you've read?"

"Yeah," Stiles nodded.

"Then I'll draw a simple spiral around you. It will only be a few runes, but you'll have to connect and follow their path. It will allow you to examine your tie to the axis a little more clearly."

"Like meditation?"

"Almost exactly so," Rick agreed. "Although your perception of reality will be altered, if your resonances hang correctly."

"Someday I'm actually going to get used to the words you use to get ideas across," Stiles muttered.

"And that's the day you become as maddening to Cassie and Caroline as I am," Rick grinned as he picked up a piece of chalk and began to write. Stiles watched, curious, as the runes appeared on the floor, all basic, all ones he recognized and knew the tones for. In theory.

"What if I do something wrong?"

"That's why I'm here," Rick answered easily.

Stiles opened his mouth to protest and snapped it shut when Rick gave him an amused smile. When Rick finished, there were nine runes drawn on the concrete floor. Rick walked over to one of the stools and sat, obviously waiting.

He looked down, saw the spiral's beginning and began to chant quietly, the syllables practically burned into his brain from studying them so often. But he had only heard them spoken aloud by Rick a few times so he could practice, and as he started, he prayed he didn't accidentally open a hellmouth in Caroline and Rick's basement.
As he followed the runes, he forced himself to believe the syllables would resonate, that they'd find the thread he was looking for and wrap around it. One rune followed seamlessly into the next, pattern after pattern, melodies that combined and split. Into the fourth rune he felt the same sense of static over his arms, on the back of his neck. Into the fifth, he felt the sounds beginning to seep into him, threatening to lock his jaw as he tried to keep his teeth from vibrating until they chipped.

It was doable, Stiles told himself, physically reaching out like the strings of the universe were all there, just at his fingertips. It wasn't precisely what Rick had meant, but he felt something, touched on something as he moved his hand like a blind man. And he was, essentially, letting his fingers glide over the different strings until he found the one he wanted.

It was easy to find, Stiles wondered how he cold have missed it. It ran from himself into the distance. For all that it disappeared into the ether, he could still see the nemeton, a bright light that threatened to burn his tongue as he worked on finishing the eighth rune. The thread itself was distorted compared to the others he'd run his hands along. It felt wrong, unsettled and uncomfortable. It wasn't dark, it just felt off. Watchful and wary, it pulsed and thrummed all on it's own, as if it didn't want to be touched.

The nemeton was supposedly not sentient. This felt almost human in the quivers and trembles that ran through it, flickered off of it like a warning to stay away.

Stiles opened his eyes and looked at the floor. The spiral of runes that had been drawn stood out, white chalk on a sea of black. He couldn't remember the concrete being black, but he ignored that, knew that grasping his hand around the nemeton's thread, the syllables that hung in the air would change and distort his vision.

Taking a deep breath, he began reciting the ninth rune, filling the space with his voice. At first he couldn't feel anything, feared he was failing, that it was too much for his first real try at doing a working. But he remembered Rick's advice, tried to match the rise and fall of his voice to the beat of his heart.

The runes on the floor began to shine, silver white and soft at the edges of the black. Stiles let the sounds echo around him, over his tongue, felt them echo and swallowed that echo down into his lungs before letting it slip out again.

His tie to the nemeton blackened, burned in his hand. He could feel poison and ichor leaking from the tether like an infected wound being cut open. Anger seared the flesh of his palms where he held it, wanted him to let go, to release it. Ignoring the demand, he finished the ninth rune and watched where the string was manipulated, the syllables lining themselves up to brand the root that had embedded itself in his chest.

The poison faded, the withered, charred thread fleshed out, pulsed. The roots of the nemeton grew into him, threaded through his veins, pure light and energy that cauterized him from the inside out.

Blinding white exploded into color, centuries bore down on his skull, pricked his heart and he gasped for breath. Water, ice cold and sharp poured into his mouth, numbed his tongue and soothed the ache of the fire.

Then peaceful, blissful darkness.

"Stiles?" A voice asked. Stiles groaned, batted at the hands on his face.

"He's awake," Another voice called. Blinking against the light, he groaned again, resisted the urge to
vomit when the groan went down instead of out, vibrating unpleasantly in his stomach.

"I fucked it up," He muttered as he tried to push himself into a sitting position. Firm hands pressed him back down. "Goddammit."

"Actually you did everything correctly," Rick's voice huffed, a hint of amusement lacing his words. "The tie overwhelmed you."

Stiles made a sound that even he didn't recognize as human.

"Stay awake, you've been out for two days," Rick told him. "You need to drink something and eat."

"Bathroom," He muttered, pushing himself up again. This time hands, Rick's, he noted, helped him stand. The world wobbled precariously, but he made it from the guest room to the bathroom down the hall without killing himself, or Rick, for that matter.

He splashed some water on his face and looked in the mirror. He didn't look different, but he felt different. Muttering about cliches, he tried to figure out what it was, needed to pinpoint what the nemeton had done to him.

Rick had called it blind justice. Stiles thought about the twins, about Boyd and Erica. He flinched, expecting the sound of Erica's voice in his head to summon physical pain. Instead, he only felt a sense of loss, a sense of something wrong.

Huh.

When he got back out, Rick helped him down the stairs and into the kitchen, where Marianne and Caroline were both working on either heating up food or cutting fruit.

"Sorry," Stiles mumbled when they both looked him up and down, examining him for any hints of injury. Their nostrils flared and Caroline pointed to the entrance to the dining room. Feeling like he'd just been smacked on the nose with a rolled up newspaper and not knowing what he'd done wrong, he let Rick usher him into the dining room.

Caroline emerged a few minutes later with a huge tray of food. Marianne followed with a tray equally loaded down.

Instead of pointing out that he wasn't a werewolf, he accepted the glass of water and watched as Caroline, the alpha, began loading a plate. When she'd finished, he began to prove that even if he wasn't a werewolf, he could at least eat like one. Throughout it, the three people around him were silent, watching carefully.

"Okay," He muttered, after finishing his plate. Caroline was already loading it down again. "Why is everyone acting like it's a funeral?"

There was silence for a moment and horror climbed up his throat. "I didn't hurt anyone, did I? Fuck, what-"

"No, Stiles. You've done nothing but sleep." Rick said, voice soothing. "We weren't sure how the tie would affect you, so we had to keep you isolated."

"It's been a long two days," Marianne admitted quietly, when no one else volunteered information.

"That's a polite way of saying my daughter and my beta refuse to speak to me," Caroline snorted. She looked tired. Stiles felt a bolt of shame as he accepted the plate from her.
"I'm sorry," He mumbled, face hot.

"It's not your fault," Rick replied, voice still hushed. "I should have considered the possibilities, and I didn't. We reacted by being a bit overzealous."

"Why? The nemeton's compulsion is justice," Stiles muttered, grabbing for his water.

"Especially for events in Beacon Hills," Rick said, as though that meant something. When Stiles stared at him, waiting for an explanation, Rick sighed and braced his elbows on the table. "When Derek came to us, we asked for his story. It's considered an alpha's right, and it is necessary for the alpha to understand a courting beta. Knowing that, we were hesitant to let Derek see you."

"And if Cassie had gone in, she would have let him in," Marianne added. It was probably meant to sound like an accusation, but there was something like pride there, fondness.

"But I've never seen Derek's face change," Stiles protested. "I've never had a nightmare where he was- How could you even think-"

"Derek wasn't completely blameless for the events in Beacon Hills," Caroline reasoned quietly. "And-"

"Don't" Stiles muttered, pointing a finger at her and not caring when her eyes flashed red. "Don't you even dare. I was there, I know what happened. He fucked up, but he paid for it. Is still paying for it. He knows what he did and he's trying his level best to do the right thing now. He pulled my ass out of the hole and I will be damned if I sit here and listen to anyone-"

"Stiles," Caroline said, eyes glowing steadily in warning. Stiles thought he might be baring his teeth at her in return, and told himself he was spending too much time around werewolves. "I understand. And while it is nice to know Derek is safe, that's not what I meant. None of us could be sure how the nemeton would perceive Derek's actions."

"Rick said it was an influence. Nothing can influence me to want to kill Derek."

"Stiles, the tie almost shattered before reasserting itself," Rick reasoned. "We didn't know how strong it would be."

"I don't care!" Stiles shouted, pushing himself from the table and standing, ruining any effect by wobbling back and bracing himself against the table. "Derek's my friend. I know his history, and shining a spotlight on it won't make me feel any differently."

When had everyone started smiling?

"We understand now," Caroline told him. "And I apologize for our assumptions. Please sit down, Stiles. If you haven't eaten, I will tell them. You know how Cassie gets when she's worried."

"She got it from you," Stiles muttered, falling back into the chair and scooting it closer. The smiles he was receiving were a little unnerving, a little mortifying, and he prayed he wasn't about to get his ass verbally flayed the moment he relaxed. But he did surprise himself and finished most of the food on the trays, his stomach threatening to burst before Caroline helped him back upstairs, directing him to Cassie's room instead of the guest room.

When she was leaving, she paused at the door and turned back.

"Stiles, I'm very glad they have you."
"You didn't sound that way," He muttered sullenly as he burrowed into the myriad covers on the bed. Cassie's scent was the strongest, but he could smell traces of Derek too.

"I must always protect my pack, you know that. But I'm grateful. You have strong faith in those you love, even as you acknowledge their flaws. It's a powerful thing. For a mother and an alpha, it's comforting to know that someone like you will be there for them."

Feeling mollified by the apology, which he was sure was a rare thing coming from Caroline, he nodded and watched her leave, the door closing behind her.

(He woke up later, too hot to sleep. It wasn't until he tried to push off the blanket that he realized he was being sprawled on by Cassie and Derek. Both of them growled gently before Cassie's nose was buried in his neck. He finally gave in to the smothering when Derek slipped out to fiddle with the thermostat before returning.)

Stiles parked in his dad's driveway. Cassie hopped out as Derek was pulling the truck up to the sidewalk.

He wanted to tell them thank you, to let them know how much it meant, especially Derek, for them to be there to help. Instead, the words stuck in his throat and he grabbed the flattened boxes from the back of his jeep with Derek while Cassie grabbed his keys and began fiddling with them at the door.

Leading them upstairs, he stopped in the guest room first. There were still things of his mother's in there. While he knew his dad wanted a few keepsakes, he also knew those were in the master bedroom. (He refused to think about where else they could be.) Anything else was fair game. He had no idea what he wanted to keep, what he could stand to let go to goodwill. Despite how much he wished it was his dad helping him, he also wasn't enough of a dick to force him to do it, especially since he and Melissa had managed to coordinate some vacation time together for a weekend getaway.

Ugh. Not something he wanted to think about while he was staring at his mother's antique sewing machine.

"Oh wow," Cassie said, obviously impressed.

"I can't use it, and I'm sure as hell not donating it," Stiles told her, flipping the machine down into the desk that had been crafted around it. "So I figured Annette would want it."

"Stiles, that's old."

"It works," He defended.

"No, like that's an antique, expensive. She'd love it, but it's-"

"Big?" He suggested.

"I'd save it for Christmas," Cassie told him.

"We can store it in my attic," Derek told them. "It goes in last though. Boxes first."

Stiles nodded in agreement, offering a wan smile before beginning to fold boxes out and taping them together. Cassie and Derek both sneezed when he uncapped the industrial magic marker he'd picked up. Boxes were labeled 'goodwill' and 'house'.
The guest room only had a few of his mother's things in them. They moved to his bedroom to give him a break, helped him efficiently pack away clothing and posters, mementos and-

"You hoard werewolf teeth?" Cassie asked, looking at the small box with something that was a mix between disgust and interest.

"Not hoard," Stiles muttered, rolling his eyes. "After Deaton explained mountain ash, I figured other things would be useful. It's always like that in movies. Don't roll your eyes at me, okay? It's perfectly logical. There's always some weird impossible to get ingredient or item, and I wanted to have my bases covered."

"One of them is mine," Derek said, eying the box with distrust. "When did you get one of my teeth?"

"After the kanima almost drowned us," Stiles snorted. "How can you even tell?"

"Stale blood," Cassie said, wrinkling her nose. "There are a few people's in here."

"From almost everyone," Stiles admitted. "Except Issac and Jackson. Or Peter," He added with a theatrical shudder. He didn't add that there weren't any from the twins either, because he wasn't going to admit to being repulsed by the idea. Christ, he'd rather have bits of Peter lying around.

"Weirdo."

"Boyscout," Stiles rebutted, watching Cassie drop the box of teeth into a box labeled for his apartment. Most of his stuff was going to goodwill. He earned enough money to buy clothes, although his wardrobe still mostly consisted of baggy jeans and plaid. And maybe some clothing he'd inadvertently traded with Derek and even Cassie over time. The beds he had in Portland were bigger and comfortable, able to fit him and his friends, not to mention he wasn't about to piss on Derek's presents to him by trying to replace them.

They took a break and ordered pizza, since it appeared from the mostly empty fridge that his dad was living with Melissa already.

"It's weird," Stiles said. "Four years ago I had werewolves crawling in through my window. I'm still not over seeing you come through the front door," He added, looking over at Derek.

"You crawled in through his window?" Cassie snorted.

"His father is the sheriff," Derek reminded her.

"Which makes it even more romantic," She giggled.

"Oh, just-No," Stiles sputtered indignantly. "Dude. Just- Wow. I can't even process that."

When Cassie's giggles turned into full on gales of laughter, Stiles threw a piece of pizza at her and laughed when the cheese got stuck in her hair.

When they finished, they walked up into the attic, which turned out to be a minefield of all the things he'd forgotten or been too young to remember.

Photo albums, clothing, sewing supplies, bits and knickknacks that defied explanation were all packed into unlabeled boxes. But when he opened one and recognized a charm he'd seen in one of Rick's books on Slavic folk magic, he picked it up to examine it and stared blankly.

"Dude. Why does my mom have Russian woo stuff?"
Derek and Cassie looked at him with questioning expressions before he started pulling other items out. Most of them were wrapped, but when he started batting away the old newspaper, a few more items were revealed, they were all charms or protections he'd read about, and some he didn't recognize but could tell they were similar to everything else.

"Deaton's sister had a gift, so maybe it's a genetic thing?" Derek asked quietly.

"I don't know. If she had, wouldn't she have been an emissary or attached to a coven?" Stiles said doubtfully.

"I don't know," Derek shrugged. "We could ask Deaton, maybe."

Stiles was reluctant to share the items with anyone, but Derek had a point. Deaton seemed to know everything that happened in Beacon Hills. If his mother had been magical in any way, the odds that Deaton knew about her were in his favor. And he couldn't just let the odd bits and pieces go.

"We can leave this box to the side. Onward," He mumbled.

Five minutes later Stiles couldn't miss the sound Derek made, pure surprise lacing the wordless exhalation.

"Oh, that's my cradle," Stiles said, walking over to the end, forced to hunch down. "My dad said it was an heirloom of my mom's."

"This is beautiful," Derek said, hands sliding over the cradle, his finger tracing a whorl where two different kinds of wood met. "They got the figuring to compliment each other perfectly."

"Do you seriously have a hard on for my cradle?" Stiles snorted. "Because that's a little creepy."

Derek gave him a flat look. "No, Gennadiy," He muttered. "It's really well made. It's needs a little work, but it's in good condition."

"Feel free," Stiles said blithely. "Mom used to talk about how one day my babies would use it. And, asshole, no using my first name just because you can finally pronounce it."

"You probably said babies have cooties," Cassie giggled.

"Actually I told her I couldn't wait and I wanted to practice. I think I was the only five year old boy that had a baby doll. Dad was concerned until he realized I was doing less baby talk and dressing stuff and reading books about the actual care of children. Then he was more worried about me knocking someone up. Until I was old enough to, then I think we both realized how slim the chances were," He added, wrinkling his nose at the memory of his highschool years.

"You aced the flour bag project in home ec, didn't you?" Cassie teased.

"Egg, and no, because Scott was my partner and was still adjusting to his strength."

"I bet you cried."

"I was very attached to Herbert. Jesus Derek, stop fondling the cradle, it's weird. It'll be in your attic anyway, you can go cuddle it whenever you want."

"And you bitch about your name," Cassie replied flatly before walking back over to the boxes.

There wasn't much, a lot of it was clothing and bolts of cloth that had been ruined by time and moths. Stiles found a few more items that seemed potentially witchy, so he packed those in the box with the
charms and wards. There were a few photo albums he flipped through before packing them away as well.

It was after six when they finished, but Stiles wasn't too worried.

"We'll get it all out tomorrow," He said. "Dad can goodwill everything." It was petty, but he was still a little angry his father hadn't mentioned wanting anything from the house. Stiles was tempted to take the pans, but he was pretty sure the point would be lost in translation.

"Food," Cassie whined.

"Alright. Deaton first though, shouldn't take more than a minute."

"Ugh, fine."

The drive to Deaton's was surprisingly silent. The vet was opening his car when they pulled into the parking lot.

"I have questions," Stiles sang. Deaton looked interested, even slightly amused, and went back to open the door to the clinic with an air of patience Stiles almost envied. Deaton led them to operating room and introduced himself to Cassie politely, then gave Derek an almost warm hello. Cassie introduced herself, eying Deaton curiously as Stiles opened the box and began pulling out items.

"Most of these are fairly mundane," Deaton explained, looking over the assortment. "Like the items you'd find in a household shrine."

"So they're religious?" Stiles asked.

"More like folk superstition," Deaton explained carefully. "Which we all know isn't always superstition. These were made by someone who knew what they were doing, but I can't get a sense that they've ever been vessels. Except for these," He said, picking up a charm bag and an old wooden bowl. "This is for protection, there's wormwood and a few other things in it. It fits with your mother's heritage, maybe something you should read up on. This is a sort of veneration item," He informed them, switching to the wooden bowl. "Water is very important in Russian folklore. I can't translate the writing, but it's got some lingering traces of energy in it."

"Does it need to be exorcised or anything?" Stiles asked, staring down at the wooden bowl, fascinated.

"Not at all. These are items of goodwill, Stiles. Love. I know your mother didn't posses a gift such as you do, but if I had to hazard a guest, it was probably a family member that did, and they made these items for her."

"I don't know anything about her family, to be honest. Just that her grandpa came over from Russia with her when she was still a baby. She never mentioned family besides him."

"If you'd like, I can make some inquiries. I don't know if anything will come of it, I'm limited mostly to the UK. Rick might know someone," He added thoughtfully. "Do you know your family's name?"

"That would be great, thanks. I can write the name down, pronouncing it is a pain," He added, taking the proffered pen and clipboard, which was actually an examination form. Once finished he packed everything back up and thanked Deaton for his time before they were ushered out.

Stiles didn't ask why they drove all the way to the next town over to get something to eat. Cassie
bitched the whole way, despite the quelling glares sent in her general direction. Stiles was more than willing to back Derek, not wanting to endure the curious glances and the downright obvious staring and whispers that followed Derek any time he was spotted in town.

When they got back to Stiles' house, they all piled onto his old bed, practically smothering each other.

Stiles exhaled a sigh of relief. The distractions of his mother's things, the things he could give to the people he loved, who would treasure them, the cradle that Derek had taken pictures of, it had all served as a distraction from the thought of leaving the house behind.

Shit. Now he was tearing up.

Cassie curled into his front, Derek curled around his back, and their legs tangled and he actually wasn't sure how hands were managing to move to make soothing motions on his skin. But he didn't turn down the offer of silent comfort.

(The next morning he took them on a tour of the house after packing everything in the truck. Cassie was sorely tempted to use her claws to carve out a few memorable chunks from the drywall. Stiles had to stop her. He wasn't sure if she was serious or if she was trying to get him to laugh, but he did laugh. When he closed the door and locked it behind him, he knew he wouldn't be coming back. Instead of taking his jeep, he let Cassie drive it and curled up in the front seat of Derek's truck, feeling a sense of déjà vu about the whole thing that he couldn't pin down and didn't want to.)

"You're totally drinking," Cassie warned him.

"No, I'm not," Stiles muttered, looking around the bar. Normally he didn't have a problem going. Except tonight was Cassie's birthday and she was in full form, dressed in a tiny jean skirt that made him feel cold looking at it (and damn werewolf heat, anyway) and a tank top. Most of the pack members in their age group were there, as were Lynn, Nat and Annette, who was making out with Tim in front of Derek like he'd never even been a consideration, which, good for her, Stiles thought. They were perfect together. They were giving him and everyone around them cavities when they were in each other's presences, but they were good together.

"They don't even card here," Cassie told him, nuzzling into his cheek. Her boyfriend was absent, he noted, and wondered if she'd broken up with him. The would be the third since the beginning of the year.

"Cas," He groaned.

"Lynn is the DD," She reminded him.

That explained why he'd been stuffed into the backseat of Lynn's little sedan with Derek and Cassie instead of being allowed to drive his jeep.

"I'm also the birthday princess," She added. "And if you have a drink or two, Grumpypants will relax and have a couple."

"You can't even get drunk," Stiles muttered.

"Why the hell do you think we brought our purses?" Cassie laughed, the sound vibrating against his cheek in time with the loud music being played. Stiles had wondered about that, felt a little stupid for not making the connection earlier, considering Annette was the only one he ever saw carrying one. "It's about relaxing and having fun, and bars are good for that."
"Fine, birthday diva," He told her, and he could feel the resulting grin blooming against his cheek before she smacked a kiss on it and bounced away with a promise of getting him something light.

"She's going to make us regret that, isn't she?" Stiles asked Derek.

"Probably," The werewolf muttered, glaring at the woman that was walking their way. The woman paled and made an abrupt turn.

"Maybe you could be my wingman," Stiles suggested. "You can be the hot but surly asshole and I'll look better by comparison, the not as attractive but sweet and goofy guy."

"That would require you actually being sweet," Cassie said as she came back and sat down next to him, three tall shooters in hand, the amber liquid in them spilling over the sides as she sat them on the table.

"I am totally sweet," Stiles protested, eyes on the shot glasses.

"Oh yeah, which is why you ripped into Adrian the other day," Cassie snorted, giving him a flat look.

Huh. Maybe that's why Cassie's boyfriend wasn't present.

"He was talking about a Cinderella birthday party," He defended.

"For his six year old niece," Cassie reminded him.

"Is he still a boyfriend?" Stiles tried, crossing his fingers under the table.

"Nope. Which is why you're dancing with me tonight."

"Shouldn't you be dancing on your lonesome, you know, the mating call of birthday princesses everywhere?"

"Maybe later," Cassie shrugged. "Until then, these are yours. Come on, empty the glasses so I can fill them back up."

Stiles glared at the shooters.

"Too many. One."

"All three."

"You said a couple," He muttered.

"And that's vague enough that three can count. Now drink, and dance with me. Or I'll tell dad you were making fun of the sagas again."

"Oh come on," Stiles groaned. "The thing with the goats was totally a reference to Loki's taste for livestock." Cassie wasn't budging however, and Stiles grabbed one of the shooters before saluting them and throwing it back. Tequila burned his throat and his stomach gave an initial protest of what it knew was coming. The other two followed in quick succession, and by the time he finished the third Cassie was already slipping them under the table to fill them with something from a flask.

Stiles knew his sobriety was a fond illusion at that point and leaned back into his seat, waiting for the alcohol to hit. Cassie shoved the shooters at Derek next, glaring at him and daring him to refuse.
"Dude, if I had to, you have to," Stiles muttered, already feeling warmth pooling in his gut.

Derek expertly downed all three shots, practically slamming them down before turning his gaze back to Cassie, who was beaming.

"See, not so hard."

"Pretty sure it was," Stiles told her, eyeing Derek warily.

The next couple of hours were a blur of dancing, sweat, ribald jokes and laughter. Stiles refused any other shots and hung back with Derek, who was still refusing any and all offers to the dance floor. And the drinks that kept coming over, sent by one patron or another. He was conspicuously alone in the booth, and Stiles felt that between that and his own abysmal dancing skills, hanging out with Derek was definitely the best of all possible options.

It wasn't until he left for the bathroom and came back that he wondered how Derek managed to even shop for groceries, because there was a guy leaning against the table, almost doubled as he leaned in close to talk to Derek. Derek who looked exceptionally pissed off.

"Hey, everything alright here?" Stiles asked, attempting to slide in beside Derek. The nameless guy, who wasn't actually that unattractive, refused to move, making it impossible.

"Just talking to your friend." Stiles could hear the slur of the guy's words, knew he was drunk and that Derek was probably restraining himself so he didn't break any limbs. Christ. Stiles felt sort of like a babysitter instead of Captain Cockblock, which was probably the same thing. Sort of. Especially when it concerned Derek.

"Well don't."

"Oh, he's with you?" The guy asked, his tone dripping sarcasm as he looked Stiles up and down, his lip curled in a sneer.

"No. He's just too good for a drunk fuckass like you," Stiles replied.

He knew he should have seen the fist coming. He really should have. But he didn't, and when he pinwheeled back, it actually took him a few seconds to register the pain blossoming on his cheek.

It took him a few more seconds to realize that he was lunging towards the nameless male and throwing his fist as hard and low, finding the soft spot of his stomach like his father had taught him. There was a loud grunt and then arms were pulling him back, away from the starting fight.

"Stiles, come on!" Cassie shouted, using her werewolf strength to yank him towards the exit. "If we get arrested on my birthday I'll never forgive you. And mom will kill us."

Stiles felt the chill air hit his face and he stumbled behind Cassie. Derek was pulling at her, expression furious. They didn't stop moving until they'd turned the block, and Cassie burst into laughter. A moment later the rest of the group was turning the corner, some stumbling a little bit more than others, the only noticeably sober ones were Nat and Lynn, who looked more amused than they should have.

"What is so funny?" Derek snapped.

"Stiles-" Cassie chortled. Despite the throbbing ache in his cheek, Stiles felt the urge to laugh to. It started and died down to a chuckle when Derek's glare moved to rest on him.
"Dude," Stiles told him, smirking and pointing. "I totally defended your honor."

"The one normal guy in our group," Cassie snorted, hugging her sides. "Playing knight in shining armor to- Oh god, tell me someone recorded that. It would be the best birthday present ever."

No one had, but Cassie was smiling even as she declared that there was no justice in the world. None.

(Stiles woke up with a black eye and only a mild headache. Derek glowered when he demanded a lace hankie for his efforts.)

On the sap moon, Rick took him to the side and told him they were going to the vé when Caroline took the wolves into the forest. Knowing that the vé was Rick's place to connect with the land and the pack, Stiles felt a trill of excitement run through him.

Cassie had obviously heard the invitation and sent him a smile and thumbs up before turning back to a conversation with her sister.

When the wolves began running into the forest, Rick began walking for the treeline too. Stiles followed, wishing, not for the first time, that the trees allowed a little more light from the moon through. He could barely see where he was going, tripping over territory that had been familiar in daylight.

It wasn't until he was in the clearing that he realized there was one at all. It wasn't big by any means, but there was a large flat stone settled among the roots of an exceptionally tall ash tree that grew at one side. Upon closer inspection, Stiles saw the outline of a design in the stone, slightly weathered but not so old the details were lost. There were wolves and ravens among the knotwork, their bodies sloping to curve and twist around one another's in one fashion or another.

"This is how I connect with them on the full moon," Rick explained. Stiles watched, transfixed, as Rick pulled a knife with a horn handle from his boot. "Caroline and I tied our threads together here," He added, slicing his thumb open deeply enough that it bled freely onto the rock. A whisper of runes slipped out, falling onto the rock as heavily as the blood did and settling. Stiles listened carefully, memorizing each syllable.

"Your turn," Rick told him, offering him a pocket knife.

Stiles took it hesitantly. He hadn't intentionally cut himself since the summer of his junior year. But he knew from Rick's books and some of his own that blood was a strong bridge, able to create threads where other things couldn't. Carefully, he opened the pocketknife, obviously new and never used if the tightness of the pins were anything to go by, and sliced his thumb.

The syllables felt natural on his tongue, light as they flowed over his lips and fell to the rock, following the path of his blood, pooling inside of it to seep into the pores of the stone.

A moment later a chorus of howls echoed through the night. He had been able to recognize Derek and Cassie's for months, had even come to recognize Caroline and Marianne's. But as the howls rang out, echoing like they were right next to them instead of deeper into the forest, Stiles would swear he recognized more, felt Tim's breathless, shy timbre, Sebastian's deep, resonating call. A few other jumped out at him, but all of them sounded happy, excited.

"Caroline felt it when you connected to the land," Rick explained, his mouth stretched wide in a grin. "She announced it to the others."
"Oh," Stiles said, listening to them as they continued a litany of howls. Derek's was a deep booming sound of contentment that supported Cassie's, making hers seem higher pitched in her excitement.

"Does it always feel like this?" Stiles asked quietly, feeling so much suddenly. Unsure if it was a connection to the land, which was something he wasn't sure he could even name, much less describe, or just his own feelings going into overload, but he felt accepted, wanted and welcomed.

"It gets stronger," Rick answered. "Some nights I can run with them."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"How-What is that like?"

"I've never wanted to be a wolf," Rick admitted. "But on those nights, they make everything worth it."

When the pack howl came, Stiles heard the humans in the barn mingling with the wolves, watched Rick throw his head back without any hesitation, and joined in. When the calls faded, Rick smiled at him with approval.

"Cassie's been helping me," Stiles answered, his grin giving away his pleasure at his obvious improvement.

"It's better." Rick's praise felt like the sun, and Stiles sat with him, slowly examining the feeling that swelled up from the land beneath him. There was a vastness to it, an old, knowing sort of feeling he was a little afraid of. There was no sense of emotion to it, just a simple existence. It was as unlike the nemeton as it could be, and Stiles let himself relax into it, coming to when Rick tugged at him and told him it was time to head to the barn.

The knife went into his pocket and he followed Rick into the darkness, away from the clearing. On the way to the barn, he didn't trip once, walking with a confidence that he should have only had after years of walking the woods.

When they got there, he was pounced by most of the pack, hugged like a favored stuffed animal before Cassie burst in with Derek on her heels. Then he was all theirs, cuddling up with them in a corner of the loft.

His last thought before sleeping was that maybe he'd survive his childhood home being sold, after all.

"Fuck," Stiles groaned, staring at the wedding invitation. He hadn't expected one, he was the best man for Christ's sake. But there it was, cream stock with embossed gold lettering.

"What's wrong?" Derek asked from his spot on the couch.

"Wedding invitation. I don't even get why they're doing it," He muttered. "I know I'm going. It's just, I don't even know what to get them for their wedding. They already have all the appliances and stuff, cash seems a little crass, even for me. I can't afford anything really fancy either. Shit."

"I can make them something."

"Derek, I can't afford to pay you, and that-" Stiles shrugged hopelessly. "Dude, I can't just keep accepting help from you."
"One, you helped me build my house-"

"You put me through the Hale Rehab program," Stiles rebutted.

"And my workshop," Derek continued as if Stiles hadn't spoken. "But I'm not keeping score. Did you ever think I might want to help you?" He finished, and Stiles had the feeling he was having something he said thrown back at him, which was more than possible because Derek was known to be a dick like that from time to time.

"Fine," Stiles huffed, giving in gracefully. Because really, he was desperate. Very desperate. "But nothing too extravagant, okay?"

"Define."

"Not a four foot wide chest with pearl inlay."

"It wasn't pearl Stiles," Derek growled. "How about a bookcase?"

"A small one?" Stiles tried, holding his thumb and index together in front of his face.

"A small one," Derek agreed, rolling his eyes. "Do you need me to go with you?"

Stiles paused. It was a tempting, horribly tempting offer. But Derek had gone out of his way to avoid the populace of Beacon Hills, and Stiles didn't feel like subjecting him to that again when he'd just given him a wedding present. Not to mention he couldn't see a meeting between the twins and him going down well. Hah, awkward wedding. No, even if he was sure Derek wanted to see them, possibly to maim and or kill them, he wasn't bitter enough to do that to the people the wedding was about, his dad and Melissa.

"I can take Cassie. I don't know who all will be there, and I don't want to put you in a bad spot," He said carefully.

Derek nodded, and Stiles knew the relaxing of Derek's body, however minuscule, wasn't imagined.

"Thanks man," He added.

The girl across the table from him was staring at him. He checked his shirt, looked around, tried to figure out why she was smiling at him.

"You're Stiles, right?" She asked. Stiles nodded slowly.

"I'm Elizabeth," She introduced. "We both have James for rhetoric," She explained.

"Oh, yeah. I uh, I've never-" Shit, that didn't sound good at all.

"It's alright, I sit behind you," She admitted with a grin. "Want to go grab some pizza after this? I'm starving."

"Sure," Stiles said, surprised. Elizabeth was gorgeous, with long curly brown hair and blue eyes. Stiles was sure he saw freckles dusting her nose through her makeup.

When they left to go to the local pizza joint, she talked about her lit class, and how they were studying Ovid. Within a few sentences she told him she didn't get the point behind Metamorphoses. Stiles thought very carefully before speaking.
"My friend knows Ovid pretty well, even the latin. If you want, I can see if he'll help you out?" He offered, hoping Elizabeth didn't take one look at Derek and jump ship for him. Then again, Derek might refuse to help. It was something of his family, something he didn't mention often, if ever.

"That would be amazing!" Elizabeth gushed. As if the offer to help her had broken a dam, she flirted with Stiles while they ate. He went home with a kiss on his cheek and feeling sort of like her knight in shining armor, bolstered by her blushing declarations and shy smiles.

Derek hated Elizabeth on sight. Stiles had no idea why. But while he and Cassie worked on their own schoolwork, Derek and Elizabeth worked on the topic of her paper. The tension could have been blamed on Derek's memories, even if he had accepted Stiles' request. But that couldn't explain the level of quiet animosity he was aiming at Elizabeth.

"It's an epic," Elizabeth muttered, obviously beginning to lose her temper.

"If you go by strict classical standards, yes," Derek told her. "But it's actually mocking traditional epics. Epics are supposed to be a continuing story. Metamorphosis isn't. It resembles Hesiod's work more."

"Who?"

Derek looked ready to say something cruel, and Stiles decided to head the impending meltdown off at the pass.

"Greek poet. Ovid's book is tied by theme instead of a continuing plotline," He said gently, shooting a quick glare at Derek.

"Oh," She said slowly. "I get it now, I think."

Derek rolled his eyes but Elizabeth was focused on Stiles, and Stiles was alright with that. Derek muttered something in Latin and left a few minutes later, saying he had to run an errand for Caroline. Stiles didn't have to be a werewolf to know it was a lie.

When Elizabeth left later, promising to call, Cassie looked up from her paper on the renaissance and religious art.

"What?" Stiles demanded when she continued to stare without saying anything.

"She smells off."

"Off like potential enemy or off like-"

"I don't know, but I don't like it," Cassie admitted. "She seems nice enough, but the scent's really offputting."

"I have an offputting scent most days," Stiles ground out, shaking his head when Cassie tried to protest. "It doesn't give Derek the right to be an asshole."

When Derek showed up the next day for dinner, bags of groceries in hand, Stiles wanted to ignore him. But Derek, even at his surly best, didn't aim that animosity towards someone for no reason. Stiles hated himself for letting his opinion about his almost nonexistent love life matter so much.

"What's wrong with Elizabeth?" He asked, putting the groceries away in the kitchen.

"She thinks Pygmalion is romantic," Derek replied without missing a beat. Stiles made a surprised
sound. He'd read almost all of Ovid's poetry, and Pygmalion had been one of the ones that rubbed him the wrong way, mostly because of the concepts that had been romanticized.

"Most people do," He hedged. Derek gave him a flat look before shrugging.

"She smells off."

"Cassie said that too," Stiles muttered, closing the fridge and leaning against the counter. His arms crossed over his chest before he could stop himself, and he knew forcing them down would look even more defensive. "Any way you could clear that up?"

"No," Derek told him without looking at him.

"Helpful. So she smells bad."

"Not bad, off."

"Like milk?" Stiles tried, and that actually earned a small smile before his friend shrugged again.

"Just be careful," Derek amended.

"Fine," Stiles sighed. "Please try to be a little nicer next time?"

Derek looked annoyed at the concept of 'next time', but he nodded anyway. Stiles took it for the victory it was. He'd seen Derek actively dislike people, even in Portland. The last thing he wanted was to be forced into the middle of that to protect Elizabeth.

Chapter End Notes

I promise on all that's holy, Deaton's weirdness is going to be explained in a few more chapters, because even if he is an inconsistent asshole I will nail his motives and behavior down. Because the idea of nails in his feet pleases me. (I might have some minor issues with his behavior in the series.)

Hope you guys enjoyed. Next update will be up (at the latest) on Sunday or Monday.

::poofles into the sarasota sunset::
19: Summer

Chapter Notes

I solemnly swear this is a Sterek fic. It's just slow build. And I take slow build very, very literally. Also, did I say this story was only about halfway through? Because I got stuck in a car for twelve hours with nothing to do but bounce ideas off of Mana. And apparently I lied. (I'm sorry?) If you're looking for blatant Sterek, it doesn't occur much in this part of the series, with some slow evolution and romantic leanings towards the end. It's the next installment (Buckets For Bailing Out The Flood) that has the in your face Sterek. So, hope that clears it up a little.

As for Cassie, I like original characters. I also adore platonic relationships. Cassie is Scott's foil, in pretty much every way possible. She and Stiles will never be romantically involved or interested in each other. A lot of her motivations (as well as other people's) get cleared up in the 20: Winter chapter.

Anywho, hope you guys enjoy, and thanks for the reviews!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Dude, this is not small!" Stiles shouted, drawing the attention of everyone in the warehouse. Derek's lips pinched in a frown, eyebrows drawing together.

"It's three by three. That's a small bookcase," He said plainly.

"No, do not 'it's only three by three' with me Derek," Stiles hissed, poking Derek in the chest. "You know exactly what I mean."

Derek's face settled into mulish lines, his eyes narrowing.

"Derek, that looks like something that needs to be in a gallery, not a present!" He flailed, arms wheeling in the vague direction of the bookcase. The comment seemed to please Derek instead of make his point for him. Stiles huffed in exasperation.

"Stiles, it's a wedding present," Derek reasoned. "For your father and Melissa."

"I need to pay for this, it's-"

"Melissa took care of Cora," Derek reminded him, and Stiles was about to yell at him for bringing up the past.

Except everyone was staring at him, and they were smirking.

"Oh my god you are all assholes," He muttered, hoping he would be heard. Obviously he was, because Miles started laughing at them. Derek frowned and muttered something under his breath before shrugging.

"It's a gift, Stiles. For your father's wedding."

"At least let me pay you."
"No."

"I'm not taking no for an answer."

"Too bad."

Miles started howling, his laughter echoing off of the walls. Stiles threw his hands over his head and stalked out into the parking lot. He didn't feel like being someone's monkey. Derek followed him out and he leaned against the jeep. He started massaging his temples in an attempt to subdue the headache that was starting to form.

"Look Derek, that's, it's gorgeous. I recognize how much work went into that. Please, I can't just- I need to pay you for it."

"Why?"

"Because I respect you and your work." And himself. He'd feel like a fraud if he didn't compensate Derek somehow.

Derek sighed.

"Taking in the family discount, it's two hundred."

Stiles made a rude noise.

"Try again." Was he seriously trying to get charged more for the bookcase? Because he felt like a moron, but it felt important. Even if he didn't know why.

"Three hundred. And if you give me more I'll burn it," Derek added, heading back for the side entrance of the warehouse. "In front of you."

"Asshole."

"You're welcome," Derek threw over his shoulder before going back inside.

The closer the wedding got, the worse his nightmares became. Even with the sleep thorn tucked into his pillowcase, things rapidly got worse and worse, until he was practically begging Derek or Cassie to stay the night. Cassie was wrapped up in another boyfriend, which meant Derek was practically living at the apartment. (One night next to Elizabeth and waking her up with his flailing combined with the resulting questions had been enough to turn him off of sleeping next to anyone else.)

Derek took it in stride, although Stiles could tell he was worried. When Stiles walked into his apartment after work only to see Rick and Derek talking at the table, he wondered if maybe it was worse than he thought.

"All of the wards are intact," Rick explained, looking as confused as Stiles felt. "The sleep thorn is as well. You still have the buffers in place," He added, nodding at the pendant. "I don't understand why they would gain in intensity."

"I figured it's because of the wedding," Stiles shrugged. "Stress and everything." He'd put a lot of thought into it, actually, because he was terrified of the wedding going awry somehow, of doing something, saying something that would ruin it for his father.

"Maybe," Rick said, looking skeptical, then shrugged and sighed. "I suppose the only thing we can do is wait until after the wedding to see if they still occur. But I don't like this."
"No one likes it," Stiles snorted. "Derek's playing teddy bear and I'm dreaming of dead people. Too bad I can't get a therapist. Hey, that's an idea, a supernatural therapist," He joked lightly, heading for the kitchen. "You staying for dinner?"

"No, Caroline and I have to go meet with the collective. It appears there's a rogue something or other picking off the local clubbers, and Martinique wants our opinion."

"You mean she wants Caroline to sniff the body or for you to see if there's anything left," Stiles clarified, rolling his eyes.

"No bodies to be found. Just the areas where they've disappeared to see if we can get a lock on anything," Rick retorted. "If we're lucky it'll be a human."

Stiles didn't comment, hearing the 'and it won't be our problem' implied. It certainly wasn't the proactive mindset he preferred, but he also knew the few officers in the supernatural know and the local supes all walked a very fine line around each other, one that no one really liked toeing, when it came to it. Too many politics, too much hassle, too much room for error.

Rick told them goodbye and left, leaving Stiles leaning against the counter in the kitchen and Derek glaring at the table like it was the source of all of their problems.

"I'm sorry," Stiles groaned, scrubbing his face. "I'm a pain in the ass."

"It's not your fault," Derek muttered, getting up and walking past him into the kitchen. "I picked up some of that sausage from the farmer's market."

"The lamb?" Stiles asked, feeling a flicker of excitement. Derek nodded and Stiles immediately went for the cabinet, already knowing what he wanted to make. Derek seemed content to watch him moving, humming under his breath as he started the water boiling and measuring out lentils.

"We've got pears, right?" Stiles asked. He knew they were out of season, but they were Cassie's favorite and she typically kept some everywhere that she stayed. But she'd been spending more time with Payton's brother, probably attempting to break his bed. Stiles couldn't even remember his name.

Derek offered up the lone two pears, both looking shy of overripe. Stiles examined them and began working on slicing them. Several minutes later, when he was looking for vegetables in the fridge, he saw Derek staring at him intently.

"Huh?"

"It's a new song," Derek shrugged. Stiles blinked, tried to remember what he'd been singing, was surprised that he'd been singing at all.

"Oh," He muttered, coloring. "It's that song. The one my mom would sing."

"I thought you didn't remember it?"

"Research. I got bored and looked through the library on campus. It's just an old folk song."

Derek hummed noncommittally and came forward to start chopping the celery. Stiles started humming again and singing the words under his breath, falling into the rhythm of the tune itself as he chopped carrots and started cooking the sausage. Derek was in step beside him, and Stiles shared the stovetop space easily.

"It's about not being afraid of the winter," He finally said, after finishing the song. "Funny, since,
you know, California and everything. The book said it was an allegory for death though, and fighting against it."

Derek nudged him with his shoulder, a silent communication that he knew what Stiles wasn't saying.

"I'm thinking of taking Elizabeth to the wedding," He said as Derek mixed the lentils in with the vegetables. Derek frowned, then nodded.

"Okay."

"What, no comments about how she smells?" Stiles asked, genuinely curious.

"She doesn't smell that way anymore," Derek shrugged.

"So no more sour milk faces?" Stiles joked. Derek shrugged again, an air of indifference affect his posture. "Fine," Stiles muttered, rolling his eyes. "Go pick out a movie. I'll plate everything. Feels like dinner on the couch sort of night."

Derek obeyed without comment, leaving him alone in the kitchen. Stiles finished cooking the sausage and let them sit as he began plating everything else. Four star chef he was not, but the cookbooks he'd been given by the girls (as he was starting to think of all the Valdyr women, collectively) and cooking with Marianne and Caroline had helped him grow in leaps and bounds. The one good thing about Derek practically living with him meant he had the excuse to cook, to relax a little in his own apartment.

The first few minutes of an action comedy were already playing on the television when he handed Derek his plate and sat down next to him, relaxing into the cushions and breathing a sigh of relief. No school, no nightmares, no wedding, nothing but him and Derek for the next hour and a half.

After the movie he worked on translating one of the books Rick had given him and gave up when he considered setting the whole thing on fire for a third time. Wordless, he showered and got ready for bed, Derek showering while he tried to relax, fidgeting with his pillow and blankets. There was no point in trying to sleep until Derek took his normal spot behind him. When Derek did finally get under his normal blanket, hair still damp, Stiles scooted closer to him, completely unashamed of himself for seeking out solid proof of Derek's presence. He wondered what it said about them that Derek was completely relaxed and didn't growl at him for attempting to spoon, even if there were two blankets between them.

(He dreamed of Scott straining against a leash held by Allison, red eyes trained on Derek as she screamed about justice. When she let the leash go, he snapped awake, a 'no' stuck in his throat. Derek was practically wrapped around him, pinning his arms to his sides and keeping his legs still. Nonsense words vibrated against his shoulder in an approximation of Derek trying to reassure him that everything was alright. Stiles knew it wasn't, but he soaked up the comfort anyway.)

When he asked Elizabeth if she wanted to go to his father's wedding, she enthusiastically agreed. He felt like he was king of the known universe, jubilant because he was taking a real girlfriend to his father's wedding, not a fake one.

And because the werewolves there would know Cassie was also a werewolf, and he didn't want to bring those sorts of questions down on himself. While it was cowardly (and he was very well aware of that) he still felt like Caroline's pack was something that was his, separate from the horror show of Beacon Hills and everyone involved. Cassie and Derek were his, something he didn't want to share, to be tainted by the opinions and examination of the pack. The dreams only reinforced the belief that
he was making the right decision.

So when he picked Elizabeth up from her apartment and started driving towards California, the bookcase carefully wrapped and boxed in the back of his jeep, he felt awesome about the whole thing.

The drive was nice. He and Elizabeth had a lot of the same music in common, and she was genuinely curious about his family and friends. Glossing over the subject of his mother, he explained about his dad and Melissa, and how he and Scott had been like brothers since childhood. He didn’t tell her about werewolves, hunters, or the lingering resentment that his childhood home had been sold. When she offered to drive, he told her only he drove his jeep, deliberately not remembering all the times he’d tossed the keys at Derek and Cassie.

His arrival was heralded by a deputy. Stiles smiled as the squad car pulled in front of him a few miles into town and followed it, flashing lights and all, to Melissa's house. When Issac stepped out, his curly hair still a mop around his head instead of the neat buzzcut most deputy's seemed to favor, Stiles hopped out with a smile.

"Thanks man," He said, giving Issac a firm handshake. "Pretty sure that's an abuse of power though." He wasn't going to ask how Issac had gotten a deputy's cruiser when he wasn't yet a deputy. Some questions were better left unasked.

"I'm not a deputy yet," Issac laughed. "Scott just wanted to know the minute you got here," Issac huffed, smiling playfully. Stiles nodded just as the front door flew open and Scott barreled out, jumping down the stairs and tackling him in a hug. Strangling the impulse to push him away, remembering it wasn't dream Scott, Stiles hugged him back.

"Dude, your dad is hilarious when he's nervous," He said by way of greeting.

"Hi Scott," Stiles said indulgently. "Scott, this is Elizabeth. Liz, this is Scott."

"The little brother. He doesn't look little Stiles," Elizabeth reprimanded in a light tone, accepting the hug from Scott like it was normal for a first greeting.

"We're extremely affectionate people," Stiles huffed through a smile.

"Like you and the others?" She asked innocently. Scott, who had already pulled back, gave Stiles an impressed look. Stiles chose not to feel insulted that Scott was impressed with his girlfriend. He was more grateful that names hadn't been mentioned. He'd practically drilled her on not saying anything about Derek because of a (vague) past and his family's inability to let go. Which was almost exactly true. It didn't keep him from feeling like he was going to burn in hell for the few lies he had told her. But the dreams persisted, lingering even into the day, making him edgy and almost neurotic in his need to keep the pack from knowing anything about Derek.

"Yeah," Stiles said. Now even Elizabeth looked impressed, and he was trying to figure out why when Scott dragged them into the house, babbling excitedly about the wedding and the rehearsal and holy crap Stiles the cake is going to be so awesome!

Stiles looked over to Elizabeth and rolled his eyes. She smiled gamely and let herself be led into the house. Melissa was out with her bridesmaids (of which Lydia and Allison were included) to do something, Stiles didn't have a clue what and Scott didn’t have any clearer idea. He needed to go get fitted for his tux and make sure the measurements he'd relayed were correct (they were, Annete had taken them for him).
His dad was on duty, so he went with Scott. Elizabeth relegated to the back seat of Scott’s car while they drove. Scott went on and on about Beacon Hills and everyone in the pack, careful to avoid any mention of supernatural things. All of the moments Stiles hadn’t allowed the time for Scott to tell came out in funny anecdotes. Despite the mention of people he didn’t want to think about, he thought he was handling it fairly well. Scott’s face didn’t shift, and the nightmares were distant enough that they didn’t needle at his conscience.

It wasn’t until that night, after Elizabeth had left them to get some sleep that he sat down with Scott and his dad. There was a six pack as they settled in the living room to relax a little.

"So what happened with Cassie?" His dad started. "You never said you two were having problems."

"We're good as friends," Stiles said honestly.

"But still, you went to Portland for her," Scott murmured. "I mean, that's a huge deal."

"I'm happy at Reed, and she and I are best friends. I don't see what the problem is."

Scott looked at him with something akin to pity and Stiles had the sudden urge to tell them the truth. Except, well, that would rain a lot of shit down on his head, and Scott would be angry, and the wedding was only two days away. Stiles knew it was best for all involved if he just waited.

"If you're sure son," John said. "Seemed like a nice girl."

"She is," Stiles defended. "Which is why we are friends."

John gave him a look he couldn't interpret before taking a pull from his bottle and shrugging.

The topic drifted to college and Stiles' work, to Scott's exams and his future work with Deaton, to some of the things that had come to Beacon Hills (mostly small and easily dealt with).

When he went upstairs to pass out, he felt like a stranger in the house. He'd always slept in Scott's room, and sleeping in the guest room just felt off, somehow. Even though he'd needed the separation, it was surreal to realize the extent of how things had changed.

Resolving to spend more time with his dad and be the best possible best man he could be, he curled around Elizabeth and fell asleep.

"So, are you a swinger?" Elizabeth asked casually as they followed Allison's car to the church. Stiles felt pain flare in his neck from looking over at her so quickly and his hands followed, making the car swerve. He righted himself and shook his head at the same time.

"No," He answered. What the hell?

"Oh. It's alright if you are."

"I'm not a swinger. Jesus, why would you even ask that?" He demanded. The word alone brought older people, married people, to mind. And for the love of all that was holy, that was not a thought he needed when he was going to his dad's wedding rehearsal.

"I thought, well, the thing with Cassie and Derek," She started. "And then Scott being all-" She waved her hands vaguely. "I mean, it's cool. I am."

"You are?" He demanded, voice cracking.
"Well, I haven't done anything since we made it official, but I thought-"

"I'm not," He muttered again.

"Are you interested?"

Oh god. A trap. It was a trap. He could lie and say yes, and be stuck with it once they got back to Oregon. Or he could be honest, because seriously, no, not possible for him, and deal with a possible break up in the middle of his dad's wedding.

"I'll have to think about it more," He told her. "It's never come up."

"You'd have fun," She wheedled.

"I said I'll think about it," He reminded her sharply. And Jesus, he'd sounded just like Derek when he'd brought up building a hot tub platform as a segue way into getting a hot tub.

Stiles knew that at sixteen, the permission to go and find every person he wanted to screw would have been fantastic, the stuff of fantasy. Except he wasn't sixteen, and somewhere along the way, he'd picked up the strange habit of being sort of possessive and a little bit of a romantic. It was excessively unfair. Elizabeth was handing him the holy grail of sex and he realized he had no interest. His past self would be kicking his ass.

They didn't talk the rest of the way, and when Stiles parked, the obnoxious spotlights were already shining on the church's stained glass windows. Resolving to ignore the moment of craziness in his car, he gave Elizabeth a small smile and took her hand. She smiled back and they went in together. He ignored Allison and Issac's worried looks.

Stiles pointedly ignored the twins, who were dressed in neat tuxedos. Their faces were changing and shifting with every other blink, and Stiles knew if he looked the fear he'd played off as nervousness would become obvious for what it was. He missed his vial of wolfsbane and resisted the urge to play with his pendant. It seemed wrong to fiddle with the wedding rings from his dad's previous marriage on the day of his wedding.

"You look fine," He promised, straightening his dad's tie for the fourth time. "You've known Melissa for years, dad. You love her."

"I know son," John replied, voice gruff. Stiles could still see the nervous tapping of his finger against his leg. "Mom would be happy for you too, you know," He added quietly, knowing the werewolves could hear and hating them a little for being there, for intruding, however unintentionally, on such a private moment. "She'd be happy that you found someone to spend your life with."

John's eyes grew overly bright, the only sign Stiles did have that his dad was about to cry if he didn't stop. And he wasn't going to do that, not when they were supposed to be making the walk in only a few minutes.

"Love you, son," John told him.

"Love you too, dad," Stiles told him, voice even, of which he was extremely proud, considering.

The twins exited first, going to find their seats in the pews. Scott slipped in, looking vaguely nervous.

"Dude, mom was crying," He muttered so only Stiles and Issac could hear. "Then she got this militant look and Lydia started harping about her makeup. I've never seen her mood change that fast.
Women are fucking terrifying."

"And just think, someday you'll be married to one. Probably just like your mom too," Stiles joked, earning another panicked look from Scott. "Are we ready?"

"Yeah, I think," Scott nodded, his face stretching into a grin. "Dude, we're about to be brothers."

"We've always been brothers, doofus," Stiles replied automatically. "Besides, they did all the paperwork this morning. It's just church official now. Dad, you ready?" Stiles asked, watching his father, who was standing perfectly still.

"Am I too old to be getting remarried?" John asked, staring at the door.

"Dude! Dad, no!" Stiles laughed, moving behind his dad and pushing him at the door. John complied, muttering about pushy children. "Dad, it's fine. Besides, the whole town is here. Never know how they'll vote if your cancel the wedding."

"Thanks," John replied sarcastically, but Stiles could hear the smile in it, and allowed himself to smile as well.

They lined up outside the doors, and his father walked first, going ahead of him and down the aisle. Stiles linked arms with Felicia, one of his father's deputies, a woman he'd annoyed when he was a child and probably enraged as a teenager. She offered him a game smile as they strolled easily past the people gathered in the church.

Scott and Lydia, Issac and Allison followed, and Stiles watched his father's face as Melissa walked down, determinedly alone because she had chosen that for herself. Stiles got the symbolism of the move, but he cared far, far more about the love on his father's face. Even if it wasn't directed at his mother, he knew his dad deserved to feel that, and firmly directed his thoughts to the ceremony.

The wedding itself continued without a hitch. He had both of the rings, despite everyone's joke that he would lose them, he cheered with Scott when their parent's kissed, prompting other cheers and shouts inside the normally quiet church. Then he led Felicia down the aisle and found Elizabeth before making for his jeep.

It wasn't fancy, but the local civic center had arranged everything for the reception. There were several toasts and speeches, but his speech moved almost everyone to at least sniffing. Melissa may have cried a little. Scott may have cried a little bit more. (The pride and love reflected in his father's gaze had almost made him sniffle, but best men did not sniffle, so he didn't. He really, totally didn't.)

His wedding present, sitting unwrapped and with nothing more than a bow next to the gift table, earned him bonecrushing hugs from the bride and the groom, and a lot of demands for where he'd found it. Lydia was practically foaming at the mouth when he gave her the company website. The bookcase with the graceful sloping marquetry had easily outshone every gift, even hers. He did not preen. That would have been immature.

When his dad and Melissa left in the back of a squad car beribboned within an inch of it's life in streamers and covered in shoe polish writing, he had one last dance with Elizabeth and fled with her a few minutes later.

He'd been intent on a romp in a house free of his dad and werewolves.

Her opening dirty talk left a lot to be desired. Since, hah, she mentioned how hot Scott looked in his tuxedo. And that wasn't the sort of thing Stiles thought of as foreplay.
"No, he's my brother. Literally, as of this morning," Stiles told her, pulling away. "Just, no."

"You can't tell me you haven't thought about it," Elizabeth tried, still posing seductively on the bed. "You two have known each other for years, and you're bi. You had to have at least considered it."

"No," Stiles reiterated. "He's my friend."

"Like Cassie and Derek are friends," She mocked lightly. Stiles knew she didn't mean anything by it, but it pricked at his temper, especially considering a similar assumption had ended his last relationship.

"Cassie and I never dated. She covered for me while I was with a guy."

"Derek?"

"God, no!" He snapped, pushing himself off the bed and looking for his boxers. "It's never been like that."

"God, you're such a closet case," Elizabeth muttered. "You even sleep with them, and you all wear each other's clothes. They're absolutely gorgeous too."

"For the love of-I don't want to sleep with either of them!" He shouted, finally losing his temper. "They're my friends. I am not sexually or romantically into my friends. I'm not interested in fucking everyone."

"Are you saying there's something wrong with that?" She demanded, her voice growing louder to match his. "Because I do not have to put up with some asshole calling me a slut!"

"I'm not calling you a slut. I'm saying it's your choice, but it's not mine. Do what you want, have a blast. But I'm not into it, so stop trying to find some inane little detail that you can use to convince me."

"Inane?" She snapped, and fuck, when had the night gone so wrong?

His phone started ringing and he grabbed for his pants, finally finding his boxers too. He answered the call and tucked his phone in his shoulder as he started dressing.

"Yo."

"Stiles?"

Scott sounded panicked. That wasn't good. Any number of scenarios began playing out in his head, none of which he could mention in front of what was probably his now ex-girlfriend.

"Yeah?"

"I just had sex with Issac."

"Forgive me, but you sound a lot like Scott tonight Allison. Why would you be calling me about what is a perfectly normal act between two consenting adults?"

"Stiles, this shit is serious! What do I do?"

"You are aware she knows of at least thirty ways to kill you with a toothbrush, right?"

"Stiles, he's going to tell her."
"Where are you?"

"The civic center."

"You had sex at the reception?" Stiles demanded, pulling on his discarded muscle tee and shrugging the dress shirt from earlier on. Scott babbled, saying he was heading home, then, no, he was heading for the point, then no because he'd made out with Allison there and oh god, his life was falling apart. Stiles told him to calm down and he'd meet him down the street at the soccer field before hanging up. He eschewed the jacket and stuffed his bare feet into the overpriced dress shoes he'd gotten in Portland, grabbing his keys on the way out.

"Stiles!" Elizabeth snapped.

"Scott's in trouble," He told her before slamming the door behind him.

Scott had a problem, and Stiles was nothing if not a generous, loving brother. Especially when his girlfriend was shrieking at him about calling her a slut, which, what? He couldn't remember actually saying that her lifestyle choices were a bad thing.

When he found his newly minted step brother, Scott was wrecked, and in more than a highly ill conceived sexual encounter sort of way.

"Dude are you drunk?" Stiles demanded when Scott pulled himself into the jeep.

"Yes," Scott moaned, slouching down and threatening to practically spill down into the floorboards.

"How the hell-"

"Lydia found a recipe for werewolf liquor last year," Scott muttered, as if the day itself had been a curse. "Issac and I were sneaking some in a flask, and we just kept going back to the coat room-"

"You fucked him in the coat room?" Stiles demanded.

"It was an accident!" Scott defended.

"Dude, did a penis accidentally fall into someone's mouth or hand, because that's plausible, but if one accidentally fell into someone's ass, that takes some fucking work," Stiles snapped. When Scott didn't reply, either too ashamed, too drunk, or too shy, Stiles swore loudly. "Un-fucking-believable. You fucked your ex-girlfriend's boyfriend and my girlfriend wants me to fuck you. Fuck this weekend. You seriously couldn't have waited until after the wedding? Until Allison's memorial day of bitterness wasn't the same day our parents got married?" He demanded.

"What, Liz wants us to fuck?" Scott yelped, and he looked nauseous all of a sudden. Stiles pulled over just in time for Scott to open the door and vomit.

"That's what you took from that?" He snapped, tossing one of the water bottles from the drive down at Scott, who rinsed and spat a few times before closing the door again.

"I didn't mean for it to happen. And what the hell is wrong with your girlfriend?"

"Do not even right now. What the hell are you going to do? You know Allison can go from singing to the cute furry things to slaughtering them in an instant."

"Dude," Scott snapped.

"Screw you. You just had sex with her boyfriend, don't even try to pretend you're not afraid she'll
"Bring out the crossbow."

"Fuck," Scott moaned, running his hands through his hair and pulling at it. "Fuck, fuck. What the fuck do I do?"

"Invest in wolfsbane to counteract the poison, carry it at all times?" Stiles offered, because he wasn't feeling particularly helpful. Despite being a little grateful for an excuse to run away from his own relationship troubles, of all the things for Scott to pull, having sex with Isaac was pretty high on the list of 'shit to never even contemplate'. Maybe he should have had that sexuality crisis talk with him back in high school when he'd had the chance.

"I fucked everything up," Scott muttered over and over. "Pack is going to fall the fuck apart, shit."

"The pack is not going to fall apart," Stiles said when they were finally parked in Melissa-His dad's driveway. He flinched at the mental correction. Not the time. "People make mistakes. I'm sure other packs have similar problems. Tomorrow you will see what Issac does. You talk to him. You figure out what the fuck happened, because there were two of you, and of the two, he's the one in a committed relationship. Unless," Stiles paused, glaring at Scott. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"No!"

"Then you will talk about what happened with him. You will talk with Allison, but only when she's ready. You will let her yell at you," He added, emphasizing his point. "You will not try to defend your actions. And that's if he tells her, which he might not."

"Oh god, I hope he doesn't tell her."

"Me too, because you finally managed to become friends with her dad."

"Oh god, Chris," Scott keened. "He's going to shoot me. No, he'll torture me first. He knows things," Scott whimpered, puppy dog eyes wide open in terror.

"Should have thought of that before," Stiles muttered as he helped his friend out of the car and up the stairs. He wasn't feeling particularly charitable anymore. Something dark and so angry, so resentful of Scott was welling up. Scott's fucking stupidity, Scott's fucking obsessive need about the pack, and that thought just brought on a barrage of memories he couldn't begin to handle.

He half carried Scott up to the bathroom and waited patiently in the hall. Then he helped Scott into bed, or dropped him, to be fair. But Scott was oblivious, the stress and panic attack combining with the drink to knock him out.

The guest room door was locked when he tried. Ignoring logic, which dictated going to Scott's room, borrowing some clothes to sleep in and passing out in there, he headed outside, then paused and began scaling the lattice to pull himself onto the roof. He carefully walked over the shingles until he was on the opposite side of the house, where Melissa's-fuck, the empty bedroom was and sat down.

It wasn't until he began to get drowsy that he even thought about it, like a needle abruptly inserted into his brain. The knife was in his hands before he realized he'd shifted to retrieve it from his pocket. It was the knife Rick had given him the first time he'd connected with the land. He'd used it a few more times on full moons, and he knew it was sharp, knew-

"Fuck," He spat, feeling so wrong, so fucking ashamed for even thinking about it. Not only would he be hurting Derek, and he knew it would completely total Derek's faith in him, but with the knife Rick gave him. Cursing again, he stuffed the knife back into his pocket. He pulled his phone out instead and called Derek.
"Hey," Derek greeted easily.

"Just-I need you to talk to me. Please," He asked quietly. It wasn't in him to tell Derek the truth.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't even begin to describe the shitshow tonight has turned into," He whimpered, trying not to cry because Derek would hear, and he did not want Derek or Cassie or any combination of Derek and Cassie showing up in Beacon Hills. That would push the night from 'disaster' and straight to 'Chernobyl' territory. Images of Allison gutting Derek immediately sprang to mind and he took a deep, shuddering breath. "So. Just, please talk. I don't care what about," He added, praying Derek wouldn't push him for information.

But Derek didn't press, in fact, he just started talking, and Stiles thanked all the gods and spirits and even the dwarves Rick took so seriously. About work, about his plans to build an addition to the deck -'but not for a hot tub, Stiles'-, about the work he was doing on restoring the sewing machine's desk, about Miles and something stupid he'd said. He talked and talked, and it was completely unlike Derek to just keep talking about anything, much less after he had run out of words. After that he started talking about his apprenticeship, about different techniques he had learned and ones he wanted to learn.

The sky was a lightening predawn blue when he felt comfortable, capable of going to sleep.

"I think I'm good now."

"You sure? I can-"

"No dude. A fucking meltdown is waiting. But luckily, I have to get Elizabeth back asap. Dad and Melissa are in Ventura anyway, so I'll probably sleep for a few hours and come home."

"More than a few hours," Derek growled. Stiles waved a hand even though Derek wasn't there to see it. It was the thought that counted.

"I'll be careful, Derek."

"Call when you leave."

"Yes, sir!" Stiles saluted. Once again, it was all about the thought. "Thanks man."

"Not a problem. I'll be waiting for you at your apartment."

"Oh god. Ice cream? Please? I know Cassie ate the last of the boston cream pie."

"Yes, Stiles," Derek muttered, but it sounded fond. Then again, Stiles knew he was running on fumes and probably about to start seeing shadow people. They usually hit at thirty six hours, but he was stressed on top of sleep deprived. Probably time to get off of the roof before he broke his neck. "Bye."

"Bye," Stiles sighed, and ended the call. He'd need to charge it in the car, since he obviously wasn't going to get to his wall charger before then.

Paying careful attention to his movements, he managed to crawl down the lattice and jump onto the ground without breaking anything. He walked back into the house and dropped onto the couch, trying to set a few alarms despite the fact that his eyes were stinging from exhaustion.
Erica was dancing over Boyd's grave, shouting at Stiles to make him wake up. One of the twins hopped off of her tombstone and handed her a lit flare. Stiles watched in horror as Erica pursed her lips and brought it close in a grotesque parody of doing her lipstick when something slammed, shaking the foundations of his dream. The image began to fracture as a screech pierced his consciousness and his eyes flew open—

Shouting. Shrieking. It was like he was six years old again and Scott's parents were arguing. Except Scott wasn't clinging to him, he was the one shouting.

And Allison.

Shit.

Groaning, he grabbed his phone off of the table and checked it. He still had another hour and a half before the alarm was supposed to go off, but early worked. Early was awesome even if it sounded like two harpies trying to peck each other's eyes out five feet away from him.

When he walked into the foyer, Scott and Allison were facing each other, faces red and in Scott's case, his eyes too. They were waving fists as they screamed. Most of it was unintelligible. Good. Stiles didn't want to understand it.

Except 'fucking werewolves' echoed off of the walls and he stopped mid step and turned, barely avoiding tripping and falling down the few stairs he'd managed.

"Reminder that—"

"Shut up Stiles!" Allison shrieked. Because that was helpful. He had a fuck it moment, deciding that it was perfectly fine given the circumstances. He really wasn't up to dealing with Allison, who was still wearing her bridesmaid's dress, or Scott, who was still wearing his groomsman outfit. Both of them looked like hell. The fact that Scott could kill him without realizing it and Allison could kill him for the fun of it just propelled him up the stairs. When he knocked, he hoped Elizabeth could hear over the shouting. Maybe she wouldn't open it. Maybe he would get lucky and she'd have left via cab for the train station or the airport. (He quietly acknowledged that he was never that lucky.)

But like a personal miracle, the door opened to reveal his freaked out probably ex girlfriend. He slipped in past her and grabbed his duffel and her bag before turning and ushering her out. She balked, obviously had no desire to try and navigate past the argument occurring right in front of the door to freedom, but he wasn't going to let that stop him. He'd dreamed in the few hours he'd slept, the sleep thorn in his pillowcase useless when it was behind a locked door and guarded by an angry female. The dream was still vivid, the edges as crisp and clear as they had been when he'd first started having them.

"I don't give a shit about how much you need your pack!" Allison shrieked. "You're a terrible alpha—"

"Pack? Alpha?" Elizabeth stuttered quietly.

"They're furries. Prone to dramatics. Best to ignore it and just walk away," Stiles instructed, guiding her down the stairs in a moment of pity. It wasn't her fault Scott's brain was two sizes too small or Allison's psychosis three sizes too big. He was almost there, but Allison was blocking the door. And for some ungodly reason, her eyes fell on him.

"And that's what you do best, isn't it Stiles? Just walk away?" She accused.

"Well, since I know exactly what you're capable of, yeah," He bit out without thinking. "Now if you
don't mind, I have to get Liz home since this place is not conducive to, well, anything really. Have fun stabbing Issac. Again."

Elizabeth gasped but Allison stepped back, her fist cocked like she was readying for a blow. He yanked open the door in time for her first to hit it instead. There was a pained cry followed by Scott snarling, and really, Stiles was now actually looking forward to an eight hour car ride filled with angry tension. At least Elizabeth wouldn't actually kill him.

"What the hell was that?" Elizabeth hissed as he threw their bags into the back. Stiles thanked the lucky star that was smiling down on him, because her anger wasn't fixated on or directed at him, which was a definite improvement over the night before.

"Look, I didn't mean to offend you last night. Being here always puts me on edge, for obvious reasons," He told her, nodding at the door. "And you're really cool and all, but I'm not into swinging. No judgment, it's awesome you're doing what makes you happy. So yeah. Sorry about last night. And that," He added, nodding at the house. "It's been shit."

"Did she really stab Issac?" Elizabeth demanded, not acknowledging his statement. She was still tense, but that was probably because they could still hear the screaming. 

"Long, long story I don't actually want to go into. Ever. But yes."

"And they're a couple?" She demanded shrilly.

"Issac and Scott both have the self preservation instincts of the dodo," Stiles muttered as he started the car.

"Will she hurt him?" Elizabeth asked, voice cracking in panic.

"No," He lied. Because Scott would heal, and he'd brought the whole thing down on himself. "Allison and Scott were a thing once. She's got a soft spot for him."

"Didn't look like it."

"She didn't have her crossbow," Stiles said without thinking and then flinched when he realized just how bad that sounded.

"I can see why you ran," Elizabeth finally admitted. "Jesus, they seemed so normal."

Stiles laughed, but it was a hollow, bitter sound.

Stiles raised a hand the moment he stepped inside and Derek looked up at him. Hopefully it would stall the demands to know what happened. Instead, he stalked back to his room and threw his duffel onto the bed and started stripping. Derek came to the door and watched. Stiles didn't necessarily blame him, but the way Derek's eyes skittered over the scars was enough of a reminder of what he'd almost done that he tried, in vain, to keep his arms over them. A towel did the trick though, and he walked into his bathroom. It took an enormous amount of effort not to slam the door.

Half an hour later he felt something akin to human and dried off. Derek was still there when he walked into his room and started dressing in his favorite sleep pants (fuck yeah marvel print, thank you Cassie) and a white v-neck.

Ignoring Derek completely, he stalked into the kitchen to try and find something to eat. When he opened the freezer and there were three pints (three, for the love of Christ) of boston cream pie
waiting, he sniffled a little and prayed to the werewolf gods that they smiled down on Derek and blessed him with sales on whatever new tools he was looking for.

Knowing Derek was watching, he pulled out one of his favorite and then Derek's before handing it off to him. The silverware drawer clattered in the silence and he gave in to the urge to sink down onto the linoleum.

"So," Stiles began, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. "Scott fucked Issac, who is in a committed relationship with Allison, in the coat room at the reception. Apparently it was an accident. Issac told Allison, who showed up at the house this morning to start screaming. I got locked out of my room last night, and I now have a new and fun phobia of lipstick thanks to my dreams. My now ex girlfriend is a swinger and we're going to try being friends, but she thinks my old friends pushed me into therapy and that's why I never talk about Beacon Hills. Which is okay, because she assumed I reacted badly to the comment about having sex with Scott because he's a furry with terrible decision making skills." He paused thoughtfully for a moment. "I think that covers it."

Derek looked like he pitied Stiles. Stiles was willing to go with that. He felt like he'd earned a little.

"Oh, and they loved the bookcase. Everyone did, actually. I gave like, two dozen people the website."

Derek nodded, smiling a little before frowning.

"Her scent, at first. It was-" Derek shrugged. "We could tell she'd been with multiple people."

"Now you tell me," Stiles muttered. "Thanks for that."

"It wasn't my place to say anything," Derek retorted.

"Next time, a heads up would be fucking great. She thought I called her a slut. Which, completely awesome, let me tell you. Scott actually saved me from that argument," Stiles added bitterly. Derek just looked frustrated, like he wanted to say something mean. Stiles wondered if he actually looked that pathetic when Derek just remained silent, sitting on whatever it was that was bothering him.

"Why does she think Scott's a furry?" He asked a few minutes later, attempting to cut through the mounting tension.

"Allison was screaming pack and alpha all over the place. It seemed like the easier explanation."

"She wanted you to have sex with Scott?"

"Oh my god, can we please not say those words aloud? Like, ever again?"

Derek nodded emphatically.

"You are the actual best," Stiles groaned, scooting across the floor and leaning against Derek, eating his ice cream. "Even if the only time you can keep your nose out of my life is when I would appreciate being told."

"I'll remember that next time," Derek quipped. "Besides, she stopped smelling like that."

"She thought I was a swinger and we were doing the one on one thing before 'exploring together'" Stiles snorted. "Christ. I never should have told her we share the bed. No one ever gets it."

"Normal people don't," Derek pointed out.
"So I should just start looking for supernatural people to date? Dude, werewolves are out, Scott's left me with such a brilliant example of what happens when you date inside the pack, and screw dating vampires. Caroline gets pissy when Cassie does it. She'd probably literally nail my ass to the wall."

"Cassie only does it to annoy Caroline," Derek grumped. Which Stiles knew was true, but it didn't change the fact that Caroline wasn't all that fond of the younger members of the local collective, not that Stiles had any idea why, but still. She didn't mind Martinique though, who Stiles had only seen once, as she was leaving the house.

"I should probably cut my losses and just become a priest."

"You wouldn't make it as a priest."

"Says you. I could be an awesome priest. Just imagine me feeding power into the hymns like I do with the runes, eh?" Stiles smirked. "I could get donations up and have a huge congregation. Good old school revival. Hey, I might be able to take over Rome. Just imagine it, Pope Stiles the first, most rockin' pope there ever was. Birth control and church wine for all!"

Derek groaned and looked vaguely ill. Stiles laughed, more amused by the pained expression on Derek's face than the idea of being the pope. They settled into that, more relaxed than they had been since he'd gotten home.

"You're home two days early," Derek finally pointed out.

"Yeah, and?"

"You still have a couple of days off work. We could go somewhere."

"Somewhere that's not infested with werewolf mellow drama? Wait, your work-"

"My orders are finished. And here isn't, but still," Derek pointed out.

"Fair point. A mini vacation sounds amazing. Anywhere. Fuck, even the barn works for me at this point. We can take a picnic basket and booze. Or weed," He added thoughtfully. "I've never tried it, but it feels like an awesome time to start. I know Mark smokes, so I could get some from him."

"How about we just go?" Derek asked pointedly.

"Like drive?"

Derek nodded.

"That's a great idea," Stiles told him, and for once, he wasn't being sarcastic when he said it.

(It turned out Derek meant leaving almost that very minute. Stiles scrambled to get dressed and grabbed his still packed duffel. They drove to the coast that night and slept in the truck, right off the edge of a golf course. There were dune buggies the next afternoon, and Stiles absolutely did not freak out when Derek's flipped over, just like Derek didn't inform him that he sounded like a screeching seagull.)

The red moon gathering was in full swing. Stiles smiled from his spot on the steps of the back deck, watching everyone. There had been a truly mortifying moment when Cassie had arranged for half of the pack to sing happy birthday as a cake he hadn't known about (or anticipated) was brought out. But for the most part he'd been left to his normal devices with the younger members, aside from a
few well wishes and small gifts.

Derek walked over and sat down next to him, leaning against the railing to watch the normal festivities.

"I don't feel like an adult," Stiles commented idly. "Arent you supposed to feel like an adult when you turn twenty?"

"What were you thinking would happen?" Derek asked quietly.

"I don't know," Stiles shrugged. "A sense of purpose or something? Maturity maybe? Like, finally fitting into my shoes or something."

"I don't know if anyone ever feels that," Derek retorted, the fact that he didn't patently obvious to Stiles.

"Oh, because you're so old," Stiles joked. "Seriously though," He started, quickly sobering. "I feel like I should have a better idea of what I'm doing, where I'm going. Shit, I don't even know what I'm doing in school, really."

"You've been taking languages and mythology classes," Derek pointed out.

"Because that's a career path," Stiles snorted. "Totally useful stuff there."

"Rick teaches mythology."

"True, I guess," Stiles shrugged. "I don't know. I just feel like-" He stopped, as frustrated with himself for being unable to explain as he was for the situation itself.

"You'll figure it out."

Stiles shrugged, wanting to believe what Derek told him. But he wasn't sure. He felt lost in a way, stuck and hovering somewhere between Beacon Hills and Portland. Even though his dreams had calmed down again, he felt on edge, uneasy.

(That night he passed out in the hayloft in a tangle of Derek and Cassie, Annette and Tim curled up near their feet. He was so focused on his future that it never occurred to him that the only people to call and wish him happy birthday had been his dad and Melissa.)

Chapter End Notes

Lack of communication seems to be a problem in Stiles' life.
Stiles wasn't hyperventilating. He was just trying to get air in a room that smelled like blood and death. And that was difficult, he admitted, if only to himself.

"Stiles, calm down. I need you to get the antidote box from the safe," Rick instructed, his voice shaking. Stiles couldn't blame him. Caroline was laid out on the table, the table they sat at, that they ate at, bleeding out while a terrifying crimson color crept up her neck, a steadily growing lichtenberg figure that grew darker as her pulse fluttered wildly in her throat, visible even to his human eyes.

Knowing which box he meant, Stiles ran for the door to the basement and practically threw himself down the stairs. His hands were trembling when he pulled his keys out of his pocket and looked for the one that Rick had given him only a few weeks before. Bile threatened to choke him, mixing with the bubbles of air in his throat that refused to be expelled. He fumbled with the keys, finally opening the fireproofed safe and pulling out the large wooden box inside.

A howl echoed above him, pained and delirious. He almost dropped the box, and remembering that Rick had told him, that no matter what was happening, to close and lock the safe, he did. The wooden box of wolfsbane was tucked securely against his chest as he ran back upstairs and into the dining room.

"Marianne, hold her down," Rick commanded, but the words were halting, his tone completely wrecked.

"Rick, tell me what to do," Stiles said when Rick fumbled the box before setting it on the counter, his hands trembling too much to open the catch on it.

"Ferox is the only kind that presents itself in shades of red."

Stiles resisted the urge to curse and opened the box, looking through the vials for the right one. When he found it, the deep indigo, almost black powder even looked malevolent. Of course it would. It was only the fucking worst of them all. He pulled out the cutting board and poured some out, looking expectantly at Rick until the man produced a zippo. The powder flamed blue and smelled cold to Stiles, although he knew it was probably only psychosomatic, based on what little he knew of the plant itself.

"We need someone to hold her feet," Stiles said. Before he'd even finished the statement, Lynn was rushing into the kitchen. Rick looked defeated already, his gaze fixed on the map tracing itself out under Caroline's skin. The crimson had deepened into a burgundy color, the veins themselves
reaching up her jaw. Another pained snarl echoed through the house as he walked over to the table.

"Where's the wound?" He demanded.

Caroline fought Lynn and Marianne as she was turned over. Blood was crusting the fabric of her shirt, and Stiles used his knife to cut open the back before pulling it away, revealing what looked like a giant bruise, an ugly stain of burgundy already shadowing into black.

"I already pulled out the bullet," Marianne confirmed.

Knowing how bad it would be, Stiles poured the powder onto Caroline's wound and struck the flint of the zippo again before setting the flame to her skin, remembering it needed to be sealed into the flesh and praying his zippo would be enough to cauterize the wound.

Nothing, nothing could have prepared him for the noise that came out and shook the windows, or for Caroline's body to tense and then seize before she began convulsing. He held the lighter to the wound even as Lynn and Marianne struggled to keep her down.

"Mom!" Cassie shrieked. He turned and saw her trying to get into the dining room, Derek holding her back with visible effort. Nat and Annette were hovering behind them, faces etched in terror as they caught sight of their mother.

"Get her out of here, right now!" Stiles commanded. Cassie howled and pulled against Derek, but Derek complied, although Cassie fought him every step of the way, cursing and screaming at him. When they were gone Stiles looked down at the flame and saw the wound bubbling. Satisfied, he pulled the lighter away and shut it.

"She's going to be okay, isn't she?" Lynn whispered, face ashen as she stared at her mother, who had gone slack on the table. Stiles saw blood dripping out of her mouth and onto the wood.

"We have to get her in a circle of ash," Stiles said instead. "Before she comes out of it."

"Why?" Lynn demanded sharply.

"He's right," Rick said, coming out of his daze. "We need to move her to the basement."

Marianne picked Caroline up and followed them as they hurried into the basement, bypassing the watching werewolves without a word or look of acknowledgment. Normally Rick's workroom was a no werewolf zone. Normally. But Caroline was beginning to whine low in her throat, her skin cold and clammy. Stiles knew it would be the best place for her considering what would happen.

Letting Rick watch over his wife, Stiles grabbed the box of ash dust and began working on creating a barrier. Lynn and Marianne watched from the stairs as he worked, silently threading his conviction into the circle. When he finished and Rick didn't move, he went for the chalks on the workbench and then walked back over, dropping to his knees. Caroline's moans were the only noise as he began to draw runes onto the floor. He left enough room between the circle and his writing for Rick to write, if he wanted to. Stiles wasn't sure if he could, if he would have the time.

When he finished, he noticed Rick was watching him. He looked like he was shattering in slow motion, nothing at all like the man that had taken him under his wing.

"You should be with Cassie," Rick murmured.

"I can't-" -let my friend's mother die without trying, he finished silently. Rick nodded and looked back down at Caroline. Stiles started to chant.
When the hallucinations started, Rick scrambled out of the circle and watched as his wife threw herself into the barrier, half shifted and terrifying in her delirium. Claws scraped at air, tried to slash through nothing, tried to get at them. Stiles kept chanting even as he wished for Rick's gift, for Rick's knowledge and help because Rick would know how to weave the words around Caroline's bellowing, would know how to keep the resonances from being disrupted by the person he was trying to help.

But Rick wasn't in any shape to help, his tie to Caroline almost visible as Stiles plucked at the thread that represented the alpha. It was already weakening, the fraying ends fading into nothing. Rick had to be aware of it, had to feel his wife's life fading in and out as her body struggled.

Not letting her go, Stiles told himself. Caroline was stubborn like Cassie was stubborn, and Stiles had faced down a dark druid and he'd survived the alphas and he fought the nemeton every day. Forcing strength into Caroline's thread was simple compared to that. The simple need to make her live through the next few hours. He could do that, he knew it. The alternative wasn't an option.

At some point, Rick's voice joined his. Stiles recognized the timbre that wove around him, and he felt Rick's power bolstering his own, following the path he'd opened and widening it like a river widening a channel.

Stiles didn't remember when he stopped feeling his own throat, but he felt his own energy pouring into the Caroline, which meant that he was still chanting. He didn't stop, continued following the path of runes, circling around it over and over.

It got worse (so much worse) before it got better, but it did get better. And Stiles focused on that, lost himself in the litany of prayers and commands he was whispering, in the feel of Caroline's thread growing stronger, more alive.

When someone shook him, his teeth clicked together painfully, sharp on his tongue. Instead of acknowledging whoever it was, the pain that threatened to numb his words, he began picking up where he left off.

"Stiles," Rick said, his voice hoarse. "Stiles, it's enough."

"Please," Stiles tried, his voice coming out as a whisper. He wasn't willing to chance raising it. His vocal cords felt raw, like he'd been gargling with crushed glass. "I can-"

"You've done enough. She'll finish healing," Rick told him. He looked exhausted, his face lined with fatigue and shadows. Salt still crusted the lenses of his reading glasses he'd forgotten to take off when Marianne had burst in on their lesson. And that-That was really uncomfortable, eye opening and frightening, because he'd seen Rick look tired, but he'd never seen him so close to the edge.

Stiles knew, logically, that Caroline would finish healing. They'd gotten her past the worst of it, strengthened her against the effects that had threatened to swamp her and tear her apart. But logic was lost on him, because he was still afraid, still terrified that he'd see Cassie with her head in her hands, too disoriented and confused by the loss to actually cry. Like he had been.

"Go tell the others," Rick urged gently. "They'll want to know it's alright."

Stiles nodded and pushed himself up. His entire body was stiff and he felt like he'd been the one poisoned. Ignoring the throbbing of his blood actually hurting, he allowed Lynn to pull an arm over her shoulder and help him up the stairs. Marianne remained behind. Her eyes were wet, and she looked as bad as Rick, but she nodded in Stiles' direction as he passed.
Everyone was parked by the door to the basement, and they all looked terrible. Stiles figured it was going to be a mental health day for everyone.

"She's going to be alright," Lynn said after he tried to speak and failed, his throat finally protesting the abuse he'd put it through. When the others looked to him, like his opinion was somehow more convincing, he nodded weakly.

Cassie launched herself at him and burst into tears. He leaned against the wall and began to sink, exhaustion hazing his vision in a blur of gray. Cassie sank with him, her whole body shaking, and Derek stumbled over, his face lined with a mix of relief and a bone deep weariness Stiles silently empathized with.

The door opened again and Rick stepped out, followed by Marianne carrying Caroline. He nodded at his family before walking up to the second floor, Marianne following. The others began picking themselves up to follow. Even Cassie stood, tugging at him.

"I'll be up in a minute, I need some water," Stiles whispered, voice breaking twice as he tried to speak. Cassie nodded and left him, needing the assurance of her mother's heartbeat. Stiles didn't, couldn't blame her.

But Derek headed into the kitchen and came back with a glass of water, holding it to Stiles' mouth. Stiles was too tired to argue about being treated like an invalid, so he sipped slowly. The urge to chug the glass down was overwhelming, but Derek wouldn't let him, even when he glared. The only attempt to grab the glass was met with his hand being batted away.

"You were down there for five hours," Derek finally told him, when the glass was empty and sitting on the floor. "What's ferox?"

"Himalayan black," Stiles said, his voice sounding slightly less like a frog's. His throat still hurt, but a few days of no speaking and he'd probably be fine. (He tried to tell himself he wasn't going to talk himself into permanent muteness.)

Derek cursed. Stiles mentally agreed. Himalayan black was pervasive, and even with the antidote, there was no guarantee of a wolf surviving it. If the body didn't have the strength to fight off the remaining traces of it, it was like an onset of rabies. Fever and delirium set in, then listlessness and death. More often than not, the werewolf in question died within a few hours, regardless of whether or not they were an alpha.

"I good now," Stiles mumbled quietly, grateful for werewolf hearing. When Derek helped pull him to his feet, he started stumbling. Ignoring the stairs entirely, Derek took him to the living room and helped him onto the couch. Stiles muttered about not being old yet, but didn't protest when Derek tugged off his shoes and socks. He closed his eyes and didn't remember falling asleep.

(He woke up once more when Cassie was cuddling into his side, a hand fisted in his shirt like she was afraid he was going to vanish.)

Nothing ever went the way Stiles wanted it to. Ever. He was convinced of that because Caroline, still
weak, was glaring at Derek, and he wanted to glare at Derek. But still recovering alphas got first
dibs, and Derek was attempting to be helpful, so he didn't deserve two glares. Yet.

"I am not contacting a hunter to ask what other hunters are in the area," Caroline snapped. She'd
been easy to set off ever since she'd woken up. Stiles had the feeling she wasn't used to getting shot
or being weakened for any length of time. When he stopped to think about it, it was an extremely
optimistic sign.

"Argent is a good man, not like the others. And I can do it," Derek said. And no, that was why Stiles
knew he was cursed. Because Derek couldn't ask. And Stiles really, truly did not want to contact
Chris Argent under any circumstances.

"No," Stiles finally ground out. "He may not actively blame you for his wife's death, but I'm pretty
sure he'd tongue a shotgun barrel before giving you any help."

Derek glowered, Caroline looked smug.

"I'll call him."

Caroline and Derek both looked at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Chris owes me one," Stiles muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. He wasn't all that better off than
Caroline was, and even Rick was taking more than his fair share of naps in between brewing the
same tea over and over (tea he also forced down Stiles' throat despite the noxious undertones to it).
Stiles was just grateful Jane was so understanding of their situation, because work probably would
have killed him.

"How does he owe you?" Derek demanded.

"Gerard beat the shit out of me for no other reason than Scott while Chris and Allison were upstairs.
So yes, he fucking owes me one, and I have no problems calling that favor in." Actually, he did. He
really did not want to talk to Chris, or anyone from Beacon Hills. Jesus, he prayed Chris would keep
the whole thing to himself. The pack showing up in Portland would be one of the worst possible
things that could happen, for any number of reasons, the main one being a weakened alpha and an
antsy, defensive pack. It wouldn't end well.

"Do you have his number?"

"Yeah. He gave his private line to everyone after, whatever," Stiles muttered, waving his hand
vaguely.

"Okay," Derek said. Caroline nodded slowly.

"Okay?"

They both nodded. And waited.

"What, like now?"

"Yes, now," Caroline snapped. He tried to forgive her. He knew, in theory at least, what she'd gone
through. It was getting more difficult to sympathize though.

"Fine," He muttered, sullen. "My phone is in Cassie's room on the charger."

Derek went to go get it, and Stiles was left alone with a tense Caroline.
"I won't tell him who you are," Stiles promised. "I'll just ask who is in the area so we have a better idea of where to start."

Caroline nodded stiffly. Derek returned with his cellphone and sat it in front of Stiles. He didn't sit back down.

Deciding to bite the bullet (and oh god, not appropriate, he told himself) he shuffled through his contacts until his found Chris' private number and hit the call button.

As expected, he picked up within two rings. Because the private number? It was the emergency number.

"Stiles?"

"I have a problem Chris, and I need some help."

"What kind of problem?" Chris asked carefully.

"Assault with Himalayan Black kind of problem."

"Then there's nothing I can do."

"Bullshit. Chris, you owe me for letting your dad use me as a punching bag. I just want the name of the outfit hunting in Portland, and then I'll be out of your hair."

"I'm not giving you names so you can go kill yourself."

"I'm not going to go after them," He lied.

"Then for whoever will be. I'm not in the business of revenge."

"No, the person that got hit lived. Barely. We just want to know who to protect ourselves from. The attack was unprovoked. My friend almost lost her mother. And I know Himalayan Black is expensive. You'll know who is here, and who's been buying the bullets," Stiles reasoned, keeping his voice even despite wanting to yell into the phone.

Chris was silent for a moment before sighing. "Alright. It might take some time. I'm not as trusted as I used to be."

"That's all I can ask for," Stiles said simply. "Thank you," He added, because it had never hurt to at least sound polite when he wanted something.

Chris hung up without saying goodbye. Stiles wasn't especially hurt by discourtesy.

"This isn't happening," Stiles muttered three days later when the person that walked into the bookstore, his work, was none other than Chris Argent.

"It is," Chris smiled pleasantly. It would have been benign if Stiles didn't know any better. Unfortunately, he did. "I think we need to have a talk."

"Jane," Stiles called out, glad his boss was in.

"Yes?" She was busy shelving books.

"I need to take my lunch early."
"Alright. Be back in half an hour."

"Sure thing."

Stiles quickly slipped his messenger bag over his shoulder and felt the knife in the side pocket, ready to be pulled out. He'd been drilled in the movement over and over for the last week, ever since he'd woken up to find Caroline bent on finding out who had attacked her and her sister. His other knife was strapped to his back just in case. He led them out and walked down to the coffee shop at the end of the block. Public was good. Public was amazing. He mumbled an order off to the barista and paid, choosing the back corner since everyone seemed intent on sitting by the windows. It offered a modicum of privacy.

When Chris settled down across from him, Stiles waited. Chris seemed content to watch him.

"How did you find me?" He finally asked.

"Phone. Wasn't difficult to get your address, and your work address," Chris admitted easily, as if cyber stalking wasn't illegal. "Or to triangulate your position when you made the call."

Stiles felt his blood run cold as Chris' meaning crashed down on him.

"Valdyr is pretty obvious," Chris added casually. "And they have a daughter named Cassandra. Same name as your girlfriend, right?"

"Not everyone does their research like you do Chris. And Cassie is my friend," Stiles ground out.

"The one who almost lost her mother?"

"I asked you for information, not the other way around."

"Stiles, what are you doing?" Chris sighed, looking worn through. Stiles refused to feel sorry for him.

"I'm trying to help my friend, that's all."

Chris looked like he didn't believe him.

"Look, I thought you might be able to help. I didn't ask you to come here. If you won't help, go home."

Their names were called and Chris went to go grab their coffee before returning and sitting back down, still intensely focused on Stiles.

"They were bragging. Said they'd hit an alpha."

"They're probably trying to make themselves look better. You know how it is," Stiles replied, keeping his tone as casual as Chris was. He felt like he was going to shake apart, the tremors he was trying not to allow to show turning inwards and making him feel queasy.

"Probably," Chris said glibly. "Sounded like they were waiting for the inevitable chaos to take out more game. I checked out the area. Not many problems. So you're probably right about it being unprovoked."

Stiles bit his tongue to keep from saying of course he was right, otherwise he wouldn't have tried calling an Argent.
"This can't turn into a war."

"It won't."

Chris reached into his jacket and Stiles tensed, reaching for his bag. But the only thing in Chris' hand was a piece of paper. He held it out and Stiles reached for it, just to see it yanked back a few inches, right out of his reach.

"I don't know what you're doing kid, but I asked Deaton, and he said to trust you. So I'm going to," He informed him, tone implying that he really didn't want to. "I do not want to be forced to come back here."

"You won't," Stiles promised, because he'd sure as hell never let Chris anywhere near the pack, especially Derek.

Chris nodded and Stiles slipped the paper into his pocket.

"Since you have some time, care to tell me what happened at your father's wedding?"

"Don't know."

"Now I'm starting not to trust you."

Stiles snorted. Not like he ever had. "Allison and Scott were screaming. Since certain words were being said, I took my girlfriend and left. Seemed like a good idea."

"Which explains why Allison hates you as much as Scott right now."

"She accused of me walking away, which I was doing. I told her it's because I'm intelligent." Maybe not in so many words, but that was what it boiled down to. In part.

Chris looked like he didn't quite believe him, but he shrugged and seemed content to let it go.

"And what about Derek?"

"Derek who?" Stiles asked, staring Chris in the eye even as his body stilled, readied itself for an attack he knew he couldn't carry out in a public place.

"Relax, Stiles. I'm not interested in him. Unless I need to be."

"I'm still not sure who we're talking about."

"Derek Valdyr. I assume he's one of Rickard and Caroline's children."

"They have a lot of children. Busy people."

Chris nodded and drained his coffee before standing up.

"I hope you know what you're doing Stiles."

"I'm not doing anything."

Chris didn't even try to pretend they were lying anymore when he gave him a look. "You're still human Stiles. And running with wolves isn't safe here."

"It's never been safe anywhere," Stiles counted. "Trust me, some days I remember that perfectly
well."

"And other days?"

"Fun in the sun," He mocked.

Chris shook his head. Stiles couldn't tell if he was frustrated, disappointed, or both.

"Are you going to tell the others?"

"There's enough going on with the pack right now. And it's not the pack's problem." Stiles had the feeling Chris was including him in that, and he didn't know how to explain it was very much his problem, that he'd seen the red and black bile Caroline had vomited, had clung tight to keep her tied to the land of the living. He wanted to say it was his business because Cassie had broken down the day before, terrified because suddenly her mother, the alpha she'd followed all her life, was no longer immortal or invulnerable. But he couldn't say those things. That would lead to questions he wasn't willing to answer, especially not if Chris was asking them.

"What about my dad?" He asked instead.

"You're an adult now. If you feel you need to tell him, you will." With that he offered a nod and walked away, leaving Stiles alone.

A heaving, shuddering sigh escaped and he let himself slouch. Checking his watch, he decided to grab a few sandwiches for him and Jane and go back to finish his shift.

The paper burned a hole in his pocket for the next three hours.

"No!" Stiles hissed, glaring at Caroline. "You will not leave me here to wait like some damsel in distress."

"Stiles, they're hunters," Cassie started. Stiles felt more than a little betrayed by her lack of confidence in him. If he was incapable, he'd admit it. He wasn't trying to throw his testicles in everyone's face in some lame attempt at machismo.

"They're hunters," Derek reiterated, and Stiles took a deep breath.

He could talk, but he was more than a little pissed off that Derek of all people was trying to remind him of what hunters were like. He remembered quite clearly, thank you very much. Some things may have blurred with time, but the two assholes that had dragged him into a car and then thrown him down a flight of stairs (and Gerard, jesus fuck) were still very clear in his mind.

Instead of yelling, he got up and walked out of the kitchen, pausing at the fridge to grab the carton of milk before going out to his car. Derek wandered out, watching him carefully as he smoothed his fingers between the top and bottom cushions of the passenger seat. Once the two catches were released, he pulled out the metal box his father had purchased from Chris and installed the moment things had settled down.

Stiles didn't look at Derek, and Derek followed him out behind the house. The bay windows in the dining room overlooked the backyard, and Stiles sat the box down on the porch before stalking over to the stone grill Derek had helped Rick build the year before. The jug went on top, and he grabbed the box as he walked past Derek until he was about forty yards away, then he knelt and with an efficiency he'd gained purely from sleepless nights of practice and never lost, he opened the box and began assembling the 1911 inside before putting one magazine in his pocket and slid the next into
place. Then he took aim.

He didn't look at Derek when he began firing, didn't take his eyes off of the target even when he ejected the spent clip and slid the full one in. He continued firing until the second clip was empty. Then he carefully checked to make sure the gun was clear and stored both it and the magazines back in the box.

Caroline and several others were watching from behind him. He didn't look at Derek, couldn't look at Derek as he retrieved the milk jug, now empty and shredded, and took it to Caroline.

"It's about the size of a man's head," He told her simply, holding it up for her inspection. When she reached for it he pulled the jug back. "Wolfsbane bullets."

"Where did you get them?" Caroline asked. Everyone else was quiet, watching him like he was about to start shooting. What hurt the most was that even Cassie looked wary, afraid of him.

"My father is a sheriff that is buddies with an Argent. I don't say that to throw titles around. I am not helpless. Never treat me like I am because I'm human," He demanded, voice quiet. "I've had enough of that condescending bullshit to last me a lifetime."

"I suppose you have," Caroline conceded quietly, her gaze focused, intent and considering.

Stiles didn't look at any of them when he gathered everything and dropped the milk jug in the trashcan on the way to his car. The only time he spared was to secure the box back in it's place.

He didn't cry when he pulled out of the driveway. He didn't cry when he drove from the house to his apartment, or when he slipped the box from under the seat and straight into his bookbag.

Her certainly didn't cry when he took the 1911 apart and started cleaning it. But the temptation was there, frustration and paranoia playing havoc with his nerves. He couldn't forget how wary of him they'd looked, like he'd suddenly pulled out-

A gun and bullets that could kill them and proven how easily he could do it. Shit.

Derek walked in. For a moment, Stiles regretted giving him a key to the apartment, but kept working on the barrel, even when Derek sat next to him on the couch.

"I feel stupid. It never occurred to me," Derek admitted.

"You don't have to be here. I know this sort of stuff makes you uncomfortable." He could see Derek's eyes zeroed in on the barrel as he worked.

"It's good. That you're capable."

"Capable," Stiles echoed dumbly. Derek was maintaining very rigid posture. Giving in, Stiles sat the barrel down and looked over at Derek.

"If you'd known more, before-" Derek started.

"I didn't. Now I do. And everyone thinks I'm going to kill them."

"They don't, Stiles. But we never considered that you would be able to use a gun," Derek said, voice quiet, serious.

"Why the fuck not?" Stiles demanded as he got up from the couch to begin pacing, too incensed to sit still. "I am a sheriff's son! It's an unwritten law that I have to know how to handle a firearm. Just
because I'm human doesn't mean I can't protect myself or my pack!"

Several emotions expressed themselves at once, there and gone too quickly for Stiles to pin down, before Derek's expression settled into a very grim sort of seriousness.

"Caroline doesn't want you in the line of fire in case someone else gets hurt."

"Then keep me close by so I can help them more quickly," Stiles insisted.

"Now that she knows you can defend yourself, that's what she wants to do."

Stiles stopped short, his argument dying in his throat. "What?"

"Rick and Caroline both think it's a good idea to have you nearby, in case. Not in the fight, but close. You can protect yourself, and if anyone gets hit with wolfsbane, you'll be able to help them too."

"I sense a but."

"Cassie doesn't."

Oh. Stiles could see how Cassie would be freaked. Even if he'd proved that he could protect himself, he doubted Cassie would see it that way. She knew him, knew him well, and it was something he'd never brought up, had never thought to until Chris had given him the list and Caroline had tried to relegate him to the role of fretting nursemaid, waiting at home for something to go wrong. (If he was being honest with himself, he hadn't wanted to think about the gun, hadn't ever wanted to be in a situation where using it was necessary.)

"She's never seen this before, Stiles," Derek informed him. "Caroline and Marianne, they've had to deal with hunters, but Cassie and her sisters? They've never had them get this close. They're worried about you."

"What about you?"

Derek made an unhappy sound, his expression bleak but resigned. "I could never keep you away from the fighting."

"And I'm alive. I even have you and Cas to keep me sane in case the nemeton tries to exert any influence."

Derek looked at him like he'd lost his mind, and he conceded that maybe making an emotionally damaged werewolf his link to stability wasn't the least questionable decision he'd ever made, but he stood by it being the best. Besides, Cassie balanced out Derek. Simple as that.

"Look. I'm not going to say I won't have more nightmares. We know that's a lie. But these guys, they came after us. It's about more than me and being afraid. You know that. And this isn't Beacon Hills, we're not kids anymore, we're not alone."

Derek nodded thoughtfully, eyes going back to the gun.

"It might bring more."

"I actually had an idea about that, but I'm not sure Caroline will like it."

Seven hunters were piled in the back of Derek's truck. Stiles tried not to acknowledge the restless apprehension that had his knee bouncing and one heel scraping a rhythmic tattoo against the other.
He'd helped bury bodies before, but that had been burying, this—This was a lot more like something out of a gangster movie or a noir film than a horror flicks he was used to.

"We'll stagger them out," He said. "Make it look—" He had no idea how it would make it look. More professional? Credible? Less like Caroline had taken his gun and shot them all in the head? For a hysterical moment that threatened to send him head over feet into another panic attack, he thought about the conversation with his dad, where he'd said Cassie would always help him dump a body. And of course it wasn't Cassie doing it. It was her mother.

He wondered if somewhere along the way, he'd slipped power and belief into his words and the universe was punishing him for it.

The Williamette, for all its scenic daytime charm, was downright eerie at three am. The fog rolling over the water and the pier that waited for them wasn't doing the ambiance (or his peace of mind) any favors.

They forewent most measures to keep the bodies down aside from tying cement blocks around their feet and a few knife wounds to their stomachs, all of which Caroline and Marianne did, shaking their heads at he and Derek both. Hopefully the bodies would surface in a few weeks, and any hunters looking for them would see the lack of claw and teethmarks, focusing on the bullet holes instead. On the silver bullets still in their skulls, the ones that were linked to the concept of the Code, whatever that was or wasn't, anymore. He had seen bodies fished from water before. He didn't want to think about how the hunters might never be recognized at all. (Stiles hadn't questioned Rick's possession the silver bullets, and he wasn't sure he ever would.)

For the next hour they drove carefully around the port. Caroline, pleased with the plan, was very efficient, and that scared the shit out of Stiles, even as he acknowledged that it was his plan she was so competently carrying out. Then he remembered how she'd almost died, and he actually empathized with her a little. She'd probably wanted to tear into them, and that she listened to his advice was a little bewildering. (He reminded himself more than once that he was a sheriff's son and had insights they didn't.)

After the last body had fallen into the water, Caroline climbed into the back seat and nodded.

"Home," She murmured softly.

When they pulled into the driveway, the sun was rising. Cassie met them outside, like she'd been waiting by the door. He realized she probably had been. They'd parted ways after the hunters had been subdued and shot. Stiles knew she wasn't happy about it, but Marianne had insisted she be with Caroline as her second, and Caroline had agreed. He'd been brought along as the emergency medic in case anyone had followed, and Derek-Stiles worried that they had brought Derek because of his eyes, because they assumed he would be okay with a body dump.

It was grim, but there was a sense of relief when they walked into the house. Everyone was waiting for them, and Stiles had expected that. What he hadn't expected was for Caroline to wrap her arms around him.

"Thank you," She whispered into his hair. It felt like he was being hugged by a mom, which he was, but not even Melissa had ever hugged him like Caroline was, and he was fighting the need to tense, to flee, to push her away and pretend he didn't need it. Because mom hugs, for him, were weird, too disconcerting, too—Shit. She wasn't letting him go, and he needed someone to tell him that what he'd planned, what he'd taken part in was necessary, because supernatural deaths he could sort of handle, or at the very least, he'd come to accept them in his life. Claw mangled bodies, bodies cut in half, broadswords and crossbows, he had gotten used to seeing those ends before he'd ever come to
Portland. The almost mundane deaths of the hunters? He had no idea how to process those, how to accept that he'd been the one to throw the idea on the table in the first place.

When she pulled away, she smiled down at him sadly, and her hand moved to rest on his chest, right over the pendant and rings.

"I'm sorry you were in this position."

"Sometimes you do the best you can," He mumbled, mostly because he couldn't think of anything else to say. She nodded before walking over to her husband and leaning into him. For all that they were embracing in front of the pack, and despite the utter lack of sexuality to it, it still felt like he was peeping on an intimate moment, something too private to see.

"Food," Derek sighed. Stiles didn't want to know how Derek could eat after everything they'd done and just chalked it up to the good old werewolf metabolism. It was that or go insane because he'd have to acknowledge that he and Derek were used to dealing with that sort of shit, that they'd both seen enough dead bodies to inure them to the horror of it.

"Shower first. I'll make food. You still have blood in your hair," Stiles told him, pointing at the stairs. Derek nodded, looked like he wanted to say something else, then shook his head and walked up the stairs.

People wandered off to get a few hours of sleep or just to relax, now that the danger was over. Hopefully, anyway. The plan was simple, rash, and probably transparent as hell, but he prayed other hunters would just see a bunch of rogues who got dealt with by their own kind.

Cassie followed him into the kitchen and watched while he rummaged through the fridge, eventually settling on reheating enough leftovers for him and Derek both. (God, he was able to eat, and what did that say about him?)

"I don't want you hurt," She finally said.

"It's not your decision to make," He answered honestly, knowing if he said anything else, it would only cause more problems down the road. The plate in the microwave was borderline hypnotic, spinning as evenly as it was. Or maybe he was just tired. Adrenaline had carried him through the night, and he just felt like crashing. He still had to get to a class in a few hours, he didn't want to miss anymore school.

And that was so surreal. From dumping bodies to class.

"I know," She admitted. "And I'm- It's good, that you can protect yourself. Use what you know to protect us."

"That's the point," He told her, turning away from the plate to meet her gaze. "If I can't use what I know to protect you, then there's no use, no reason to it."

Cassie nodded, stepping forward and slowly moving to hug him.

"I hope it's over," She whispered. Stiles sighed and hugged her back, squeezing her once before relaxing. He hoped it was over too.

(When he said he needed to get to his apartment and grab his stuff for class, Cassie muttered and dragged him to her room, Derek following closely behind. He thought about the night, about the bodies sinking into the water, and tried to curl into himself. Derek and Cassie's bodies stopped him, and he reminded himself that they were the reason for it, that they were worth it, would always be
A week before Halloween, Chris called. It was another not casual-casual conversation where Chris mentioned that an outfit of rogue hunters had been executed, their bodies surfacing from the river. No one was claiming responsibility, but after some digging, it had been found that the hunters had been breaking the code. No one was willing to look any further than that, and hopefully things would be quiet in Portland for awhile.

Stiles thanked him quietly and ended the call with Happy Halloween.

When he broke the news to Derek, they went straight to Caroline in her office, and Stiles received another far too sincere thank you hug, this time from Marianne, who had been listening at the door.

By Halloween, it was almost as if the hunters had never come.

(Stiles and Derek left their phones in the apartment as much for peace as they did so Cassie couldn't worth it. However, that didn't stop the nightmare that burned him from the inside out.)

"Come on," Stiles wheedled, shoving Derek in a futile attempt to get him moving. "You know if you go in to work Cassie is just going to ambush you again."

"I can't just call out," Derek muttered into the pillow, stubbornly clinging to it.

"I'm skipping class," Stiles pointed out.

"No you're not," Derek informed him, turning his head to glare. Stiles smirked back.

"I'm never in school to skip for my birthday, so yours is my proxy. Besides, the Black Panther movie is out," He whined.

"Isn't it my birthday?" Derek asked, brow arching. "I'm supposed to pick the movie."

"Whatever, you've been staring at the posters too, don't even lie to me. I know what you want to see," Stiles quipped. "All day movie marathon, on me dude. Star Trek included."

"What about-"

"The new Gerard Butler saves the world movie too," Stiles interrupted, refusing to mention the name because he'd been teased about it ever since the title had been released. The Raven his ass. Gerard Butler he was not. Rick either, although Rick was taking the teasing much more gracefully. "And if you get your ass out of bed, we can get breakfast before we catch the matinees. And then maybe lunch before Star Trek tonight."

"You planned this," Derek stated, voice flat.

"Bet your ass I did. Just be thankful Cassie doesn't know any better, or she'll use us as her personal pincushions for the next month. I'm glad Miles will love the food so much he'll forgive her for dropping in."

"She'll forgive you by Thanksgiving," Derek reasoned, pushing himself away from the bed.

"Hah, no way dude. Maybe once she sees her Christmas present, but not before that. Now come on. Breakfast."

(Siles and Derek left their phones in the apartment as much for peace as they did so Cassie couldn't
somehow track them down. Stiles even drove to a different theater than they normally frequented, just in case. There was no cake or birthday song or anything Derek would have maimed him for attempting. Instead there was a lot of popcorn, soda, and far too much candy. But Derek was smiling, and Stiles did a mental victory dance every time he saw it. It made listening to Cassie's ranting later that night that much easier.)

Chapter End Notes

Maybe it's because I live in the south, but I've always pictured Stiles to at least know how to properly handle a firearm considering his dad is a law enforcement officer. (The incident with the crossbow gun aside.) The box and gun were referenced in the first chapter of the story (see, my loose end is no longer loose!) and I feel that after everything that occurred, his dad would have been on board with him having the means to protect himself, along with a few hundred hours on the range. Anywho.

Funny story. In my English-Old Norse dictionary, Valdyr means wolf. On the aberdeen college site, it means ruler/keeper/authority. The more you know.

Aconitum Ferox is considered one of the most deadly plants in the world.

And I still want a Black Panther movie.
"You enchanted a magic eight ball," Derek said, voice flat as he glared at the small globe.

"Not enchanted, per se," He hedged. "It's just sort of set to work instead of being inaccurate."

"Stiles-"

"It's not cheating!" It sort of was. Stiles knew it was in a kind of gray area, one divination stumbled into more often than not. "It's for when we just need a general idea, and not always," He added. "Just-it's like a perception thing, you know? And not for always, just sometimes. It's like runes, but easier. More people friendly."

"This is the sort of innocent thing that becomes dangerous," Derek reminded him. "And comes back to bite us in the ass."

"Oh come on, man," Stiles whined. "It's not like it tells the future. Just-Try it. Ask it something."

Derek huffed but took the children's toy, closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and shook it.

When he looked at the answer, his lips thinned into a tight line.

"It's broken."

"No it's-Damnit it Derek!" Stiles squawked as the plastic started cracking. It broke with a gush of weird smelling, dyed water puddling onto the floor.

"Dude!" He hadn't even gotten a chance to show it to Rick. Who probably would have sat him down for a lecture on the proper use of magic, but still. It was impressive, he knew that much. He'd wanted to brag a little. A teeny bit. And used it a little more. Asking about the weather and sports scores didn't count as using it for personal reasons. He'd had to test it. (Asking if he'd get laid in the next six months and getting 'cannot predict now' had been more than mildly disheartening. That he'd kept getting it had almost inspired a Jumanji-esque burial in the Williamette.)

"You know it was a bad idea."

"It was a great idea," He pouted, attempting to emulate Cassie. Her pout could make people bend over backwards, and that sometimes included Derek. Rarely, but often enough to give Stiles hope.

"Stiles," Derek warned, wiping his hands on his jeans and frowning.

Obviously he hadn't mastered the pout.

"Fine," He huffed, shrugging. "I'll go get a towel."
Derek was tossing the pieces in the trashcan when he got back.

"What did you ask it anyway?"

"Nothing," Derek muttered.

Lydia's eyes had widened the moment he stepped into the room, and really, that should have been enough of a sign that he should turn around and return later. Her mouth opening, just hanging open for a solid thirty seconds, had been a sign to haul ass. But he hadn't. (Obviously he was either getting cocky or he had stopped caring, and he wasn't sure which it was.)

Her mouth finally thinned into a tight line, and she declared, as loud as she could, like he had tried to steal her baby, "You've been dabbling!"

Stiles leaned forward to let his elbows rest on the counter and smiled lazily at her, probably because his latent suicidal tendencies were rearing their ugly heads again. Other than cradling his chin in his hands, he didn't answer. Beacon Hills always brought out the best in him, and the idea of getting yelled at by Lydia first thing was really doing wonders for his disposition.

"Stiles?" Scott asked, voice hesitant. Stiles didn't look at him. Scott was dating Allison and Issac, and he was having trouble processing the quickly shifting shadows over his brother and his girlfriend's face (Isaac looked damn near cherubic sitting between them) so he chose to ignore him.

"I put up some wards around the house earlier," Stiles finally said. "Since Lydia forgot them when she was doing them for her own," He added, the statement bordering on an accusation, full of bite despite his glibness.

Pandemonium erupted. If he had been inclined to be a worse person he might have enjoyed it, if only because he'd finally managed to set them all off without even touching the dirty laundry. But he wasn't, and as much as he wanted to ignore the look of absolute pain that entrenched itself on Scott's face, or Lydia screaming about how he was using magic, or Danny's look of utter disappointment, he couldn't.

"What are you all freaking out about? It's warding. Scott, you should be happy since it protects our parents," He reminded him.

Scott reared back, his eyes flashing red, before he turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. The doors to the patio slammed a moment later, the glass in them shaking.

"I cannot believe this!" Lydia snapped, green eyes manic. "What have you-When did you start this?"

He shrugged. "I don't see what the problem is."

His answer only seemed to piss Lydia off more. She huffed, and then she was following the path Scott took to the back patio. When he turned to look at everyone else, most of them were glaring at him like he'd admitted to animal sacrifice instead of protection wards.

"What?"

"You've done a lot of stupid things Stiles, but this-" Allison started.

"You're the last person that gets to talk about stupid things with me," He interrupted. "But go on. Seriously. Tell me how badly I've screwed up."
Except now she wouldn't, and it was beginning to bother him. Issac had his head turned into Allison's neck, Danny was resolutely looking at the television, seemingly fascinated by the infomercial, and Ethan was following his lead. Aiden was the only one that appeared apathetic to the whole situation.

Feeling like he'd missed something, he walked back out to his jeep and went to the one place that might provide some answers. Or half answers, at least.

He didn't even bother with waiting for Deaton, instead hopping over the barrier and walking through the back.

"If you'll wait just a moment Stiles," Deaton said quietly, as if he'd been expecting him. Considering how pissed Scott and Lydia were, Stiles knew it was a distinct possibility that he had been. Waiting quietly, he watched the vet finish giving a cat a shot before taking it to the back. When he returned, he'd removed his gloves and jacket, and he took a moment to wash his hands.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Me using my gift, apparently. Lydia decided to screech about it and now everyone in the pack is looking at me like I'm Satan."

Deaton leaned against the counter, drying off his hands slowly. It was fairly maddening, especially after dealing with Rick for so long, because Rick was forthcoming and Stiles wasn't sure Deaton would offer that, had no reason to expect it.

"When you accepted the pendant, what did you think it meant?"

"It was a Christmas gift," Stiles shrugged. "A present from the Valdyrs. I figured it was a nod to Rick training me."

Deaton's eyebrow went high and Stiles knew it was the 'you're an idiot' eyebrow. Mostly because he was used to getting it from Derek. Maybe Deaton had learned it from Derek's mom, like some sort of gift that just kept on giving.

"That necklace was a message, Stiles," Deaton reminded him. "If I may?"

Stiles pulled it out of his shirt. Deaton didn't look impressed in the least, but Stiles felt his mulishness was warranted. When the vet picked it up however, Stiles couldn't stop the growl that rumbled up from his chest and into his throat.

"I can't read old Norse, but I assume you know what it says?"

"The raven's devotion is the heartroot of wolves," Stiles said impatiently, stepping back to pull the pendant from Deaton's fingers. Deaton actually looked irked by his retreat, his eyes still on the pendant.

"Ravens are remarkable birds," Deaton began, and Stiles was about to interrupt, to tell Deaton he didn't need a zoology lesson, but Deaton raised a hand and continued on. "They're incredibly adaptive creatures, very intelligent, they're known for their use of natural tools and fascination with strange objects. And they have a wide range of vocalizations."

Stiles was positive Deaton smiled at the last part, and he stuffed the pendant back in his shirt to cover for what could have turned into a smile of his own, because the situation was still screwed and he shouldn't smile when people were comparing him to a bird because of his mouthiness.
"In the wild, ravens form a symbiotic relationship with wolves. They'll eat alongside the wolves, sometimes lead them to prey or to carcasses they themselves can't eat, and warn them of danger. They've even documented cases where wolves and ravens play together. In the mythological world, tales of ravens and wolves spread from the Norse to Inuit mythos. They have very special significance to the Norse, though, as I'm sure you know by now. The pendant represents a very strong bond between emissary and pack, raven and wolf."

Stiles felt any amusement at Deaton's anecdote wither and die with that statement.

"I thought I wasn't cut out to be an emissary," He bit out.

"I said you couldn't be Scott's emissary," Deaton replied evenly.

"What, because of Lydia? Was her gift somehow better?" Stiles snapped.

"You never could have been Scott's emissary."

"Why?" Stiles demanded. "Am I not good enough, am I-"

"You would have ripped the pack apart. The pack that was and still is Scott's anchor. He needed that stability then, or the chances of him going feral were a certainty," Deaton told him, voice echoing in the small room. "Because of his tie to the nemeton, it's something he requires."

Stiles didn't even given himself a chance to process the accusation because he couldn't even begin to comprehend the absurdity of the situation, of the insinuations Deaton was throwing at him.

"The pack that has two murderers in it? Or Allison, of the quick temper and even quicker trigger finger?" Stiles demanded, voice brittle. "In what world was that the stability he needed?"

"I made a judgment call, Stiles," Deaton told him, voice sharp and expression hardening. "You have great potential, potential that would have been wasted in the constant infighting. I had planned to find you a teacher, and then Valdyr called me wanting to know why a spark from my pack's territory was half insane and untrained. I told him about the sacrifice, and let he and his wife decide whether or not they wanted to pursue you."

"You gave me those books, Derek's stuff before I even told anyone I was thinking of moving there."

"I had an inkling, and decided to push," Deaton admitted. "Stiles, if you had stayed here, Lydia would still be the emissary. Despite every effort, the nemeton's effect on you and Scott will never fully fade. The feelings would fester, and either you, Scott, or both would turn off the path."

"What path?" Stiles demanded.

"Where you both reach your full potential. You're both capable of great things, but only when you're not pulling one another in opposite directions."

Stiles glared at Deaton.

"You had no fucking right to play us like this, to move me around like your fucking pawn."

"You aren't a pawn, Stiles," Deaton told him, voice sharp. "If you had stayed here, you would have been forced into an unsuitable role and eventually the pack would have disintegrated. Scott could have gone feral. You know what a feral alpha looks like. You know what they're capable of. My oath was to act for the good of the pack."
"It was our choice! My fucking choice," Stiles snapped. "I had a right to make that decision for myself."

"You had to have known, Stiles. Rickard is an emissary, and he was training you. At every opportunity you went to Oregon, even choosing to go to school there. You accepted a priceless heirloom that all but states the title. You're smart, Stiles. Smart enough to put those pieces together."

"Unless I thought I couldn't be an emissary! Unless I thought I was in my brother's pack because someone didn't fucking warn us," Stiles retorted sharply. "How is this going to affect Scott, huh? Where in your master plan did you make room for that?"

"You've been migrating for years. It's been a slow, steady break, one he could handle when he realized the truth, especially since his pack has stabilized and settled without your presence."

"So this was about making sure that I wasn't in the way?" Stiles snarled. "That my potential didn't go to waste? Fuck-Did you know?" Stiles demanded. "Did you know what I saw, what I was dreaming? Did you fucking know what I was going through?"

Deaton's expression was curiously, damningly blank.

"You did. You fucking-I can't believe you. You were willing to let a teenager kill himself. And for what?" Stiles demanded.

"My oath was to protect the pack."

"And what was I? Expendable?" Stiles shouted. Deaton didn't answer. "So I'm a tool," Stiles started. "A fucking piece of equipment that goes to the first bidder. Fuck you. You could have done anything differently. You could have at least told me."

"You and Scott never would have accepted it back then."

"You're damn right," Stiles growled. "You took one look at everything, fucking everything, we were to each other and shit all over it because of you didn't have the balls to be upfront with us."

"You were teenagers."

"That's not an excuse," Stiles hissed. "It will never be an excuse. We went through shit that even adults couldn't deal with. Unlike you, when the people we loved were in danger, we actually did something about it," He added, feeling a sense of satisfaction when Deaton's eyes narrowed. "We kept fucking going. And you didn't give us shit for credit. So you can take your excuses and shove them up your ass."

He didn't wait for an answer, or another excuse, or anything, sure the sound of Deaton's voice would only incite violence. He stalked out of the room and then out of the clinic entirely. He slammed his car door when he got in and tried to think, every ugly insecurity he possessed attempting to swamp him, to drag him down beneath the surface.

Ruthlessly, he throttled the panic attack that threatened. He needed to get out, away from the words he'd heard, the accusations and insinuations, fucking Christ, out of Deaton's goddamned parking lot.

When he found himself in Melissa's driveway, he stared dumbly at the house. No one else was there, no one else was likely to be there, still decorating the pack tree at Lydia's.

It crossed his mind that he could go to Lydia's, tell Scott what Deaton had done, tell him everything. They could fight it, figure it out, he could-
Come back.

Every instinct came down on him, screaming a definite, unequivocal no. Not because of the twins or Allison or his still simmering resentment at Scott. Derek and Cassie wouldn't come with him, couldn't. And he could never ask that of them.

Fuck. When had he stopped wanting Scott to run back to him? At what point had he started wanting Portland more than Beacon Hills?

The pack was probably still scrambling over what they perceived as his betrayal of them. It was for the best, he knew, because he had no clue what to say, what to tell Scott. He didn't even know what to tell his dad, but he knew he couldn't stay, needed to get out of Beacon Hills before he completely lost his shit, Christmas be damned.

All of the presents went under the tree, and his duffel bags went in the back of his jeep. When he passed the sign telling him he was leaving the town, he considered turning back around, not running away from the problem. But he needed to think, to get some distance before he decided anything, came to any conclusions, shit, before he opened his mouth and made it all worse, which would be inevitable if he stayed.

At five his phone started ringing. When it didn't stop, he shut it off and threw it in the back with his bags.

When he saw a sign declaring that Portland was only 150 miles, he pulled over to the side of the road and stared down at his steering wheel.

He couldn't face them yet, couldn't face Caroline or Rick, or even Cassie. He didn't even know if he could face Derek. Not when he didn't know what was going on inside of his own head. Not examining why, he pulled back onto the road and followed the signs to 34, taking the turnoff instead of staying on the highway to Portland.

Two hours later he was staring at the ocean beyond the vista as the sun set, not sure what the hell he was doing. The world felt too big, too cold.

"Fuck," He muttered, twisting in his seat and grabbing his phone. When he turned it on, the screen blinked with notifications for texts and voicemails. He ignored them and hit speed dial. Derek's phone rang before the voicemail came up and he ended the call, immediately redialing.

"Stiles?" Derek asked, the hum of a machine working in the background.

"Hey," He muttered into the phone. Now that he had Derek on the line, he had no idea what to say.

"You sound off."

"Like milk," He joked weakly.

"Did you dream?"

Stiles made a choked sound that was supposed to be a laugh. "No more than usual."

"Stiles, what happened?"

"I'm in Waldport." The moment he said it he wished he could take it back.

"I'll meet you there."
"Derek, it's not-"

"Where are you?"

"The vista on Rio."

"I'll be there, Stiles."

"Thank you," He whispered, voice thick. The line went dead and he stared down at the screen, the alerts still blinking. All of them were from Beacon Hills. None of them were from his dad. Shoving his phone in the pocket of his hoodie, he got out of his car and pushed himself up onto the hood of his car.

The sun was gone, the sky already dark blue deepening into black. Stiles stared up at the stars and felt like every horrible cliché of his life had come back to haunt him, each one adding a new scrap of trite banality to the pile.

"Fucking self reflection," He muttered, looking down to the ocean.

As much as he hated to admit it, Deaton had been right, at least in part. And damn that high handed son of a bitch anyway. Stiles pictured the faces of the pack, their expressions when he'd admitted to using magic. Fuck, not one of them had given him a chance to explain, or explained anything to him, just made a snap judgement-

But that wasn't fair though, he realized, hating himself for the unwelcome onset of self awareness. Because he'd done the same thing. Maybe they didn't get why. Maybe-Maybe they thought he was the fucked one. And he was, in a way. Even though his mind rebelled at the comparison, he forced himself to separate his instincts and bias from what had happened that afternoon, to everything that had led up to it.

He'd left, shut them down, shut them out and run like hell at the first opportunity. Even making excuses for himself, thinking about how they had all circled their wagons around the twins, around Allison, it didn't change the fact that they'd had no clue what he'd been doing for over a year, that most of them had no idea what the past three years had been like for him. (But then, the few times he'd tried to explain, to do anything, they'd acted no better. That vicious voice refused to be entirely silent.)

For a minute he felt a surge of dark satisfaction that he'd managed to pull one over on them. The sensation was quickly doused by a bolt of shame, because one of them included his dad. Then anger bloomed, remembering Deaton's words, his tactics of moving them around like a god, so sure he was doing the right thing. Stiles couldn't help but wonder how much of Scott's determination to ignore the sins of the past had been based on the emissary's advice, what all Deaton had said and done.

"Christ," He bit out, when the realization dawned. Deaton and Rick had been speaking since he was seventeen. Deaton had admitted to pushing him towards Rick. How much had Rick known? How much had he helped 'push' things?

All of the kindnesses he hadn't deserved, the birthday parties and gifts, the special treatment, all of it made more sense in that light. Stiles even found himself doubting Cassie. She'd been the one to pull him into the pack, more so than Derek had. Stiles remembered her childish declaration the first night they'd met. 'Best friends'. He'd written it off as drunken excitement. But what if Rick and Caroline had known his potential and told Cassie to take an interest in him?

Potential. That word tasted bitter as he mouthed it silently. How much of their kindness had been because of his potential?
Worst of all, he didn't know if he could claim being any better. It wasn't like he hadn't gone to Portland fantasizing about Scott calling him to say he missed him, that he'd screwed up and made a massive mistake, that he needed Stiles. Except-

He didn't want Scott to come after him anymore. At least, not like that. Not to try and bring him back into the pack. Not as a beta or an emissary. He'd never fit with Scott like that again, not after everything he'd gone through. Led or not, Scott had still ignored him when he'd needed him to listen the most. And Stiles knew he wasn't going to get over that easily, not enough to trust Scott as an alpha.

Not enough to trust him like he trusted Derek, and even Cassie. Because Caroline's daughter she might be, but it had been three years. Some things couldn't be faked that long. Months, a year maybe, but he'd been hooked for awhile, and she hadn't left like the job had been done.

If she had been told to be his friend, to lure him in for the purpose of his gift, she hadn't stayed because of that. They were both too abrasive, too loud and sarcastic to hide that sort of thing from each other for so long. And if she had been told to befriend him, well, it wasn't that different from him initially using her as a stopgap for Scott, was it?

And Derek-Fuck.

By the time Derek's truck pulled into the parking lot beside his jeep, Stiles was half frozen from the ocean breeze cutting through his hoodie. He still had no clue what to say to Derek. Derek who had taken him in, pulled him kicking and screaming out of his own head. Stiles thought about the life Derek had literally built for him in Oregon, the life he'd lived happily, waiting for the day Scott came to his senses. Even if things had changed, what he'd done initially was still piss poor behavior, especially considering how many people had used Derek in the past.

The werewolf was silent as he hopped onto the hood of the jeep and sat next to him. Stayed silent, face blank and shoulders hunched.

"I have so much shit in my head right now," Stiles finally admitted, his breath steaming in the air, vanishing in a second on the breeze. "If I fucked up but things changed-" Stiles started, then stopped. He was so bad at this. Shooting himself in the foot would be less painful. And have the added benefit of changing the subject. "If I promised that things were different-" Why couldn't he just say sorry? Why was that so goddamned difficult?

"What are you talking about?" Derek asked quietly.

"I always thought Scott would choose me," Stiles admitted. "I thought he would wake up one day and realize that I was gone and come running after me like some lovesick teenage girl."

"He is good at that," Derek replied. Stiles chanced a glance at him, only to see him still staring out over the water. It was too dark to get any more detail than the outline of his profile.

"Yeah," Stiles agreed. "He'd have flowers and shit too. And his fucking ridiculous puppy dog eyes."

"Not as good as Cassie's."

Stiles hummed his agreement. "I used to imagine going home and just settling back in, playing halo and making fun of him because he sucks. We'd eat three pizzas, drink ass tons of mountain dew and keep making fun of each other so we'd hold it until we almost killed each other trying to get to the bathroom first."

"Sounds pleasant," Derek muttered.
"Surprised you never noticed the smell outside my window."

Derek twitched angrily.

"Kidding dude. Scott peed in my shower a few times, but the window was always off limits."

Derek muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath.

"I treated Portland like fucking Switzerland in some sort of silent war, right? Only I pretended it wasn't happening and I don't think Scott even realized there was a problem. But I just-Waited, at first. Like Scott would just call or show up and beg me to come back, kick the others out and tell me I had always been pack, that he couldn't have one without me."

Derek's whole body seemed to shrink a little. He'd never been small, would never be able to manage it, but Stiles knew the signs of the werewolf trying to make himself a smaller target, as though it would somehow protect him from all of the unpleasant truths the world threw at him.

"Deaton knew everything that was going on with me. Back there." God, it was so much harder than he'd thought it would be. The dramatic starts and stops weren't helping, he knew it. He was actually starting to behave like a werewolf, unintentionally emulating their flair for the dramatic. Jesus. "He knew about the dreams and-"

"Everything?"

Derek's abrupt snarl killed his words, and Stiles tried not to shout at the werewolf for interrupting when he'd finally resolved to just say it all. But Derek was- Derek was beyond angry. His eyes were glowing like a neon sign and his fangs were jutting from behind his lips, although his face remained the same. The signs of Derek's rage were a vindication he hadn't realized he'd needed, allowing him to feel safe in his own anger, justified, in a sense, because someone else was angry on his behalf.

"Yeah, that was about my reaction. Minus the throat singing. Pretty sure I maxed out my use of the word fuck for the day. Because seriously, fuck Deaton. I may have considered killing him with his stapler. He said I would destroy Scott's pack, that he helped sort of-Push me away, I guess. For the greater good and everything."

Derek opened his mouth to talk and Stiles shrugged, plowing ahead before Derek could say anything that would make him reconsider the whole honesty thing.

"I've been thinking. About the past couple of years and everything. Like, I've been really stupid. Self centered, an asshole. It's not really anything new, just the extent of it, I guess. Because for two seconds I thought about telling Scott what Deaton had done. Fight the whole thing, figure shit out."

Derek looked-Derek looked blank.

"Then I realized that it would mean I would have to leave. Fuck Derek," He muttered, running a hand through his hair only to tug at it. "I stopped wanting Scott to come and get me. I mean, don't get me wrong, I want us to figure out how to be friends somehow. But-But I don't want to give up you or Cas. Fucking Christ, I'm a shit. I know I am. But you guys-I can't." He made an exasperated noise. How had he cried over his mom to Derek and he couldn't just say it?

"I fucked up, back then. And I fucked up by not dealing with it sooner. I just-I didn't even think. It was so easy to just go with it all and ignore the implications. Like maybe no one would fucking notice or something," He snorted, his sarcasm aimed directly at himself. "I don't know when I stopped giving a shit about being in Scott's pack and started pretending I was a part of yours."
"You think you've been pretending?" Derek bit out.

"Well I haven't oathed or anything-"

"You saved Caroline's life," Derek snapped. "You went on a hunt. You come to the gatherings. You've-" Derek made a frustrated noise. "You're pack in everything but name."

"Except for now," Stiles muttered, biting at his lip, worrying it. "Rick's been talking to Deaton since I was seventeen."

Derek's eyes widened. It would have been hilarious, because even now Derek rarely allowed himself to look caught off guard, no matter how far out of left field something had come.

"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing," Stiles admitted. "But I don't want to leave you guys. Even if I'm not pack or whatever. Unless you want me to. And I'd get it. I mean, I screwed up." And that was—Exactly as painful as he'd thought it would be.

It was depressing to realize that he still hadn't managed to get any better at expressing himself when it came to needing people. If he tried any harder to say it he'd probably manage to make himself spontaneously combust instead. He had no fucking clue what he'd do if Derek decided he wasn't worth the trouble. None. And being without a plan, without some sort of idea of what to do, where to start to make things right again? He couldn't remember being so lost since his mother had been strapped into a gurney and whisked to the hospital.

"I'm sorry I'm such a massive fuck up and I fail at friendship."

Derek barked out a laugh that was colder than the air.

"I think of the two of us, I still come out first."

"Oh come on," Stiles groaned. "Dude, I thought you were past this self flagellation thing. Jesus, I came to you because I trusted you. And you're an awesome friend."

"I let you come to me because I was the one that broke you," Derek snapped. Stiles wondered when he'd stumbled over the landmine that was blowing up in his face.

"Wait-What?" He demanded, understanding settling in. "You're my friend out of guilt?"

"At first," Derek admitted, looking like someone was trying to pull his teeth out rusty pliers. "You came to me," He sighed, running a hand over his face like he wanted to hide behind it. "I screwed up everything back there. I got people killed. You got pulled into it, and you got messed up by it. But you came to me," He repeated, like it was some sort of miracle Stiles had shown up on his doorstep, uninvited, strung out and angry. "When you showed up so fucking broken," Another shrug. "It felt like I could do something right. Like I could make up for all the damage somehow."

"What about now?"

"What do you want me to say Stiles?" Derek demanded, shoulders hunching defensively.

"The truth?" Which, yeah, he knew he probably didn't have the right to demand, but he needed some sort of confirmation that he wasn't Derek's penance.

"You're not a project," Derek bit out. "You're a pain in the ass and obnoxious, you live to find new ways to annoy the hell out of me but you're also loyal and so goddamn smart. You just keep giving parts of yourself like you'll never run out, keep throwing yourself in the way even though you'll
know you'll get hurt again and it's so goddamn frustrating. But I trust you because you do it so other people don't end up as screwed up as we are. Just don't-" Derek stopped staring at his hands as he fisted and relaxed them, over and over.

"Don't what?" He prompted dumbly, because he had no idea what to say in the face of that. None. Which was a first for him. Of course it would be Derek that would find the mute button. Of course.

"Don't leave," The werewolf muttered, eye clenched shut.

Stiles heard what wasn't said, felt the fear spiking Derek's words. 'Don't leave' was the same as 'I want you to stay'. And wow, they were both so screwed up. "Don't leave," God, it was terrifying, to be an significant part of Derek's life, someone he wanted, maybe even needed. What had been easy for almost two years was suddenly frightening in the enormity of it's implications. It had been easy to allow Derek to become a vital part of his life, almost effortless. But he'd never considered how difficult it had to be for Derek to let anyone, let alone him, become important.

"Fuck," Stiles muttered, scrubbing his face as the realization settled into him. "I'm sorry," He repeated, hating that he didn't know what else to say. "I'm not-" He paused, searching for words. "You, I trust you. I-" He was spectacularly bad at this. Why wasn't mind reading a werewolf power? "I won't leave," He blurted. "You," He added, feeling stupid for making a promise he had no idea if he could keep or not.

But he wanted to keep it. Maybe, hopefully, that would make the difference.

Derek's entire frame shuddered, but some of the tension bled out of him. Stiles supposed that meant Derek had heard it as a truth. God, he hoped it was a truth.

Stiles realized that first summer had only glued the pieces together, allowed them to keep moving forward without falling apart. They'd both come out of it as jagged as ever. But and it was that 'but' that was encouraging and equally shit-fucking-terrifying, after that, they'd actually managed to start doing more with themselves than just holding together. He wanted to think so at least, hoped that maybe they were actually good for each other despite their mutual damage.

If he was being honest with himself, he had too many thoughts, too many voices echoing in his head to figure it out. But he trusted Derek. Derek still felt right, that thread he'd recognized before he'd fully understood what it meant still moving, thrumming in the back of his mind, a grounding wire for the impulse that still wanted to reach out when everything was too much. Like now. He felt the need to change, to alter. With some subtle work, he could turn circumstances to his favor. Too bad Rick had not only trained him to be aware, but between his dad's deep seated ideals and Rick's uncompromising standards, he felt guilty for even having the impulse, however unconscious.

"Come on," Derek murmured, several minutes later. Stiles followed him as he slipped off of the hood of the jeep to the truck. They slipped into the back seat of the cab and Derek pushed the console of the front seat down to prop his feet up on it. It reminded Stiles of Beacon Hills, of Derek trying to help him back when he'd been eighteen and desperate.

He hesitated before curling up against Derek's side. The werewolf's warmth was too tempting to resist, the comfort offered something he knew he needed.

"I don't think anyone is ever completely selfless," Derek mumbled into the darkness of the cab. "But that-It doesn't mean some things aren't real."

Stiles nodded into Derek's shoulder, knowing it was an apology and forgiveness.
"I have to talk to everyone, don't I?"

"Yeah," Derek sighed, relaxing a little.

"It's going to involve more feelings, isn't it?"

"Probably."

"That's going to suck," He muttered, voice sour. Because he was sort of done with the feelings thing. His confession to Derek felt like he'd filled a yearly quota of some sort.

Derek grunted, but it actually sounded sort of amused. Stiles looked up, doing his best to glower. Derek glanced over at him and rolled his eyes. But he felt better, knowing that Derek got him despite the equally butchered explanation and apology. Like maybe the world wouldn't be on fire when he woke up and the sky would still be firmly in place.

"Sorry I ruined Christmas."

"You didn't ruin Christmas Stiles."

"Pretty sure I did."

"We can blame Deaton," Derek muttered, obviously feeling a stroke of inspiration. Vicious, visceral inspiration.

"Deaton as the Grinch. You know, we compare him to green dudes a lot. Like Yoda. Next it'll be Hulk. The emo one, not the awesome ones."

"Godzilla?" Derek suggested.

"Shrek."

"Slimer."

"Yoshi."

"Kermit."

"You win," Stiles said, choking on the laugh that wanted to erupt, high and pitched. Any chances of thinking up new green characters were lost as he imagined Deaton speaking in Kermit's voice.

"We're going to have to sort all of this out," Derek informed him a minute later.

"We?" Stiles asked, wanting to hate him for being serious but was too focused on the 'we' part of it.

"We," Derek confirmed, but gave no other explanation. Stiles hummed, shifting closer into Derek's warmth, nosing his shoulder until Derek muttered and raised his arm, allowing him to cuddle into his side. It was awkward, they were both the same height, but Derek didn't complain, just allowed him to arrange himself.

"Thanks."

"What?" Derek grumped. Stiles glanced up and saw the werewolf's eyes were closed.

"For being as emotionally crippled as I am and therefore empathetic to my inability at making friends like a sane human being?" He tried, biting his lower lip. A laugh was stuck in his throat, mostly
because he needed to think it was funny when it really wasn't.

"I have no idea why we're friends."

"Masochists, the both of us. In a normal relationship there's a sadist and safewords but-"

"Go to sleep, Stiles."

"Bet you wish we still had the eight ball."

"Sleep."

Stiles stuck his tongue out, but he closed his eyes and pretended that it was entirely possible everything would be alright. The sound of the ocean echoed outside of the windows, surrounded him and blended with the pulse he imagined he could hear.

(He dreamed of Erica and Cassie rollerblading on the tracks of a roller coaster, arguing playfully over whether his name was Batman or Cupcake. Boyd's laughter echoed, deep and rich, when Derek said Ginnadiy.)

Stiles peeked an eye open and immediately narrowed it when he saw the officer standing outside of the car.

"Time to get up," Derek muttered, voice slurred from sleep. Stiles groaned and buried his nose deeper into Derek's armpit, which might have been mortifying at any other point and time, except he was still tired, and sleeping in a truck had done wonders for his early onset of arthritis.

"I'm not getting arrested for you," Derek told him, shifting away. Stiles muttered, shifting into the warm spot and ignoring Derek cursing as he opened the door. There was a brief discussion outside of the truck. Apparently Derek's experiences with law enforcement had made him a bit more wary, but infinitely more polite. There were lies about traveling to California and getting lost on the way, pulling over late the night before and resting. The officer took it in stride and let them off with a warning. Stiles considered it a win as the cruiser drove away and he climbed over the seat, mostly falling into the front.

"Don't you have your jeep?" Derek reminded him.

"Goddamnit."

"Follow me, we can probably find some place to eat around here."

"Yes, oh fearless leader," Stiles muttered, getting out of the truck and digging for his keys. When he couldn't find them, he started looking on the ground, afraid they'd slipped the night out before. The hum of the window to Derek's truck sounded behind him and he turned. The keys were dangling from Derek's hands, the werewolf's expression exasperated. Stiles caught them with a muffled curse and stuck his tongue out before getting into his jeep.

As it turned out, the little tourist niche didn't have much of anything in it, at least, nothing that was open. Being the off season, most of the restaurants were closed until dinner. They did luck out, finding a little cafe with more of a 'locals' feel than anything meant to draw in people visiting the coast.

Coffee warming Stiles' hands, he considered what he should do. What he was supposed to do.
"Do you think Rick and Deaton planned it together?" He asked quietly. It said something, that Derek didn't look surprised by the question.

"I don't know."

"Oh." He'd hoped for more, maybe for Derek to defend the Valdyrs, his pack. Because being wanted for his potential was one thing, and he could handle that, probably. It wasn't like he hadn't used them. But the tactics that had been used, the way Deaton had gone about it, if Rick had been complicit, knowing what he'd been going through, Stiles knew he'd never be able to trust the emissary, and by extension Caroline, ever again.

"If Caroline and Rick wanted you because of your gift, maybe that's why they were so accepting of me," Derek murmured quietly.

Stiles expelled the breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. Fuck. Of everything he'd considered, that had never even crossed his mind. Derek had made the pack his anchor, the cornerstone of his life, and Stiles knew that the possibilities had to be affecting Derek, had to be confusing him just as much. Feeling more like a self centered bastard than ever, Stiles knocked his foot gently against Derek's in what he hoped was a show of solidarity and comfort, weak though it was.

He couldn't lie and say it wasn't possible. But he hoped it wasn't. For Derek's sake, if nothing else. Because he could handle his own weaknesses being used to reel him in, but he'd hate himself if he'd fallen for it and dragged Derek along with him. Granted, he was sure he would hate Caroline and Rick even more.

"We'll talk to them."

"After Christmas," Derek agreed.

Stiles shook his head. He didn't know if he could pretend that long.

"We're staying here," Derek added. "For a few days."

"But-"

"I think we both need the time to think before we try talking to them about it," Derek interrupted. "The space will do us some good."

"Did you even bring any clothes?"

"I still have some of our laundry in the truck," Derek reminded him, brow arching as if to insinuate that was somehow Stiles' fault.

"Hey, I don't have a washing machine, alright?" He defended. "Besides, it's only fair."

"Fair? That I wash your dirty boxers."

"I cook for you."

Derek looked ready to say something then shook his head and went back to his coffee. Their food was sat down in front of them a moment later and they busied themselves with eating. When they finished, Derek tossed some bills on the table.

"There's a bed and breakfast down the way still open for the season."
"Dude-"

"Hotels reek, and I'm not spending Christmas stuck in a cesspool of god only knows what. B&B's take better care of their sheets."

Stiles knew better than to argue with Derek for the moment, especially since his voice had gained a biting edge to it. Following him out, he got in his jeep and waited for Derek to pull out of the parking lot. The bed and breakfast was about fifteen minutes away, almost right on top of the sparse beach. An older man opened the front door before they'd even gotten out of their cars.

The old man introduced himself as Shaw and told them all about the amenities, about how they didn't get too many visitors during the off season, but the sunsets were to die for in winter, a million things that bounced off of Stiles' brain instead of being absorbed. After that they were shown to a room and left alone with the reminder that dinner was served at eight, but if they wanted a decent lunch the Lazy Susan was the place to go. (Stiles was pretty sure that's where they'd eaten breakfast.)

When the door shut behind them, Stiles looked over to Derek, who was walking to the patio door and looking out into the garden. It was strangely akin to the inside of a cabin, wood paneling covering everything. But it wasn't done up in chintz and frills, as Stiles thought all bed and breakfasts were. Thankful for that, he dropped their bags on the bed and sat in the window seat, eyes on the beach beyond the gardens.

Stiles dropped his duffel onto the floor next to the bed and settled into the window seat that overlooked the dead garden. The ocean was just beyond it, visible over the wooden fence that needed a fresh coat of paint. Derek began untying his boots and settling into the bed.

"Did I ever tell you about how I lost my virginity?" Stiles asked as he listened to the sound of the water. It was distant, but he could hear the echo bouncing off of the glass, muffled and distant.

"No," Derek muttered in a voice that implied he didn't want to hear it.

"We were in Ventura," Stiles started anyway. "At a club. Some blonde, I can't even remember her name. I was sort of drunk and exhausted. I can't remember how long I'd been awake. Halfway through I just lost any desire to be there, like some sort of mental flatline," He snorted. "I told her I might be gay."

"Is she the one that slapped you?" Derek asked, looking less amused than Stiles had thought he would.

"Yeah. I left after that, went to the beach house and drank a glass of whiskey on their deck. The sound of the water helped me sleep," He finished. "I imagined heartbeats. I didn't dream."

Derek got off the bed and walked for the window. Stiles watched as the werewolf slipped it's latch and cracked it open so that sounds could filter in. The muffled echo was louder, but the chill was stronger. Stiles shuddered and moved to close it when Derek tossed the quilt at him. Wrapping himself up, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"It does sound like heartbeats," Derek admitted several minutes later. Stiles nodded but didn't say anything.

"Cassie?" Stiles asked, staring dumbly at the redhead standing just outside his door.

"You two thought you could run away for Christmas without me?" She snapped, barging past him into the room and dropping her bag on the floor before spinning to glare at him, her hands settling on
her hips. The move was so reminiscent of Caroline that Stiles blinked, needing to clear the image from his mind.

Stiles had no idea what to say.

"How did you-"

"I know all your passwords," She reminded him. "Your online statement showed transactions here."

"You can't just-" Derek started, but Cassie growled at him, baring her fangs. Stiles slammed the door shut and prayed Shaw wasn't listening.

"Disappear on Christmas?" She snapped. "Tell my parents you 'need some time away from Portland'?" She snarled. "They've been really fucking quiet, like someone fucking died. What the fuck is going on?"

Stiles looked at Derek, who shrugged back.

"It's my fault, I called Derek," He started.

"And what about me?" She demanded. "You didn't think I needed to know you were, whatever it is you're doing right now?"

Stiles chewed his lip, looking from Cassie to Derek, back to Cassie before walking back over to the window seat.

Stiles wasn't prepared for the conversation about to occur, wanted to have it even less so. But Cassie was there, and his need to get it over with was outstripping his anxiety. So when she sat down, arms crossed over her chest and jaw set, Stiles tried to figure out where he should start. Then he began to talk.

He admitted everything in a quiet voice, starting with the truth of Beacon Hills, the parts he'd never told her, the bits and pieces of himself he hadn't shared with anyone but Derek. It was mortifying, to admit that he'd been so scared of his nightmares, shaming to admit that there had been a point where he'd considered leaving her behind. The truly agonizing part came when he told her that Deaton had played him, and that he was scared her parents had too, and he didn't know what to think about the pack anymore. She remained silent throughout the whole of it, gaze so intense he couldn't stop his knee from bouncing. Nothing gave away a hint of anger or hurt, and he almost wished she'd act like she normally did, emotive and outspoken. Even if it meant her screaming at him when he admitted that he didn't know what to think of her initial behavior, of the friendship she'd offered so easily.

When he finished, explaining what had happened to set everything off, he ran his palms over his knees, trying to dry them while she stared down at the floor, worrying her lip between her teeth.

"Mom and dad never told me to do anything. And I didn't know you had a gift until dad gave you those books for your birthday," She said several minutes later.

Stiles mentally cursed, not even looking to Derek for confirmation of whether or not she'd lied, because she sounded so lost, so utterly unlike herself. A year after she'd met him, and in all that time-Christ, she'd followed him to Beacon Hills before she'd known, tried to help fix the problems between he and Derek months before she'd been aware of any sort of potential.

"I'm sorry," He muttered, unable to look up at her, the new information assimilating itself into what he did know.
"You're not the only one trying to escape," She finally admitted. He looked up at her, anxiety twisting in his stomach. "Mom said that alpha could go to any one of her children. We've all been training for it since we each hit puberty. I don't want it. I don't want to be responsible for everyone," She bit out vehemently. "When you showed up, you didn't care who was alpha. I wanted that. So I tried to keep you to myself, for awhile. I actually hated Derek a little, at first," She admitted, casting an apologetic glance at Derek, who had moved to lean against the patio door. "Because I knew he was more important to you. So I just-All of the big gifts, the birthday parties, it was all my idea. That was me trying to make a friend. And I don't actually know how to do that, I guess" She admitted with a sharp, self derisive laugh. "I grew up with the people in the pack. Anyone that knows who my mother is makes the first move, always. But you just didn't care, and I didn't know how else I was supposed to get your attention."

Stiles stared, dumbfounded.

"You're so fucking insecure," She muttered, wiping at her eyes. "And it drives me crazy. I know what Scott did to you fucked you up. But you're such a good person, you just act, and even if you were running away, you still- You saved mom and helped us and listened to me and you came to me with your problems, and even though I normally hate it when people do that, I wanted to help you. I was glad, because it meant we were friends. Maybe I'm a shitty person for wanting you to stay because you don't care that I'm the alpha's defective daughter. I want you to stay for me. I don't care if you don't become emissary. I don't care." She repeated, her face a blotchy red that Stiles had never seen as she tried to stop herself from crying and failed. "Don't leave me."

Stiles wondered how his confession had turned into Cassie apologizing, wondered how Cassie had hidden her insecurity for so long, her own issues concerning her mother's status and her lack of desire for it. He wondered what had happened in his life that two people wanted him in their lives, apparently needed him despite knowing how fucked up he was, what he'd done.

"Even if I'm not pack," He started, seeing her shoulders sag and her face grow even redder. "I'm not leaving Portland. I won't leave you."

"What about Derek?" She sniffed, looking over to the other werewolf, who had remained silent throughout the exchange. Stiles was surprised to see sympathy softening the edges of his expression.

"I thought you hated him," Stiles teased weakly.

"Used to," She muttered. "Not now. He keeps us from being too stupid."

Stiles laughed, a gurgling, strangled sound. "If anyone had said that four years ago-wow." He took Cassie's hands in his, rubbed over the knuckles. Werewolf hands never scarred or callused, and Stiles almost envied them their lack of marks, the illusion of not being touched by the stress of work and fighting, of everyday accidents and anxiety. "It doesn't excuse what I did," He finally said. "I'm sorry that I never drew the lines like I should have."

"I always thought it was because of Beacon Hills," She admitted. "Sometimes I'd understand what you'd say in your sleep, you know? I always thought you didn't make a big deal out of committing because you were afraid of it happening again. I kept trying to show you we weren't going to do that to you."

Stiles shrugged. "It was. But I was an asshole. When the pack showed obvious signs of wanting me to join, I just wrote it off because I didn't want to deal with everything. Fuck, that means it's real, you know?" At Cassie's oblique glance he sighed. "Responsibility is a bitch. I'm a selfish bastard. I just-" Fuck, he really hadn't meant to make excuses for himself. The roiling self loathing that had been a consistent bedfellow for the week made itself known. "I'm an idiot."

"You are," She mumbled, her fingers lacing through his. "I won't say my parents didn't encourage us being friends because of your gift," She added. "Because I don't know. But I don't think they would fake everything just to get on your good side. I don't think they'd be nice to Derek just to get to you. Mom's pretty ruthless, but she's also a good person. And dad is too."

"We're going to talk to them," Stiles promised quietly.

"And then?"

"One step at a time Cas," Stiles told her. She nodded and tugged at his hands, leading him to the bed and pulling him down. Her expectant gaze fell on Derek, who slowly sat on Stiles' other side and laid back, eyes on the ceiling.

"I think you guys are the only ones that tolerate me being such a child," She mumbled.

"Is that a good or a bad thing?" Stiles asked, slipping an arm under her head and the other under Derek's arm. It was as close as he felt he could get to holding hands while they were still being so serious. Derek didn't push him away, which he supposed was a plus.

"Good, I think. I can't be like this with the others. Even Annette is trying to grow up and be-" Cassie shrugged. "More. They want me to be like them, like somehow I'm doing something wrong by not wanting it. You two-You were both different. You acted like pack, but you were still sort of distant or something, I guess. Except with me. It always felt like this was ours, like the lost boys or something," She added quietly. "And I liked it, not being the only one that didn't fit right."

"We're all selfish," Derek commented quietly. "But-" Stiles felt him shrug.

"It's normal to want friends," Stiles added. "To want people that just get you. So it's okay to be selfish, I guess. Because we all want each other to be happy too."

Cassie hummed thoughtfully and nuzzled into his shoulder.

"Even if neither of you are mom's, you're mine," Cassie mumbled.

"And you're ours too," Stiles told her. She nodded, peeking up at him and giving a shy smile, which was so incongruous compared to her normal character that Stiles couldn't help but laugh.

"Sorry, Derek," She added a moment later, peeking over Stiles chest to meet Derek's gaze. "For trying to steal Stiles. I'm glad it didn't work."

Derek exhaled, a long sigh tinged with something akin to amusement, just an edge too tired for it to actually qualify

"Me too," He finally said.

"Can I stay with you guys?"

Stiles was more surprised she was asking permission than by the question itself. "Cas, your parents-"

"They know I came after you. I think-I don't know, I mean, you could be right and it's all so you both stay or whatever. But if it's not, she'll understand. And if it is," Cassie shrugged. "Fuck her. Not like I haven't pissed her off before."

Stiles didn't know what to say to that. Cassie's tendency to occasionally play the spoiled brat made more sense in light of her confession, and he was still trying to process that she didn't want alpha,
that she’d been resisting her mother’s training in what was probably the only way she knew how at first, and now she was stuck in it. What was it like, to be around people that had known you your whole life, never allowed to move past the roles they'd assigned you? He'd thought Beacon Hills was bad, but growing up in a pack was probably worse.

"Have you ever told her?" He asked quietly.

Cassie hummed. "She said it didn't matter, that the power would just pass on to one of us. I considered leaving the pack for awhile, back when I first turned eighteen. It would have cut me out of the running," She admitted, earning a sharply drawn breath from Derek in response. "But I couldn't do it. Go me," She added in a mutter.

"It's not bad to recognize you don't want it," Stiles told her gently. "It's a lot of responsibility."

"Better than me," Derek chimed in. That surprised Stiles more than anything that had been said so far. Derek continued, eyes still focused on the ceiling over them. "I didn't think about any of the ramifications until it was too late."

"I know you were an alpha, but you don't talk about it," Cassie admitted, voice quiet in deference to Derek's mounting tension. Stiles slipped his fingers in between Derek's, potential awkwardness be damned.

"I got people hurt, killed," He finally said. "I was the worst example of an alpha."

"Not the worst," Stiles pointed out. "You messed up, but you weren't Peter or Deucalion."

"Thanks," Derek muttered flatly. "I'm not a mass murdering psychopath."

Stiles nudged him, making an exasperated sound. "You tried man," He informed him. "Even when it was blowing up in your face, you tried. I think that's why I went to you that summer. You were rebuilding your life, working on a house, just doing something. And I wanted to figure that out. I felt like everyone else had stopped trying, just went with it. And I think I was too tired to anymore. Just-I needed to make something pure, help do something that was worth it."

Derek remained silent in light of the confession, but Stiles felt Derek squeeze his fingers lightly, almost unnoticeable given how intensely he was focused on Derek's face.

"And then you held me hostage," He added, lightening his tone. "Pretty sure our friendship is based on stockholm syndrome."

Derek made an exasperated noise while Cassie thumped him soundly on the chest.

"See, this is what I mean by screwed up," She muttered. "Both of you."

"You too," Stiles reminded her. "Hey, if we're the Lost Boys, does that make you Peter Pan, because you're a girl and he's usually played by a girl."

"Asshole," Cassie muttered, but she was smiling as she shifted so that her head was on Stiles' chest. "And I would totally be Tinkerbell, all bitchy sass and possessiveness. Derek would be-"

"Don't-" Derek warned.

"Starkey," Cassie continued, smirking.

"Who?" Stiles demanded.
"The first mate that survives with Smee. The Indians kidnap him and make him their babysitter," She explained, grinning impishly at Derek, who glared back.

"Oddly appropriate," Stiles snickered. Derek elbowed him in his side. "So who would I be?"

Cassie was quiet for a moment. "Nibs," She finally giggled. "Because wolves chase after him." Stiles chuckled at the logic and even Derek snorted in amusement, his mouth twitching in a grin.

"Not exactly the lost boys. More like misfit toys. We'd make an awesome parade. Which, you know, I think we deserve. So much emotional honesty in the last few days. It's like we're growing up. I want balloons. Maybe confetti."

Cassie made a rude sound and shoved him.

Stiles stared at the presents.

"You seriously stole them from under the tree?" He asked.

"Yeah," Cassie told him, as if it were obvious. And it was, but Stiles wondered when she'd decided that she'd be spending Christmas with them instead of her family. "Just in case you guys didn't want to come back."

His presents from them were dug out of his duffel bag and he watched Cassie ripping into hers with her normal enthusiasm. The resulting screech as she stared at the book in her hands made even Stiles want to clap his hands over his ears.

"So you forgive us for Derek's birthday?" He asked when she stared down at the slightly worn looking edition of poetry.

"You-Where did you find this?" She demanded, looking up at them and then back down to dust jacket with Jim Morrison's face on it. "This is a first edition. Guys-"

"Funny thing. We looked on the internet," Stiles informed her. She was too caught up in almost reverently opening the book to glare at him.

"Thank you," She murmured quietly, closing the book. Stiles knew it was because she was tempted to read through it and was attempting to resist the urge. Not that he blamed her, apparently the book was a hot commodity, he and Derek both pitching in for it on an auction site. It was just unfortunate that the cheapest autographed one had been five grand. They'd even considered it, for a couple of days.

He opened his next, Cassie's first because she looked ready to burst out of her skin.

"Holy shit," Stiles muttered, staring down at the hardcover edition of his favorite Green Lantern arc, one he'd considered splurging on but never been able to justify to himself. "Dude." Cassie was grinning at him, hugging her own book to her chest.

He opened his present from Derek next and immediately faltered. "Shit," He muttered, staring down at the broken frame. The edges were jagged, ruined beyond repair, and part of the flowering inlay had fallen out. Behind a broken pane of glass his mother's smile stared up at him.

"I'm sorry," He muttered, staring down at the picture of his mother, apologizing to her as much as to Derek. Where had he even found the picture anyway? Had he gone through the photo albums boxed up in the attic, searching pictures of Stiles' family just to find something appropriate?
He tried not to think of Derek going through family photo albums.

"It's alright," Derek told him, tugging gently at the frame. Stiles resisted for a moment, staring at his mother, covered in dirt from weeding around her scraggly gladiolas. Then he let go, eyes moving to meet Derek's gaze.

"I'm sorry," He repeated again, shame burning through him.

"It's okay Stiles, accidents happen," Derek repeated, setting the frame on the desk carefully. Stiles drew his knees up to his chest and watched, suddenly shy about his gift to Derek. As Derek carefully unwrapped the book, Stiles wondered if it had been a good idea after all. When the werewolf looked down at it with obvious confusion for a moment, Stiles felt his stomach bottom out.

Then Derek opened it to a random page and his eyes widened, one hand moving to hover over the picture.

"You probably don't care about the Cosmati or marble or anything, but I thought it could be sort of like inspiration, or something?" Stiles tried, blushing when Derek looked up at him, expression one of mild surprise. "Like the disciplines are different, but maybe-" He shrugged, floundering. Derek nodded, eyes going back down to the book.

"Thank you." The words sounded sincere, felt all the more sincere as Derek stared down at the page, interest lighting on his features. Cassie peered over and her smile immediately brightened. She gave Stiles an encouraging nod, and he felt like maybe he'd actually gotten it right.

"You know, this is our first actual Christmas together," Stiles told them, offering a lopsided smile.

"Is that bad?" Derek asked carefully, voice neutral.

"I wish it had been better circumstances," Stiles shrugged. "But it's nice. Kind of cool to be able to see you guys opening your presents instead of just hearing it."

Derek nodded and Cassie murmured an agreement. Ten minutes later Shaw was knocking on their door, telling them that he'd made some hot chocolate. They all lounged in the living room, drinking hot chocolate that Stiles suspected was laced with some sort of alcohol to add some extra warmth, and reading through their Christmas presents.

"Does this mean we're old?" He asked randomly. "Books for Christmas and everything?"


Stiles saw the pillow sailing at Cassie and burst into laughter when she screeched and clutched her book protectively to her chest to save it from a potential drink spill.

Stiles felt decidedly uncomfortable with the idea of confronting Rick and Caroline separately and without Derek, but it appeared that was how it was going to play out. Caroline was busy with work, and Rick knew something was wrong, had called to ask for a meeting with Stiles. A meeting, which sounded so formal, so final. Rick had stared Derek down and requested privacy for a discussion with his apprentice, and Stiles had given in, nodding at Derek until the werewolf had left to go to the living room. It wasn't so far away, and if Rick lied, Derek would be able to tell him. He hoped.

"When Derek called and said you were both staying outside of Portland, I called Deaton to see if anything had occurred in Beacon Hills," Rick said, staring at Stiles from across Derek's dining room table. "It sounded like there are things we should discuss."
Stiles stared down at his coffee like it would offer the answers to the universe. He knew it wouldn't, but it never hurt to hope a little. (Unfortunately, his gift didn't seem to extend that far, not that he'd ever tried or anything.)

"I was reaping the benefits of you training me and ignoring the commitment it implied," He admitted. "And I've been using you all to hide from everything in Beacon Hills. I'm sorry." No, no his abrupt confession hadn't been like pulling off a band-aid at all. More like getting punched in the face, the initial sting quick, the following pain quickly getting worse. He hated metaphors.

Rick looked caught off guard by the blunt confession. "I can't say that's entirely surprising, given what Deaton told me. It certainly clarifies a few things."

"Did you and Deaton plan all of it?" Stiles asked quietly. "If I didn't have a gift, or if I couldn't be an emissary, would you and Caroline have treated me so well?" He asked quietly. "Would you have helped me at all?"

"In the interest of clearing the air and making informed decisions, Caroline was the only reason you were allowed to stay that Summer," Rick finally said, voice sober and expression grim. Stiles met the even stare of the man that had taken him under his wing, determined to hear the truth, if nothing else. "When I met you, I knew your potential. But your potential was, at the time, a nonissue to me because of your problems. I didn't want you here, near my pack, and especially not my family."

Stiles ground his teeth together. Of everything he had expected to hear, Rick saying he hadn't been wanted or welcome was the last thing he had prepared himself for. And despite everything, even though he felt like he had no right to feel hurt after the questions he'd asked, the insinuations and paranoia he'd shown Rick, he was hurt by the revelation that he hadn't been wanted.

"Do you know why Caroline took such an active interest in Derek?"

Stiles shook his head, startled by the subject change.

"Derek is powerful for a beta. Part of that power comes from the beta, his beta, that he killed. It's independent of the spark that made him an alpha, and will remain with him until he dies. It makes him stronger, better than most betas."

"So Caroline saw his potential," Stiles said in a neutral voice, choosing his words carefully as he tried to strap down the anger that wanted to lash out at Rick for even mentioning that incident in Derek's range of hearing.

"I saw his potential, and I told Caroline what Derek could grow to be. She felt it was worth the risk. Since Derek arrived, humbled and wanting to learn, to build something out of the ruin of himself, I also felt he was worth the risk."

Stiles wanted to ask why not him, what had been so wrong with him?

"When you arrived, Caroline told me about you, and I understood her reasoning for letting you stay. Until I met you. Until I saw the paths connecting you and my daughter. You were, are, a catalyst for other people's potential. And I didn't want you here to begin that reaction."

Rick seemed determined to surprise him, because that was a revelation he hadn't expected either. Stiles wondered how emissaries could keep so many secrets without giving hint to them. It behooved him to realize that if he kept going, he would probably be no different.

"I don't understand."
"When an alpha has children, the tie to the next alpha is not fixed. It's not a matter of the first born or the son or daughter, there is no discernible reason most of the time. It's difficult to tell, even if you can read the threads and see where they lead."

"Then why-"

"Because your presence created to the potential for Cassie to become an alpha. The more you're with her, the more likely it becomes."

"Shit," Stiles muttered, uncomfortable. Did Cassie know? Would she have sought him out if she'd known? "How could I have changed that?" How could he have that much of an impact, make it possible?

"I don't know, like I said, it's difficult to read those potentials at all. My best guess is that you are the bridge that creates the natural base of a pack. Second, emissary, alpha," Rick explained. "Cassie will have the mental fortitude required to be an alpha, and the pieces would be in place for a seamless transition. In theory."

"In theory," Stiles muttered, thinking about how desperately Cassie didn't want to be alpha, how she'd admitted that she'd realized what it would mean and done everything she could to make herself the least likely option. And he had come along and done-But it hadn't been intentional. Fuck, if Cassie had known, she would have stayed as far away from him as possible. Jesus, how was he going to tell her?

"When you arrived, you were emotionally unstable at best, self medicating and scared out of your mind. Derek was still on the fringes of the pack, refusing or unable to integrate. My daughter had no interest in leading the pack, was doing everything she could to prove how unsuitable she would be. I initially thought she pursued friendship with you because of your apparent problems, which was, in retrospect, the worst assumption I could have made. The ties between the three of you began strengthening almost immediately. I told Caroline, and she chose to have faith that you could all change, become better, be better, for each other."

"So you were nice to me because of Caroline," Stiles asked, voice flat in an attempt to hide his own hurt.

"If you want me to say I wanted you and what you represented back then, I can't. I was afraid for my daughter. She latched onto you so quickly, Stiles," Rick sighed, showing the first signs of remorse. "And I love her. You were projecting your rage so strongly I was afraid she would someone be caught up in it, drown in it. So yes, my initial welcome was the result of my wife's decision. But by the end of that summer, I felt differently. Admittedly, I still had reservations. I didn't know what you would be like when you left, or if you would even come back. Then Derek went to the funerals, and he came back from California angry and afraid, telling me that you were dreaming again, that you were falling apart. Only you hadn't relapsed. Despite my worry that you would, you didn't. I decided to trust Derek's faith in you that you wouldn't. And that's when I contacted Deaton and inquired about your future."

"So you guys arranged for me to be here."

"Yes and no," Rick admitted. "I was under the impression that you couldn't remain in Beacon Hills, and more importantly, that you didn't want to. But Deaton never told me what he had done, or didn't do. His tactics were-Stiles, I would never condone isolating a child and leaving him to his own pain. Even when I didn't want you near my daughter, I wouldn't have left you without defense against what was you were facing. What Deaton did was wrong, no matter how he tries to justify it. Very
many things could have occurred differently if you'd understood what was happening to you, if your
brother had been aware of what was happening to you."

Stiles nodded, wanting to believe Rick, wanting to hope that at the very least, if Caroline hadn't
decided he was welcome, that Rick would have helped him that much, that Rick would have been
willing to do the right thing regardless of his personal biases.

"To be honest, I assumed, and that was my mistake. I assumed you were coming to us,
understanding what that meant, wanting what that meant."

Stiles didn't know what he wanted anymore.

"Caroline's judgment is rarely wrong, and she always acts decisively. If she took a special interest in
you and Derek only because of the potential both of you posses, she would have handled the
situation differently. But she does care about you, both of you, for more than just what you can do
for our daughter or even for our pack."

Stiles wanted to believe that too, wanted to believe that even though Caroline was an alpha, she was
also a person, someone that saw beyond the advantages they could offer and see the people they
were.

"In light of what I know now, I can understand why you would question our actions, but welcoming
you and Derek into our family was never about exploiting your need for that sense of security or for
being wanted. It was initially because Cassie was changing, caring about other people's wants and
needs instead of resenting them for having them. Then it was because we got to know you. You and
Derek both are a part of our family, no matter what other roles you may or may not fill. You fit. It's
simplistic, but it's the only truth I have."

"Why are you going so easy on me?" Stiles asked quietly. He'd used them, to hide, for comfort, for
any number of reasons. He'd ignored commitment and responsibilities that were part and parcel of
what he'd been given because it had been the easy thing to do.

"We accept your fallibility because you're human, and young. Caroline and I both understand that
things are rarely as cut and dry as we want them to be. The alpha you're at odds with is your brother,
and that's difficult enough, but there were other forces that worked against you. You're also dealing
with ties most people can't comprehend, not even me. It says something, that you were willing to
admit to using us, that you're facing this now and admitting your own mistakes. You've come further
than you think, and you're not the child I met when he was seventeen anymore.

"The truth is, we care, Stiles, and that influences us as much as your love for your family does your
decisions. We knew you were in trouble, and we know that there are scars that will never fade, ones
that will affect you for the rest of your life. But it doesn't change that you helped rebuild the barn, for
no discernible gain. Or that when I didn't have faith that my wife would survive, you ignored me and
did everything in your power to keep her going through that night. You still suffer nightmares you
knew you would have as a result of doing what was necessary to keep us safe. Nothing can alter the
simple truth of your actions. And when it counted, you have acted for my pack and for my family. If
you still wish to pursue it, I would like to keep you as my apprentice, with you understanding and
accepting what that will mean."

Stiles realized he was rubbing his thumb over the pendant. And that said it all, didn't it? He still
wanted, and the past couple of weeks had given him a new perspective on relationships, one he
hadn't had before. Not everything was sunshine and light, people weren't entirely altruistic, but that
didn't mean they couldn't care, didn't care.
"I'll give you some time," Rick said even as Stiles opened his mouth. "Cassie hasn't been sleeping at the house lately." He added as he stood up.

"We've been staying together," Stiles admitted quietly. Rick nodded, smiling a little.

"You three have always had strong ties between you," Rick acknowledged quietly. "They've grown stronger in the past week. Almost fixed."

"Does it still worry you?"

"No," Rick told him. "Because I trust you both."

He left after that, and Stiles wandered into the living room where Derek sat, sketching out a design. The Cosmati book sat open on the table.

"He didn't lie," Derek said in a quiet voice. Stiles took a measure of comfort in that, because Rick, when he did try to lie (and that was rare) was apparently no better at hiding it than most people. At least, not when it came to werewolf senses.

"What are your feelings on it?" Stiles asked, eyes on the ceiling.

"Caroline and Rick took me in because of my potential," Derek muttered, the sound of the pencil on paper growing louder as he bore down.

"Into the pack," Stiles mumbled, knowing it was unfair of him to point out when he'd been so angry before. "Not their family. They did that." Stiles paused, looking for the words Rick had used.

"Because we fit," Derek finished, voice flat, as though the explanation was unimpressive. Stiles looked over and saw the conflicted lines of his features.

"It's okay to want it, you know," He told him. "I do too."

"But they-" Derek tossed his sketchbook on the table, looking for words. "Boyd-" He stopped again, but it was enough for Stiles to understand what he was grappling with.

"We've both admitted that it's unrealistic to want people to be completely selfless," Stiles told him. "We can accept Cassie using us, or us using each other. We trust that we care about each other beyond that, so it balances out, you know? We're fine admitting our motivations aren't always pure. But sometimes they are. And I think that's how it is with Caroline and Rick. It's not just about us, and you know it can't be. They both have a pack to think about. We were two idiots that were running away from our bullshit. But they did help us, and I feel like, like they actually care. Like he meant it when he said we were family."

Derek's jaw worked, tight and ticking as he stared at the wall.

"Whatever you decide, I'm behind you, one hundred percent. We're sticking together," Stiles added, feeling like it needed to be said, hating that even after so long, Derek probably wouldn't know that, trust it as first instinct. "And you know Cassie will too."


Stiles stared at the door. He knew Scott was waiting, had intentionally chosen what could probably be considered neutral ground, although it didn't feel that way. He also knew he could, should, just walk right in. It had never been a consideration before. Lydia's house was the de facto pack house because of space and her parent's lack of presence. But it was Lydia's house, was the pack house, and he wasn't a part of it anymore, hadn't been for a long time, not really.
Taking a deep breath, he walked inside and walked to the living room. No one was there. Cars had been in the driveway, but no one was in the living room. Or the kitchen. Walking through the first floor, he was shocked to see everyone sitting at the dining room table. It smacked of a jury sitting, awaiting his testimony, and shit, that was an uncomfortable. Scott sat at the head, Lydia to his left, Issac to his right, Allison next to Issac. The twins were there, but Danny was absent. Stiles figured he was probably at school.

Stiles looked around, knew what was expected, but couldn't stop the flare of resentment that surged up because he was being put on trial, in a way, and even if he had screwed up, he didn't feel like he had been the only one. His dad was absent, and Deaton was very notably not present, which pissed him off even more.

So instead of sitting, he leaned against the doorjamb.

"I guess we should clear all this up," Stiles finally sighed, when no one else showed any signs of breaking the silence. "I can't be a part of this pack."

"Why?" Scott demanded, voice tightly controlled. His posture gave away his tension. Stiles wondered if the alpha was going to wolf out. But his eyes were still brown, even if it looked like his hands were fisted to hide his claws. It did prove one thing though, that Deaton hadn't spoken to Scott, and Stiles wished again that emissaries were more open with their packs. So much trouble could have been circumvented. But maybe it was for the best, because it didn't give Scott an excuse to try, and maybe that was a blessing in itself.

"Because I can't accept the others." He didn't say anything about the nemeton, about his dreams, about influences, because that would also give Scott ammo to try and convince him to stay, and Stiles knew that would be a bad idea too. The break needed to be clean, and Scott had to accept it. He wouldn't if there were doubts, if there was an other option available.

"So, what, you're going to run away because of us?" Lydia snapped.

"I would never feel safe here. Since I can't ask Scott to give up his pack, I'm choosing to leave."

"Where are you going" Lydia asked. Stiles noticed she was speaking for Scott, who looked like he was contemplating breaking the table. Stiles forced himself to not give in to the myriad, conflicting urges that clamored in his mind, each thought and suggestion wanting to spill out of his mouth like poison. But he knew it would only make it worse, so much worse than it already was.

"I'm apprenticing to an emissary in Portland. I'm going to be his replacement."

"You're leaving us for another pack?" Lydia demanded, expression growing incredulous. "But-

Instead of explaining, Stiles shrugged before pulling out the pendant he'd been wearing and letting it rest over his shirt. It felt wrong, not touching his skin. He hadn't realized how much strength and comfort he drew from it being there until it wasn't.

"Explain," Lydia commanded, eyes zeroed in on the pendant.

"Ást hrafn er vargr hjartarótum," He said easily.

"What is that?" Lydia demanded, obviously not understanding.

"It's a symbol of what I am to the Valdyrs."

"Like your ex girlfriend?"
"Never was a girlfriend," Stiles corrected. "You all had hardons for me not being single, so I let you assume."

"Why?" Scott demanded, teeth clenched together.

"Because it was easier than telling you how bad this place was for me, that I had to get the fuck out or go crazy. It was the simplest, most bare truth he could give, but it was also the most honest thing he could have said.

"I'm sure it was so hard," Lydia hissed. Stiles felt the resentment, the anger seeping into his words, his mouth, but he'd tried, was trying, and fuck them, he thought. Fuck all of them but Scott, because Scott was his brother, and as far as everyone in the room went, he was the only one that mattered.

"I don't really care what you think," He shrugged, allowing some of his anger to slip out into his words. "If you want to hate me, fine. You're not my family, and I'm not part of your pack." Stiles saw the werewolves stiffening, jaws clenching and hands fisting. "Frankly, at this point, the only one I give a damn about is Scott and our parents."

"That's crap Stiles, and you know it," Allison accused. Stiles shrugged. His fear of her vanished when he realized he might actually be able to take her on and win, that he'd survived far worse than her and her accusations. It was liberating, realizing that they might actually be equals, in a way. After years of seeing her standing so far above him on the pedestal Scott had put her on, it was empowering to realize he was just as smart, just as capable and lethal. He wondered how she didn't see it, for all of her hunter training.

"Once again, you're not on the list of people I give a shit about. I don't care if you're in a threesome with my brother or not."

"You're not my brother," Scott snarled, his eyes flashing red.

"So, what? Because I'm oathing to the Valdyr pack, you're disowning me?" He asked casually, even though it fucking hurt to say it.

"You want another pack, they can be your family," Scott snapped. "Since you obviously can't have what you want here."

Stiles stared at him for a moment. He felt far too calm, the anger he'd been fighting freezing and numbing him. Obviously he was about to lose it, and he couldn't do that. Not in front of them, not when he'd worked for years to keep from spouting all the secrets resting just under his tongue. It sickened him to realize that he was still biting his tongue for the greater good.

"Okay," He shrugged, doing his best to appear nonchalant. Then he turned and walked away, heading for the front door.

"Where are you going?" Lydia shrieked. Stiles didn't know why she sounded panicked, but it wasn't his problem anymore. Hadn't been for a long time. So he chose not to answer, just let the door shut quietly behind him.

Instead of going to his dad and Melissa's house, he drove out to the point and called his dad. Given everything occurring, he needed to see his dad, to try and explain everything. But when his dad picked up, he heard the sounds of the pack in the background, Lydia and Allison arguing with one another, Scott trying to calm them both down.

"Dad?"
"Son, you have something you need to tell me?" John demanded. Stiles heard the sound of the arguing abruptly cut off.

"Yeah. I'm at the point. Could you come out here?"

"I'll be there."

"Alone, dad. This- I just need to talk to you."

"Alright. I'll be there in fifteen." He hung up before Stiles could say anything else, and Stiles dropped his phone in the passenger seat and climbed out of his jeep. He chose to sit on the hood of his car, looking at the town spread out.

It was movie perfect, idyllic and peaceful looking. Like any bad cliché, it didn't give any hint to everything that had happened, things that still happened. His eyes drifted to the section of town where he knew the cemetery was, unable to help himself from staring, thinking about the people buried there.

He was still staring, imagining Boyd and Erica's probably neglected graves, when his dad pulled up next to him. He was realizing he'd never taken them flowers or anything, had never gone back after the funerals.

His dad leaned up against the side of the jeep, his arms crossed over his chest and silent.

"I can't stay here," Stiles finally said, careful of his words. He resented being forced to protect Scott, especially after what the alpha had said not even an hour before. But-Scott was still his brother, and he was trying to do something right for a change, not screw it all up more. He just wished he knew what the right thing was, because he didn't have any cues to read off of, and there was no precedent in his life that gave him a hint of what to say, to do.

"Any reason why?"

"This place is a graveyard," He admitted. "I've lost too many people here. I can't."

"I can't see the good for all the bad."

His dad inhaled, a sharp breath that hinted at how much that statement must have hurt him.

"I love you dad, but I can't do it."

"The others said you've been sneaking around with another pack."

Stiles huffed, rubbing his forehead as he tried to figure out how to explain without spilling the few secrets that would destroy Scott's anchor.

"I have been," He said bluntly. "I found a pack in Portland. Cassie's family."

His dad cursed and began to pace. Stiles couldn't look at his father as the words flowed out.

"I thought we were past the secrets," He finally bit out, and Stiles flinched at the anger in his tone.

"Christ Stiles, when did this start?"

"When I left," Stiles admitted, feeling like a child again, like the teenager that had gotten his father fired, had endangered him and lied to him, again and again. He couldn't tell his father when the lying had started because he'd never stopped.

"And you never thought to tell me?"
"I didn't know how," He choked out, feeling the tears already starting.

"And what, you expect me to believe you just can't be here," John snapped, voice growing louder. "When the others, who haven't been lying to me, just told me it's about this emissary thing? Jesus Stiles, I didn't even know you were into the stuff Lydia and Deaton do, and now you're hauling ass away from your home, your family-"

"I'm not abandoning you," Stiles shouted, unable to stop himself. The accusations dug into his skin, pricked at his guilt because that's what he had been doing, and he couldn't tell his dad why he'd fled Beacon Hills, couldn't say anything. The hopelessness of it, the weight of the secrets rested in his throat, threatened to choke him.

"Well then what the hell are you doing?" John demanded furiously. "You've lied to me, kept secrets, you didn't even tell me what you were doing, and now you just want to feed me some line about how you can't tolerate it here because of the bad things that happened and expect me to believe it, like it would make everything alright? I thought I raised you better than this, Stiles."

He didn't try to deny anything, didn't try to defend himself, because his dad was right. Of everyone, he should have trusted his dad, shouldn't have lied to him, hidden the truth from him. "I'm sorry," He muttered, hugging his knees. "I didn't mean to screw this up."

John shook his head, ran a hand through his hair and then let his hands drop to his sides. His shoulders slumped in a sign Stiles remembered all too well as defeat.

"I don't know what to do, Stiles."

He didn't know either, and he didn't know how to tell his dad that he was just as clueless. He'd been an idiot, a self centered one to boot, to expect his dad to be in his corner after the truth came out. But damn it, he had hoped.

"Just give me some time to think about this."

Stiles nodded, knowing that 'time' meant ' awhile', that it wasn't going to happen overnight, maybe not for weeks. Fuck, maybe not for months or years, and he didn't want to contemplate that, because forever without his dad was worse than lying to him. He'd rather go back to the status quo than think about not talking to his dad for years.

The sheriff's car pulled away, his dad inside of it.

Numb by how badly everything had gone, he got in his jeep and started driving. When he passed the Beacon Hills sign, he tried not to wonder if it was the last time he'd ever see it and failed.

"It could have gone better," Stiles muttered when he walked into his apartment that night, or morning possibly (he wasn't sure anymore), only to see Cassie and Derek waiting for him on the couch. He didn't want to think about the morning class ahead of him, or the afternoon classes after that. If he was being honest with himself, he didn't want to think at all.

"I'm going to grab a shower. Road funk and everything," He muttered, walking past them and to his bedroom, closing the door behind him in a request for privacy. He didn't want to feel bitter. He still had Derek and Cassie, still had the pack even, despite doing his best to get it to blow up in his face. But his dad-Shit.

He tossed his shirt at the hamper and was slipping his feet out of his sneakers when he saw it, a new addition on his nightstand. Walking over, he picked it up and realized it was the frame he'd broken
before, Derek's gift to him. The glass had been replaced, and the picture of his mother was the same. But the frame was different, a fault line of gold seaming the broken edges together. It seeped into the place where the inlay had chipped out, finishing half of a flower in gold. He sat down, staring at the new glass and the photo behind it.

His mother's face smiled back up at him, and he wondered where he had been when the picture had been taken, or if he'd even been alive. He wondered what she would think of everything, if she'd be able to offer any advice, or if she'd be disappointed in him too, betrayed by what he'd done.

The door opened and Cassie peeked her head in. Stiles offered her a weak, watery smile, still finding himself surprised that she hadn't abandoned him the moment she'd found out the truth.

"Is it alright?" She asked, voice quiet. Stiles nodded and she crept in, followed by Derek.

"Thank you," Stiles mumbled, voice thick as he scrubbed his face. "I kind of like it, like this," He admitted as he sat the frame back on his nightstand. Cassie sat behind him and hugged him, her face pressed against the spot between his shoulder blades. Derek sat beside him, their shoulders touching in a silent offer. Stiles leaned against him.

"I really don't want to lose my dad," He whispered.

"You won't," Derek promised.

Stiles stared down at the box Rick had given him, still taped and covered in foreign postage stamps and writing.

"Holy shit," He muttered. He'd completely forgotten that he'd even asked Rick for help in finding out about his mother's family. Cassie peered over his shoulder and stared at the sloping handwriting of Stiles' real name written just below Rick's.

"I'll leave you to it," Rick told him quietly, leaving Cassie's room and closing the door.

"Do you want to open it?" Cassie asked. Stiles nodded and Cassie used a claw to cut along the tape. The flaps almost popped open from the force of the packing popcorn trying to escape and Stiles dug through it, heedless of the styrofoam getting all over Cassie's bed.

He pulled out five books, a manilla folder, and a letter. He sat the envelope and books to the side and tore the letter open, curious who had sent him the items, what they would know about his family.

It was in English, thankfully, although formal, almost stilted as he read past the pleasantries and got to the meat of the letter itself.

"My grandad was an emissary," He told Cassie, unable to keep himself from laughing at the coincidence. "It says a beta killed the alpha, and he refused to work with him. Tensions got too high, so he left." Stiles wondered if he'd left willingly or been run out, so afraid he'd gone all the way to California.

"Kind of funny, in a weird coincidence of the universe sort of ways," Cassie said, opening the folder and pulling out printouts of microfilm. Stiles sat the letter to the side and began sorting through them with her. Most of them were blurred and in Russian to boot, but in one article there was a picture of a man and a pregnant woman. The writing below it was too blurred to read, but he recognized the man from some of his mother's photos, and the woman from her resemblance to his mother. His grandparents when they'd still been young.
"You look just like him," Cassie murmured.

"Alkaev nose," Stiles replied automatically, just as his mother had any time someone had pointed out how he had shared her features.

"What are the books?"

"The letter said a few books of his that he left behind. They scanned them, apparently, but felt I should have the originals." He picked one up and opened it. The handwriting looked like Cyrillic, but he immediately saw that it wasn't the standard Russian he was used to.

"I can't read this," He muttered.

"Maybe dad can help?" Cassie offered, staring down at the page.

"Come on," Stiles urged, already bolting from the bed and opening the door. The first flush of excitement he'd felt in weeks was making him giddy, breathless.

Rick, he and Cassie were all still hunched around Rick's laptop, trying to figure out the dialect when Derek got there.

"Dude, dude!" Stiles said, practically vibrating in his skin. "My grandad was an emissary!"

Derek smirked at him as he flailed, waving the book under his nose.

"And that?"

"It's some sort of weird dialect! And my grandad wrote it," Stiles explained, grinning. Derek held his hand out and Stiles gave him the book. Derek flipped it open and looked at it, brow wrinkling in confusion.

"It looks like Cyrillic."

"It does, but it's not normal. Dude, I think it looks like the birch bark letters, my professor has some pictures of them in his office!"

"They do look very similar," Rick admitted, stretching. "We obviously can't show him the book, it's probably a journal of some sort. But I can scan a page to show him."

"Really?" Stiles asked. Rick was a professor, and he'd probably make more headway than Stiles would.

"Really," Rick smiled, rolling his eyes in amusement.

Stiles nodded and he and Cassie fled for the stairs, dragging Derek behind so they could show him everything that had arrived.

"They offered to stay in contact," Derek said, looking over the letter. "They might be able to help with the book."

"Oh, hadn't read that far," Stiles said, blushing as he accepted the letter. At the bottom next to the name Abram Ivanovich was contact information, including an email address.

"Dude," Stiles said again, not sure what else to say.

(He emailed that night, thanking Abram profusely for sending everything to him. He also asked
about the language, and found out the next morning that he'd been right. It was Old Novgorod, and even better, Abram offered to tutor him if he wanted.

Chapter End Notes

Yergh. So much dialogue. But if I stare at this chapter any longer I'm going to set my computer on fire with the power of my mind. On accident.

1.) The sheriff and Stiles have a long history of their relationship being strained because of Stiles keeping secrets. And his dad does love him, but I can imagine him being hurt and really disappointed in Stiles, and he does have a temper, which has been shown in the show. I still hated writing that, and it will be fixed. And there will be sheriff disappointed face and sheriff defending his son in the future, no worries.

2.) Deaton-I don't *hate* him. I just think emissaries act on certain levels outside of packs (more on that later) and that he's also damaged in a lot of ways. He admitted he was trying to forget what he was, and I think the loss of the Hales had a lot to do with that. It's a personal headcanon that he would look in on Peter and try to figure out how to help him and just sit there helplessly before finally staying away out of guilt. Including that we don't know if Morrell is alive or not, when this all started, he might have been dealing with the death of his sister. So I can see him doing a lot of questionable stuff to try and keep the new pack together and Scott stable. No, not justified, but still kind of understandable in the grand scheme of things.

He's always played things really close to the chest and taken huge gambles with other people's lives, and he's sort of fascinating to me, because his behavior could be typical of emissaries given how Morrell acted too. (I have a bazillion emissary headcanons Im feeding into this fic, okay? Go with it.)

3.) Stiles and Derek are both emotionally constipated and bad with words. But they're getting better! Look! Progress! Character development! (no, im not telling you what Derek asked the 8-ball, that comes later)

4.)Go look up the Cosmati family. Just type the name in google. Their work is AMAZING.

5.) The picture frame was fixed based on Kinstugi, which is the mending of broken pottery with gold. The idea is that something becomes more beautiful for it's 'flaws'. It is done with wood as well, although the technique varies, and gold or tin is typically used. (I imagine Derek says more by the things he does than by talking, because he sucks with words most of the time. Oblivious people *coughhhhackstilesbackcoughcough* are oblivious.)

6.) I think Cassie loves Peter Pan, for obvious reasons. Nibs is the Lost Boy that was chased by wolves. He was also the boy that didn't go back to Neverland because he couldn't bear to leave his children. (the parallels draw themselves) When Starkey is revisted, he's taught children to be polite. And how to be pirates.

(If I missed anything, let me know?)
"I don't know if I can accept this," Stiles admitted quietly. He understood the logic of it. He'd even examined his tie to the nemeton, sought out that unflagging sense of 'correct' that it had forced on him for three years, but there had been nothing to guide him, to make the concept any less horrifying. Fuck, what if it was Derek or Cas? Or even their family? How could he do it?

He'd never felt the loss of his dad more, because his dad would know what to say, would know the right choice to make. More than anything he trusted his dad's sense of right and wrong, and he needed that. Especially knowing how fucked his was.

"I understand Stiles," Rick said, expression solemn. "It's a lot to ask, to take on."

"How did you?" Stiles demanded, glaring at the emissary.

"I wasn't that close to the pack initially," Rick explained. "The former emissary, the man I apprenticed to, explained that a degree of separation was best for an emissary. He was friendly with Caroline's father, but they weren't friends. He didn't have any friends within the pack, most didn't know who he was, to be honest. And most emissaries maintain that distance. In the long run, it's simply easier."

"Derek didn't know about Deaton," Stile murmured, remembering how surprised Derek had been to find out Deaton had been the family secret.

"Exactly. Deaton revealed himself out of necessity. Had things been different, I'm not sure any of you would have ever known. And that's not uncommon among us. My bond with Caroline and the pack isn't singular, but it is rare. From everything I've read, it was more common, a long time ago. But eventually rifts began to form because of our duties."

"How did you end up so close to Caroline?"

"Caroline was stubborn," Rick laughed, nostalgic smile on his face. "An omega had attached himself to a witch, and they were causing problems in the area. We were paired together in a search. When we found the omega and witch, I was injured. She called me all sorts of names, practically threw a dictionary worth of insults at me, but she took care of me until we made it back. After that she decided to pursue me. She said she just knew."

Stiles remembered Cassie latching onto him, her confidence that they would be friends, and imagined Rick being on the receiving end of that certainty, that unwavering belief, knowing his role as emissary.

"I ignored her. She wouldn't stop. I don't know if there's magic in Caroline's line, if there is, it's too faint to discern, hidden beneath the spark of what gives a wolf the ability to shift. But I think she sensed the threads too. And she wasn't willing to give them up. I eventually explained what I was,
what I had promised to do if necessary. I told her that emissaries and wolves shouldn't be close."

"What did she do?"

"She let it go, or so I thought. Two months later she arrived at my apartment with a box so heavy she had to carry it in. Then she asked me to at least read them before making a decision."

"What were they?"

"Priceless family heirlooms, journals of former alphas, of emissaries that had been friends and loved ones of the pack. I think I spent a month reading through them all, rereading them, trying to make myself understand."

"But you did."

"I showed up at the next moon gathering, having reached my own conclusions. She took me to the barn and-

"If this is about to turn into a sex story, I should warn you, that would be really awkward and I'll have to leave," Stiles interjected, glaring at Rick.

"No, that came later," Rick said with a fond smile, and Stiles gave theatrical shudder because no. "We have children."

"Asexual reproduction is totally a thing found in nature and advocated by supernatural writers everywhere."

Rick snorted, but he was smiling as he continued. "Her father was the typical protective father, there was a lot of posturing and a very awkward family dinner, one that involved an unnecessary amount of claws and casual threats. But she introduced me to the pack. I saw faces, names, threads that wound from person to person. And that night she told me what the duty meant to her, and gave me this," Rick said, reaching into his shirt and pulling out a pendant that was an exact replica of the one Stiles wore.

"There are two, one for master, one for apprentice. I still don't know why they were given to the pack instead of being retained by the emissaries, though I could hazard a few guesses. But this was her promise to me, of our future. And it's been difficult, Stiles, I won't be cruel and lie to you about that. There were times when my children didn't have control, when Caroline lost herself- It's difficult. I can't let myself forget my oaths."

"How do you accept it?"

"I can't tell you, you know that," Rick sighed. "But I wish I could."

Stiles nodded, letting Rick walk past him to leave him alone in the workroom.

He wanted to go upstairs, wanted to smile and laugh and harass the girls, wanted to help Marianne and learn whatever recipe she was using that night. He just didn't know how to face them. Instead, he eventually hopped off of the stool and used the cellar door to get out and made for the barn.

Derek found him curled up in the loft later, though he didn't know what time it was aside from 'dark'.

"Everything okay?"

Stiles watched Derek warily. If he kept going, he might have to hurt-might have to kill Derek some
"You said your anchor is duty," Stiles started. Derek sat down and leaned against a stack of bales, watching him intently.

"What if your duty, what if you have to do something that hurts people you love?"

Derek hummed thoughtfully. That he didn't answer right away was terrifying, mostly because Derek's sense of duty was so deeply ingrained in him now, and the hesitation to speak showed how conflicted he was.

Stiles was aware that they both had too much baggage with the word 'duty' in a way, that Deaton's heavy handed actions still affected the both of them, lingering like a stain that wouldn't quite come out of their consciousnesses. It was part of the reason he was having such a difficult time accepting the whole thing. At some point Deaton had been able to justify his actions in the name of his oath to the pack, and the more Stiles learned about being an emissary, the more he realized how easy it would be to make those justifications. In the grand scheme of things, he wouldn't have been that much of a loss, and Deaton had made that decision. Rick had admitted others would have too, with the same justification.

And if he accepted that he would have to pass judgment on wolves within his pack, what sort of justifications would he have to make? Where would the lines be?

"The fifth initiation is accepting the role of executioner," He mumbled, when Derek still hadn't said anything. "If the pack won't take care of someone- Pack or not, I'll have to."

Derek didn't look all that surprised by the revelation.

"Like Peter," He said easily.

"Or you, or Cassie. Or-"

Derek huffed, scooting to sit closer to him.

"It wasn't easy to kill Peter, you know." It sounded almost like an accusation, and no, Stiles had never actually considered whether or not Derek had found it difficult. Peter had been evil, through and through. Everything Stiles knew backed up killing Peter as part of the laws the supernatural community lived by. Christ, Peter had killed Laura.

"Even after Laura?"

"Even-Even after Laura," Derek admitted, staring at the opposite wall, gaze shuttered. "Peter used to be the family prankster. He was sort of obnoxious, but he was funny and he liked to joke. He was smart, and for awhile, I wanted to be him, you know? He was more like my older brother than my uncle. I got into basketball because he was the team captain in high school. I couldn't forget that."

"Is that why you didn't kill him when he came back?"

"I'd hoped it was a second chance," Derek shrugged. Stiles heard the implied 'but it wasn't', because he knew that Derek's family was important to him, and the two surviving relatives he'd had left had cut and run once the dust had cleared. And maybe that wasn't fair of him, Stiles thought. Cora had been grieving and needed her pack, Peter had been alive, really alive, for the first time since the fire. They had probably wanted to live real lives without the reminder of what they'd lost constantly staring them in the face.
"Maybe I'm selfish," Derek murmured.

"How?"

"If I ever-if it ever came to that, I don't want it to be hunters," Derek admitted slowly. "I'd rather it be you or Cassie. I'd know-You'd have cause."

And it was selfish, so selfish, because Stiles never wanted to kill Derek. A few scattered moments of terror aside, he didn't want Derek dead, wasn't sure he could do it if it was asked.

"But you'd never make me do that, would you?" He tried weakly.

"Anything could happen Stiles," Derek reminded him. "Peter wasn't always bad. And I'd rather you execute me than let me turn into something like him."

"Oh god," Stiles gasped, trying not to think about the words 'kill' or 'execute'. They revolved in his head, a damning litany.

"Stiles, breathe," Derek told him. And, yeah, Stiles realized that he needed the reminder because he wasn't.

"How do I-how do I face everyone if I do this?" He choked. Derek moved until they were facing one another, his legs on either side of Stiles. Stiles realized at some point he'd drawn his knees up to his chin and now he just wanted to hide behind them.

"Because you would never act without cause, because it would be for the good of the pack," Derek told him. "Because we trust you to be strong when we aren't, to do the right thing when we can't."

"Are we having a moment?" Stiles asked, because that declaration was too big, too much, too 
*everything* for him to deal with, especially coming from Derek. "Because I'd rather not have a moment when we're talking about me having to kill people. It's creepy."

Derek didn't look at all fazed, which was worrying. Normally he would roll his eyes or bite out something sarcastic. Instead he was watching Stiles with-Stiles had no idea what it was, just that there was something there, and it was terrifying, because it looked like more than trust, it resembled something dangerously close to 
*faith*.

"You're a good person Stiles," Derek told him. "And whatever decision you make, it's the right one for you, remember?"

"I want to keep the people I love safe," Stiles whimpered. "Not kill them."

"If it came to that, they wouldn't be the people you loved anymore, just like Peter wasn't, isn't, the uncle I remember."

"You'd never do that."

"People can surprise you."

"I think you'd kill yourself before you did anything like that," Stiles told him with quiet conviction. "You-I know you. And you wouldn't become Peter. Not even-Not even if you lost everyone again."

"And I know you," Derek said, voice hushed as he took Stiles' hands between his own. "And I know you'll never be Kate, or even Chris. What you do will always be for the good of the pack, for the people you love."
Stiles wanted to soak up the certainty, the sheer loyalty Derek was expressing, sure that no one had ever had that much faith in him, in who he was. And, admitting to himself that he needed it, needed the unwavering faith of someone that knew him, flaws and fuck ups included, he allowed himself to.

Stiles was thinking about taking a gap semester. Between midterms, the pack, magic, and his job, he wanted a break. He needed to reorient himself, figure out his life. It wasn't that he was terribly confused or disoriented by the fact that he was going to be living in Oregon permanently, just- He needed to see a little bit more for himself, a sort of odd wanderlust settling in once he realized that road trip with Scott (something he'd probably stupidly held onto) was never going to happen. He just wanted to get out, see things. The ocean was awesome, but he'd grown up making day trips there.

When he told Rick, Rick immediately understood and mentioned a sabbatical he had taken when he was an apprentice, and Stiles liked the idea. Rick, being a professor and more understanding than he probably deserved (definitely more patient), helped him figure out how to organize and schedule everything, starting with school. His training intensified until he was sleeping at Caroline's house three days out of the week, too tired to make the drive to his apartment or even to Derek's by the time he crawled into bed. Considering Cassie was seeing someone, he'd been relegated to the guest bedroom for most of those days. Derek crashed with him there occasionally, and occasionally at the apartment. He barely ever got to go back to his house (and he never stopped to think about the day it wouldn't be his house), where his mail went.

It was all pretty routine. There were no more incidents with hunters, or anything to cause a massive blow up. (Aside from Cassie and Caroline arguing about her human boyfriend, but Stiles' survival instincts said not to touch that with a ten foot pole.)

So when he pulled into the driveway of the house for the first time in two weeks, intent on dinner and ignoring his studies for an evening, only to see his dad's civilian car in the driveway, he was more than a little freaked out.

Massively freaked out.

His dad was asleep in the front seat. Derek was nowhere in sight, probably working late with Rick on the plans for the remodeling over the garage.

Stiles took a moment, exhaled, inhaled, and tapped on the window. When his dad didn't wake up, he tapped a little harder and watched as his dad jumped and slowly came to. They stared at each other for a good three or four minutes; increasingly awkward, alarming minutes, before John shifted and Stiles stepped back so his dad could get out of the car.

"Hi dad," He greeted lamely. Because he couldn't actually figure out what the hell he was supposed to say to his dad showing up on his doorstep out of the blue. Sitcoms hadn't really prepared him for it, and he hadn't allowed himself to hope for his dad suddenly showing up on his doorstep. (He had, but he'd imagined his apartment doorstep, not Derek's house, which was disconcerting in and of itself.)

Of course, considering his life and his stellar run of luck, Derek's truck pulled up the driveway and abruptly stopped, Derek's expression almost panicked behind the windshield. Stiles peeked at his dad and then sighed, waving for Derek to go ahead and park in his normal spot.

"Something you need to tell me son?" John asked as Derek parked. His eyes were glued to Derek, who made no move to actually get out of the vehicle. It would have been funny in any other circumstances, because Derek was afraid of his dad. Except, circumstances being what they were, it
was only distantly amusing. (Kind of distant.)

"Probably a lot."

"Good. I went to Deaton, he told me about the Valdyrs. I spoke to someone named Caroline, and she said we needed to talk."

"You went to Deaton?" Stiles asked, immediately on the defensive. Rick had hinted that he and Deaton were still in contact, but only insofar as attempting to understand the nemeton. Stiles had accepted the necessity, mostly because Rick's lip had had that particular curl of a sneer he got any time he graded papers.

"I wanted to know what was going on," His dad muttered defensively. "Since no one else was saying anything, he was my next best option."

"Huh." He refused to comment. "And Caroline said we should talk?"

"I'm pretty sure it was code for getting our heads out of our asses. She has an interesting way of sounding polite while making you feel like an asshole," John replied, eyes on Derek as he finally climbed out of the truck. "Hale," He greeted. "Or is it Valdyr now?"

"Hale," Derek said, staring at the sheriff like the man was about to draw his sidearm.

"Derek, I've got some groceries in the jeep, for dinner tonight. Could you-" Stiles tried, when the silence between the three of them stretched on a moment too long.

"Got it," Derek muttered hastily, practically bolting for the jeep to grab the bags before fleeing into the house.

"I take it there's a story there," His dad said slowly.

"Probably not the one you think."

"I don't know what to think, Stiles," John sighed, leaning against his car and running a hand over his face. "I get a call to Lydia's and everyone wants to know about this other pack, like I knew about it. Since then everyone's been antsy. I feel like I can't say my own son's name anymore. And I don't understand any of it."

"Why are they mad, or why did I choose another pack?"

"How did you even find another pack?" John demanded.

"Kind of a long story."

"Then we can start at the beginning. And the truth, Stiles. I can't do secrets anymore. I don't want us to go back to hiding things again."

Stiles took a moment to feel guilty and then remembered Scott's declaration that John didn't need to know about the murder of two teenagers, that the twins were good, and swallowed the guilt. Some of it, at least. Maybe an eighth of it.

"Let's go inside. You can see part of the how and why, at least."

"What do you mean?"

"I helped Derek build this place. After junior year."
"I thought you were in Seattle."

"I didn't want anyone to know where Derek was," Stiles shrugged as they walked up the stairs and paused in front of the house. "Dad, none of this is Derek's fault, okay? And- And I don't want the pack finding him."

"Why?"

"Because he's happy now, and he deserves it. The pack would bring back every bad thing Beacon Hills was for him, and I won't let that happen," He said, injecting as much vehemence into his tone as he could, hoping to get his point across. He'd thoroughly examined his reasons before he'd ever gone back to Beacon Hills for the 'discussion'. Even then he'd known if the pack had caught any hint of Derek, they'd have tried to find him. Scott would, at least, and Stiles had imagined dozens of scenarios that had only reaffirmed his faith that Scott needed to stay away from Derek, at least until he'd accepted that Stiles had made his choice.

John eyed him skeptically for a moment before nodding slowly. Stiles knew that was the best he would get and opened the door.

"Nice place," John said, stepping in and shedding his jacket, placing it on the coat hook by the door. Stiles and Derek never used it for coats, just their keys. The jacket looked strange hanging there, like a reminder of how out of place his dad's presence was. And it hurt to realize that it felt like his dad didn't belong. "Got a bathroom?"

"Upstairs," Stiles said. "Second door on the right."

While his dad walked upstairs, Stiles tried to take a moment to compose himself.

"Is everything alright?" Derek asked quietly.

"Probably not," Stiles groaned, grinding the heels of his palms into his eyes.

"Do you want me to go to the workshop, or-"

"That's fine. I'm sorry I'm running you out, but I don't know if he'd be able to handle you and me at the same time."

"Not a problem."

Stiles felt like it was even if Derek genuinely didn't. Instead of saying that though, instead of asking Derek to be there while he explained things, he shrugged instead. "I'll come and get you for dinner."

"You should tell him the truth. All of it," Derek told him, voice quiet.

"But-" All of it? And what? Hope for the best? Stiles shook his head, knowing instinctively that the 'best' he could hope for was his dad having a meltdown of some sort, and he didn't want that, his dad didn't need that.

"He loves you. You're his son," Derek reminded him. "He came all the way up here to hear the truth. You owe him that."

Stiles nodded mutely, knowing the wisdom of it even as he reminded himself of the inevitable fallout. Derek gave his shoulder a quick squeeze before walking outside, leaving him alone with his dad. Taking a deep breath, he began going through the groceries and pulling everything out.
When his dad came back down, Stiles was arranging items in a roasting pan. Busying himself, he babbled about nothing, absolutely nothing of any consequence. But when he'd finished and set the timer, he pulled out two bottles of Caroline's winter lager and led him to the den.

"I don't know where to start," Stiles finally said, when the silence had become suffocating.

"The beginning is usually the best bet," John replied calmly.

So Stiles started with the alpha pack. And he talked. He told the sheriff about looking for Erica and Boyd, about finding Erica dead and Boyd and Cora alive, he talked about Jennifer and the killings and thinking Derek was dead and trying to tear down the Hale house, about the suicide hotel and almost dying to save Scott. He talked about the twins and seeing Boyd's corpse and Derek's expression, about helping Issac bury Boyd because Derek had gone catatonic, refusing to leave the flooded apartment. The more he spoke, the faster the words came, the more emotional he got even as he tried to curb it, to hold back the tide of helplessness and rage that accompanied the secrets he'd been keeping.

When he got to the nightmares, to the nights of doing anything to keep from going to sleep, he was shaking, breathing shallowly because how was he supposed to tell his dad he'd resorted to alcohol to sleep and cutting himself to stay awake? The words tripped out of his mouth, stilted and hoarse as he tried not to cry, knew he didn't deserve that luxury. When the sheriff lifted his shirt, Stiles didn't stop him. He couldn't force himself to look his dad in the face though, either, turning his head away until the shirt dropped and then looking at the coffee table, his arms circling his chest to hug himself.

He continued, talking about helping blow up the Hale House, getting the pictures from Derek, about needing to get away because everyone was pretending like it was all good and he couldn't. He explained the summer at Derek's, showing up unannounced, and he told his dad about Derek giving him the choice to stay and get better or call him to tell him the truth. Stiles saw his dad flinch, but continued without apologizing, without explaining that he hadn't known how to tell him that he'd sunk that low because if he started he'd never stop.

He explained about sleeping on unfinished old floors and sawdust and too much diner food, threatening Caroline, the gatherings at the barn, Cassie doing everything to be his friend and Derek getting dragged into it with him. He admitted that they all overcompensated because they'd all wanted each other that desperately, had used each other and somewhere along the way actually started to care about one another as people and not just coping mechanisms.

And if the memories of his senior year were dim in comparison to that summer, Stiles didn't mind, because through it he'd had people that reminded him there was more than what he'd been a part of before. It had been the start of joining the pack, and Stiles admitted he'd consciously avoided acknowledging the whole thing, not wanting to make a decision one way or another because of the inevitable outcome. When he told his dad that he chose Derek and Cassie's friendship, chose being with them, over Scott's pack and Caroline's pack, removing his potential from the table entirely, and that they'd determined to stick together regardless of the outcome, he saw his dad staring at him with an unreadable expression that could have been worry or regret, he wasn't sure.

When he finished, his dad heaved a deep, weary sigh, his face lined with fatigue and regret.

"And you thought you couldn't tell me?" His dad sounded burned out, ruined, and Stiles would have given anything, anything at all to take back the pain his father was feeling.

"I didn't know how," Stiles whispered. "How was I supposed to say anything when everybody was closing ranks and expecting me to fall into line with them? Dad, we'd just- We were talking again, we were good, you were happy. And-"
"And nothing," John told him. "Not a damn thing is worth you putting yourself through that. Not a false sense of security, not your friend's opinions, nothing. You're my son. I'd have shot every one of those bastards if they'd tried to hurt you. You're my son," He repeated, like that was the only thing that had ever needed to be said. Stiles clung to the affirmation, to the conviction that only his dad ever seemed to be able to muster. "You will always come before anything and anyone else."

"I'm sorry," Stiles whispered, looking down at his hands, not sure whether he should feel ashamed or relieved, guilty or secure.

"Everyone made it out to be that you wanted this emissary thing so much. No one said anything about all of this. This has been-Years. Christ."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do. I wanted- Dad, I felt like hurting them, just going ahead and acting for the greater good. Even Scott- I was thinking about hurting Scott. I couldn't stay," Stiles admitted, knowing it was only a fraction of the reason, but one of the biggest ones. Ashamed to admit it, he didn't look at his dad, stared down at his hands and picked at a hangnail. The thought of hurting Scott was something he was still trying to come to terms with, the level of violence he sometimes felt completely out of left field, something he didn't know how to deal with, not really.

"I wish you'd told me," John sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He looked exhausted. "There's no chance you or Hale will testify, is there?"

"No point," Stiles shrugged. "We both know the physical evidence is gone and there's no motive without the whole werewolf thing." And he didn't want to drag Derek into that hell, knowing what would be waiting, knowing that justice would never really be served.

"What about their families?"

"That's why I dug up the bodies and called in the tip," Stiles admitted, knowing it wasn't enough but unable to give any more than that. "I'm sorry," He said again.

"Tell me that you're happy here. That you're safe," His dad asked several minutes later.

"Usually," Stiles answered, determined to be honest. "It's still werewolves and the supernatural. But coming here was good for me dad. Being here, it's where I belong."

"And Cassie?"

"Never my girlfriend. Covered for me so I could come here without people asking too many questions."

"Are you gay?"

"I thought I didn't dress right," Stiles teased. His dad arched a questioning eyebrow and Stiles offered a small smile. "Elizabeth was actually my girlfriend. But I've dated a few guys too."

"And Derek?"

Stiles considered what he should tell his father. His dad knew Derek had helped him out, but Stiles wasn't sure he could every properly express the scope of it all. Derek was his best friend and his anchor. How could he explain that to anyone that hadn't lost a best friend or ever needed something to keep him from losing control of himself?

"Derek is my best friend. I trust him as much as I trust you."
His dad chewed on that, obviously analyzing it. It was a big jump to make, Stiles knew. If anything, Derek had probably been the last person his dad had ever thought he'd see again. And to suddenly be told that his son lived with Derek Hale, that they were best friends, well, Stiles wouldn't have believed in three years ago, and certainly not now.

"I'd like to meet Caroline and Rick before I go."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Stiles said cautiously. Caroline and Cassie had only become more protective of him after his exile from Beacon Hills, and he wasn't sure how they'd take his dad showing up. Stiles still wasn't sure to make of it, if he was being honest with himself. "Dinner'll be ready soon. I need to tell Derek so he can wash up."

"What does he do now?"

"You know that bookcase you love so much? The wedding present?" Stiles asked, the first beginnings of a grin starting to stretch his lips when his dad nodded slowly. "He made it. It's his thing."

"Jesus," John muttered. "He's been busy."

"Just wait until you see the other furniture," Stiles smirked, enjoying that particular facet of his dad's bewilderment over the others he had seen in the past hour. "We've got a good water heater and the water pressure can handle two showers at once, if you want to grab your bag and change. I know the drive here is killer, and sleeping in a car sucks."

John nodded and got up slowly, looking older. Stiles had never noticed it before, felt so strange noticing it then. He was as tall as his father, a little taller than, actually. And he had filled out somewhere along the way. Not like Derek or even Scott had, but he was-He was an adult. And holy christ, that was a terrifying realization. He was an adult but he still felt like a stupid teenager that didn't have a clue. Painfully clueless. And yet he was-Grown. Choosing to ignore that feeling for as long as he could manage, he followed his dad outside and split ways to go into the workshop, where he could hear the lathe moving. When the door opened, the lathe came to a stop. Derek sat the block he'd been working with to the side, face impassive when he pulled off his mask.

"I think it's going to be okay," Stiles sighed, shrugging. He felt tired suddenly, tired and a little worn through, rubbed a little thin. "Is it okay if he stays for a few days?"

"It's your house too," Derek reminded him.

"Not what I asked," Stiles mocked.

"It's fine," Derek said, dropping his mask on the table and pulling out the earplugs he'd been wearing. "How're you doing?"

"I don't know," Stiles answered honestly. "He wants me to be happy, he's pissed I hid all this, hurt that I couldn't-" Stiles paused, choking on the words and gestured futilely with his hands. "He wants to meet Caroline and Rick."

"Good."

"Good?"

"They should meet. He's your father, Stiles. He loves you. And Caroline and Rick love you too."

"Are you saying we should have a family dinner or something?"
Derek shrugged but smirked a little.

"Oh god, Elijah will ask him all sorts of questions about cops and guns and-I can't even with that image right now," Stiles muttered, thinking of Marianne's youngest interrogating his dad. Derek was an asshole for making him think of that. "Come on, dinner is almost ready."

When he was plating dinner, Derek and his dad were talking. Light stuff, mostly what Derek had been doing with himself, questions about the house and what they'd done to it. Stiles proudly showed off the pictures on his phone, pictures he still hadn't deleted and probably never would.

There was a lecture about blowing up the Hale house. Stiles didn't mind. His dad seemed to understand, even if he couldn't approve. Dinner actually ended on a fairly positive note.

His dad crashed in his bed that night. Stiles crashed on the couch, sensitive to the information overload his dad was experiencing. No reason to add to it by sleeping in Derek's bed, even if he really wanted to. He did end up crying on the couch though, for worrying his dad, for the weariness on his dad's face, the sheer release telling the truth had afforded. Most of all he cried because his dad was there, had listened to him, loved him. He still had his dad, and knowing that shifted something in his chest he'd felt slowly pressing down on his chest, keeping him from breathing freely. Derek came down and remained silent, allowing him to curl into him and fall asleep when he finally stopped, exhausted in every possible way.

(Stiles woke up to his dad smiling down at them and Derek completely still, staring up at his dad with something that would have been called fear if it had been anyone else. He smelled bacon and decided to let it go, just the once.)

Stiles paced nervously in the living room. He still resented that he'd been told, politely but firmly, that Caroline and Rick wanted to speak to his father. Alone.

Derek was at work, but Cassie had skipped out on one of her classes to be there and offer him moral support as he silently panicked. He'd told his father everything, at least, he thought so. But god only knew what he was being told, shut up in Caroline's office. And because of werewolf hearing, he couldn't even hover outside the door to try and listen.

"It's going to be alright," Cassie assured him for the fifth time. "You told him everything."

"Yeah, but-" Stiles flailed, hoping the gesture conveyed that there were thousands of little details he hadn't told his father, like about Caroline's near death, or dumping bodies in the Willamette, or knocking himself out for two days messing with his connection to the nemeton. All of which his dad would find highly relevant.

"The door's opening," Cassie whispered. Stiles immediately stopped pacing and looked at the trio as they filed down the hall and into the living room. His dad looked a little stunned, and Caroline looked amused. Rick had a carefully neutral face. Stiles recognized it as the one he wore when he was trying not to laugh.

"My son is magic," His dad said slowly.

"Uh-" Stiles actually had no clue what to do with that. As far as opening statements went, it was the last thing he had expected. "Sort of?"

"And you build not only houses, but barns."

"Sort of?" Stiles repeated. "More like fix them?"
"And they haven't caved in."

"Dad!"

But his dad was smiling. It was the first smile Stiles had actually seen on his dad's face since the wedding, and he didn't care what Caroline and Rick had told him. His dad was smiling. At him.

"Stiles, we need to start dinner," Caroline reminded him gently. Stiles started, turned to her and nodded. He silently thanked her for making the group small that night, sending most of the others out for dinner and a movie so his dad wouldn't be so overwhelmed. Cassie got up to follow them into the kitchen and Stiles whirled on her.

"No."

"But-"

"No."

"Stiles," She whined.

"You exploded the bread maker last week," Stiles reminded her. "The new one." That had been a sort of late Christmas/please make fresh bread for me Stiles' gift from Derek. He'd only gotten to use it for three months, and barely at that. He'd had plans.

"I didn't read the directions right," She defended. Stiles snorted.

"Doesn't matter. We found dough inside the pan cupboard yesterday. Derek's still freaked about the finish."

"Not like he can't fix it," Cassie grumbled, walking back to the couch. Stiles heard muffled chortling and saw Rick and his dad both biting the inside of their cheeks as they watched them.

"What?" He snapped.

"I always wondered what it would be like if we'd ever managed to give you a sister. Guess now I know," His dad smirked, apparently amused. "I have no idea how I thought you two were dating."

"More people make that assumption than you think," Rick joked, leading his father to the patio doors and opening them. Stiles watched, utterly amazed, as his dad and Rick joked about him and Cassie, poking fun at them.

"Dude, did your dad just co-opt my dad?" Stiles asked.

"I think so," Cassie said, watching the pair as they sat down outside and continued talking, their laughter echoing against the glass of the windows.

"Hey, if you want to earn me brownie points, and you totally, completely do, you'll go grab a couple of bottles from the garage for them," Stiles sang, giving her his best approximation of puppy eyes.

"You look deranged," She muttered, but she was smiling and getting off of the couch.

"You are amazing. My dad likes stouts," He added, fleeing for the kitchen where Caroline waited.

"What did you tell him?" Stiles asked as they began chopping vegetables.

"The truth, Stiles. That you are a member of our family as well as his, and that you are a member of
the pack," Caroline told him. It was the first time she'd referenced his place since he'd spoken to Rick and officially-officially accepted his role as his apprentice. That she hadn't used the words 'important' or 'valuable' when she easily could have soothed the remaining vestiges of worry he'd maintained despite telling himself he was valuable, in a sense, an asset. Still, it was nice to not hear it.

"He's proud of you, you know," Caroline told him several minutes later, as he was heating the oil in a pan.

"Why? I lied."

"You did," Caroline admitted. "But in the circumstances, nothing is simple. Your choices were not the best choices, but they are understandable. We also recognize that you were a child when you ran away. When you went back, you could have chosen to press the issue, could have destabilized your brother's pack and forced him to choose," She added. "Don't shake your head. You could have. You could have done many things. But you chose to protect your brother's anchor and to try and keep your father from being forced to choose between the pack and his work. From a distance, it's easy to say that it's still not what I would have done, but I know how important an anchor is, as I'm sure you do, and as an alpha, I know how important the pack is to my sense of stability. So I honestly can't say if I would have done any differently. As much as we try to apply logic to our relationships, the truth is, sometimes we can only try to do our best for the people we love. And you did, even though you were still hurting. Are still hurting," She finished quietly, staring pensively at the counter.

"Huh," Stiles mumbled, unsure of what else to say.

"You're growing into your own man, Stiles. He has every right to be proud of you."

"Oh," He muttered, flushing brightly.

Derek came in half an hour later and stopped abruptly, staring through the windows that looked over the patio, eyes widening. Stiles watched him, wondering what would give the werewolf that expression.

"Everything alright?" Stiles asked.

"Dad's telling the story about the night you got a black eye defending Derek's honor," Cassie snorted from the living room.

"Oh my god," Stiles groaned. Derek was actually blushing, and Stiles wished he had his phone on him, because that-That was a totally new thing he wish he could immortalize.

"He makes me sound like a damsel in distress," The werewolf muttered.

Caroline began to laugh.

Stiles' dad stared at the apartment, eyes skittering over the books on the coffee table, the dining room table, on top of the television.

"How many languages are you studying?" He asked, walking over to the couch and sitting down. Stiles shrugged, fidgeting as he watched his dad examining the book of Russian poetry.

"Uh, it depends on how you look at it, I guess," He admitted, walking over and sitting down.

"Russian, Rick mentioned Norse?"
"Old Norse. Uh, Russian, Latin, and a dialect called Old Novgorod."

"I get the Old Norse and Russian, but Latin? And old-What?"

"Latin is because of Derek," Stiles admitted. "He uh, his mom wanted him to learn it. I sort of, challenged, myself I guess? That summer he said something in Latin and I had it recorded, but when I got home I didn't want to look up the translation, it felt sort of like cheating, or something. Easy. So I liberated some of the books from the Latin class at school and started teaching myself."

His dad looked like he didn't know whether to smile, roll his eyes, or run away. Stiles had absolutely no clue what to do with that combination of expressions.

"Derek knows Latin?"

"His mom was a huge fan of Ovid. It's actually pretty awesome, you know? Like, I haven't really told Derek how good I am, I don't know if it would bring it back for him. But-" Stiles shrugged. "Maybe someday."

"And this other one?"

"Old Russian dialect. I uh-" Stiles paused, then got up. "Be right back." He promised, walking back to his room. He had one of the journals, a laminated piece of the microfilm printout serving as a bookmark. Everything else was in his room at the house. When he came out and opened the book, slipping the picture of his grandparents out, his dad's eyes widened in recognition.

"Your grandfather?"

"Yeah. I found some magic stuff when I was packing up mom's stuff. Rick helped me out and sent out some inquiries. Turns out grandpa was an emissary," Stiles said, smiling a little. "Abram, uh, Abram Ivanovich, the guy who sent some of the stuff he'd left behind, just a few books, has been helping me with finding out more." Though there hadn't really been 'more' to find out, although whether it was because of Russia's changing politics or pack politics and the resulting upheavals, neither he or Abram could figure out. The pack itself had vanished before he'd even been born, leaving no real clues.

"An emissary?"

"Back in Russia. He had to leave because he wouldn't work with a new alpha. It sounds sort of like he was driven out, but no one really knows what all happened. Abram thinks he was really close to the old alpha and couldn't forgive the new one for killing him." One of many working theories.

"And this dialect?"

"He wrote in it, in his journals. Abram's tutoring me, the journals are my homework."

His dad leaned back, the laminated picture in hand.

"It makes sense," His dad said slowly, like things were clicking into place. "He was always closed off, definitely not you call a people person. He loved your mother though, man. She was his whole world. I always thought losing his wife-" His dad stopped for a minute, took a deep breath. Stiles settled a little closer to his dad and waited patiently. "I always thought it was because he lost his wife that he was so overprotective of your mother. When we were teenagers, he didn't want her out after dark. The first time I brought her home late was the only time, let me tell you. That old man," His dad shook his head, like the memory still carried a note of terror for him. "But your mom, she stood toe to toe with him. I've faced down a lot of people, but he scared the hell out of me. And she stood
there with her hands on her hips and said they were safe and told him she loved me. That was the first time too. That she said it."

Stiles listened avidly. His dad hadn't spoken freely about his mom since her death, and he'd never heard anything about this.

"I didn't think much of it. Stupid kid that I was, back then, I bought into the insular foreigner stereotypes. Your mom caught a lot of flack for it at school, too. Not that she didn't throw it right back," His dad added with a chuckle. "She had a temper. And a mean left hook, buddy from my team tried copping a feel once. But boy, she could sing." That was wistful, sad. Stiles hummed quietly in encouragement. "The first time I heard it, her singing with her dad. It was beautiful, like something you hear in a church. Just, amazing, even if I couldn't understand a damn word of it. That's when I knew I wanted to marry her. Barely eighteen, but I knew I wanted to hear her voice every day."

"I didn't know," Stiles admitted quietly. "I remember her singing, though."

"She sang all the time, especially after he died. I think it was her way of staying close to him. They butted heads, a lot. But they were close despite that, maybe for it. I think he was proud of her, for being so headstrong, even when it pissed him off. It was why she named you after him. She loved you both so much," John told him, throwing an arm over his shoulder. "She was an amazing woman."

"She was," Stiles agreed.

"She'd be happy for you, you know that, right?" His dad asked several minutes later.

"Really?" That-That had been something that had gnawed at him. His mother had placed family above anything else in life, and with the way he'd screwed up, how he was leaving, he hadn't known what she would think, what she would say. The fear of her being ashamed of him had been almost as bad as knowing his dad had been.

"I think she knew how hard it was for her dad to leave his home, and I'm not sure he ever really connected with anyone again. She'd be happy, that you've found people that get you, that accept you."

Stiles nodded, feeling unusually solemn in the face of his father's stories.

"Do you think she knew? About werewolves and everything?"

"Maybe," His dad sighed. "I don't know. But if she did, I think she would have been a lot like you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your mom believed in everything, without any reservations. Remember? And I think she would have been in the middle of it. If she'd been alive when the Hale fire-" His dad stopped, shaking his head. "Maybe I would have had a better idea. But she was-It happened after that. So I don't know."

Stiles hummed thoughtfully.

"No one knows who the emissary was before Deaton. He supposedly doesn't know, and any clues were wiped out with the fire. I've been wondering, but I haven't checked," Stiles admitted.

"What do you mean?"
"I've been thinking about checking into when Deaton arrived, see if the timing works or not."

His dad nodded. "Sounds like a good idea. Why haven't you checked?"

Stiles shrugged. "Would have been weird, is all. I guess it's just strange, to think if I'd been born before grandpa died, if the Hales had lived, maybe I would have been his apprentice. Just, a lot of what ifs."

"Huh." His dad said, voice thoughtful. "I don't know. Even if they were, you're still with Derek, right? Caroline says you two and her daughter are attached at the hips. I get that it's not all of them," He dad added gently. "But you're both still looking out for each other."

Stiles nodded, not really sure what he felt. He'd never brought it up to Derek, the past still being something they spoke of in absolutes, never allowing themselves the 'what ifs'. He didn't know if it was because it would hurt too much to think of how things could have been different or if it was because they'd both accepted that it couldn't be changed. But it was something he'd been curious enough to ask Rick about. Only Rick didn't know, couldn't find any records of who had been the Hale emissary. Deaton could be lying, but Stiles honestly didn't know, and probably wouldn't have trusted a concrete answer anyway.

"Do you mind checking? I mean, I'd get it if you didn't want to, but-"

"I don't mind. You sure you want to know?"

Stiles nodded. He wasn't exactly sure what he'd do with the information regardless of whether his grandfather had been or not. But if he had been-

He didn't believe in fate. He really didn't. But a part of himself liked the idea, that even if life had worked out differently, even if Scott had never been bitten, he and Derek would have crossed paths, become friends. (The irony wasn't lost on him.)

"You ever think about specializing in languages? Since you seem to be good at them," His dad suggested later, thumbing through one of his Russian textbooks.

Stiles stared at the books scattered through his living room, from translating dictionaries to lexicons and notebooks filled with notes. He hadn't even thought about it before, really, but he spent an inordinate amount of time learning and translating.

"You think?" He asked quietly.

"Do you enjoy it?"

Stiles thought about it, thought about how languages were puzzles that looked like a mess until he found the keystone and suddenly things fell into place, about the gratification that didn't quench the need to know.

"Yeah, dad."

When his dad left a few days later, they both looked better. They'd talked, and his dad had spoken more with Rick, the two getting along unnervingly well. (Stiles sincerely feared for himself and Cassie now that Rick and his dad were 'buddies'.) They'd had dinner with the Valdyrs again, the second time involving the whole family. Somehow, his dad hadn't gotten overwhelmed, even when Elijah asked him uncomfortable questions about the prostitute population in Beacon Hills. They weren't perfect, but they were getting better.
He pretended to look away when his dad pulled Derek from a handshake into a hug and thanked him -'helped my son, Derek, thank you-' was all he heard- before giving his dad one last hug goodbye.

Derek looked stunned as the car drove away.

"Your dad just hugged me."

"Yeah, he did."

When Derek looked at him, completely bewildered, Stiles laughed, long and hard, until he was doubled over and crying a little. His face hurt from smiling so widely.

(A week later his dad called and spoke to him in quiet tones. Stiles thanked him, promised him he loved him and hung up. He didn't say anything to Derek or Cassie about it.)
It was unseasonably hot and muggy for June, and Stiles had been politely but firmly voluntold for the renovations to the pack house. Derek and he had gotten through it all fairly quickly, Stiles had never forgotten the work he’d done or let himself grow rusty with tools. They’d reached the point of priming the walls in preparation for paint, which Caroline still hadn’t picked out. He and Derek both were debating the idea of building another garage as they worked - 'we don't need one Derek', 'yes, we do' 'what for, your truck?' - when Caroline walked in. Stiles, training to be more in tune with the pack and with the alpha especially, could easily sense that she was upset, and he and Derek both dropped their rollers into the trays and wiped their hands of the excess paint that had dripped on them.

"You have visitors, Stiles," Caroline intoned, voice cool.

Confused, Stiles looked at Derek. It wasn't his dad, Caroline liked his dad, and respected him even more. Not able to think of anyone that would come to him at the pack house, he nodded and followed her downstairs.

Scott and Lydia were sitting on the couch, backs ramrod straight in an overcompensation for perfect posture. Or it could have been the intense, focused stares directed at them. Unfortunately, there weren't many secrets among werewolves, and the Christmas-That-Didn't was an unspoken but known event. Even Rick, for all that he wasn't a werewolf, looked predatory as he watched them.

He was extremely aware of his worn, ripped jeans and the paint speckles on his shirt and skin, still drying into stiffness. Everything felt formal except for him. Maybe it was because Caroline was still wearing her powersuit from work, or because Lydia had dressed up a little, but it felt official. And anything official, especially involving him, was cause for alarm.

"We'll be nearby if you need anything," Caroline told him, the warning to Scott explicit. Everyone but Cassie began filing out of the room, and Stiles understood what Caroline was doing, knew exactly why Scott had come with Lydia, knew they were following protocols he still thought were bullshit even as he understood the necessity for them.

"Hello," Stiles greeted cautiously, sitting down next to Cassie. She looked relaxed except for the fact that her jaw was so tight it looked ready to shatter.

"Hello," Lydia started. Scott just looked angry, and Stiles wondered why the hell they were there when Scott obviously didn't want to be. Scott's mouth opened and Stiles thought maybe he would get that reason, but then there was the sound of teeth clicking together, and Stiles felt as much as saw
Derek walk into the room before sitting down next to him. The white primer stood out even more on Derek's skin than on his own, and there were streaks where he'd tried to wipe them off.

Scott growled. Stiles felt his stomach bottom out when Cassie returned the sound.

"I'm about to turn twenty one," He said, stating the obvious and hoping to draw focus back to himself. "And that's when I oath. I take it that's why you're here? To ask me not to?"

"Stiles, John said to come talk to you, we're trying," Scott ground out. Stiles figured it had something to do with the fact that Derek was pressed against him on the couch.

"About what? Because I know it wasn't about bringing me back to Beacon Hills."

Scott looked like he was resisting the urge to wolf out. Lydia looked genuinely desperate, which he would have found disquieting had it been any other situation. As much as she drove him crazy, he knew she was normally stronger, more poised. Now she looked like she was barely holding together, ready to fall apart beneath the pressure.

"Stiles, you're ours," Scott tried, and huh. Even though Cassie was growling right in his ear, he was positive he heard a few other growls coming from outside the room, completely in sync, which would have been impressive under any other circumstances. And even comforting, given what the declaration meant. Instead, he was silently offering up any number of promises in exchange for potential violence to be kept to a minimum.

"I haven't been yours for almost four years," He finally said, thankful the words came out sounding like a statement instead of an accusation. "No, Scott," He added gently.

"So that's it?" Scott snapped, temper quickly unfurling as his body tensed and he jumped up, hands waving. It felt dangerously like the entire house was tuned into Scott's sudden movement and Stiles felt Cassie and Derek both ready to spring, to get between him and Scott and protect him. He let his hands find their legs and willed them to stay down. "You talk to your dad, tell him everything, make sure he can't even look at me without disappointment. John won't even allow the pack near the house, and for what? Derek?"

"Don't. Derek and my dad have nothing to do with this," Stiles warned. "This was my choice. If you have a problem with it, then that's on me, not them."

"You lied to us. To me," Scott accused. "You've been sneaking around for years! With Derek!" He added, spitting the name even though he refused to look directly at Derek, which Stiles realized was a genuine accomplishment, considering Derek was practically glued to his side.

"Guys, I think you should show Lydia-Somewhere else. I don't care. The back yard, whatever. I need to talk to Scott alone." As much as he appreciated the support, he knew Derek and Cassie's presences were only making it worse, and he knew Scott wasn't going to see straight until they (Derek, specifically) were gone. Lydia looked ready to protest, but Derek and Cassie both stood, made a point to nod at him before staring at Lydia until Scott nodded tightly in her direction. She followed them out the door to the back deck and Stiles waited until Scott sat back down.

"I made mistakes, Scott. No one is arguing that I fucked up. It doesn't change that I had to leave," Stiles started quietly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I made a dozen excuses, and that was my fault. But I can't come back."

"I had to deal with everyone telling me no just to come here and talk to you," Scott snapped. "And you're just saying sorry and telling me no? Stiles, you're my brother, you belong with us, with me."
Stiles made a derisive sound, shaking his head. "You really don't remember, do you?"

"Remember what?" Scott demanded.

"Everything, for a start," Stiles muttered, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice and failing. "I was a fucking disaster back then."

"Everyone was messed up after Jennifer and Deucalion were gone," Scott countered. "You weren't the only one having problems. At least you didn't have to deal with figuring out how to run a pack," He added. Stiles didn't know what Scott was trying to accomplish, but he was almost positive the anger, making itself known in the flush blotting his skin and grinding of his teeth weren't it.

"How would you know about my problems?" He snapped. "You wouldn't even listen to me."

"All you ever talked about were Ethan and Aiden-"

"Because they murdered people, Scott. It could have just as easily been Issac as Erica or Boyd," He reminded him, sickened that he even had to put it in that perspective. "It could have been any of us."

"Erica and Boyd left the pack-"

Stiles bit the inside of his cheek, tasted blood and swallowed the secrets down, because those wouldn't help, would only make things so much worse than they already were. They weren't just his secrets to keep, and they'd do more damage to Derek than they would to Scott.

"It doesn't matter, Scott. They were willing to kill any of us."

"But Deucalion was ordering them to!"

"Are you serious?" Stiles sputtered. "You were a newly turned beta resisting your alpha, who was feral and had better control of you via your link than Deucalion had over the twins. And you expect me to believe they couldn't have said, 'hey, maybe this murder thing is wrong'? Fuck the fairy tales, Scott. Human love doesn't erase the past. It doesn't change that I had to help bury two bodies."

"So what, I tell Aiden and Ethan to leave and you'll come back?" Scott sneered. "Because emotionally blackmailing me is totally ethical."

"No, I'm not saying that at all. They can leave, you can kick them out, whatever. I'm not coming back, not to the pack."

Scott opened his mouth, but the words must have sunk in because he made a strangled sound before looking like he'd been physically wounded by them.

"Why?"

"Because I don't trust you," Stiles admitted, forcing himself to not look away, to keep his focus squarely on Scott. He owed him that much.

The bitter bark of laughter that erupted from Scott's chest was unexpected, grated in Stiles' ears and made him flinch.

"That's so typical," Scott snapped. "You lie to me for years and then say you can't trust me?"

"I'm not asking you to trust me, I know I don't deserve it. But no, I can't trust you. When I tried to tell you something was wrong, you ignored it." And even if he had been led to it, even if he had been vulnerable, Stiles knew he wouldn't be able to forget that, wouldn't be able to instinctively trust that
he would register on Scott's radar when things went to shit again, as they inevitably would.

"But you trust Derek?"

"Derek doesn't have anything to do with this."

"Bullshit Stiles. I can't believe this. You trust him more than me?" Scott demanded, anger and shock mixing in his voice, making it dissonant.

"Yes."

"After everything he did?"

Stiles pinched the bridge of his nose and tried not to start screaming. "None of us is innocent Scott. We all fucked up. At least he admits his culpability and tries to be better than what he was." He didn't voice the accusations that sat on his tongue, tried to escape his mouth because it would be so easy to hurt Scott, to tell Scott all that Derek had done for him. But Derek wasn't a tool, wasn't a weapon. He couldn't do that, and even if it would be an (excruciatingly tempting) emotional kick to the balls for Scott, it wouldn't help anything. And, he reminded himself, he wanted to fix the situation, or at least reach a point where fixing it was possible.

"Scott, Derek isn't the reason I left. Stop trying to drag him into this. It was my choice."

"You're lying," Scott snarled. "I can hear your heart."

Stiles shook his head, knowing what the lie was. Even as he sorted through plausible explanations, ways to skirt around Deaton, Scott continued.

"Derek could be using you like he's always done and you're pretending like we're the ones that fucked you over! You hated him-"

"Don't, Scott," Stiles snapped.

"Why? You're telling me not to ignore the others, but Derek gets a free pass?" Scott demanded incredulously. "You know him!"

"I do know him," Stiles reminded him. "A hell of a lot better than you do."

"How can you just ignore that he used people?"

"I'm not!" Stiles roared, surprised by his own volume, by the fact that he and Scott were suddenly toe to toe, in each other's faces. "I'm not blind to who he was Scott. But when it counted he was there. There were dozens of times he could have left me for dead and he didn't. He pulled my ass out of the fire when I needed it, and it's a hell of a lot more than you did! He had to tell you to actually look at me and you still didn't have a clue!" He bit back the rest, sucked on the open cut in his cheek to keep from going further, before he became another person that used Derek to hurt someone else, before he crossed any more over that fucking line.

"I knew you were having some nightmares-"

"Some?" Stiles choked out, half hysterical on the edge of his anger. "Some nightmares? Every time I went to sleep, Scott. Every goddamn time," He snarled. "I was killing myself trying to stay awake and you couldn't be bothered because you wanted it to be over, and fuck reality." It had been a slap in the face of everything he'd done, and it still hurt, that he'd been ignored in favor of pretending the world was fine, that everything was fine. He'd been willing to let Scott burn both of them alive, and
in the end he hadn't warranted more than a few excuses.

"Stop doing that, it was bad for all of us," Scott ground out, glaring at him.

"This bad?" Stiles sneered, pulling up one side of his shirt and damning the consequences. When Scott's eyes widened and tracked over his ribs he felt a mirthless smile twisting his face. "Tell me Scott, how hard was it to close your eyes and stick your fingers in your ears? Because I tried, but they were always there," He finished, letting the shirt drop back into place. "I couldn't stop seeing them, and when I tried to tell you you didn't listen."

"What did you do?"

"I think that's pretty obvious," He snapped. "You got to waltz merrily into the future clinging to your childish ideals because you were so fucking terrified of the truth. I didn't get that option. In your perfect little bubble we would always be best friends, we'd always be brothers, so it was totally fine to leave me by the wayside to fucking butcher myself for your sense of peace."

"I trusted you to be there."

"You lost the right to that expectation that day you looked at me and told me to lie to my dad about the twins. Or maybe it was before that," He added, feeling the years of resentment, the buildup of a hundred close calls, of being left behind or forgotten spilling out. "Maybe it was when you were playing grabass with Allison and I was left in a fucking operating room with a bone saw. It could have been the time you hung up on me when I was facing a kanima. And let's not forget you neglecting to mention your little plan with Gerard, the guy who beat the shit out of me because of you and firebombed my dad's office with my dad inside!"

"I didn't have a choice!"

"There are always choices," Stiles snarled, spitting the declaration into Scott's face, ignoring the red of his brother's eyes. "Don't try to pretend that you were all alone in the world because you had me, and you forgot me. When it counted, you weren't there. And you want, what? A convenient excuse, a scapegoat? Look in a fucking mirror Scott. Shit, blame me. I chose this. I chose to leave."

"So you're choosing another pack, Derek, over your own family," Scott spat out.

"If you were actually my family you wouldn't try to turn this into an either or scenario," Stiles bit out venomously. "God, it's like the world has to revolve around you. If it doesn't work the way you want it to it can't possibly be valid, can it? Everybody is forgiven, everybody is loved as long as they cater to your insecurities. Fuck that, I don't need that kind of acceptance and I sure as hell don't want to be your goddamn security blanket."

"So you don't care if I lose it, if you screw up my anchor?" Scott bit out.

"Don't," Stiles warned him. "Don't you ever-" He shook his head, thinking about feral alphas and the gun in his car, of the role he still hadn't completely accepted. "We made choices Scott. We have to live with them. I am choosing to stay here. You have a pack, you have your anchor. I haven't been a part of it, I can't be a part of it."

"Even if I need you," Scott tried, and Stiles acknowledged bitterly that no, Scott's kicked puppy face hadn't really lost any of it's power. It was still a punch in the gut, the words validating one part of him while simultaneously pissing off another. "Stiles, I need you to be with us."

"Don't you fucking dare," Stiles snarled, growing more angry at the obvious manipulation. He hated that Scott could still get to him, that Scott was willing to go that far. "You don't need me."
"And they do?"

"Yes!" Stiles shouted.

"For what? What's so important that you're willing to leave behind your family?"

"They're my family too!" Stiles snarled, feeling the need to change, to alter the world around him. It slipped into his voice and he could feel the power around him humming dissonantly from the lack of direction. He snapped his mouth shut and tried to think of the water, of Derek having faith in him, expecting better of him, afraid because he felt potential dancing at his fingertips and on the tip of his tongue. Two years of learning himself hadn't prepared him for the onslaught of his gift wanting, reaching despite every conscious effort he made to reign it in.

"You're calling these people family?" Scott demanded. "You're an emissary, not their son. You do-"

Stiles didn't hear the rest, tried to shut it out and think, to clear his mind. When he tried to breathe all he could drag in was shallow pants of air, too small to sustain his lungs. The world tipped dizzily under his feet and he braced himself, prepared himself to fall forward. He thought about his dad calling him randomly, for no reason at all, just to hear him talk about whatever new and weird thing he'd learned. Despite that, or maybe because of it, he could only think about 'family', his mind cycling back to it and how fucking angry he was that Scott was demeaning what he'd built, what he'd done, the people he loved and everything they'd been through together. Every heartbeat was another second, another litany of buried resentments making themselves known, like every cut was opening, bleeding out poison that had been trapped beneath the scar tissue. A thousand moments he'd needed Scott and been forced to find his own way came back to haunt him. Every time he'd been alone, hurt and terrified in his room juxtaposed over all of the moments he hadn't been, and he couldn't find Scott in any of them.

"Alpha McCall, I'm afraid you've worn out your welcome."

Stiles started, looked over and saw Rick in the doorway, expression set in hard, unforgiving lines.

"You said we could talk, privately," Scott started.

"Stiles, anchor it," Rick commanded, not even looking at him, his eyes trained on Scott. "Derek, Cassie, inside now," He added, louder this time.

"Stiles-" Scott started, turning to look back at him. Stiles looked up into concerned brown eyes and couldn't stop the bark of laughter that erupted from high in his throat. Scott was always concerned too late, when the damage had been done and he hated it, hated how years of hurts and resentments were culminating in one concerned look, too little too late. He hated, and it was a wash of adrenaline in his system, chaotic and purifying. The darkness around him receded, the too bright light in his eyes burning them, spots and sparks dancing in his vision.

"Stiles," Rick started again, coming closer. "Ground it."

The words echoed and reverberated in the world around him and he could feel the resonance, felt Rick trying to push that wave back, to dam it up before it exploded out of him.

Stiles tried to find that reason, that solid base he'd had. 'Do right'. Do right for his dad, for Derek, who had faith in him. Do right to be worthy of everything they'd done for him. Except he had no idea what 'right' was when everything was narrowing itself to an angry, spiteful pinpoint of focus.

"Get out," He whispered, voice hoarse like he'd been screaming. He was reasonably sure he hadn't, although he couldn't be entirely sure since there were arms wrapped around him, a solid warmth at
his back, and he couldn't remember when Cassie had buried her face between his shoulder blades, wrapped her arms around him like she could hold all of his problems and keep the anger from spilling out.

"What-"

"Leave, Scott. Go home." Please, he thought. Please just get out, get away. just let me fucking breathe.

"You just had a panic attack and you want me to leave?" Scott demanded, voice pitched with incredulity. "I'm not leaving you here with them!"

Incredulity swelled, backed by years of building cynicism and bitterness. Them. Like they hadn't slowly pieced him back together, like they hadn't helped him build himself into something stronger, offered him a home, a choice, solidarity. Them, a damning label for outsider, and Stiles didn't belong with them, when he had never belonged anywhere else. In a vicious moment of clarity, he knew he was part of 'them', and that meant Scott wouldn't let him be a part of the 'us' he'd implied. The dam broke.

"You're not welcome here."

The pressure in his skull abated so quickly he felt dizzy, sagged into Cassie and let her hold most of his weight. For the first time in an eternity his chest expanded and he could feel air rushing into his lungs.

Rick drew in a sharp breath.

"Alpha McCall, I think it's time for you and your beta to leave," He said, voice quiet but unyielding. "Now. You'll be escorted out of the territory."

"We don't need an escort," Scott snapped, face red. Something sharp twisted in Stiles' chest at the sight. Scott looked ready to cry, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen him like that. Not since they'd been facing the deaths of their parents.

"Nevertheless, you will have one. Marianne, please," Rick intoned, no longer looking at Scott. Stiles knew Rick well enough to see the frustration in his eyes as Lydia and Scott were practically shoved out of the room.

When the front door closed, loud enough for them to hear it in the living room, Rick heaved a sigh and dropped down onto one of the couches.

"I just fucked up, didn't I?" Stiles muttered, face flooding with heat.

"I wouldn't put it in quite those terms," Rick said carefully. "It's nothing that can't be undone."

"What did I do?"

"You created a compulsion."

Stiles stared at Rick with rapidly growing comprehension that twisted and soured into horror.

"Fuck," He muttered, pulling away from whoever was keeping him upright. "I'm sorry. I-I didn't know-I didn't mean to-"

"It can be undone," Rick told him. "If you want to, that is."
"What's going on?" Cassie asked, voice quiet. "Stiles what did you say?"

"I'm sorry," He mumbled again, not sure if he was apologizing to Rick or Scott or to Derek and his dad for screwing up so spectacularly even though he'd tried not to. He stumbled away, back for the stairs.

Autopilot kicked in, his body moving of it's own volition up the stairs and into the room he'd been working on with Derek. His hand shook when he grabbed the paint roller and started painting again, blind to the wet stripes of white. Tears scalded his eyes and he sniffed, trying to hold them back and failing.

He couldn't figure out when the tension had snapped, when he'd given up. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out the moment he'd stopped wanting to fix things because even now he wanted to find Scott and apologize, to ask him to just listen. Even if it wouldn't do any good, even if Scott was too angry, he just wanted to say sorry, that he hadn't meant it. He felt like a child again, apologizing for a rash bout of anger, for pushing Scott over on the playground after his mother had died, angry for as long as it took to inhale and exhale, horrified and ashamed that he'd hurt his best friend.

Fuck. A compulsion, a geis. He'd done something to make Scott leave. And the worst part was, he didn't know how he'd done it, what he'd altered, only that he'd felt better after he had. Wondering what that said about him, what it said about his control, he dropped the roller in it's tray and gave up on painting. He wasn't even sure if Caroline and Rick would want him in their house. Jesus-Rick had taught him how dangerous they were, how easily they could backfire and he'd thoughtlessly created one aimed at Scott. His brother.

"Stiles."

Stiles turned to Derek, saw understanding he didn't deserve practically radiating from the werewolf.

"I'm sorry," He repeated, scrubbing his face and feeling a tacky line of paint pulling at his skin. He waited, not sure what he was waiting for.

"It's alright," Derek told him, coming closer. Stiles wanted to step back, to put some distance between himself and everyone. He settled for shaking his head. If there was one thing it wasn't, alright was that exact thing.

"I tried to hold it back," He whimpered, a pathetic attempt at defending himself that fell flat in his own ears. He'd tried to hold back his will, his temper, everything, and he'd failed.

"It's alright," Derek repeated, his hands coming up slowly to rest on his shoulders. "Stiles-

"He's never going to talk to me again. Shit-" He blurted. "Derek, I fucked up. I aimed it at Scott-"


The sharp lungful of air was bitter with the chemicals from paint. Stiles gasped around the taste that fouled his mouth and tried to inhale again only to fail. The more he tried to breathe the more his lungs rejected the air. He pushed away from Derek, stumbled back into the wall and slid down. The chemical smell only got worse, burning the inside of his throat. Everything he wanted to say got caught in his mouth, turned back and down.

He felt air rushing over his face, warm and moist, against his nose and mouth. He hadn't realized his eyes were shut until he opened them and saw Derek's face in front of his, their foreheads pressed together.
"Breathe with me Stiles, in two three," Derek kept murmuring rhythmically. Stiles latched onto the echo of his voice, followed the pattern of the breaths fanning over his face.

His heart unclenched in between each beat, his vision expanded, the gray seeping out and giving way to color. Derek kept repeating the process, in two three hold two three out two three, the vibrations of his words echoing over too sensitive skin.

Stiles sagged against him, holding the pattern and letting it pull him back.

"I'm sorry," He said again.

"Breathe," Derek repeated, the tension eking out of his body.

It could have been minutes or hours later when Stiles felt his teeth unclench enough to start talking again.

"I screwed up," He muttered. "I shouldn't have done that."

Derek didn't try to gainsay him, and he was grateful for it, grateful he didn't have to list out the myriad reasons of why it was wrong, how badly he'd reacted. But he wasn't pulling away either, and Stiles knew he deserved something, anything as punishment.

"I'm not any better than the rest of them." And that-That was a bitter pill to swallow. After all of his sanctimonious bullshit, he'd lost his shit and used his gift to put a geis on Scott.

"You didn't hurt him," Derek said into the quiet.

Stiles buried his face in his hands, not sure enough of what he'd done to actually explain it, to know whether or not he had magically harmed his brother. That he'd emotionally fucked him went without saying, and now that all of his anger had cooled, he was left with the sinking feeling that he'd lost something as important, as vital, as a limb.

"I used magic against him. I acted-" He shook his head and exhaled sharply into his palms. He'd acted like a child. He was only a couple of weeks away from being twenty one and undertaking a life long oath, and he'd just had a meltdown that included using a magical ban hammer on his brother. Adding insult to injury, he'd had no right to act in that capacity, knew he'd overstepped boundaries that were solely Rick and Caroline's to determine. Even if he'd tried he was sure he couldn't have done worse.

"It'll be okay," Derek tried. Stiles choked on a laugh.

"It won't," He muttered into his hands, sure for the first time it wouldn't. "Scott-Fuck. Scott," He mumbled, unable to look at Derek because he was crying over Scott and he didn't know how to stop. "I can't fix it." Which was the worst part of it all. He'd tried, and somehow he had fallen short.

"We'll fix it," Derek promised, pulling him closer. Stiles sagged, let Derek arrange his legs so that he was flush against him. He fought the sensation that he was breaking apart, that Derek was trying to keep all the pieces of him held together with a faith he hadn't earned and a compassion he didn't deserve.

Because he knew that the compulsion could be broken, that he could undo his magic. But he was never going to be able to take back everything he'd said.

(Caroline told him later, her face a mask of sympathy, that Alpha McCall had banned the Valdyr pack from Beacon Hills. Stiles hadn't thought he could cry any more than he already had. Sitting in
the chair in her office, trying to meet her eyes and failing, he realized he'd been wrong.

"I shouldn't have gotten angry," Stiles muttered into the phone. "I fucked up."

"This compulsion thing, what is it, exactly?" His dad asked.

Stiles shuddered. Rick had explained it, and given how pissed he'd been, it wasn't technically all that bad. That didn't change his feelings about it, didn't diminish the shame he felt for creating it in the first place. "I'm connected to Caroline's territory, sort of like I am to the nemeton. It's not—it's not like that tie. But I apparently put a sort of mood into the land."

"Mood?"

"Scott can come here, but he won't feel welcome." It was significantly less than the bans Rick had woven into the land before, apparently more than Stiles had ever realized. Those people couldn't even come into the territory. But still, he'd done something incredibly stupid without even realizing it, and the exercises on his control had increased until his only free time was when he was on a break at work or passed out at night.

"And the nemeton, did it—" His dad trailed off. Stiles knew it was still a sore spot for his dad, that even though he didn't know what it was exactly, he had grasped the idea and blamed himself, still.

"Rick's not sure. But I don't think—" It would be so easy to blame the nemeton. Rick had even suggested it, only—Only he didn't know, wasn't sure he wanted to know. Even if it had been, it didn't change anything. He'd had it under control, and seeing Scott—He wanted to shift culpability and at the same time wanted to shoulder all of the blame. "I don't think it was that," He finally said.

"Scott's been an ass before, but this takes the cake," His dad said. "Sounds like you both screwed up, kid."

"I'm sorry," Stiles whispered, needing to say it to someone, to anyone. To his dad and Derek for betraying their faith in him, to Caroline and Rick for falling short of their expectations, to Cassie for scaring her. To Scott, who wouldn't listen.

"I know kid," His dad sighed. "If he tries to keep you out of Beacon Hills, I'm going to shoot him," He declared abruptly, easily, as if it was no big deal that he was threatening to shoot his stepson. Stiles made a horrified sound. "With normal bullets. He'll be fine and I'll have made my point."

"Dad, it's not that easy."

"When is it ever? But you two will figure this out. You told him the truth, Stiles. All you can do is wait for him to come to terms with it. And to pull his head out of his ass so he can actually acknowledge his own mistakes."

Stiles didn't hold out much hope of either happening at any point in the foreseeable future, if ever.

"He said you weren't allowing the pack near the house."

"That was actually Melissa's decision."

"What?"

"She's pissed too son. Scott didn't just lie to me about what all happened back then."

Stiles shook his head like it actually meant something, like his dad would be able to see it. "She's his
"And she loves him. But she's disappointed in him, and she's dealing with it her way."

Stiles scrubbed his face. The last thing he'd wanted was to endanger the relationship Scott had with his mother. Small wonder Scott had been so angry.

"Hey, this isn't on you, you know that, right?"

"Sure dad," He muttered.

"No, you listen to me. What's going on between Scott and Melissa is on them. She and I both know that your and Scott's problems are yours. This is because of his dishonesty with us, not you."

Stiles knew his dad wasn't reprimanding him for what he'd done, but it still sort of felt like it.

"You're biased and totally pissed on my behalf," He retorted, needing to get away from the image of Melissa crossing her arms and yelling at Scott.

"Damn right, although I'm pissed he lied to me too. But she's smarter than us. She knows the difference. Don't put this on yourself. Scott has to deal with the consequences of his own actions, same as you."

"What consequences?" Stiles demanded. "I'm-I still get to talk to you and I have Derek and Cas and the pack here. Shit, I know if I showed up there he wouldn't force me out. What consequences am I dealing with, exactly?"

"You know what it is Stiles," His dad said, voice going quiet.

Stiles bit back the sarcastic retort that had been ready to burn past his lips. His dad knew his defenses better than he did.

"Look, my break's almost over. But just-Give it some time. Scott's a decent kid. Once he sits down and thinks about it, he'll call you."

"Sure dad," Stiles mumbled into the phone, having absolutely no faith in that statement whatsoever.

"Love you kid."

"Love you too dad," He sighed, staying on until the call disconnected. He tossed his phone on the couch and leaned back.

Derek found him still sitting there when he came in over an hour later. As if sensing the riot currently going on in Stiles' brain, he remained silent and sat on the opposite end, sitting the phone on the coffee table.

"I really wanted to fix it," Stiles admitted quietly. "I wanted us to figure this shit out together. I wanted us to figure out how to be friends again, instead of this-" He waved his hands angrily. "And I lost my fucking temper. I should have-" He stopped. He didn't know what he should have done, but everything he had done hadn't been it, not by a mile.

"I lost my best friend."

Because even if Derek knew him inside and out, even if Cas was his partner in crime, neither of them were Scott, who had been there for him when his mom had died and traded lunches with him and played video games through dozens of different game stations and promised him they'd be
Superman and Batman when they were just eight years old. Derek and Cassie were his best friends but they weren't replacements, they weren't Scott, and he had always held out some hope that he and Scott would figure everything out, like they always had. That they would figure out some sort of plan so they could actually take that dumb college road trip they'd always talked about to see all of the stupid sideshow attractions no one actually cared about and be the best man at each other's weddings and godfathers to their kids, all of it. Gone.

"Fuck," Stiles muttered, throat thick. "I don't know what to do anymore."

"Give it time," Derek said, shifting closer. "It'll work out. You and Scott are brothers."

Stiles slouched into him.

"I feel like I've disappointed everyone," He admitted quietly. "Rick and Caroline said it wasn't that bad, that I can undo it, I just need to work on my control. She said I acted defensively instead of actually hurting him," He snorted, remembering that conversation more clearly than he wanted to. Caroline's understanding had been a punishment all on it's own, only increasing his guilt. "I just--" He shook his head.

Derek hummed thoughtfully, threw an arm over his shoulder and pulled him in closer. "We all lose control at some point," He started, voice quiet. "It's inevitable."

"Yeah but I put a taboo on Scott kicking him out of a territory," Stiles countered bitterly, unable to push down the self loathing that had been a constant bedfellow ever since Scott had left.

"When we first started showing signs of coming into our strength, my mom would pull us out of school," Derek continued. Stiles quieted immediately. Derek sometimes recounted bits and pieces of his life before the fire, but not often, and rarely without reason. "We were a danger to everyone around us. Laura didn't think so. So she hid it."

There was a point to the story, Stiles knew, he just didn't know what. Derek paused, his eyes flicking back and forth, like he was sifting through visible memories laid out in front of him.

"Laura pushed a boy into a wall. He fractured his shoulder blade and got a concussion, and there were some scars left, from her claws. I don't know why she did it, but she was pulled out of public school the next day. Mom kept a better watch on us after that."

"I'm almost twenty one. I know better."

"Losing control isn't subject to age."

"It doesn't change anything," He snapped impatiently, knowing he was being unfair, that Derek had offered a part of himself and his life. But Laura had been in school, a child just coming into her own strengths.

"It doesn't," Derek agreed. "I get it though. Being angry at yourself for hurting someone. Being afraid of what you're capable of."

Stiles felt a new wave of guilt overtaking his anger and he sighed, tried to shift away from Derek only to be pulled closer.

"We can only try to be better," Derek reminded him quietly.

Stiles shuddered, heaved a sigh and gave in. There weren't many other options, after all. In the end, all he could do was try to be better, somehow. To learn, even if it felt like the whole lesson had been
nothing but an exercise in futility.

"I'm not disappointed, you know," Derek offered an eternity later.

Stiles didn't say that he should be, that being worth everything Derek had given him was his cornerstone, the anchor he used when the world pressed at him and his gift pushed back.

"I'm sad. I know how much Scott means to you. But I know you two will figure it out."

"Thanks," he mumbled, wanting to believe it, to have faith in it. And even if he didn't deserve to, well, he did, have a little hope, that is. Just enough to take the edge off of the sadness and let him breathe.

Stiles re-read the email for the umpteenth time, just to make sure he wasn't missing anything, wasn't misinterpreting the Russian words lining his screen.

In a fit of frustration, he'd asked about points where the currents pooled, and how Abram worked with them, if he'd even done so. He'd mentioned his tie to the nemeton, explaining what it had done to him, how he'd made the sacrifice and why, all of the bits and pieces of what he'd done and even the theories he and Rick had. Abram had taken a while to respond, but he had responded, and with a wealth of information Stiles hadn't even known existed, each new fact or idea more bewildering and encouraging than the one before it.

When Derek walked in, loaded down with groceries, Stiles was still reading over the email.

"Did you know in parts of Europe it's not uncommon for people with gifts to offer themselves as sacrifices?" He asked bluntly.

Derek sat the bags on the dining room table and came to sit next to him, expression very carefully neutral, patient.

"Like, it's considered a mock sacrifice, because they live. But they still do it." Like he had, killing themselves, going under and somehow being pulled back.

"Why?" Derek asked, brow furrowing into a deep V. Stiles shook his head.

"Apparently being tied to an axis can enhance your power. Fuck, people do this to themselves willingly."

"You said that Rick and Deaton agreed the nemeton was polluted though," Derek murmured thoughtfully. "That the sacrifices Jennifer made tainted it."

"That's the thing though. Some of them have been the same thing." Not many, granted, but enough, if you recognized the signs. There were other polluted axes, and people tied to them, people that had slaughtered innocents just for a chance at being stronger.

"Maybe other people thought it was worth it."

Stiles cursed fluently in three different languages, ignoring the arched brow Derek gave him when he shifted seamlessly to Latin. "Fuck it. Anyway. The ties aren't fixed, not like Rick thinks they are."

Derek was definitely interested, his whole demeanor changing, his body shifting closer to Stiles.

"They can be broken?"
"Yeah. I mean, Abram said it's really difficult. But it can be done," He started, looking back at the lines of Cyrillic.

"You're not telling me everything," Derek pointed out, expression growing wary. Stiles shrugged uncomfortably, still trying to puzzle out the implications of Abram's caveats.

"He said that sometimes the tie doesn't break right. That people get pulled out of themselves or something, bound to it."

"Like Rick thinks Jennifer is," Derek muttered, voice flat.

Stiles nodded.

"No."

"But."

"No, Stiles. You can't risk that."

"But I'm supposed to live with this for the rest of my life?" He demanded. "I'm just supposed to feel this thing, this fucking thing that just needles into my brain when I let my guard down? That makes me question myself all the fucking time?"

"Yes," Derek snapped, getting up and pacing the length of the room, exuding nervous, anxious energy with every movement.

"This isn't your life Derek, it's mine. I have a chance-"

"You could kill yourself," Derek roared, eyes flashing blue. "You could get pulled into it and die. Is that what you want? Is it worth it?"

Stiles stared at Derek, not quite sure what he was seeing. Derek looked angry, but he sounded-Scared. Derek was scared.

Death didn't happen to the person dying. It happened to everyone around them. He'd been a fucking idiot to forget it, especially where Derek was concerned.

"I hate dealing with this," Stiles admitted. "It feels like I tried to do the right thing and I got punished for it, like I'm still getting punished for it. Even Rick saying that tying myself to the vé permanently might balance it out doesn't mean it will disappear. I'm always going to have this and I don't fucking want it. Every time I think about being an old man dealing with this shit I feel like I'm already there. It's so goddamn heavy."

Derek opened his mouth to say something, then shook his head violently and walked towards the door, already digging his keys out of his pocket.

"Dude, Derek," Stiles shouted, leaping off the couch, over the coffee table and grabbing Derek's arm. "Don't. Just-I'm not saying I'm doing it, alright? I'm just, it's frustrating. I have an answer and I can't-" He flailed helplessly.

"I know we're not enough," Derek said, not looking at him. "I know I don't have a right to tell you what to do with your life-"

"Bullshit," Stiles muttered. "Friends tell eachother what to do with their lives sometimes. Especially when it concerns, you know, breathing. So yeah, I get it. And it's not that you guys aren't enough,
alright? No one could deal with this for me. The substitute doesn't get a substitute," He joked weakly. "It's just frustrating, alright? To have an answer but not be able to do anything with it."

Derek nodded slowly. Stiles let go of his arm and walked over to table covered in groceries and stared at them, not really seeing anything.

"I don't ever forget it's there. But most days it's tolerable. Just lately, this thing with Scott," He shrugged. "It's like we were broken before the sacrifice, but the minute we went under, we just, I dunno, lost any chance of fixing things." And as much as he wanted to blame the nemeton, he knew a majority of the blame rested squarely on his shoulders, for running, for lying and hiding everything. For using his gift, for telling Scott to leave when they'd both been angry, for walking away without explaining, thinking it had been the right thing to do.

"Deaton had more of a hand in it than the nemeton," Derek said quietly.

"Except I get it," Stiles shrugged, still feeling a fresh wash of distrust every time the vet's name was mentioned. "The more I learn from Rick, the more he explains exactly what emissaries do, the more I can see where Deaton was coming from. And no, I don't fucking agree with it. But maybe he saw how broken Scott and I were, and how angry I was. It wasn't right, but I get it."

Derek was watching him, expression worried.

"It scares me that I get it, alright?" He finally admitted. "Like maybe someday I'll be an equally vague, mysterious asshole that just moves people around like everything is one big game. And this fucking tie, how can I be sure it won't affect that?"

"You haven't let it before."

He had no idea how Derek managed to have faith in him. None. It was one of those wonders of his personal world, sometimes appreciated and other times, like now, not. He didn't want assurances that he'd always be good, didn't want anyone to have expectations he'd inevitably fall short of. Again.

"I left. If I keep training I won't have that option."

"But you said you had an anchor," Derek pointed out. Stiles shrugged, not for the first time wondering how much of the fight Derek had heard.

"What if it's not enough?"

"Then it wouldn't be your anchor."

"Werewolf logic," Stiles muttered, grabbing the carton of milk and shoving it in the fridge. "I'm human, remember?"

Derek rolled his eyes. "You won't let the nemeton determine your actions. When it pushed, you pushed back. That's what you're good at."

Stiles was sure there was a compliment in there somewhere, in that weird, backhanded way that was all Derek could ever seem to manage. Then again, Derek had been the one to inform him, more than once, that 'pushing it' was probably his most fatal character flaw, in a long and varied list of similarly unhealthy traits. He stuck out his tongue for want of anything else to say.

(That night Derek slept closer than normal, eschewing his routine of starting the night half a foot apart in favor of throwing an arm over his side. Stiles didn't comment precisely because it was unusual. He didn't bring up breaking the tie again.)
Stiles’ twenty first birthday, a few days before the full moon, was an official pub crawl planned by Cassie in the city proper, with almost every single pack member between the ages of eighteen and thirty present. Her boyfriend was suspiciously absent, and Stiles knew better than to ask. Cassie had several flasks of her mother’s liquor stashed on her person (he seriously had no idea how, but she bragged that there were at least seven). Derek made the executive decision to not indulge.

He knew Cassie was trying her best to cheer him up, to distract him from the loss and his upcoming oathing by getting him blitzy. Needing that sense of normalcy, he threw himself headlong into it, staunchly pushing any thought of Scott and Beacon Hills, of the nemeton and his oath, to the back of his mind.

Stiles started the night mildly buzzed. He wasn’t sure how she accomplished it, but Cassie managed to get Derek to start drinking. After the third bar kicked them out because they’d seen Cassie's flask, everything was a little bit of a blur. He just remembered laughter and light.

He woke up hungover in a tangle of limbs, and he was missing his shirt. He was in Cassie's room, and the tickling sensation on his hip was Cassie groaning into it. Derek had an arm thrown over Stiles’ chest and his head was under a pillow. He was also missing his shirt. And his pants. After a quick check, Stiles realized he was still wearing his baggy jeans from the night before, but his belt was gone. And he was wearing one shoe, the other foot completely bare.

"Never drinking again," Cassie muttered. Stiles wasn't sure he'd be over the hangover before his oathing, and that probably wasn't a good thing.

"Liar," Derek muttered in return, his voice muffled by the pillow he was using to shield himself from the light peeking in around the curtains. Stiles was one hundred percent on board with that idea, and squinted to see where a pillow was. Cassie had annexed them. Again. He considered stealing Derek's, but that would probably involve struggling, and he wasn't up for that, especially since he was positive Derek would either win or eviscerate him if he succeeded.

"How stupid was I last night?" It was a legitimate concern. There were cameras, he remembered that much, and almost everyone in the pack was a facebook friend. More to the point, his dad was on his friends list, along with several people from the station. He was a sheriff's son, and even if he was out of state, his dad was an elected official.

"We'd have to check pictures," Cassie mumbled, contorting so that her face was buried in the covers.

"Derek?" He tried, reconsidering elbowing the werewolf when he tried and his stomach lurched.

"I can't remember after the fifth bar kicked us out. Before that you were fine," Derek grumbled, head still lodged beneath the pillow.

Fifth. Huh. He couldn't remember getting that far. "So no one knows how we got here?"

"Dad," Cassie groaned. "I remember being in the bed of Derek's truck. I think dad drove us back."

Five minutes later, while they were making a valiant attempt at passing back out, Rick literally burst through the door, slamming it open. Singing. Cassie snarled at him and then whimpered, and Stiles felt Derek cringing and clutching the pillow more tightly over his head. Rick, the bastard, sang, literally, that food and a hangover cure awaited downstairs. Then he slammed the door behind him.

"Kill me now," Cassie whined.
"I didn't know wolves could get hangovers," Stiles whimpered around the throbbing in his skull as Rick's voice echoed and tore holes in his brain.

"Surprise," Derek growled before shifting so he was sliding off of the bed. Stiles' whole world spun in myriad directions at once and his head made known that it did not like being soaked in booze. Stiles was fine with that, could live without repeating the night before. Even if he couldn't remember exactly what he'd done to refrain from repeating it.

They all crept downstairs, slowly, cautiously, as though any sudden movements or noise would kill them. (Stiles was reasonably certain they would.) Despite Rick's earlier behavior, he and Caroline both sat at the breakfast table quietly, eating their breakfast and reading their tablets. Marianne brought three plates heaped with food out to them, and a pitcher of water. Stiles got a cup of Rick's 'special tea', which Cassie and Derek both stared at in envy. Stiles did not gag when he took the first sip. Or the second.

"You three were quite the show last night," Rick said as they ate. Stiles felt his whole face grow hot. Rick was biting the inside of his cheek and failing to entirely suppress a grin.

"You were," Caroline agreed, a small smirk dancing at the corner of her mouth. "I think it's safe to say it was more lively than Cassie's twenty first."

Stiles paled. He remembered most of Cassie's twenty first, remembered running out of the bar and the resulting black eye. As far as birthdays went, it had been pretty...Stiles actually had no word for it. And for his to be worse-

Oh god, the pictures.

"Cute piggyback," Caroline added casually before taking another sip of coffee. Stiles gaped, terrified by the many images that conjured.

The special tea did wonders, and Stiles wanted the recipe. It was entirely possible he could sell it as a hangover elixir and never have to worry about student loans again. He felt vaguely human by the time Rick slid an envelope onto the table.

"Happy birthday," He said simply. Stiles, who knew his birthday was being celebrated during the full moon, picked up the envelope and opened it.

A round trip plane ticket to Norway, the dates reading two months apart, set during his gap semester. Cassie had gotten her own ticket only a week before, the trip itself for her, a potential alpha of a Scion Pack, to meet the pack they had branched off from generations before. Stiles had been a little envious at the time even if she had hated the reason for it. Now he had no clue what to say.

"Oh my god," He whimpered, eyes blurring dangerously.

"The emissary there will be taking over your training while you're with the pack," Rick explained. "It's a part of your apprenticeship. Consider it a working vacation."

"We might have forged your signature to get an expedited passport," Derek added, smiling. He looked a little worse for the wear, but he was smiling, and Stiles had no clue how to thank him, or Caroline or Rick. Going to Norway-He had no idea where to even begin. It just hadn't occurred to him, not even when Cassie had told him about it, whining about being separated from them for two months.

And then it hit him.
"I'm going to be in Norway."

"Yes," Caroline smirked.

"I'm going to freeze to death."

"Oh my god," Cassie suddenly squeaked. He thought she was simply echoing the sentiment when he saw that she was staring down at her lap, her face a vivid red that clashed with her hair.

"What?" Stiles demanded.

Instead of saying anything, she put her phone on the table.

The picture was of him riding on Derek's back, an arm looped around his neck and Derek barely holding his long legs off the ground, and Cassie was riding on his back, her legs wrapped around his waist and tilting him dangerously backward. Despite the fact that they were on a sidewalk outside of a bar with people staring at them, they were smiling like morons for the camera. Very, very drunk morons. Cassie and Derek's tightly shut eyes only made it worse. Stiles wondered how they hadn't gotten arrested since Cassie had one arm wrapped around his chest and her free hand was waving a flask for the whole world to see.

How had they even managed to stay upright?

His dad had commented below it. 'Glad to see you finally figured out how to avoid tripping over your own feet.'

"Oh my god," He muttered into his hands when he saw several other comments and over twenty likes on the picture. Derek looked like he was going to crawl into a cave and spend the rest of his life contemplating his terrible decision making skills. Cassie, damn her, had gotten over her initial embarrassment and was smiling like it had all been her doing. (She'd planned the party and somehow gotten Derek to drink, so Stiles wasn't entirely sure she hadn't planned the photo.)

"Like I said, very cute piggyback," Caroline murmured, smirking into her cup. Stiles looked back at the photo.

It was posted on Caroline's account. His dad was facebook friends with Caroline. He had absolutely no clue what to say about that. Except maybe that he was genuinely freaked out and a little happy about it at the same time.

When they found the video of the Bohemian Orgy Annette had posted, Stiles was slightly put out that Derek wasn't in it. Drunk he might have been, but apparently not enough for karaoke. Derek thought it was the only redeeming quality of the evening, even if he couldn't remember everything.

Unlike every other moon at the vé, he was stopped by Rick when he pulled his knife out.

"It's going to go a little differently tonight," Rick told him.

Stiles was a little irate that he hadn't been warned, but Rick pulled a knife free of the side sheath he'd donned. The blade wasn't metal, but Stiles couldn't actually tell what it was, aside from maybe some sort of glass or translucent stone. He didn't get the chance to ask however, because Caroline, in full pelt, was loping into the small clearing.

Stiles was abruptly, uncomfortably aware of two things. One, Caroline didn't have clothes on when she shifted back into her human form. And two, the entire clearing was surrounded by werewolves
and humans. That had never happened before; they'd always given the vé a wide berth. Stiles had always assumed it was in deference to it being Rick's space.

But Caroline (again, naked, so weird, why hadn't he been warned?) was standing beneath it, in front of the stone slab that served as the hörgr. He almost made a crack about not agreeing to be wolf married before stopping himself. Somehow, he doubted it would be appropriate, even if he knew it would get everyone to laugh. And despite wanting to dispel his own nervousness, he knew it wasn't the time or place for empty chatter.

He'd thought his oathing ceremony would be more elaborate, something with lots of speaking and, well, oathing. Of the formal kind. Maybe the signing of some sort of contract with his blood.

Instead, Caroline swore her protection and that of her pack's, shelter and sustenance, her loyalty and her love. Vaguely aware of what a beta traditionally said when binding themselves to a pack, Stiles paused before answering.

"I swear to work for the well being of the pack as a whole and all of those within it. I promise to help the pack grow, to help it build, and to help maintain what is bigger than just myself," He declared with conviction, echoing the sentiment Derek had offered and feeling it resonate, feeling the rightness of the words settle in his bones. He said nothing about submitting to the alpha, but he'd read enough to know that emissaries were not and should not be subservient to any member of the pack, that their position, even if they were pack, didn't allow for them to bow down to the alpha's wishes.

He wasn't an emissary yet, but he couldn't be a beta.

Caroline nodded in approval. Rick came forward and offered the knife. It looked like dark, murky glass, and when Caroline drew it lightly down the length of her thumb, the wound didn't close. Stiles accepted the blade, wary of Caroline's blood, and used the opposite (but equally sharp) side to cut the length of his thumb.

They didn't bleed on the altar. Instead, she laced her fingers through his. He could feel their blood slipping down between their palms to mingle before sliding down his wrist. She took care not to press her wound against his, and Stiles trusted her, knew she wouldn't change him, knew she respected his choice, respected him.

Only because he had been training to feel it without looking for it did he feel the shift of something, oddly personal and yet foreign, utterly not him, settling into him. When he looked from his hand to Caroline's face, he saw her smiling, looking more than pleased. She looked happy, and he'd seen her smile before, but for a moment he could see the Other, her alpha self smiling back at him through the thin mask of humanity that had been transposed over it.

Then she threw her head back to howl, and the pack surrounding them began to follow suit. Rick let out a piercing, joyful howl and Stiles joined them, the sound undulating and rolling out of his throat, folding itself into the whole.

"You've got it now," Caroline told him, smiling as their hands parted and dropped.

"Wish someone had given me an idea of what to say," He muttered, flushing hotly and looking resolutely at her face. For a moment he'd actually forgotten her nudity, and he didn't feel up to acknowledging it, even if she was smirking at him.

"You did fine," Rick told him, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Now, I think you have two people that want to congratulate you personally."
Neither Cassie nor Derek moved beyond the treeline into the clearing, but the moment he stepped out Cassie was practically climbing him, arms wrapped around his neck tightly. Stiles didn't mention that she was sniffling, but he did shift and move her so that her legs were wrapped around his waist instead of his thighs. She continued sniffling into his shoulder.

"I was afraid," She admitted after everyone had left them behind, leaving for a run or for the barn.

"Of what?"

"That you'd decide to go back."

Stiles hummed, squeezing her legs. "You two are my best friends, and this is my pack. I don't want another one."

Cassie whimpered, and even Derek looked relieved, at ease.

"It just-I was scared. It wasn't real until you said it."

"I get it. It's alright. I'm pack now, and nothing, no one is going to take me away from you two, ever. I swear."

Cassie's sniffling quieted a few minutes after that, and when she slid down, Derek came forward. Stiles hadn't expected a hug. Derek didn't do it often, usually he didn't initiate hugs (although most other physical contact was a given). But through the tight embrace, Stiles swore he could feel Derek's heart pounding against his chest. He hadn't thought Derek of all people would be nervous about his oathing.

"Never leaving you guys," He promised into Derek's hair. "You're mine, and I'm yours." Derek squeezed him harder, earning a squeak, before letting go.

"Everyone's at the barn," Cassie reminded them, smiling. Any trace of her anxiety was gone, and she was just herself again, a little impatient, a little restless.

"Is there cake at the barn?" Stiles asked, smiling when Derek rolled his eyes.

"I think so. I know they want to pass you around."

"That sounds like a bad porno."

Cassie cuffed him lightly on the back of the head but smiled anyway.

After the hugs and more cake and maybe a little more alcohol than he should have indulged in after his pubcrawl, he, Cassie and Derek ended up in her room instead of the loft.

Cassie talked quietly. She admitted that if had Stiles left, she'd have gone insane, probably done any number of crazy things to get him back. Stiles, knowing Cassie didn't let herself think about her insecurities often, let her talk. Derek remained silent, but there was a sense of relief in the way he slumped against him.

"This is us," He promised, each of his hands in theirs. "Even when we find new friends and even husbands or wives or whatever, this is us. No matter how much we change, we're always going to have this." He didn't think about illness, or hunters, or death or arguments when he said it. He didn't think about how he'd said the same to Scott once upon a time, their pinkies linked. He put his faith in the words and hoped the world complied.
Derek and Cassie almost smothered him and he did gripe, telling him that they were furnaces. He 
ruined the moment a little, but it seemed a natural progression, all of them settling in to sleep. 

(Derek's present arrived just as Stiles was waking up. Miles and a couple of the other guys from the 
shop helped carry the pieces inside and assemble the bed and dresser in the freshly painted bedroom. 
A mattress quickly followed, and Stiles' first act was to pull Derek and Cassie onto the bigger bed to 
cuddle while Rick said it was officially the room for the apprentice. Unofficially, he and Derek were 
there often enough and Cassie's bed was small enough that they might as well have a place they 
could all pass out comfortably. Stiles didn't admit he'd gotten used to waking up feeling like he was 
part of some sort of basketweave.)

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Chapter End Notes

I feel like it should be pointed out that Scott's reacting to Stiles lying to him for *years* 
and Stiles still has problems listening (they both do, obviously). This will, of course, 
come back to bite him in the ass later.
Chapter Summary

He stalwartly refused to acknowledge that it felt more like he was on the supernatural equivalent of a snipe hunt. If anything, he was willing to keep an open mind after meeting an honest to god huldra.

Chapter Notes

Codas Can Be Found Here

Trigger Warnings: Ritual Cutting, Flying (in a plane), Body Modification

When Lydia called, Stiles had almost let it go to voicemail. But the worry of something happening to his dad had superseded personal feelings, and he answered. While he was glad nothing had happened to the sheriff, he hadn't looked forward to asking Caroline for a favor. Especially since it included Lydia.

But, and it was always but when it came to anyone from Beacon Hills. But, he wanted to try and fix things, and maybe Lydia was a good place to start, despite his misgivings about her love life. Maybe they could figure everything out between the two of them. Hopefully it was time they all grew up and stopped lashing out, stopped being so goddamn shortsighted. Hopefully. He knew that Lydia typically had a cooler head than anyone else in the pack, except maybe Danny, and if he was lucky, she was as tired of whatever was going on as he was.

Caroline nodded, still understanding. It was probably more than he deserved, but her sympathy meant a chance at fixing things, and really, he was selfish enough to take it.

"You're to take Marianne and Derek as protection."

"Yes ma'am." He was willing to go along with that, considering how the last meeting had gone. Caroline, for all that she knew it was a personal matter, considered him hers even if he wasn't a beta. He was pack, and in the end that instinct overrode any sensitivity she might have felt for the delicacy of the situation. He couldn't blame her for being protective, or, as she called it, cautious.

And that was it, apparently. Two days later Stiles allowed himself to be driven, like some sort of diplomat (which was true in a way, he supposed) outside of Portland to meet Lydia, who was waiting for them, him, specifically, in a little diner in Salem.

When he sat down across from her, he saw her watching Derek and Marianne take their seats at the breakfast bar. Their backs were to them, allowing an illusion of privacy. Stiles knew that she was as aware of the illusion as he was, of how little it actually mattered.
"I want you to come back so I can leave," She told him bluntly, almost as soon as he'd sat down. Stiles was thankful for the bench, because otherwise he would have fallen on his ass. Or his face. His sudden spurt of flailing made either option equally likely.

"What?" Because, really, what?

"I don't want to be an emissary. I never wanted to be an emissary," She admitted after a moment, expression calm and her words flat, like she'd been practicing in front of a mirror.

"You had a choice," He finally said, not sure what else there was to say. She'd taken to her training like she took to any other challenge. Despite how little attention he had paid the pack in Beacon Hills, how forcefully he'd tried to ignore things, that was one thing that stood out. Lydia had loved learning more about her gift and werewolves. Any chance she'd had she'd practically force fed them 'necessary' facts so they had better understanding of packs and wolves.

"Do what Deaton said and be tied to the pack, to Beacon Hills forever, or have him bind my gift so I didn't go crazy?" She hissed, her words gaining an abrupt, angry edge. Stiles wondered at how easily he'd provoked her, at how quickly her mask of composure slipped. "How is that fair?"

Stiles almost rebutted that until he thought about Deaton. What Deaton had said. What Deaton had done. It was more than possible he'd convinced Lydia there was no other way so he could take her on as his apprentice and keep him out of the running for it. And granted, the other ways would have been difficult, it wasn't impossible. Lydia loved challenges, thrived on them. She would have made it, if she'd known those ways existed.

The waitress came over and took their drink orders. Stiles took the time to look at Lydia, really look at her. Her posture was still proud, her head held high, but she looked tired and tense. A little desperate. It was the same look she'd had when he'd seen her in July. When the waitress left, he shrugged, not quite sure what to say. Because fair was something beyond them, both of them. Fair applied to people that didn't have to decide between losing their gift or losing their minds, losing themselves or losing their parents. Fair wasn't a part of their lives, hadn't been a part of their lives for years. Just choices and consequences.

"It's not about fair, Lydia. It's about doing the best you can with what you have," He finally sighed, rubbing his face and thinking about the last time he'd said those words and they'd meant something. All the times he'd said it and it had covered everything.

"That's easy for you to say. You got to leave." It was an accusation, one he honestly hadn't been expecting, even though it made sense. Stiles almost snapped back, took a deep breath instead and looked her in the eye, refusing to back down from the anger.

"It was that or kill someone in the pack. Maybe half of it, give or take," He stated plainly. When her mouth dropped open, he continued, keeping his voice low, calm. Rick's training was definitely taking, although there was nothing more to what he was currently doing than keeping his tone modulated and rhythmic. "I needed to do what was best for me at the time, or I wouldn't have survived senior year. It led to this, but the situation hasn't changed. Scott's anchor is the pack, and we both know he needs that. This isn't easy for me. Scott's my brother. My dad is split between the both of us, and I never wanted him in that position. I never will." His tone rang with quiet, steady conviction.

"What if you took my place?" Lydia tried, and Stiles wasn't surprised by the growl that rumbled only a few feet away, although he saw Lydia flinch and glance over at the counter where both wolves sat, their bodies practically vibrating with the barely leashed tension.
"Sometimes people leave their packs," Stile conceded. "But it's rare. I've already made my oath."

"We've always pulled off the long shots though," Lydia tried. And Stiles suddenly understood it. He'd forgotten her dream of a Fields Medal, of MIT and changing the world. And that was never going to happen if she was tied to the pack, unable to leave. But he couldn't give her what she wanted. Despite how he had gone about making it happen, Deaton had been right about what would occur if he'd stayed. He'd do no better in the pack now than he would have when he was a teenager. If anything, he would be worse, knowing more, being more confident in his own feelings. The tie to the nemeton be damned, he would alienate everyone and probably become something worse than Deaton, because he wouldn't trust anyone to do the right thing.

And even if there were days he wanted to punch the shit out of his brother, Scott still needed his anchor. Beacon Hills needed an alpha that was sane and stable, willing to protect the nemeton from the things that sought it out. Scott deserved to have an emissary he could trust, not what Stiles knew he would inevitably become.

"I don't want to. I left for a reason, even if I didn't acknowledge it at the time. I can't be a part of Scott's pack, and I won't give up what I've built here."

"But you're tied to the nemeton," She countered, posture going rigid as she prepared herself. What for, he wasn't entirely sure. He wouldn't argue, the debate would be entirely one sided, because she could throw hundreds of reasons at him, but none of them were enough to change what had happened, nothing could make him give up what he knew was right, what he'd gained. Nothing she said would change reality.

"It doesn't work that way, Lydia. People can have multiple ties," He continued gently. "I feel it every day, will continue to feel it for the rest of my life. But Rick is pretty sure that after I pass through the seventh initiation, it'll be balanced by completing my connection to the vé."

"Stiles, how far are you?" Lydia demanded, eyes widening.

"I'm done with five, Rick's waiting to tell me six. Five took me awhile, which is why I'm behind." Awhile being months, and even now he still wondered about it at night, watched Derek and Cassie and tried to avoid the big 'what if'.

"Executioner," Lydia mumbled. "I'm- I'm on five."

Stiles wondered if that was why she had called him out the blue, begging for a meeting. Everything she knew about the twins, about Scott and Allison, it had to be bothering her. He knew she was smart, and he knew she had considered every option and angle.

Even if he didn't agree with her choice, she probably loved Aiden, and at least cared for the others. It was something he could sympathize with, because it wasn't an easy choice. If anything, it had shifted his perspective of himself in a way he was still uncomfortable with at times, no matter what Derek said to justify the necessity of it.

"When Rick told me, I almost quit," He admitted. "He said he would understand if I did. It's a hell of a position. If Derek or Cassie, shit, if any of them go feral and the pack won't deal with it, I'll have to. And that scares the shit out of me. That's why it took me so long."

"I don't know if I can do it," She admitted. "I talked to Deaton, about a lot," She added vaguely. Stiles only barely held back the sarcastic sound that wanted to issue itself. "He said I've been resisting each initiation, that's why I'm only at the fifth. I thought I was just being cautious, considering every potential. But when he said that- I think- I know it's because I resented being tied
down to Beacon Hills."

"That's understandable. Being an emissary is hard, Lydia. And the way it happened back then-" He shook his head, not sure if he should voice his own opinions about Deaton's motivations in choosing her. There was no solid proof, and he wasn't entirely sure he could trust her intentions. Lydia, above all, was a survivor, and a smart one. They weren't close any more, and she'd come to him wanting something. It wasn't entirely beyond the realm of possibility that she would use any and all information to achieve that end.

"But there are people like us that aren't emissaries."

"You know if I point one way or another, it'll just come back on me, don't you," Stiles pointed out shrewdly. "I can't give you permission to find out about those other possibilities. It's your life. It's your choice how you decide to lead it, and you have to take responsibility for those decisions, whatever they end up being."

"I can't tell if you're being incredibly wise or covering your ass," Lydia muttered.

"It seems to me the second would indicate the first, but it could just be a friend from highschool offering the only bit of good advice he's got," He quipped, surprised at the frustration leaking into her tone, reflecting in how she sat. "Seriously, I'm still muddling through this. It's not easy. I really screwed up by trying to avoid dealing with actually making a decision. Scott has a right to feel betrayed, and so does everyone else. None of you saw it coming, and whether I was trying to avoid the inevitable conflict or not, it doesn't excuse it. Don't get me wrong, I love my pack. But my dad, no one can replace him. No one can replace Scott either."

"You don't seem to care about anyone else."

"You know my issues," He replied, intentionally vague. Because he wasn't sure how he felt about her anymore. He wanted to believe she was genuine, but at the same time he knew what desperation could make people do, and he had no doubt she was desperate. Otherwise she wouldn't have gone behind everyone's backs to arrange a meeting. And he knew with absolute certainty she hadn't informed anyone about seeing him. "Issac is the only other one I was actually friendly with out of them, and he and I could never connect. I don't know why, but it never happened. It would be easier to say we didn't antagonize each other. With what's happened, I'm sure he can't stand me."

"But Issac tried to kill me. If I can forgive him, why can't you forgive the others?" She demanded, and he almost shut her down right there, because as close as they might have been once, she didn't have a right to make that demand of him.

"Because I'm not that great at being a human being. No one's perfect, don't pretend that I am."

"What about Derek?" She asked, and he couldn't stop the frown he felt forming.

"What about him?"

"He- Just, why Derek, Stiles?"

Stiles thought long and hard for a moment before answering, careful of what he said because Derek was right there, and he didn't know what Derek was comfortable with him revealing. "Even if he and I weren't friends, he was something stable. A fixed point that I could count on. But when it was over- Everyone else was moving on, and I couldn't understand it. So I went to someone that might understand me."

"The scars," Lydia said, eyes flicking to his chest before coming back to rest on his face. "Scott said-"
"She stopped, looking unsure again, worried and even hurt.

"I started abusing my adderall the moment it was over," Stiles shrugged, trying not to think about Marianne sitting right there, able to hear everything. If he could get through to her, maybe she'd give up wanting to him go back at least. Even desperate, she wasn't a monster. "More than normal, anyway. It only took me a few weeks to start resorting to adrenaline. I went to Derek's, to help him build his house. He found out. By the time I left, I didn't do it anymore."

"All that time, Stiles-" She started, voice hitching and eyes gaining an ominous sheen.

"It's a process. I still have nightmares, I still dream about it. There were fundamental wrongs that occurred, and they were ignored. That fucked with me, with how I saw everyone." Lydia looked uncomfortable again, and he didn't elaborate, knowing he'd made his point.

"I'm sorry," She finally whispered, uncharacteristically apologetic. Stiles hated the indecisiveness of his own brain as it struggled to interpret the sincerity of the declaration. "I'm sorry I was such a bitch. I saw you leaving and you were doing everything I wanted, and I hated you for it. I'm sorry I didn't see what was actually happening to you." Her hands were on the table, fingers laced together, wringing and knotting and moving. Stiles felt bad for her, remembered how they had been friends once, and reached across and stilled her hands, his thumbs running over hers.

The action made him feel a little better, though he wasn't entirely sure why. Like it was just the right thing to do, for once. Even though he doubted her, couldn't help but feel cautious, he knew that she was lost, probably as lost as he'd been, as he still was sometimes.

"That's okay. To be honest, I thought you were being a bitch because you were suddenly the emissary's apprentice and thought you knew best. Like when you told Scott to burn the sleep thorn. I never really questioned whether it was something you wanted or not. So on that, we're even."

"Sleep thorn?" She asked, looking confused.

"He found a sigil in my pillowcase senior year. You told him to burn it."

She opened her mouth and then paused, recognition sparking in her eyes. "I thought you were trying to prove you were a better option. Deaton said he could only train one of us, and it was either apprenticing to him or having my gift bound," She admitted. "I freaked."

"It's okay," He shrugged, trying not to remember those weeks after and the hell they had been on him, how close he'd been to breaking completely. "I understand why you did it. We were screwed up back then, and you felt cornered. I get that."

"But not Aiden," She whispered, and Stiles thought she might start crying.

"Your love life is your choice," He said, attempting to pull his hands back, his goodwill immediately beginning to chill. But Lydia wouldn't let go, and when he looked from their hands back up to her face, there were tears in her eyes, her face flushed beneath her makeup. It looked real. Lydia could cry prettily when she felt it could help, he'd seen it. Whatever was happening now, it wasn't that.

"I couldn't stop feeling it, once I started," She admitted, voice low and pitched. "Do you know how many people die in Beacon Hills, Stiles? How loud some of those deaths are, how they just linger?" She asked. "I felt them, all of them. Especially Kali and Jennifer, they were this loop. And Aiden, like the potential for it, the violence was always there, in him. It sounds so stupid, but being around him was like constant white noise. It drowned out everyone else." The words came out rushed, almost tangling into one another.
"He helped you build a tolerance," Stiles stated plainly, not sure whether to be horrified or sickened that Lydia had intentionally sought out that violence in Aiden, or to pity her because she'd seen death everywhere too, and been desperate enough to resort to using him to endure it.

"We all had our ways of dealing with it," She admitted, her mouth twisted in a rueful smile. "I don't think any of us chose particularly healthy coping mechanisms." Her statement was accompanied by a discreet but worrying sniffing sound.

"We've been in this situation before," Stiles informed her, feeling dangerously on edge as the new information assimilated itself, as he tried to find artifice and manipulation, her typical machinations. The he couldn't scared him, because he didn't know if it was because it wasn't there or he just didn't want to see it. "And I ended up facing a Godzilla knockoff and keeping a two hundred pound paralyzed alpha from drowning for two hours."

"That's where you were? Saving Derek?" Lydia huffed. It sounded wet, like her tears were resting at the back of her mouth, waiting to spill out at the slightest provocation.

"Mortal danger versus crying girl. Any sane man picks mortal danger," He joked. Lydia squeezed his hands and let out a sigh.

"I ignored it because I thought I couldn't have anything else. Because I was angry and self centered and because he was there, and no one pointed out what he'd done. So I told myself if they could take everything away, if I had to lose MIT and Jackson and everything I'd worked for, everything I loved, I could at least get what I needed. It doesn't make any sense, but-" She huffed, obviously frustrated that she unable to explain herself. Stiles kept himself from commenting, but barely. A quick glance over at Derek revealed tense shoulders but little else.

"I'm not asking you to justify it Lydia."

"I can't," She admitted simply. "I shouldn't even try to make you understand."

"You had all of your dreams taken away. At least when you went crazy, you didn't start torturing people," He added, unable to stop the comment from slipping out.

"Allison, right? No one really talks about it, so I didn't know until I asked Deaton. I never knew- I guess I can't act surprised by it, not after Aiden." Lydia sounded surprisingly bitter about that.

"Small wonder," Stiles snorted ungraciously, not bothering to hide his contempt at the mention of that time, of the vet, of realizing Lydia still trusted him. "Look, I messed up. You messed up. But realistically, the only one who has messed up less is Danny, and I'm pretty sure he's the second coming. I expect water to wine tricks any day now," He added, adding a levity to his tone that he felt was necessary to keep himself from devolving into an incoherent mess. Everything he'd known, or thought he'd known, about Lydia was tangling itself up, and he wasn't entirely sure how to deal with her anymore.

"True," Lydia agreed.

They were quiet for a moment, their waitress setting down their food with a wink. Stiles didn't have the heart to correct the sly smile directed at their linked hands.

"Scott targeting Derek was a really crappy thing to do. I'm sorry."

"You can't make apologies for other people."

"Stop being so damn smart, Stiles. You're talking like a more accessible Deaton." Lydia sounded,
actually she sounded relieved, and he had no idea why.

"I'm not sure how I feel about that," Stiles muttered, taking a sip of his coffee. He didn't know how to feel about a lot of things anymore, but the thing, person, he reminded himself, Lydia was a person and not just a situation, sitting in front of him probably took precedence for the moment.

"Deaton's like an oracle, and you're blunt, no vague wordplay."

"I am surrounded by blunt, to the point people. People I trust implicitly," He answered simply, refusing to bring up Deaton's actions. Lydia's opinions and choices were her own, and he wasn't going to be blamed for influencing them. Some small part of himself also wondered if it would make the perfect case to take back to Scott. It would be easy to blame Deaton for everything, when really they were all just as culpable.

But that could be ignored in favor of clinging to some false hope, to using the emissary as an excuse. Lydia was ruthless even when she wasn't cornered, and he knew she could spin the story to her favor. In the end though, it would only drag things out. Stiles knew it would, because in those moments he asked 'what if', he'd seen the logical conclusion to going back. Nothing good would come of it, not really. In the end they'd all only have more buried resentments, all of them exceptionally more corrosive and poisonous than the ones they'd started with.

Lydia stilled, eyes on the table. "If I wanted to leave, how would I do it?"

Stiles sighed and prayed he wasn't about to say something that would come back to bite him in the ass. "There are dozens of ways, Lyds. But don't be a dick about it, if you do decide to leave. Don't make my mistake. Think about it. Talk to Scott. He's the alpha. If he's going to start acting like one, he's got to start being treated like one. A real one, not just everyone's best friend. Whatever it is you choose to do, just make sure it's what you need."

"What if I-Is it selfish? Everyone else just has this. This image of the pack living and growing old together. It's like it's wrong to want something else."

Stiles understood that, probably more than she could begin to fathom. He'd had that same idea for over a decade with Scott. College roommates, neighbors, best men, godfather slash uncles, growing old as best friends, and everything that had entailed. Now they were actual brothers, and he knew he'd probably never have any of those things.

"Look at it this way," Stiles pointed out, trying to remain objective. "This is my perspective, my experience. If I went back and became their emissary, I'd resent being forced into that position. And it would poison me to them. It would never be a good relationship, maybe even more distant than the one Deaton had with Derek when he was an alpha. I know myself well enough to admit that sacrificing this would eventually make me hate them." And he would, that he had no doubts about. Even if he did love them, there would always be that reminder, that loss that would stain it and twist at least a part of it. The only reason he didn't feel that resentment towards Derek or Cassie was because they hadn't tried to make him choose, they hadn't demeaned his relationship with Scott even when they easily could have. "You have to know yourself that well, even the parts you don't like."

"You resent us for trying to bring you back." It came out sounding like an apology.

"I resent that you can't understand why this is better for me," He corrected, keeping his voice even.

Lydia was quiet for a moment, offering a small, wry smile.

"I'm understand. I think you're insane, but I envy you a little. That you're where you want to be."
Stiles allowed himself to believe it, if only because Lydia had admitted the caveat.

"I in no way envy you," He said slowly, thinking carefully. "But I've got your back, if you need it."

"Really?" It was strange, to see Lydia Martin looking so unsure of herself, so surprised. He tried to recall the person he'd thought he was in love with and failed. It was like that Lydia was a ghost that had faded, out of sight, out of memory. "I was awful, before you left. Even though I was jealous, it doesn't excuse it."

"And I didn't think about how you would feel about being tied to the pack, so it balances out. We were young and neither of us actually communicated," Stiles told her. "Look, I know how hard it is. Trust me, I know it's terrifying, and I knew I had support. We were friends. I still care about you, even when you make my head want to implode." Which was surprising, because even though his mind was telling him to be careful, there was that idealistic, hopeful part of him, the one he thought of as his better part, telling him that he was saying the right things, that it was how he could start to fix things, at least with her. That he was doing the right thing, extending the offering. "So yeah, I've got your back on this, whatever it is you choose."

Lydia nodded, and she actually looked like she was going to burst into tears, her whole face screwing up in a mask as she tried to hold it back.

"Shit, don't cry."

"Shut up Stiles," She said, too loud and pitched, like the sound she'd been holding back had transformed in her throat and rushed out of her. But she was smiling a little.

They didn't talk much after that. He made sure she had his contact information, including his skype name, and he paid the bill. She got into her car and left, not looking back or waving. Stiles prayed she had been genuine, that they'd both done the right thing instead of the easy things. Derek and Marianne ambled out moments later. Ignoring the front seat, he pulled Derek into the back with him and leaned against him. It felt like the first time they'd relaxed since Lydia had called.

"Did I do the right thing?" Stiles asked. They were halfway to Portland and the entire drive had been quiet, no one deigning to speak.

It was several minutes before Derek answered. Stiles had been prepared to take the silence as his answer, as a negative he didn't want to voice.

"I don't know. I think so."

He and Lydia talked to each other over the phone and on skype after that. Stiles knew Cassie didn't like it, but Derek seemed to accept the situation, at least on the surface. His suspicions of her almost died completely when she didn't ask him to go back, or mention the Beacon Hills pack at all for that matter. He didn't tell her about Deaton, that one last bit of caution remaining with him regardless of whether or not he trusted her.

A week before he was slated to leave for Norway, Lydia called him crying, just outside of Portland and begging to come see him. He told her to come to Caroline's, where he'd been working through one of Rick's old journals. After he hung up, he went to talk to Caroline in her office. He'd been promoted to being one of those few people allowed in and out without knocking, although he still knocked, too used to the action to discard it completely.

"Lydia called," He greeted quietly. "She sounds like a wreck. I told her to come here." The alpha regarded him evenly, her face giving nothing away.
"I trust your judgment," Caroline answered simply before looking back at her screen, dismissal evident. It was more than a little surreal, humbling even, that she wasn't questioning his decision to invite Lydia back into her home. That she trusted him that much. The idea did panic him a little, make him question himself, if he was doing the right thing. It felt right, like it was what he should have done a long time ago. That didn't stop him from second guessing the feeling.

When Lydia knocked on the front door, he was surprised by how apt an adjective 'wreck' had actually been. It was worse than when she had first come into her gift, shadows under her eyes, too prominent to be covered by makeup, and her eyes were bloodshot from crying.

"I had to get away," She quipped, looking at Stiles. "Everyone is being completely unreasonable."

"Come on," Stiles sighed, grabbing her hand and pulling her into the house when she hesitated. "Don't worry, no one's going to eat you."

He took her to the living room, which was thankfully deserted, and sat down in one of the armchairs instead of his couch. He was grateful no one made their presence known, reminding Lydia that she was being watched. A little shocked, but grateful.

"I spoke to Deaton, and Scott. Deaton understood, Scott," She trailed off. Stiles wondered at the declaration, wondered if Deaton was willing to let her go now that he was safely oathed to another pack, no longer a threat. In a way he knew what he was saying sounded narcissistic, like he had been that big of an obstacle, but at the same time-He couldn't completely shake the feeling.

"He's- He didn't shout or anything, but he's just tense, all the time now. Everyone can feel it. And the twins- I broke it off with Aiden. I couldn't ignore it anymore. Issac thinks-" Lydia shuddered. "He thinks I'm being selfish and not considering the pack. Allison is saying I should have the right to choose," Lydia snorted. "Like the abortion debate. 'It's her life, it's her future'," She mocked derisively. Stiles reluctantly, silently applauded Allison's support.

"So she's at odds with Issac, and Scott is just between them, not saying anything one way or the other. The twins are upset and that means Danny's upset. And with the full moon being so close, it just got really bad. Allison came over because she and Issac. Aiden came over wanting to fix us," Lydia bit out, frowning. "And Issac came over to try and persuade me to stay, Allison jumped in, and they ended up arguing over me like I was some sort of idea and not a person." She shrugged. "I couldn't handle being there."

"So you drove eight hours to me?" Stiles asked.

"I didn't know where else I could go. I resented it, but I made them my first priority. God, I don't have anyone outside of them that would understand. Except you."

Stiles heard a wealth of meaning in the statement, the last two words loaded. The part of himself that wanted to help, to fix things, gave in almost immediately, dragging his cautious side with it. For all that, he trusted the statement, because Lydia Martin didn't admit to needing people, not even when she was trying to manipulate them.

He moved over to the loveseat and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. He had obviously become as tactile as the wolves. "It's okay. We can figure it out."

"There's nothing to figure out," She retorted waspishly. "I have a life. I have a right to my own dreams."

"I'm not disputing that," Stiles reminded her. "I am saying that we can figure out how you can leave
without burning your bridges and pissing on the ashes." Like he had.

"It's too late."

He flinched at the finality of her voice. "It's not-"

"I left a formal declaration with Deaton."

Stiles groaned and scrubbed his face. "A note? Lyds-"

"Scott just doesn't want to deal with it, he won't talk to anyone about it, Allison told me," She interrupted. "I don't think Allison and Issac are helping him to be honest, even if they have good intentions" She added, voice going soft. "I know the pack is his anchor, but this is a ridiculous level of codependency."

Stiles shook his head and slouched down into the loveseat. "It's different for wolves, you know that."

"Except it's not," She argued. "We need anchors too. Or was whatever you did last time just my imagination?"

He glared at her only to get an arch look in return. Out of everyone that did know about the compulsion, so far she was the only one really calling him out on it. Despite their crash course in rekindling high school friendships, he wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that.

"Then you can appreciate how much he needs it."

"He has a whole pack," She bit out.

"But every person he loses destabilizes it for awhile, you know that," He reminded her. "I'm not telling you to go back, alright? But just-Try to understand it from his perspective. We have our own ways of lashing out, but they don't include turning into a six foot wolf and running rampant. There is a difference. He's probably trying to stay out of it so he doesn't hurt someone and Issac is trying to protect him."

"You're seriously still defending him?" Lydia asked, the tension seeping out of her like she had realized the argument was over. Her body slouched against his and they stared at the blank television, their reflections distorted and angled back at them. Nothing could hide how tired they looked though, how much of a mess they both were.

"There was a lot going on back then. Scott, he would have gone feral, if he hadn't had the pack. We would have lost him, and god only knows who else in the process. The chances of that happening now aren't as bad, but it still fucks with his balance when people leave." He said it confidently, knowing Scott well enough for that, or willing to make that excuse for his behavior, he wasn't sure. "So he's going to react badly. He'll get over it." Eventually. Maybe.

"I got into MIT," Lydia finally said, her tone almost challenging him, like she expected him to say that there was something wrong with that.

"It's been what, less than two weeks-"

"I already knew. I applied after we came here. I just wanted to see- And when I got the acceptance letter-" She trailed off.

"Were you seriously coming to me for confirmation?" Stiles asked. Lydia nodded against his shoulder. That was a psychological kick to the balls. When had he become someone worth asking?
Someone worth trusting? Fuck, he had no idea how to tell her that the last thing she should do is trust his judgment. He barely trusted it.

"I can't face them again Stiles." The declaration sounded uncertain, which he wasn't sure would ever stop being surreal to him, even though he knew her better now, probably better than he'd ever known her.

"When do you start?"

"I start during the Winter session. The lease I signed starts in November."

Stiles hummed thoughtfully. It was September.

"Why don't you find a place in Portland for a couple of months? Something furnished and month to month."

"Will Valdyr-"

"I'll talk to Caroline," Stiles promised, hushing her with the statement. "It'll be okay Lyds. No one deserves to be alone just because they're trying to figure their shit out, mistakes or not."

"You were."

Stiles huffed a laugh, feeling slightly amused for the first time since her arrival. "No, I wasn't."

A moment later Lydia sighed. "No, you weren't." After that, a sniffle he didn't acknowledge, mostly because he knew she would be embarrassed if he did. "Thank you."

The next week was a mix of packing, growling at Cassie to be nice, and Lydia regaining her old fire as she went apartment hunting and listening slash interrogating him about his life and the magic he and Rick practiced, which was usually what provoked Cassie's growls, thus circling back to his own. Caroline, damn her, seemed amused by the situation. Stiles had only asked for Lydia to be allowed in Portland and explained her situation. Caroline had gone a step beyond that and declared haven for Lydia, which was probably unnecessary in the grand scheme of things, but he knew it put Lydia at ease to be officially 'neutral' in the supernatural world, at least until she found a coven.

Derek was almost, actually sort of clingy. Stiles never slept alone anymore, which wasn't that different from usual, except Cassie spent most of her nights with her family, trying to pack in as much time as possible with them, leaving him and Derek sleeping alone. Lydia gave him a very hard sideeye the first time she realized they shared his bed. Stiles elected to ignore it, because there were things he had no clue how to explain.

Derek and Lydia developed a sort of truce between them. Stiles suspected Derek actually sympathized for Lydia a little, and Lydia felt guilty about how they'd both been left wrecked by the Darach and Deucalion. Still, that didn't mean everything was comfortable, and they both seemed determined to fill every spare moment of his time, sometimes actually coming to silent glaring battles and forcing him to choose, which he sort of thought was bullshit. Stiles was sure the only thing saving Lydia from being thrown out on her ass was the fact that she hadn't complained when Derek had told her, in no uncertain terms, that she was sleeping on the fold out couch in the den.

It was all very stressful, and when his dad arrived, making a point to hug Lydia, he thought that would be the final straw. Instead, the whole world calmed down to a mild sort of chaos, more manageable than what it had been. His dad was a surprisingly placating presence in the middle of all the madness, even if he and Rick were so chummy it seriously started to make him worry about their
intentions.

It didn't mean he wasn't exhausted by the time they got to the airport. After they checked in, he was subjected to a round of hugs from everyone that had come to see them off. Which felt like half the pack, his dad, and Lydia. Derek even hugged him again, and told him he’d miss him. Which, a little strange, given he’d never heard the words from Derek before. It did make him hug Derek that much harder. He tried to imprint the memory of the werewolf, of how he felt, into his brain.

He and Cassie held hands when the plane took off. Neither of them quite believed that they were going to Europe. During their layover in Chicago, they took pictures of each other making faces and sending texts saying they already missed everyone. In Newark they took pictures of the other travelers and sent them off with captions like 'Spot Snooki'. (Caroline asked what that was and they spent the next half hour laughing.)

When they touched down in Oslo, Stiles was wired, exhausted, excited and terrified all at once. Cassie was holding his hand so tightly he thought she might actually forget herself and manage to break something. There were two people there to greet them, the alpha and the emissary. Herleifr Næss spoke in heavily accented English and informed them they had several hours before they reached Trondheim.

Stiles and Cassie curled into each other in the back of the SUV and watched the scenery pass them by, too tired to appreciate it, too wary of all the newness to sleep.

Herleifr, Leif for short he told them with a smile, told them all about the pack. It sounded similar to Caroline's in most ways. The pack itself had been established for literal centuries, going back before the 'rise of protestantism' came to them, according to Leif. Stiles knew in some peripheral way it was astounding they had survived that long, and he mentioned it aloud. Leif admitted several of the major fires that had occurred had been the result of hunters. Stiles had felt a pang at that, thinking about Derek and how other people had gone through the same thing halfway around the world.

Leif went on to explain that he had three sons and his second was a cousin. Stiles could barely pay attention, even when Amund, the emissary, an old man with a full white beard and exceptionally bushy black eyebrows, told him that they’d be working together during the duration of his stay.

When they arrived at Leif's home, he and Cassie followed Leif into a guestroom and crashed so hard Stiles couldn't remember falling asleep.

"Working vacation my ass," Stiles muttered, glaring at the opened tome, and it was a tome, not a book, Jesus pogoing Christ. It even smelled like it had been pulled out of a cellar. A damp moldy one. Maybe he’d pissed Amund off. His ADHD and Amund's ability to sit still and focus for hours, not to mention his generally dour disposition, were still having problems coexisting in the same space. The book, tome, could be punishment for being a generally chipper, curious human being. There was at least an eighty five percent chance anyway.

"At least you're learning something useful," Cassie muttered. "I'm leaning about the Úlfhéðnar. Riveting stuff, let me tell you."

"Please, I'm learning about that too," He huffed. "I swear to god man, Amund is from the Iron Age with how he talks about this stuff. And at the the Úlfhéðnar are cool. I mean, wolf berserkers that were actually werewolves fighting in full view. That's badass, alright? That could be an action movie starring the Hemsworth brothers. This," He muttered, waving at the book in his lap. "This is just insane. Like, there are gods mentioned, and ritual sacrifice. It reads more like the sagas."
Cassie rolled her eyes and he pouted. They'd had plans, really. Like going out on weekends and being tourists. Doing all the touristy things people did when they went to another continent, taking selfies at national landmarks and buying useless things they'd never use and would probably break the first time they did. When Rick had said 'working vacation' Stiles had thought 'vacation' would factor in somewhere. So far he'd been handed dusty books and drilled on what he did know. And it had only been a week.

"I miss Derek," He added petulantly.

Cassie wilted a little and Stiles immediately felt like an asshole. Ignoring the inner Lydia screeching at him, he snapped the book shut and tossed it onto the desk in the corner of the room, taking a moment to appreciate the loud slapping sound it made when it landed. Cassie snapped her own book shut and he tugged her closer.

"Derek should have come with us," She muttered sullenly. Stiles nodded, unable to disagree because Derek should have come. Except, responsibility and all that other adult bullshit Stiles hated when it got in the way of a perfect vacation. Even if it was a 'working vacation'. At least having Derek around would have made the studying tolerable.

"It's been years since we've been separated. I hate it," She added a minute later. "It feels wrong being so far away from him."

It did feel wrong, and in more ways than he'd expected. Stiles had accepted that he would probably get homesick. But the sense of being incomplete, of literally missing a chunk of himself had been entirely unanticipated. The foreign surroundings only made it worse, because there was nothing familiar that he could sink into and allow himself to remember. There was no warm security blanket he could wrap around himself to pretend he was back home, waiting for Derek to get in from work.

He had no idea how he was going to survive two months if a week had reduced him to wanting to email everyday, even if it was only to say hi. He hadn't yet, but it was tempting.

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Everyone in the pack was supernaturally beautiful, even the humans, and Stiles felt completely inadequate compared to them, shy in a way he hadn't felt since highschool. Cassie was already cozied up to Matthias, Leif's third son, who she'd gotten attached to before Stiles had even realized who Matthias was. Most of the pack didn't speak much English, if any, and he spoke very little of the local language, the Old Norse he knew too different to engage in any in depth conversation. All in all, his first full moon gathering was turning out a lot differently than what he was used to. Granted, it could be because he was cold, and nursing a cup of thick, chewy beer in front of the bonfire, but there was also a sense of loneliness he couldn't shake. He didn't belong.

"Hei," A deep voice said, just as a man sat down beside him. Contrary to the deepness of his voice, he didn't appear much older than Stiles. He replied in kind, grateful that at least that much was similar to English so he didn't butcher it.

"You are," The man began, his words heavily accented. "Valdyr's láðvórðr."

"Yeah," Stiles nodded, recognizing the title the pack used for Amund. "Stiles," He added, offering his hand.

"Sander," The man said, returning the handshake with a smile. Stiles did not immediately think of a tool. (He did.) He was grinning though, and that seemed to encourage Sander.

They tried to communicate and failed, over and over. But by the end of the night, Stiles realized he
was being flirted with. It hit him that Sander was the werewolf equivalent of a norse god. And that he was completely uninterested in him. He even tried to scrounge up something, anything, that could be desire and failed to get anything deeper than light amusement at the wolf's antics.

He went back to the house alone, contemplating what had changed.

Stiles stared at Amund as if he'd lost his mind. He'd been studying with the emissary five days out of the week, learning everything from the history of the pack, including about the turned alpha that had split off and gone to America, to different methods of manipulating the threads. Reading them was still something he was having issues with. Despite his and Amund's personalities not being the best match in the world, he'd thought Amund liked him. (He did not count the incident with the bell bracelet as anything more than a well meaning joke, even if he had been pissed off when he found out what it meant. It was only slight retaliation that he refused to take the damn thing off.)

He certainly hadn't thought Amund had been out to actively kill him.

"You want me to what again?" He tried, hoping he'd heard wrong.

"You will be staying here," Amund informed him with a maddeningly calm smile. "Through the night."

"I'll freeze." He was already freezing, and he was wearing a thick, down stuffed jacket and a beanie. He'd even bust out wool socks. He hadn't even been aware of owning wool socks. (There was a sneaking suspicion that his dad had stashed them in there, and where had he even found wool socks in California anyway?) None of it seemed to work against the pervasive biting cold that came in off the coast to mix with the lingering dampness from the rain the day before. If anything, he was surprised things hadn't started frosting over.

"It's not that cold," Amund dismissed easily. Stiles made a sarcastic noise, knowing that there was no point in reminding the emissary that he lacked the penguin DNA that made it so easy for everyone else to walk around like forty five degree weather wasn't a big deal. Late September in Norway was supposed to be pleasant. Which, hah, pleasant if you liked freezing your ass off in the rain. Thus far he'd tried to remain indoors unless dragged out by Cassie and Matthias. Stiles preferred staying indoors. Under blankets. Blankets he was remembering with something akin to desperation.

"It's rained every day this week," He tried instead.

"Then pray it won't rain tonight," Amund smiled, his beard stretching to show it more than any part of his face giving it away.

"And what am I supposed to do out here?" He demanded, too cold to flail his arms so he could emphasize his point. He stubbornly kept them folded, his gloved hands tucked into his armpits.

"Speak to the vættir," Amund told him, like it had been obvious.

"And say what?"

"Anything. Just don't offend them," Amund finished, already walking away from the vé. Stiles readied a volley of insults creative enough that the emissary probably wouldn't even understand what he was saying, but the wind chose that moment to blow through the trees around him and cut straight through him.

"Don't offend the vættir," He muttered. "Which, no problem, not like you don't have a history of pissing off supernatural creatures just by opening your mouth."
Wanting at least a partial windscreen, he moved over to one of the larger ash trees circling the
clearing, although not the largest one, which still had something Amund had been messing with
earlier that day tucked in between it's roots. The trunk helped a little, and he shrugged deeper into his
jacket, wishing he'd thought to wear the obnoxiously bright neon hat Cassie had gotten him as a joke
over his beanie, which felt more and more inadequate the longer he sat down and leaned against the
trunk.

The ambiance didn't help his mood at all. He was stuck in the middle of the woods at night. By
himself. And he didn't even have the comfort of being in his own country. Nothing good could come
of it. In fact, he'd been specifically warned dozens of times against going into the woods at night, by
Amund and Leif both. His only comfort was that at least the trees were mostly full still, and that it
didn't look like anything out of a Halloween card. Otherwise he would have told the old man to
shove it. (Well, maybe. Despite being old, Amund was unnervingly tall and strong looking.)

Not knowing what else to do, and with no particular guidance, he closed his eyes and sorted through
the knowledge Rick had drilled into his head and what he'd gained from Amund since his arrival.

He didn't attempt appealing to any one thing, and he figured trying to call on any specific thing
would be a bad idea, in any case. Remembering Rick's opinion about how everyone typically loved
stories, he started telling them about his pack. He stalwartly refused to acknowledge that it felt more
like he was on the supernatural equivalent of a snipe hunt. If anything, he was willing to keep an
open mind after meeting an honest to god huldra.

Somewhere in between comparing Derek's patience and Cassie's gregariousness, he realized he'd
slipped from language to language, using the words from each that provided the nuances he'd needed
as he moved between speaking and almost singing, an easy rhythm established. Hoping he wasn't
pissing anything off by using Russian, Latin or English along with the Old Norse, he kept going,
closing his eyes and drawing his knees to his chest to try and conserve his body heat. It seemed to
work, because he actually felt warm again, the shivers that had been a constant companion gone and
his blood moving freely through his body.

The stories spiraled back to everything that had happened in Beacon Hills and forward again, a
smooth progression of past and present that moved seamlessly.

He didn't remember falling asleep. When he woke up to the sound of someone laughing, he looked
around him, searching for the source. A large, fat raven took off from the branch above him and into
the trees behind him. Stiles shivered and stuffed his hands back into his pockets, moving to stand.

A small, dirty canvas pouch fell out of his lap. Bending down, he was surprised by the weight of it
when he picked it up. Once opened, he stared down at the stones inside. Different colors and sizes,
but all cut and polished smooth.

Stuffing the pouch in his pocket, he oriented himself and found the path out of the vé that led to
Amund's cabin. Shivering when he stepped out of the clearing and down the path, he pulled his
beanie down and his jacket up a little higher as he trudged back. The emissary was already awake,
and Stiles felt the drool pooling in his mouth when he smelled coffee and bacon.

"You dropped something last night," He said, dropping the pouch on the table and immediately
making for the small kitchen. Amund arched one of his dark, caterpillar like eyebrows askance and
Stiles shrugged. "I think I messed up, I fell asleep."

"Not uncommon, you only had to stay the night," Amund told him, scooping the eggs he'd been
working on onto thick slices of toast. Stiles poured himself a cup of coffee and grabbed one of the
offered plates. Amund followed him to the table. Once they sat, Stiles began shoveling food into his
mouth, not realizing how hungry he'd been. Amund pushed his plate to the side and dumped the pouch out onto the table.

"These are not mine. Were did you find them?"

"The tree I was sitting under," Stiles admitted after swallowing. He followed the statement by chugging half of the coffee, willing the heat to warm the chill that had seeped into his bones on the walk back.

"Some of these are very rare," Amund hummed thoughtfully. "What did you say?"

"Just stories about home," Stiles shrugged.

"Did you try to do anything? Sing any galdr?"

"No," Stiles said slowly. "Just talked like you told me too. Why?"

Amund shook his head, staring down at the scattered, brightly colored stones. "It is not a bad thing," He assured him. "These are a gift for you."

"Are you sure?" Stiles asked, confused.

"Yes. These are for you," He repeated.

"Okay," Stiles shrugged, going back to his food. He paused, a bite of runny egg halfway to his mouth. "Any clue what they all are?"

Amund began listing off names, most of which meant nothing to Stiles. But Amund sounded impressed, and given how difficult it was to actually impress the old man, Stiles was willing to go with it. The only thing that stood out after that was when Amund said, in a very serious voice, that the stones were for 'important things', they shouldn't use them frivolously. He'd nodded and chugged the rest of his coffee.

Stiles stared at the email, unsure of what to make of it.

"What's wrong?" Cassie asked quietly, coming into the room. "I could hear your heartbeat downstairs."

"The twins are dead," Stiles said, looking up at her. "Dad sent me the details. It looks like a wolf did it." In fact, a werewolf had most certainly done it. Aiden, at least. Ethan had been with Danny at their apartment. In Berkeley, they'd all been in Berkeley, not Beacon Hills. Stiles didn't know what to do with that, didn't know what the hell he was supposed to think.

"Both of them?"

"They had some sort of weird connection. Whoever did it got them while they were separated and just took on Aiden. Ethan died when he did." In bed while he and Danny had been asleep. Danny had woken up to Ethan dying. Stiles shook his head, trying not to picture Danny forced to go through that, probably knowing exactly what was happening and unable to stop it.

"It's not surprising," Cassie shrugged. "You said they weren't strangers to violence before, right?" Stiles nodded.

"I didn't even know they'd left Beacon Hills. Dad got the news from Danny to pass on and looked into the case," He added woodenly. A part of him wanted to allow himself the feeling of satisfaction,
to give in to the rabid joy that echoed somewhere in the back of his mind at the thought of the twins dead. But the thought of Danny, who had seen the best in everyone, who had always been the 'nice guy', forced to endure seeing something invisible killing Ethan-He didn't even know how long it took. It could have been minutes, maybe hours.

"You alright?" Cassie asked, her hand moving to rest on his shoulder.

Stiles shrugged, not sure how to answer. "I should probably tell Derek. He'll want to know."

"He might be on," Cassie suggested.

"No, it can wait. We're skyping on Tuesday. Just-Don't leave tonight?" He requested in a small voice. Cassie nodded, pulling him away from the small desk and towards the bed.

(They stayed in bed for the rest of the evening, not even leaving for dinner. When he fell asleep, he dreamed of Scott eating two still beating hearts before splitting down the center into two of himself. One of them came at him, the other loped into the distance.)

"You're joking, right?"

Amund glared at him, not impressed with his response if the eyebrows were anything to go by. (Stiles seriously considered his life that he could read people just by their eyebrows and blamed Derek completely.)

"Dude," Stiles whined. That glare was almost as effective as Rick's glare. With a pang, he realized he was actually going to miss Amund, crotchety old man that he was. He was fun, and old age had given him a sharp, caustic wit that complimented his own.

That didn't mean that telling him a tattoo was 'tradition' and that it should be applied 'traditionally' was going to go over well. Tattoos had never even been a consideration before. Much less 'traditionally' applied ones.

"You don't have to," Amund admitted.

Stiles wondered if he was trying to use reverse psychology. Because it was sort of working.

"A needle. By hand? Seriously?"

"All initiations require pain," Amund reasoned, like the normal way wasn't painful at all.

"Why? Why can't they involve ice cream or beer or orgasms?"

"They can," Amund chuckled, his glare vanishing. "But the pain is necessary in all of them. It makes it stick."

"That sounds exactly like something a viking would say."

Amund gave him an amused look. Since his night in the vé they'd actually gotten closer, as if his ability to not freeze to death had actually been a test and he'd passed. Or Amund had come to the conclusion that Stiles was too obstinate to let someone try to pull a Hansel and Gretel on him. He definitely knew better than to go to random cottages and ask for help by now, in any case.

"Are you sure I shouldn't get this when I finish my training?"

"It will mark where you have been, and help you remember what you have learned."
"You make it sound so reasonable," Stiles muttered sourly. One of Amund's dark, furry eyebrows arched before he pulled up first one sleeve and then the other.

"Holy shit."

Tattoos covered his skin, a map of lines and curves that started at runes Stiles had seen and others he only barely grasped and moving into intricate knotwork and creatures that echoed the style of things Stiles had seen as art in the books he'd studied.

"That was all done with a needle?" He demanded.

"The runes and some of the others," Amund admitted. "They required it. The rest was done with a machine."

That made him feel marginally better, but it didn't make Amund look any less like a bad ass Santa.

"I want you to deliver our presents next year. I expect you to stay for cookies and milk. American tradition is to set out soda but I'm sure we can swing some aquavit. Rick has some stashed for special occasions," He insisted. Amund swatted his head and muttered something in Nynorsk. "I'll do it," He blurted. "I mean, it's important, right? To remember here." He cursed his impulsiveness, wondering where the hell that had come from.

Amund nodded seriously.

"My dad's going to kill me."

"Your father loves you," Amund admonished. "I know you talk to him over your computer. You're more focused the next day, happier."

"We could do that if you'd get the internet," Stiles quipped, but he was grinning as he said it. Amund hated computers, his favorite means of communication being letters or the telephone, which apparently didn't always work, because blizzards. (Amund said snow, Stiles knew better.)

"Or you could learn to write," Amund harrumphed.

The wash of green, purple, and blue in the sky bent and whorled so slowly Stiles was sure half of the movement he thought he saw was an illusion, but a stunning one nonetheless. Cassie's hand gripped his tight through their gloves as they stared up, leaning against the boat railing. Matthias, who had seen the aurora borealis enough times that they weren't all that enchanting anymore, had opted to stay inside the boat's cabin hours before. Stiles had no idea how anyone could ever stop finding them amazing, didn't even care that he was gawking like a normal tourist. He was freezing and even Cassie was shivering inside of her jacket, but he couldn't make himself go back to the cabin where the promise of heat and laced coffee waited.

"I wish he was here," He mumbled, wondering was Derek would think of the colors pooling and bleeding in the sky like watercolors, how he would look at them and how they would inspire him. What would he make, after seeing it? Because Stiles knew he would make something, that he'd have to. He wasn't in the least bit artistic and he wanted to create something.

"Me too," Cassie whispered, clutching his hand more tightly. Even though he didn't want to look away, he shifted and used his hand free to pull his camera out of his pocket. It would be a poor substitute, but he took pictures for Derek and his dad, even recorded some footage before shoving it back into his jacket and throwing an arm over Cassie's shoulder. She leaned into him, head tilted up to look at the sky.
"I miss him," Stiles admitted. Cassie wrapped an arm around his waist and squeezed gently.

"These here, they are important to you," Amund hummed as he traced the runes, each one hidden and stacked into the design. Stiles nodded. "But they are not you."

"No. They're others," He admitted.

"Loved ones," Amund said, a hint of a smile making his beard twitch. "You create beautiful things for them. Your will is the protection of the pack and your family. More than láðvǫrðr, son, or brother. You will become more than just a catalyst."

"I-What?" Stiles asked, staring at the emissary. He remembered Rick calling him a catalyst, vaguely, but most of his attention was focused on the whole 'more than guardian' thing, which was frankly pretty terrifying, the implications falling somewhere below 'seeing Jackson again' on his list of priorities. He was content with the idea of being the kind of emissary Rick was. Rick was happy, had a family, a career, and only occasionally brushed up against something life threatening.

"You will become," Amund repeated, with a hint of steel backing his words. "Just as others do."

"Meaning?" Stiles started, remembering that Amund's gift was being able to 'see the truth in the potentials'. Which meant he could see the future, not that he called it that, or ever really spoke about it. Stiles had the feeling Amund didn't particularly like his gift, and after knowing more about Lydia's, he couldn't exactly blame him. Readers typically had a shitty time with their lot in life. Rick was a rare exception, from everything he'd come to understand.

Amund shrugged, his face looking confused. It was the same befuddled, innocent expression Rick sometimes adopted, and Stiles wasn't fooled by it for a minute.

"Amund-" He started.

"I see many things," Amund said flippantly. "That is all."

"I hate it when people do that."

"And someday someone will say that to you, as I did to my teacher."

"I'll make sure to enjoy it."

"I do," Amund smirked. "This," He said, pointing to the base, "Will be done by hand. The rest I can use the machine for."

"Oh thank god," Stiles muttered. He'd almost compromised the surrounding knotwork because, yeah, a hand poked tattoo? It would be hellish at best. But he hadn't, because there were too many steps, too many elements inside of the twining threads, ones he couldn't give up without making the whole meaningless.

"You are tied to them," Amund hummed at his back. "All threads are nothing more than what connects the-'" He searched for a word. "Atoms of our own selves. They are what is in the space between."

"Pretty important threads," Stiles muttered, trying not to focus on the chill in the room as he pulled off his shirt. He heard Amund's sharp intake of breath and tried not to feel self conscious as his scars were exposed. Because it was always cold, he'd never removed his shirt in anyone but Cassie's
presence, and apparently when he was cold, like now, the scars took on a darker tint, some of them almost purple.

"All threads are important," Amund finally said. "They are the vibrations in the spaces between. If you look, you can guide yourself through them to find the resonances of those you love most."

"You're seriously telling me to go to my happy place?" Stiles snorted.

"You will experience pain regardless," Amund told him, as if it didn't matter to him in the least. Stiles could almost see the apathetic shrug. "You feel things too deeply." At that, Stiles could feel the gaze zeroed in on his side and resisted the urge to shift away. "But it does not always have to be a burden."

Stiles didn't say anything to that, wasn't sure there was anything to say. Instead, he listened to Amund's steady breathing as he wiped the area down.

The first prick on his flesh almost made him jump out of his skin. The second was worse, and he bit the inside of his cheek, trying to remember that it was important, although why was hard to keep in mind.

Closing his eyes, he traced the design behind his eyelids, remembering every detail. He should, considering how much work he'd put into it.

He started talking in Latin. School and his online tutoring sessions with Lydia had made him, if not fluent, proficient. It was easy to imagine Derek sitting across from him, telling him a needle wasn't nearly as bad as claws and a blowtorch. He whined about how much it sucked, but hey, he was officially a badass, no one would be able to deny that anymore. Inane things, things he hadn't mentioned in their Skype sessions came out. Leif's similarities to Caroline, his differences, Amund's disdain for people in general and the photo of a woman and a little boy that sat on his desk, one Stiles didn't know the story of. Cassie's eyes any time she looked at Matthias, her desire to visit Amsterdam because it was Amsterdam. How big Norway felt most of the time, how small it could seem when he was walking with Cassie in a crowd of people.

In a lot of ways, he talked to Derek in ways he normally wouldn't, the freedom of a different language allowing him to speak freely in front of Amund and Derek's distance making it easy to just let go.

He told Derek he missed him, that it felt like he was older and younger at the same time, learning so much but still so painfully, obviously ignorant compared to Amund, how Derek would enjoy snarking with the emissary via eyebrow language alone. He admitted that sometimes he would go to Tollak's workshop and pretend he was back in Portland, the smell of sawdust reminding him of home. He sighed when he said that as much as he liked knowing what an experience Norway was, he knew he wasn't home, that he actually had a place he belonged, and that he missed it, that being so far away made him feel like a part of him was missing, carved out and waiting for him.

"Finished," Amund said, sounding pleased. Stiles looked up, blinking against the light. He couldn't remember closing his eyes. Everything was surrounded by a soft, glowing halo. He felt like he'd been drinking whiskey in front of a warm fire, his whole body lethargic, flushed.

"Really?"

"I said so," Amund reminded him, but his voice was quiet. Stiles nodded and felt old, rough fingertips tracing over his skin and heard him murmuring. The old man was a lot better than he or Rick at manipulating the threads, and he trusted Amund even if he was too dazed to understand what
"Thank you," Stiles stuttered after he'd finished, the words thick in his mouth.

"It's tradition," Amund reminded him, as if they hadn't spent hours sitting in the same spot. "Valdyr will have to touch it up, since you will be gone. But the magic is there. You carry it well."

"Thanks?" Stiles mumbled, shivering as something cold and thick was smoothed over his spine.

"You've taken the sixth step."

"Really?" Stiles slurred, surprised in a distant way.

"You have created this, and it is a map and an oath. It is the offering of yourself to yourself."

Stiles knew he should understand the reference and didn't, his brain fogged with endorphins and whispers of latin. He thought he could hear a wolf howling and shook his head, wondering if he was hallucinating from the chemicals his brain was soaking itself in.

Amund hummed a song he didn't recognize, but Stiles felt it soothing through him, deep and even, steady. When he was dropped off at Leif's home a few hours before sunrise, he stumbled in and immediately sought out his bed. After shedding his clothes he practically collapsed into it, staying awake just long enough to cocoon himself in the blankets.

(He dreamed of fog weaving through redwood trees and the sound of the ocean. The scent of the damp woods was chewy and sharp in his mouth, tart with the hints of salt that lay over it. Almost familiar eyes followed him as he moved, surefooted, through the early morning light. There was a vague sense of something being promised to him, but he didn't know what it was. Instinct told him he wanted it, that however ignorant of his own path, he was moving towards it.)

When he carefully packed all of their souvenirs away in the bag they'd had to buy specifically for said souvenirs, Stiles didn't think about Amund and Leif, who he'd grown to enjoy spending time with, or Cassie and Matthias, who had been clinging to eachother more tightly as their departure date drew closer. He thought about Derek, and his dad, being able to actually hug them again. He thought about sleeping in his own bed, any of them, with Derek and Cassie, tucked snugly between them and warmer than he'd been in two months.

Cassie didn't stay in his room that night. Stiles didn't mind, although he had trouble falling asleep, excited and nervous about going back home after being gone for two months.

The next morning he sat in the front of the car with Leif while Cassie and Matthias cuddled in the back. Any time he looked back at them, he caught Leif's eye and Leif smiled the same sort of knowing smile that Caroline would sport when she knew exactly what would happen. Stiles smiled the same smile back. He wasn't blind, after all. And even though he still couldn't actually read threads, it felt like something was there, a potential for more that went beyond wishful thinking. Not that he said anything about it, or would. It felt cruel to tell her that when they were leaving, and he didn't know Matthias well enough to know if he would follow Cassie. (He sort of hoped he would while selfishly wishing he wouldn't. Losing Scott to Allison was a memory that still stung, and he was more than sort of possessive of Cas.)

After a grueling flight with a layover that extended from forty eight minutes to six hours because of storms, and then a mad dash for their terminal, they were in Portland. There had been a lot of sniffling and outright crying on Cassie's part, and he'd done his best to comfort her. But when she saw her father waiting next to Derek, she threw herself into his arms. Rick's eyebrow climbed up in
surprise and Stiles mouthed 'boy' at him. He nodded once as Cassie started crying again.

He swung an easy arm over Derek's shoulder as they walked for the baggage claim, leaving Cassie and her dad to talk alone.

"Miss me?" He asked, grinning. Already he felt settled, even if he was tired and achy from spending too many hours in airport and airplane seats.

"No," Derek said, staring straight ahead. But Stiles didn't miss the quirk of Derek's lips before it was completely hidden.

"Come on Derek, I missed you. So much. Like, you'd love it over there. One of the wolves, Tollak, he does amazing stuff with wood. I mean, wow. Oh, that sounded fucking awful, didn't it? Not-Ignore all that. Anyway, I showed him your portfolio on the company site--"

"Tollak and I have emailed a little," Derek told him, brow arched as though he'd somehow beaten Stiles by already conversing with the old wolf. Stiles knew better, because Tollak's English was truly atrocious. He'd barely been able to explain why he'd lingered in the workshop all day.

"Fine, fine," Stiles sighed dramatically. "I guess that means you don't want your present then. I can totally return it, although shipping it back will cost more than--"

"I missed you," Derek muttered, throwing his arm around Stiles' waist before sniffing at him. "You smell like them." It was definitely an accusation and Stiles resisted the urge to stick out his tongue.

"Guess you'll just have to help fix that. Which bed, ours or Cassie's?"

"We have a bed?"

"Yeah, the one over the garage."

"That's your room."

Stiles made a rude noise he didn't even attempt to stop. "Whatever, you always sleep in there with me. We split the drawers evenly. You even have a nightstand. Our room, so technically our bed."

Derek didn't say much of anything else while they waited for their bags.

When they got back to the pack house and Stiles flopped on aforementioned bed, he closed his eyes and sighed heavily. The prior two days and Cassie's depression had exhausted him, and he was thinking about a shower and sleeping for a week. Or maybe sleeping for a week and then showering, he was beyond being picky about whichever happened first.

He was still debating the merits of getting up (and failing to really find any) when he felt fur against his cheek before a cold, damp nose nudged him. Giving up on the idea of sleep for at least a few more hours in favor of consoling his best friend, he reached out to scratch behind an ear. "It'll be alright Cas, things will work out."

Stiles jumped when the wolf barked, the sound too low to be Cassie, right in his ear. Startled and flailing, he scrambled back for a moment, eyes on the black wolf that watched him, head cocked, blue eyes unblinking. It was most definitely not Cassie, who had a red and brown coat and wasn't nearly as big.

"Derek?"
The wolf nudged his knee and offered what had to be a smile. A wolf smile.

"Dude! You did it!" Stiles shouted, realization dawning on him. He hadn't even known Derek had been trying to attain full transformation, and to come back and suddenly Derek could do it like it was nothing, and he hadn't been there. He'd missed one of the biggest events of Derek's life, and he was supposed to be there for things like that. That was what people-

Oh.

The realization hit like a train, his whole being stilling around the thought. Suddenly his complete lack of interest in Sander, in anyone, made perfect sense. In a terrifying and equally exhilarating, 'holy shit I'm an idiot' sort of way.

"God, I missed you so much," Stiles whimpered, and when he wrapped his arms around Derek's neck and buried his face in the fur there he resisted the urge to sniff. It would offend Derek to be used as a snot rag, and the last thing he wanted was for the wolf to snort in his face. (Cassie had done that and it had been like an amped up sneeze. Wolf snot was disgusting.) Derek's coat was soft and the wolf was even warmer than he was as a human, the difference of his bulk not even awkward as he rubbed his face against the fur. Derek as a true wolf. It was edging on a miracle, a sign that maybe Derek was healing.

Cassie walked into their room, eyes rimmed red from crying when she froze, spotting Derek. And then she was a tangle of fur and clothes she hadn't discarded, yipping excitedly.

Stiles laughed when she hopped onto the bed with her shirt halfway off, his arms full of fur and wolf. He was home.

(Derek was entranced with his tattoo, and he was forced to lay on his stomach while both werewolves stared at the healing surface of his skin. Fingertips ghosted over the design, Derek's, Cassie's, or both, he wasn't sure. Cassie declared she wanted one someday. She changed her mind when Stiles told her about the blowtorch.)

(He promised himself he'd take care of that other problem later. Or never. Preferably never.)

"Holy shit-I-Fuck!" Stiles shouted, staring at the new building behind the house. It was a little smaller than Derek's garage, but not by much. He flailed wildly, looking from the workshop to the group of people behind him. Suddenly, being forced to stay at Caroline and Rick's home for a few days made sense.

"Language," His dad chuckled, looking inordinately pleased.

"You-I-" It was his. His own workshop, independent of Rick's, his own place to store all of the things that made Derek itchy and uncomfortable, his own space to work and study and practice without being bothered. His, completely his. Built on Derek's property. Like he belonged there, would always belong there.

And not only had Derek built it, but he'd asked his dad to help, along with others in the pack, even Miles and some of the other guys he worked with. It wasn't just from Derek, it was from his family, pack, friends. People that cared about him and wanted him to stay, to have a place there.

"You're about to undergo the seventh initiation," Rick said. "Derek thought you would want your own space to work in."

Stiles wanted to cry.
He moved carefully, carving a small hollow into the cabochon with the bur. His hands threatened to shake as he concentrated, used the slowest setting he could to shape the glass into a bowl. His focus was split between humming quietly and maintaining the shape he wanted without cracking the piece of blue obsidian. Both of the stones he had been working on had been from his night in the vé back in Norway, and after some research, he knew his chances of getting more were slim to none. (And his goal was definitely, not in any way frivolous.)

Rick came in later, after he'd finished carving the runes into the glass and smoothed the edges. The settings were waiting, Stiles just needed to gather the energy to start the next step.

"Derek said you've been in here all day," Rick murmured, eyes on the table, zeroed in on the pendants.

"Working on something," Stiles told him, nodding. It was silent permission for Rick to examine what he'd been planning for over a week and working on implementing all morning.

"I never realized," Rick murmured, fingers hovering over the lines on Derek's pendant. "I suppose it's the things right in front of your face that you miss."

"It seemed to fit," Stiles hedged.

"It does," Rick acknowledged. "I think-It's distilled. Perfect."

"I have one for Cassie too, the amber one. I'm giving them to them after the ceremony."

Rick nodded, smiling softly as he examined the purple hued amber. "I never cease to be amazed at your ingenuity, Stiles. I'm glad you found us."

"Me too," Stiles smiled, Rick's sincere praise warming that part of himself that still needed validation from time to time.

Rick paused at the door. "You know the old poem?"

"Memorized them all, remember?" Stiles snorted, almost but not quite managing a glare. The rune poems had been the bane of his existence for months because Rick hadn't just demanded memorization, but interpretation as well.

"Maybe you should tell Derek someday."

His dad was there, completely unfazed by the formality of the situation. Stiles felt a little like he was graduating. He supposed he was, when Rick began to process of tying him to the land itself. It was a permanent tie, a symbol of a lifetime commitment, and even though he was terrified, he felt right, good, doing it. His blood spilled off of the altar and over the roots of the ash tree. He sang, knowing it was the same oath Rick had sung when he'd become the emissary of Caroline's pack. The syllables plucked and thrummed along the lines of power that rested beneath the ash tree, not as strong as the pool where the nemeton was, but bright, beautiful. It felt pure, unburdened by the events the nemeton had suffered.

When he finished, he felt the tie just beneath his skin, knew it would be a constant presence, something that ran along the thread tying him to Beacon Hills. Unlike the dark scarring left behind from his sacrifice, the mark he felt, knew was there, felt more like someone had exhaled and the
memory of it lingered, a ghost pressure kept alive by impressions of the territory, things he'd felt every time he connected to it through the vé, only a little deeper, steadfast.

At the end of the ceremony, Rick presented him with a wolf pelt. Stiles was horrified at first, until he was assured that the wolf had died of natural causes, that nothing lingered around it, metaphysically clinging. When he accepted it, the brown and red fur was soft and thick, peppered with strands of black and white. He noticed the ties and realized with a start that it was a headdress, like the one he'd seen in Rick's workshop once, before it had disappeared.

"You did it," His dad whispered into his ear as they hugged. "You chose your life, and chose what you wanted for yourself and worked hard for it. I'm proud of you son."

Stiles felt it was probably okay that he thought about how far he'd come, how he and his dad had finally gotten to a point where they were okay, that he was accepted. He also felt that it was completely justified to hug his dad more tightly and whisper thank yous for everything his father had done for him, for his acceptance and love.

When he joined Cassie and Derek, he pulled the pendants out of his pocket and explained what they were, why they had his blood inside, caught between the cabochons and the settings. Cassie and Derek both nodded, serious but obviously pleased, and slipped the necklaces over their heads.

"They'll stay on through the change too," Stiles told them, grinning. "So there's no excuse if I ever see you without them." Cassie kissed his cheek and hugged him to her like he was going to disappear. Derek followed suit, hugging him and nuzzling his hair, murmuring a quiet thank you into his ear.

And then there was the normal celebration that accompanied any pack event. His dad moved easily with the werewolves, talking and joking, answering questions about his job. No one mentioned that he belonged to another pack, and he never mentioned the other pack. It wasn't quite a pink elephant, but it did make Stiles wish that the situation had been better.

When he walked in, Derek was almost immediately in his face, checking him over. Stiles bit back a laugh and gestured to his back, which itched and tingled.

"I needed Rick to touch up the tattoo," He explained. Derek's head tilted a fraction, just enough to admit his curiosity, and Stiles pulled off his shirt and turned, presenting the bandage to him. Derek's fingers carefully began pulling at the medical tape. Stiles felt cool air hitting his back and the chill of it seeping into the salve that had been warm between his skin and the bandage.

"It's darker," Derek murmured.

"Just fresh ink. It'll be more solid now." He didn't mention Rick's admiration of the tattoo, or how he'd fairly preened under the praise the man had given it. Derek stepped back and Stiles turned to him, smiling.

"Your arm?"

Stiles blushed and carefully removed the bandage Rick had applied to it. It had been an impulsive decision, probably a terrible, completely terrible idea. But he'd wanted it, and had already endured the pain of having his back done. Comparatively, the tattoo on his arm hadn't been nearly as painful. Derek held his wrist and examined the cyrillic letters.

"Volk deržát menjá za okovoy. It's about my anchor," He blurted, blushing when Derek gave him a questioning glance.
Derek examined the words again, his fingers barely brushing over the raised flesh, before dropping his wrist and nodding, not demanding an explanation. Stiles was grateful he let it go, not sure how he’d explain it without lying.

(It took Cassie over a week to accept that he wasn't going to translate it for her.)

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter left to this part of the series guys.
Also. Stiles is an idiot. So is Derek. It's part of their charm.

Stiles' arm tattoo is: Волк держит меня за оковы, which translates to 'the wolf holds my fetters'. I'm seriously hoping I got that right, as I don't actually speak Russian. (Body modification in fic is a thing for me. Let me indulge my little quirks.)

The concept of 'an offering of yourself to yourself' is pulled from Odin on Yggdrasil. More on that in BFBOtF.

Láðvǫrðr means 'land guardian' in old norse. (Also, there is no relation between Rick and Amund.)

The ulfhéðnar were similar to berserkers, but whereas berserkers were considered 'bear like' and wore bear pelts, the ulfhéðnar wore wolf pelts etc. Both were considered to be possessed by the spirits of animals, which accounted for their inhuman abilities in battle. So yeah. I couldn't really pass that up. The more you know.
21: Winter

Chapter Summary

Imagine that the world is made out of love. Now imagine that it isn't. Imagine a story where everything goes wrong, where everyone has their back against the wall, where everyone is in pain and acting selfishly because if they don't, they'll die. Imagine a story, not of good against evil, but of need against need against need, where everyone is at cross-purposes and everyone is to blame.-Richard Siken

Chapter Notes

I should probably preface this chapter with an apology. I am so, so sorry. There is so much assholery and drama, and it's pretty much the manic depressive roller coaster from hell for everyone involved.

The Codas have all been packed together into It Connects the Dots (for those that didn't notice the random addition) and there are so many codas for this chapter.

Also, I'm sorry this took so long. I turned into an actual crazy person editing this, and editing, and editing, and trying to make it perfect, then freaking out because the format is different. And then I went overboard and now I've just decided to post or it will literally never happen.

Lastly. A lot of this was planned before 3b started, so some things are not in line with it. ::shrugs:: C'est la vie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Stiles," His father greeted. It was cautious, and Stiles was immediately on guard. He'd been making noises about visiting for Christmas, and Stiles still wasn't sure. While he was reasonably certain Scott wouldn't force him out of Beacon Hills, he didn't know about Allison or Issac. Lydia had made it clear that the pair blamed him for the pack's schism. Their reactions to his prescence were unpredictable at best. Stiles also wanted to let Scott have his space but he didn't want to lose Christmas with his dad. Neither he or his dad had managed to figure out an alternative, but Stiles didn't want to screw up Scott's Christmas. Not after his pack had lost more than half it's members and he'd lost three friends. It didn't help that Stiles was sure Caroline wouldn't let him travel to Beacon Hills alone anymore. The idea of an irate Derek and Cassie standing guard made him want to break things.

"Dad," He replied tentatively. "Everything alright?"

"We're kind of-We have a problem. Down here."

"Okay," He said slowly, ready for a rant.

"The pack's in trouble."
"I'm-" Stiles stopped himself from saying he wasn't part of the pack. His dad knew that. So obviously something was more than wrong. "Dad, just say it."

"Allison and Issac went missing three days ago. Scott left this morning and we can't find him. He was in rough shape. Deaton can't get a lock on them, says there's something interfering."

"So it's supernatural."

"Yeah, we think so. Chris can't find them either."

"And he can't call other hunters in to help," Stiles added, the sinking feeling in his stomach already telling him everything he needed to know.

"Yeah," His dad sighed, his exhaustion leaking through the phone like a palpable thing.

There was a beat, a pause. He could say no, he could say he couldn't, could say and claim any number of things. Except- It was his dad. And Scott, despite everything. Scott didn't deserve to lose more people he loved, and even though he was reasonably sure Scott hated him, they were brothers. That's what family was, he reminded himself. Some families were just broken. It didn't change anything, not really.

"I'll be down there in the morning," He promised, ignoring his sense of foreboding.

"Thank you, son."

"Love you dad. Stay safe."

"Love you too."

Stiles disconnected and tossed his phone onto the bed.

Of course his first real conflict as an emissary wouldn't even have anything to do with his pack. *Fuck.*

He started packing his things, throwing some clothes into one duffel and the weapons he kept in his room in another. It wasn't until he was shoving his phone in his back pocket that he thought about Derek and Cassie, and how he would explain leaving town without them following.

Everything that came to mind would only make them want to follow. At the very least they would demand to come, at most they would demand that Caroline be informed. And for all that he trusted Caroline, he knew the alpha would force him to slow down and navigate all the proper channels. As an emissary, he'd be forced to. It would easily become a logistical nightmare, the sort of interagency ordeal that had driven his dad insane. If the pair neglected to mention that they were leaving, he had no doubts she'd tear into them and punish them for something he'd decided.

And there was no way Derek would stay behind.

Chewing his lip, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened his texts. The latest one in the conversation was a grocery list from the day before. Typing out a quick message, he took a deep breathe and prayed he'd be forgiven.

'Met someone, staying the night at their place tonight.'

He hit send and tried not to think about Derek imagining him with someone else. Those thoughts were better pushed to the side (far, far to the wayside) because in the end, he wasn't going to drag
Derek back into Beacon Hills when there was a crisis, especially not to help Scott.

Fuck, he already felt like a train wreck.

Gathering his bags, he turned off the light and closed the door behind him.

He spent fifteen minutes going through his workshop and pulling down anything he thought he might need, filling up another bag before zipping it shut and hurrying out, paranoid Derek or Cassie would pull into the driveway and catch him in the lie. When he gripped the steering wheel, he realized his hands were shaking, knuckles white.

Taking a deep breath, he avoided the question that he knew he should be asking himself and pulled away from the house. In an effort to staunch the panic and keep it from bleeding over, he started going over plans, talking out loud to ease the sensation of being alone.

Determined to follow through now that he'd already started, he drove twenty minutes out of his way, back toward the city, and stopped at a drug store. With half a mind he filled a basket with energy drinks and snack cakes. The clerk barely paid any mind as he rang everything up, nodding dully at the requests for a prepaid debit card and a cheap prepaid phone. Stiles barely remembered what the kid looked like when he got into his jeep and went to the closest gas station and filled up.

Before he got onto I-5, he turned off his phone and plugged in the new one, sending a text to his dad telling him it was his emergency phone.

The drive consisted of sugary energy drinks that settled in his stomach like acid and plotting out various scenarios, none of them particularly encouraging. Anything that could take a hunter and beta was bad enough, but to evade an alpha, a hunter and local law enforcement took work. That even Deaton was having problems finding them meant magic was involved somehow, and that didn't bode well.

He stopped just outside the state line at an oasis to piss and stretch his legs, to draw in some of the cold, biting air. When he tried to eat, one bite of a twinkie and he was spitting it out onto the oil stained parking lot, trying not to heave.

The road ate time, both blending into one another until he was staring at the cheery sign welcoming him to Beacon Hills. He pulled over and dumped everything in the passenger seat to the floorboard before pulling the cushion up and opening the safe. The heavy comfort of the gun in his lap only reinforced his paranoia, the sense that he was being watched, studied. It was an unsettling welcome home, like the town was sucking him back in to fill the empty space he'd left behind.

It wasn't quite dawn when he pulled up to Scott's-Melissa's house. He still had issues with the mental corrections and made a silent vow to figure that out after the whole missing pack situation was resolved. Hesitating, he stared at the house and wondered if he'd missed a call from his dad saying everyone had returned. The presence of the black SUV in the driveway didn't give him much hope.

In a moment of irrational selfishness, he wished Derek was with him, because he'd never wanted to come back to Beacon Hills, had never wanted to get pulled back into the perpetual nightmare. Even knowing more, feeling like he had actually become something better than what he'd been, he didn't feel ready, didn't feel like he'd come all that far from sixteen and stupid. In petulant, angry moments, he'd fantasized about coming back and saving the day, making them see him for what he'd become, but the fantasy was crumbling, had crumbled the moment he'd hung up the phone. A dream come true perverted to fit the town itself.

The front door opened and Chris Argent stepped out, eyes scanning the jeep. He looked-
Disappointed, maybe. Stiles tried not to ponder the many reasons that could be and stashed his gun in the dashboard before getting out. A resolute nod in the hunter's direction served as a greeting before he opened the back and started pulling his duffle bags out, more careful with them than he had been tossing them in.

"Stiles," Chris greeted from behind him, making him twitch. When he spun to look, he saw a carefully neutral gaze and a ramrod straight back. He looked over the man's shoulder, not trusting his vision.

"Hi. Dad called," he offered by way of explanation, shoving the bag of his clothes at the hunter and grabbing the bag of weapons. The sound of the door slamming shut was muffled and eaten by the cold air, dulled somehow. Everything felt muted except for the biting chill. He followed Chris inside, scanning his surroundings as he did.

"Any news?" He asked as the front door closed, looking around the foyer with something akin to distrust. Stiles couldn't find it in himself to relax when he couldn't stop the itching feeling under his skin, surrounded by the familiar and feeling like a stranger to it. It served him right, he supposed. Whatever his head was doing, he'd done it to Scott times ten. Still, he felt off, being in Scott's house, like he hadn't spent half of his childhood in it.

"Not yet. Deaton's still trying to get a read on them, but," Chris sighed and shook his head. "John and Melissa are trying to get some rest upstairs."

"Has Deaton renewed the wards here?"

"Your dad and Melissa won't let him near the house." Chris made it sound like a question even though his voice didn't hold any particular inflection. Stiles recalled his dealings with the hunter and the vague sense of dislike was pulled back out, almost nostalgic. It was easy to remember why he'd hated Chris.

Stiles groaned. "Fuck. Okay. I'm going to override that. We need his help. Call him and see if he's willing to come here. I want everyone in one place. In the meantime, I'm going to set up wards-"

"Your dad doesn't want him here," Chris repeated.

"I know why, and I'm saying personal bullshit comes second to finding everyone. We'll be more effective with everyone in one place."

Chris made a noncommittal sound but he was pulling his phone out of his pocket. Stiles walked back to the kitchen, felt the hunter following right behind him. There was a quiet command to join them and then the sound of the phone snapping shut.

"I'm going to have to make keys for everyone," he muttered, opening the bag and pulling out one of the boxes of vials. The boxes were works of art in and of themselves, random gifts that just appeared on his workbench occasionally. He knew Derek made them, and usually he tried to be extra careful with them, organizing them neatly on his shelves and benches. Even as he opened it, he was checking for chips, feeling guilty for how he'd just slung it into the bag.

"A ward against humans?" Chris asked, watching him intently. Stiles saw a shadow slide down, a veil of a sneer, there and gone in a blink. He shook his head and turned to the cupboards.

"Against everything. Humans, werewolves, fucking dragons apparently," Stiles explained, looking through the cabinets until he found a metal mixing bowl. It wasn't what he would have used, but it would work.
"I've never heard of something like that."

"Learned it in Norway. Back from when sieges were still a thing."

"Your dad mentioned it. Why'd you travel all the way to Europe?" Chris asked, carefully nonchalant. Stiles shrugged it off, hesitant to share life stories with the hunter. Even if they had a common enemy and were working to the same end, he didn't particularly trust him, the fact that he was an Argent being the least of the problem.

"Sabbatical. Just got back last month."

"And the keys?"

"Each one needs to be inconspicuous and something you won't lose," Stiles continued, turning on the sink and letting water spill into the bowl. Once satisfied, he shut the water off and put the bowl on the counter, ignoring it for the moment and pulling out the box of empty vials. Chris watched, expression giving nothing away as he started uncapping vials and setting them up. It was nerve wracking, to be the focus of such unwavering attention. Stiles hummed under his breath as he looked for the powder Amund had forced him to create.

Black powder, shimmering with bits of color poured into the bottom of each vial. Stiles remembered Amund's insistence and wondered for the first time if the emissary had foreseen the situation. The wards were strong, bordering on useless considering the totality of the boundary and what it took to maintain it. Not to mention the work that went into creating the powder itself, from hammering stones into shard and dust to burning and grinding down fresh ash. He'd remembered the process of grinding pigment for paint the entire time, had babbled at Amund about it. The whole thing had been hell on his wrists.

He pulled up his sleeves as he worked, continuing to hum. Stiles was more than aware of what he looked like as he moved. When he pulled out his pocket knife and made a cut on his forearm, Chris made a surprised noise that he ignored. Holding each vial to the cut he watched as blood poured in. It took longer than he would have thought for the blood to seep into the powder. Stiles didn't acknowledge the borderline physical sensation of Chris' curiosity coming from across the counter and continued humming, changing the song to the one he'd been taught. Hours of work were vindicated as the blood thickened the powder to paste and he felt potentials becoming tangible.

Satisfied with the loose threads waiting to be tied together, he capped the vials and pulled his sleeve down. When he looked up, the questions were obvious. It fulfilled a vindictive, petty part of himself that he was doing something that Chris didn't have the first clue about.

"I need you to go outside and bury these at the corners of the property. Get as far as you can to the borders," He commanded, ignoring the sudden scowl. "It doesn't hinge on following actual property lines, but I would love for my car to be within the perimeter."

"You want me to dig holes and bury these?" The question was flat and unimpressed. Stiles met the glower head on and kept his posture loose.

"I was under the impression hunters always had a shovel. Was I wrong?"

Chris took the four vials, his expression shifting suspiciously close to a grimace. Stiles didn't, couldn't miss the warning glance cast in his direction before Chris used the back door to slip out of the kitchen and into the backyard.

"Dick," Stiles muttered, already moving to mix more of the powder into the bowl. He pulled up his
sleeve again and looked to the door before working the cut so that it started bleeding again, sluggishly at first and then more freely. The throbbing grew to a stinging, pulsing ache as the edges widened. He watched the water ripple and shiver, his blood blooming like ink before disappearing into the whole. Satisfied, he jerked his sleeve back down and used a finger to draw in the water. Mumbling under his breath, he focused on the threads he felt outside, dangling and incomplete. Potential.

When Chris came back in, he tugged at the ends, pulling them in and focusing them on the bowl and everything contained therein. The tugging sensation he'd been told to expect started, and he exhaled, inhaled, and continued. The stave he'd been taught came alive under his fingertip, blood and ash following his movement and settling on top of the water before sinking.

"I need something to make a key. Something you always have on you."

"My gun?" Chris offered. Stiles looked up from the bowl long enough to give Chris a withering glare, one that was met with a blank face. Despite the mask of apathy, Stiles knew Chris was smirking.

"It has to go into the bowl. Pretty sure a gun is a bad idea. Your ring would work, or a necklace if you wear one."

"My ring?"

"Wedding ring. You're still wearing it." Seeing Chris' hesitation, Stiles sighed and tried to be empathetic to the man's plight. It was a dismal failure, but at least he'd tried. "It's not going to curse it or anything. Once the wards are dropped the ring will become inert."

Chris stared at him, and Stiles knew he was being scanned for a lie. Knowing he didn't deserve trust, he couldn't help but feel affronted at the assumption that he would lie about this, when everything else was going to shit. But the hunter relented and slipped his ring off of his finger.

Grabbing it impatiently, he dropped it in, the hollow plunk echoed above the sound of his humming before he felt the wards recognize it as a key. Finished, he pulled it out and tossed it at Chris, opting not to mention that Chris could wipe it off without worry. The grit would be a minor annoyance, but it was enough to sate the passive aggressive impulses he didn't make an effort of curbing.

"How can we be sure this is going to work?"

"Try walking past it without the key. Nothing will cross the line without one. Except me, but that's because it's my blood helping tie it together."

"It can keep humans contained?"

Stiles repressed the unholy glee roused by Chris' obvious discomfort. Ruthlessly biting back a smirk, he nodded slowly. "It's not very practical, considering how much goes into making the base, but yeah. Like I said, from back when sieges were a legitimate concern."

"But you can make the base?"

"Yes."

The assessing gaze made his skin crawl, but he endured with an indolent arch of his eyebrow. Clearly he had some sort of death wish. "You've been busy."

"Emissary."
Chris' nod could have been an acknowledgment or a sign of respect, though Stiles doubted it was either. The hunter did seem to relax, if only enough for his shoulders to slump an increment. He looked exhausted, which wasn't surprising.

"I'd like to know exactly what happened," Stiles finally said, walking over to the coffee maker and pointedly not thinking about how much of a trespasser he felt like in his father's house, how inappropriate it felt to be making himself at home, like he belonged. The coffee was cold and he poured it out, looking for grounds and filters, filling the machine back up.

"Allison and Issac were studying together. Scott was at work. We weren't aware they were missing until Scott got home that night. Your dad and I both looked the house over. No sign of forced entry or a struggle. Cars were still in the driveway, books and laptops on the table, open. Shoes by the door, none of the weapons caches had been touched. It looks like they just disappeared. Scott couldn't catch any scents, but," Chris paused.

"He may or may not have been operating at full capacity at that point," Stiles interjected when the hunter didn't continue. Chris nodded, looking grateful that he hadn't inadvertently caused offense. Stiles didn't get the reaction, knew as well as Chris did that Allison and Issac going missing would have compromised Scott on some level. "And nothing?"

"It's been several days," Chris reminded him. "And the deputies had a turn through there yesterday."

"Is that what set Scott off?" Stiles asked carefully. Chris nodded, his mouth a rueful slash on his face. Stiles took note of the stubble, wondered if the man had even showered.

"We couldn't stop it, Issac's work called it in, so your dad had to make it official. We're trying to keep it quiet. Melissa's worried her ex-husband will find out."

"He's still hanging around?"

"He's made a point of dropping in when things involving Scott bleed over into paperwork." Chris made it sound like it happened often, which probably pissed his dad off to no end.

"Fucker," He muttered, scrubbing his face. "Alright, so the sooner this is done, the better. Noted. Nothing like the threat of that asshole stopping by to provide incentive." Chris gave him a flat look and Stiles rolled his eyes, making no attempt to hide the gesture. The coffee pot hissed and Stiles pulled down two mugs and filled them, needing something to do with his hands.

"I know this is probably a touchy subject, but is there any chance your alpha will help?" Chris asked as he accepted the coffee.

"We'd have to find Scott first, probably," Stiles admitted, frowning. "The Valdyr pack is banned. Caroline is pretty big on abiding by the rules. And if she comes into the territory while Scott's and his pack are missing, it would be easy to misread her intentions."

"But you're here," Chris pointed out, leaning against the counter.

"I sort of hauled ass after dad called. None of them know I'm here." And he wanted to keep it that way.

"So you're breaking protocol."

"Pretty much," Stiles agreed, taking note of Chris' smirk. "I know Scott wouldn't keep me from my dad. It's just the pack itself." He shrugged. "There are politics involved. We'd need Scott to rescind the ban. Unless I get killed, in which case it's open season."
"Meaning?" Chris prompted.

"Caroline could step in and demand restitution, regardless of the ban." And even if most of the pack didn't come, there would be enough to make short work of any problem. Cassie wouldn't stop until she'd razed the whole fucking town. He didn't want to think about what Derek might do.

Chris seemed to grasp the idea at once, nodding with something that looked like caution. "Let's not let it get that far."

"Sounds like a great idea," He muttered. "Any clue how Deaton has been searching for them?"

Chris shook his head. "He said there's too much interference. I don't really know what that means."

"And he's on his way?"

"Still asleep or busy. I left a message."

Stiles grumbled and finished his coffee. "I can try looking for them, but I'd need maps. A few, at least."

"Your dad probably has some in his cruiser," Chris supplied. Stiles nodded and looked around, mentally going through the rooms of the house and mapping them out. He bit back an oath when he realized there was no real space for privacy aside from the guest room or Scott's room. He'd commit a few serious felonies to be at Lydia's, if only for the space and her workroom. Pulling out his keys, he flipped through them and found the old cruiser key he wasn't technically supposed to have.

"Be back in a minute."

Ignoring the tension that only seemed to be getting worse instead of better with the offer, he went back outside and tested the key in the trunk lock and made a triumphant noise when it opened.

"Seriously needs better security," He sighed, immediately spotting the box of local maps. He checked one, saw that the map of the preserve was more detailed than the one of the town itself. Regardless, they worked well enough for his purposes, and he grabbed a handful and was about to shut the trunk when he looked again, noticed how shallow it was. Glancing at the carefully organized chaos of the trunk, he saw the outline of the false bottom.

It wasn't as surprising as he wanted it to be. His dad had made sure he was armed, after all. And he and Chris were probably still on friendly terms, despite the pack itself being persona non grata. Slamming the trunk closed, he walked away, trying not to think about how many times his dad had been forced to use the probably illegal, unregistered firearms. Or if he would have to use them in the next couple of days.

"Are you crashing in the guest room?" He asked, not even bothering to look at Chris as he talked.

"For now."

"If you could just, I dunno, go there. Or go watch tv, or listen for Deaton or whatever. I need to work and I don't want any distractions."

"Work?"

"I'm going to try and find the others."

"I can-"
"Give me the space I need to do it," Stiles interrupted. "Don't worry, I'm not a dumb kid anymore, no more charging into battle without telling the grownups what's going on."

"It's amazing how much moving out of state can mature someone," Chris drawled, smirking.

Stiles scoffed. "I like living. My chances are better if you're there to provide another target."

Chris actually appeared relieved despite the barb and left the room. Stiles looked down at the maps, eyes scanning them to make sure they covered the entirety of the town and preserve. Mumbling to himself, he practically dropped into the chair and took a deep breath, resolutely ignoring the initial sensation of exposure. Most of his workings done either with Rick or in the privacy of his own workshop. His hands felt unsteady, almost foreign to himself as he dug through his bag for a pen. After the first few minutes he began to settle into his task, his hands steadying and moving smoothly.

Knowing that established patterns and rhythms helped, he started on the first map, creating a spiral of bindrunes that started from the nemeton and fanned out to encompass the map itself. It was intuitive, the strokes of the pen coming as naturally as breathing. Stiles allowed himself a moment of confidence, to think maybe things would work out.

He was older, wiser, and for once, he had his dad at his back. Even if everything else went to shit, he could count on that. It was more than he'd had the last time everything had blown up in his face, and he wasn't useless anymore.

After finishing the three maps, he grabbed a lighter from his duffel and moved the maps to the sink. Willing it to work, for his power to follow the directions he'd written into the map, he lit all three and watched the flames moving around the paper.

All three went out almost simultaneously, leaving a perfect outline of the town and the preserve..

"Well that's fucking helpful," He muttered, bracing his palms on the edge of the sink and leaning forward. He traced the spiral of runes, wondering if he'd done anything wrong. Following each one, there was nothing there that would have let the result remain so unspecific.

"What's wrong?"

It was a point of pride that he didn't jump at the sound of the hunter's voice.

"It's not giving me anything but Beacon Hills," Stiles told him, still glaring at the maps, trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong.

"That means they're alive though, right?"

"Yeah," Stiles admitted, his sense of confidence quickly turning to dread despite the assurance that they were alive. "God fucking damnit."

"What?"

"I think I can take a different route."

"The way you say that makes me think it's something I should say no to."

"But you won't," Stiles bit out. "Because you want to find Allison, and we may not have another option."

"Try telling me first," Chris said, his body shifting slightly, like he was bracing himself. Stiles
recognized that pose, knew it like the back of his hand. It was like his dad was standing across from
him. That-That was a little creepy.

"I can use our ties to the nemeton-"

"No."

Stiles gaped at Chris, not quite sure he was hearing correctly. Because surely he wanted his daughter
found. "Dude, are you serious? Deaton can't find them, and if someone is blocking them, this might
be the only way to get a read on them."

"And the nemeton is dangerous," Chris snapped, his entire body tensed like he was ready to jump
into a fight. Stiles watched his face shudder, twist, tried to keep his body from betraying him. Two
blinks and it was gone. "I'm not chancing Allison gaining more exposure, or you for that matter. The
last thing this situation needs is a psychotic emissary with actual abilities."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or not," Stiles muttered. "Regardless, someone is hiding them, so
the odds are in favor of it being a witch or someone with aptitude and training. They're hiding from
Deaton, and I am like, ninety nine percent sure he's a reader. A strong one, if his timing in the past is
anything to go by. Me following my tie back to the source and going from there might be the only
way to find them short of doing it on foot."

"And what about the darkness? Deaton said that the currents are polluted. How is that going to effect
you?"

"I've worked with my connection before. At worst I pass out. I didn't have the urge to murder
anyone, or start hallucinating."

"In Portland?"

"Yes, in Portland," He snapped, frustration bleeding through his attempt at calm and collected.
"Look, I've got two buffers in place to cushion me, alright? I've got a tie-No, not like the one to the
nemeton. I'm tied to my alpha's territory. Emissaries typically do that. Don't ask me why Deaton
didn't. And this," He added, rubbing the outline of his pendant. "We're not sure how it was made,
just that it's a pack heirloom, so no, I can't make one for Allison or give her mine," He added, cutting
off the question he saw resting on the tip of Chris' tongue.

"How long were you out?"

Stiles shrugged. "Not long."

"How long?" Chris ground out.

"A day," He lied.

"It's too long. Right now you're the only backup I have. John is on call and Melissa isn't trained for
this. I need bodies, so the answer is no."

"You're not in a position to order me around, Argent," Stiles told him, voice chilling. "So far you've
failed to find anyone, and I was asked to come here and help. If there were other options, trust me,
I'd take them. But there aren't, so it's this or we get to hoofing it and pray that whoever did this
doesn't notice a hunter and emissary running blindly through the territory."

"It's not worth the risk. I'm not letting you do this."
"Letting him do what?" A groggy voice asked. Stiles turned, saw Melissa staring at the both of them, her hair barely contained in a messy bun and wearing one of his dad's BHSD shirts and jeans.

Immediately a sense of awkwardness descended on the room. Chris crossed his arms over his chest and refused to speak, and Stiles couldn't quite meet Melissa's gaze head on. Staring at some spot over her shoulder, so there was at least the illusion of looking at her, he struggled to figure out what to say.

"I can use our links to the nemeton to try and find them," He said, proud that his voice remained emotionless and even.

"No," Chris snapped.

"Why not?" Melissa demanded, voice sharpening as the information banished the last vestiges of sleep.

"Because it risks exposure to the taint," Chris barked. "Stiles knows how to contain not just werewolves, but humans too. Which means if he gives in to it, we'd have another problem. It could expose Allison to it even further. Not to mention we're short on bodies and the last time he tried this, he was apparently unconscious for twenty four hours."

"It's different this time," Stiles tried.

"How?"

"I know what to expect this time, and I know more. I'm tied to the vé and I've got the protections in place. Look, it's been two years. And even if it does knock me out, I'll be fine. You guys can still check the maps."

"And what if it doesn't work?" Chris countered, pointing at him like it would somehow emphasize his point.

"I'll make it work."

Chris opened his mouth, obviously ready to continue arguing when someone cleared their throat. Stiles turned back to the entrance and saw his dad staring at them.

"Hey dad," He greeted weakly.

"Son," He returned. "It's too damn early to be yelling. Chris, you're in my way," John grunted. Chris moved away from his position in front of the coffee maker, pointedly keeping his distance from not only the sheriff and Melissa, but Stiles as well. Stiles huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, immediately regretting it because he was mirroring Chris' position exactly.

"Stiles, it doesn't sound safe," Melissa started quietly.

"It's not unsafe," Stiles interrupted. "At worst it's psychic whiplash, and I doubt it'll even happen this time."

"You're in closer proximity now, and psychic whiplash doesn't sound like something we need to deal with when you're the one that controls the wards."

"I know what I'm doing now," Stiles snapped impatiently. "Look, if anyone has any better ideas, I'm all ears. Barring that, we can wait for a sign. Knowing our luck, that sign has a significant chance of involving massive injuries or dead bodies."
The low grade grumbling was almost wolflike, and Stiles pinched the bridge of his nose, refusing to look at anyone. It was taking everything he had not to explode out in a ball of nerves, to not take the out, because while he had examined his tie, he hadn't attempted anything more than that. The idea of touching it again, of immersing himself in it was repellant at best. It wasn't like he wanted to endure another bad trip, but he couldn't think of anything else that would work. And it was Scott. Fuck everyone else, he owed Scott that much.

"How's the garage looking these days?"

There was a long, tense silence before his dad, looking completely awake and aware nodded slowly. "I've got half of it cleaned up, we've been working on organizing it," He said from behind the rim of his coffee cup. "That going to be enough space?"

"Yeah," Stiles mumbled. "I need to make keys for you guys so you can get past the wards first." In case he ended up with another magical concussion. "Your rings are the best bet."

His dad and Melissa both reluctantly handed over their wedding rings and Stiles took a deep breath, keenly aware of the lingering resentment he felt over the fact that he was holding wedding rings, silver toned, probably white gold or platinum, completely different and alien compared to the rings resting over his pendant. Mentally berating himself for being a childish moron, he ignored the very obvious, angry vibes emanating from Chris and dropped them in the bowl of black water.

When he finished, he gave them back, ignoring the questioning glances, and carefully packed all of his supplies back into his duffel. Navigating from memory, he walked through the laundry room and into the garage.

There were boxes lining one wall, neatly labeled with either his dad's or Melissa's handwriting. Attic, donate, Scott's things, Stiles' things. He stared at the boxes of their stuff, wondered what his dad and Melissa had felt the need to keep.

Making another exasperated noise, pissed mostly at himself, he sat his bag down and looked through it, finding chalk and then cursing himself for forgetting the maps still in the sink. Needing a few more minutes to at least calm down, if he could calm down, he started writing on the concrete floor. The door opened and closed. The lack of footsteps told him it was either Chris or maybe his dad, and he knew that as curious as Chris was, he wouldn't follow him out.

"You forgot the maps. I didn't know if you'd need them," John offered, tossing them onto the duffel before walking back and sitting down on the steps. "Chris is just worried. I think he has an idea of what the nemeton does, and he doesn't want you or the others hurt by it."

It was as much as a peace offering as he was going to get. Knowing that, Stiles nodded and mumbled out a quiet acknowledgment, aware that it didn't matter since Chris was the one inside, and praise Jesus for that. The clicking of the chalk as he wrote out the structure of the path he wanted to follow was the only sound after that. The chill of the garage quickly cooled the flush of anger, and Stiles fought the urge to start shivering, focusing on the lines of writing, not so much caring about how nice they looked as the precision of the path he needed to follow. His dad remained silent, his frustration and worry a palpable thing, hanging in the air between them.

"Alright," Stiles sighed, looking over the runes written out on the floor. His dad held out the maps and Stiles took them, still not quite able to meet his gaze. "Thanks."

John didn't deign to reply, and Stiles chose not to push it, moving to sit down in the center of the structure he'd drawn onto the floor. Arranging the maps and candles with more care than was strictly necessary, he lit the wicks and closed his eyes.
His voice echoed off of the walls and floor of the garage, making the space feel emptier than it actually was. Each syllable resonated, continued to hang in the air as he started at the outside of the path and followed it in, closer to himself, to the nemeton.

It wasn't any different than first time, although the shift wasn't as gradual as it had been before. Or maybe he was more sensitive as he pulled at the umbilical like cord that tied him to the nemeton. It still reminded him of something oily, slick like grease. The grit of ash lingered on his tongue as he ignored the immediate impulse for action, decisive and violent, that sang through him. He followed it to the axis, where the currents moved and sang around him, pooling and shifting restlessly, meeting and crossing or repelling each other, constantly in flux and generating power. The spark and creation of new energy would have been beautiful, for all that it was just a sensation dancing over his consciousness, except he couldn't take time to appreciate it. As the last syllable fell from his lips, he reached out, looked for a similar darkness. He'd half expected to feel a tug, something that would lead him to Scott or Allison.

Instead, he was struck by an abrupt, excruciating tension as his mind was pulled taut and stretched thin, trying to reach in every direction at once. Stiles choked on a scream that tried to escape when a hand slipped over his throat, distant but as real as the pain shredding through him. He sensed power, bloated and bursting at the seams of each fingertip. It was a shadow, an oily stain over everything, and Stiles felt it's amusement as distinctly as he felt the claws pricking into his neck.

He tried to say something, to pull from any of the numerous defensive techniques he'd been taught. Nothing came to mind, panic making him blind to anything but the pain that only grew worse and worse between each heartbeat. Reaching out blindly, he groped for anything familiar, for Scott or his dad, for Derek, for anything to wrench himself out of the pit he was sinking into.

Fire erupted below him, reaching up and surrounding him. Cruel and relentless, it wrapped around his body, braced and choked his lungs and bones. The resonances distorted, shaped and broke into something cold and sharp, an agonizing counterpoint to the phantom heat. The hand around his throat tightened, claws digging into his skin and taking root, growing longer and longer until he felt them curling, winding through his flesh and flaying everything inside.

Light broke like glass and blinded him, gouged his eyes and pushed in, like it was searching for something. Slick darkness followed, blood and sludge eeking in, flowing into his skull and flooding his mouth with putrid earth. Claw and bones fused beneath his muscles, made every movement a new, painful experience. Each second brought another relentless, hungry wave of agony, his screams fracturing and splitting, creating new distortions.

Every beat was an eternity, the waves blending into one another until he couldn't figure out if there was still a rhythm or if the world had slowed and he was still caught in the middle of a crest that never peaked, never fell.

A sharp jerk pulled him out of his skin, made him cry out in relief as the pain faded into something almost tolerable.

Stiles snapped back into himself, cursing and trying to get up from the floor only to stumble and pitch forward, vertigo making his stomach churn. The pain of fire was gone, a dull memory as cold sunk into him, froze his lungs and made his heart stutter and trip painfully in his chest.

Derek. He needed Derek. Needed to find him, needed- \textit{Shit}.

"D'rek," He muttered as the world spun around him. He recognized the thread pulling at him, a whisper in his skull that only made the buzzing worse. Attempting to stand was proving to be the worst idea he'd had all week, including answering his dad's call.
"What's wrong?" His dad asked, shooting forward, heedless of the runes drawn onto the floor. Stiles reached out for him, stumbled and clung to him, dug his fingers into his arms and held fast, trying to ground everything in his dad's solid presence. It didn't happen fast enough, because Stiles tried pushing him away only to turn and vomit. His body kept shaking, seizing as he emptied his stomach on the floor. Luckily none got on their shoes. He was willing to take what he could get.

A few minutes later the whirling was at a minimum, only starting when he moved, but that was fine, he figured. He could walk if he needed to. His dad was just more comfortable.

"That sucked," He muttered, keeping his head directed down so he didn't blast his dad in the face with his breath. "Fuck. Derek's failsafe- I need-" The thread was insistent, a droning murmur.

"The maps are gone."

"Completely?" Stiles croaked, not moving to look back at where the maps were supposed to be.

"Nothing left but ash."

"Fuck," He groaned again.

"Derek's failsafe, what does that mean?"

"Creates a thread. Way to find him if he's in trouble."

"Call Cassie, see if she knows what's going on," The sheriff informed him in a quiet, steady voice. Stiles was grateful they weren't discussing the side effects of his trip. He shuddered and nodded, realized he was shivering. John slowly started guiding them inside. Not wanting to concern his dad or deal with his dad being concerned for him, he slowly pushed away from him and took several deep breaths as they shuffled to the door. By the time they got there, he felt like he'd settled back into himself enough to feel the actual cold, the phantom sensation of being flayed alive still needling him, but not quite real.

In the kitchen, he dropped into one of the chairs and accepted the phone thrust in his line of vision. It was already ringing, connecting. Deaton was sitting next to Chris, a cup of coffee in his hands. Stiles did his best to ignore the man's existence. He wasn't capable of processing any more than what was already in his head without his brain imploding from the pressure.

"John," Cassie's voice answered, half growl.

"Cas, where's Derek?"

"Stiles? Goddammit." The growl turned into a snarl and he heard another in the background. "Derek, he's in Beacon Hills."

"Derek's there?" Confusion warred with relief, a nauseating lightness bursting inside his skull.

"We've been trying to find you, you complete asshole."

"What-"

"Stiles?"

"Hey," He greeted, swallowing bile. Derek sounded- Relieved and pissed off at the same time. He hadn't missed that tone, had almost forgotten what it sounded like entirely.

"Why are you in Beacon Hills?"
"It's nothing."

"Stiles-" Derek warned.

"I'm just helping Scott with something."

The phone was yanked out of his hand and he stared at his palm for a moment, surprised his fingers weren't breaking from the force still vibrating in his hands. His father's voice came out clipped, terse. An explanation of what was going on.

"No," He bit out, standing and trying to reach for the phone. The fact that his father was able to shove him into the chair with almost no effort at all wasn't the least bit humiliating. Not at all. "Dad, no. He's not coming here. This isn't his problem."

Judging by his father's expression and the rising volume on the other end of the line, that had been the wrong thing to say.

"We'll see you guys soon." Pause. "He looks like hammered shit right now, he's not leaving the house." Another pause. "He tried finding them through the nemeton." The thunderous expression tightening the sheriff's features didn't bode well for his immediate future. "Drive safe. Bring as many as you can."

He disconnected the call and slammed his phone on the table, his glare zeroing in on Stiles. "Two days?" His dad snapped. "You were out two days last time you tried that?"

"You said twenty four hours," Chris added, looking disappointed, which Stiles wasn't overly concerned with. Chris could go to hell.

"It was before I learned anything," He countered. "I've gotten better and I thought it would work."

"Well it didn't," His dad reminded him. "And you didn't show any signs of coming out of it. You can probably thank Derek for saving your ass by using the fail safe."

Stiles groaned, cradling his head in his hands.

"What fail safe?" Chris demanded.

"Their pendants. The destruction of the sigil catalyzes the creation of a thread for me to follow."

"A magical tracking beacon," Chris clarified. Stiles nodded, not missing the irony of the situation. Chris was giving him an appraising glance. Stiles didn't flinch or twitch under the once over, waiting for the question he knew was coming. "And you can make something like that?"

"I can. I can also show another emissary how to create it." Stiles hoped Chris understood what he was saying, because even if he was willing to make them for the pack, and for Scott he would do it, he doubted that any of them would wear something like that from him. "Whoever is the base, like I am for Derek and Cassie, they have to be able to at least sense the thread created. Deaton," He added, nodding tightly at the vet. "He's a reader. He should be fine."

Chris looked to his right and nodded even though Deaton didn't say anything. Stiles bit back the diatribe ready, waiting at the back of his throat.

"You alright son?"

"Aside from feeling like someone just copped a feel on my soul," Stiles muttered, rubbing his arms to
try and will some warmth into his skin. "I'm fine. Just- Something is fucking with us. And it's in the currents."

"Meaning?" Melissa asked, sitting a mug in front of him. Stiles accepted it and immediately regretted the first sip when the taste in his mouth clashed with the bitterness of the coffee.

"Meaning this is a lot worse than we thought. I should have had something-" Stiles bit out, frustration only exacerbating the cognitive dissonance wreaking havoc with his hold on the physical world around him.

"What did you see?" Chris asked calmly. Stiles recognized the tone, remembered his dad questioning him the same way. Gentle interrogation. He hadn't known Chris was capable of it, he'd only ever been subject to the 'bad cop' routine. He must look like shit for Chris to be playing nice.

"I can't see, not like Lydia or Deaton can. But I felt- Like I was expecting to be pulled to one of them. But something found me first and tried to pull me everywhere. And then fire and just," He shook his head, shuddering. "The vé is alive in the sense that it's energy, right? But it doesn't have it's own personality. It's not sentient in a way we recognize. Even with Caroline and Rick tied to it, they're distinct from the currents." Stiles paused, brows pinching in thought. "This was a definite personality."

"Deaton said the sacrifices made polluted the currents," Chris added. Deaton seemed content to let everyone else talk.

"Yeah, but," Stiles ran a hand through his hair. "This is different." Stiles had no idea how he knew that, only that he did. Something nigged at the back of his mind, his last experience trying to follow the tie back. Something about it bothered him, but he couldn't remember what it was, and it was making the sensation of screwing up that much worse.

The sheriff's phone started ringing and he answered it with a clipped 'Stilinski' before walking out of the room.

Stiles stared down at his coffee, then looked up at Melissa. "I need to brush my teeth. I forgot to pack anything like that," He started, trying to look apologetic and probably only pulling off pathetic. He felt pathetic.

"We've got some spares in the hall bathroom, under the sink," Melissa told him, nodding but not moving to get up.

Stiles mumbled out a thanks and got up. Feeling a little more sure of the world beneath his feet, he pushed away from the table and walked away, scared to see the look on their faces, not sure if he could handle whatever he would find there.

After rooting around under the sink in the guest bathroom, he found two dust covered toothbrush packages and opened one. Toothpaste was on the counter, wedged behind the faucet. Like Scott had always done at his house. Stiles shook off the sense of nostalgia or whatever it was trying to tighten his chest and liberally coated the bristles. He brushed, spat, rinsed, and repeated the process, the taste in his mouth almost gone by the time he gargled. After spitting, he swallowed a cap full of mouthwash for good measure and leaned forward, staring at his reflection in the mirror.

He looked like shit, and he'd been back less than a day. It had to be a new record. Bitterly, he wondered how far he'd regress before he was able to leave.

Sharp knocking on the door broke through his self contemplation. Jerking it open, he was surprised
to see his dad there, grim faced and tense.

"Scott's house is on fire."

"What?"

"The department says it looks like a total loss."

"Was there anyone inside?"

"They don't know. It was too late to go inside by the time the fire department got there. All they can do right now is contain it."

Stiles couldn't help but remember the fire reaching up towards him, pulling him down, peeling his skin back. "Shit."

"I have to go check it out."

"I'm coming with you."

"No," His dad said, shaking his head. "Stay here with Melissa. Chris is coming."

"Chris can't figure out if this was supernatural or not," Stiles countered.

"Right now you're our advantage," His dad reminded him. "Whoever did this might not know you're in town. If not, then we need to keep it that way."

Shaking his head, he frowned at his dad. "Fine. Take Deaton."

The expression on his father's face was nothing short of resigned. "I don't trust him."

"His oath is to protect the pack. Have Chris sit on him."

His dad looked less than pleased with the command, but nodded in agreement.

"I've got a burner while I'm here." Although it was now useless, apparently. He just didn't feel like trying to walk out to his car for the other one until the phantom pain stopped. "You should have the number. Call me when you find anything out."

"You didn't want the pack knowing." It was a statement instead of a question, and Stiles ran a hand through his hair, wishing he could explain to his dad why in a way the man would understand.

"Derek's gone through enough. If I'd told them- Caroline would have tried to follow protocol, and it would have been a fucking nightmare without Scott giving her the go ahead. We didn't have time. I would have ignored her, and Derek would have followed me, maybe Cassie too. I don't want them disobeying their alpha, and I don't want them in the middle of this. Dad, he lost everything here."

"And he doesn't want to lose you," His dad reminded him. "It's his choice. Don't try to make it for him."

There was nothing he could really say to that, not without starting an argument, so he didn't try. Stiles followed him downstairs, saw Melissa pacing the length of the kitchen. Chris was absent, probably already on his way to the house. Deaton was standing and pulling his jacket back on.

"Be safe," Melissa commanded, hugging his dad. It was strange to see them like that, moving with thoughtless, practiced affection, the kind that only came with familiarity. He barely remembered their
relationship forming. Stiles turned away and sat at the table, reminded again of how little he actually belonged anymore.

Derek was coming. Possibly with the pack. "Fuck god and nuns and all the little children," He muttered quietly into his hands.

The front door closed and he was left alone with Melissa, not quite sure what to do with himself. 'I'm sorry' wouldn't cut it, wouldn't help with the terror she had to be going through. It sure as hell wouldn't help him, and he didn't know what to say to fill the silence, wasn't sure what she was thinking, how to navigate the topic.

"Do you think it's hunters?" Melissa asked, taking Chris' former seat and hugging herself.

"It's their M.O.," He muttered, mouth pinching in a frown. "Isolate the alpha, draw him out, make sure he has nowhere to run."

"Will they come here?"

"They can't," Stiles assured her. "The wards keep out everything and everyone. It's why even regular humans need keys. Hunters won't be able to get in. And that's if it's hunters."

"You don't think it is?" Melissa asked, frowning at him.

"I don't know, maybe. But it wouldn't explain the interference. Not unless one of them knows enough magic to manipulate the currents. And what I felt," Stiles shrugged. "I don't know. It has to be someone that knows what they're doing."

"Could it be Gerard?" Melissa murmured, fingers circling the rim of her mug. "He seemed like he would be willing to do anything to get an edge."

"I'd heard he was slowly liquifying," Stiles muttered, Gerard's face still too vivid in his memory. "And Chris has been keeping tabs on him."

"On everything he does?" Melissa asked, looking skeptical. "And from what I know, the fire is his style too. Scott said the bite was warding off his cancer, but that the mountain ash kept him from fully changing. If his body finally flushed out the mountain ash," She added, shrugging. "It makes sense. He also has a history with the pack, so there's motive."

"Chris and Deaton could go find him, but it would tip him off, Gerard's too smart not to know when people are on to him. And if it isn't him, he'd know something was going on. If he's wanted to make a move, now would be a great time to do it. He'd probably even be able to justify it under the code."

"Justify it?" Melissa demanded in a sharp voice.

"There are a few rules in the supernatural community," Stiles admitted slowly, trying to find the right words to tell her the truth. It wasn't easy, and he had no idea why she hadn't been told, if Chris or Deaton had ever thought to even mention the possibility to her. "If someone becomes unstable, they become a danger to the world around them. The pack, or even the emissary, are supposed to," He paused, unable to look her in the eye. "They're supposed to handle it."

"Handle it," She said, voice flat and void of emotion.

"With packs, it's the alpha who is supposed to do it. Barring them," Stiles mumbled, turning his mug of coffee clockwise. "An emissary. For most packs it's a standard precaution to keep hunters from using it as an excuse to invite themselves in."
"You think Gerard planned it this way?"

"If he destabilized Scott, I mean, Deaton wouldn't do anything until he had proof Scott took a human life. But hunters wouldn't see it that way. They'd see a feral alpha, and the emissary and local hunter not doing anything about it. And he has the connections to find someone that can do whatever is going on with the currents."

"You don't believe it," Melissa said bluntly. Stiles leaned back in her chair and tilted her head to stare at the ceiling.

"It's a possibility. But there's not enough information. It could be Gerard, and it fits, but," He shrugged and looked back at the table again. "It's a shot in the dark, and whoever this is, they're willing to go the distance." Which Gerard could and had done. Stiles didn't want to admit that it felt too neat, even for Gerard. Gerard was about the up close and personal. And if the bite had finally taken, he'd have the ability to be right there in the middle of it all. He'd be flaunting his new, improved body.

"So who could it be?"

"We might not even know them," Stiles sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He had no idea which would be the better option either, someone they'd dealt with in the past, or someone completely new. If it was someone out for revenge, there was no guarantee that he'd even know who it was. He'd been gone for three years, cut off for one.

"Is there anyone you can think of?" He asked Melissa. "Anyone wanting revenge, anything?"

"Scott doesn't tell me everything, and he's been really quiet ever since-" She stopped herself, but her furtive look was enough to finish the sentence. Stiles understood immediately that she was withholding the 'you', and he wondered if she was more worried about hurting his feelings or pissing him off.

"Still, anything you remember?" He prompted.

"Gerard, Deucalion, the twins-"

Stiles shook his head. His dad hadn't told her? "Why the twins?"

"I don't know what happened exactly, but Issac always made it seem like there was some sort of falling out. The twins and Danny left the pack right after Lydia."

"They died," Stiles told her, gauging her reaction. There didn't seem to be much of one at all, nothing indicating relief or regret. "In October. Pretty sure it was a wolf."

Melissa nodded, chewing her lip. "Lydia left, but I don't think she'd do this." Stiles nodded an emphatic agreement. He'd managed an odd sort of long distance friendship with Lydia, and was half tempted to call her and see what she could tell him.

"She's at MIT. We've stayed in touch."

"I can't really think of anyone else. Scott usually manages a peaceful resolution to whatever's going on."

"Are we sure this is about Scott?" He proposed, bracing his elbows on the table.

"What do you mean?"
"It could be aimed at Chris. Chris is known for protecting the pack here, and Scott is his defacto son in law, which is probably hard for other hunters to handle. Are people aware of his relationship with Allison and Issac?"

"They don't hide it, most of the town knows. It's been gossip fodder before."

Stiles couldn't miss the quiet defensiveness underlying the statement, giving it a subtle sharpness. He doubted it had been just gossip fodder. Small towns lived off of rumors just like they seemed to breed stupidity. Regardless of the fact that they lived in California, there were still the typical assholes.

"Chris would have a better idea of who has the skill to pull this off. And I told dad to get Deaton on the house, so we should have an idea of who did it."

It was a not so subtle and entirely futile hint to keep them both from winding themselves up over the possibilities. It could be a hunting outfit. He hoped it was a hunting outfit. At least that way his dad could hopefully link them to the arson and throw them in a holding cell. Humans were easy, and if humans took care of it, other hunters would probably be leery of any revenge tactics. If it was Gerard, so much the better, because a vindictive, vicious part of himself would actually take pleasure in putting an end to that problem once and for all.

If it was something else- Stiles stopped himself from pursuing the idea before he did exactly what he'd been trying to avoid. It wouldn't do any good.

"Did you have breakfast?" Melissa finally asked, breaking through the silence.

"I was in a hurry to get here," Stiles muttered.

"I'll take that as a no," Melissa sighed, getting up from the table and walking over to the fridge. "I've got eggs and turkey bacon. It's on the late side, but it's quick."

"Thank you," Stiles said, immensely pleased that Melissa had kept up with his dad's diet. It was probably stupid to be happy over something so small with everything else, all of the unknown variables hanging over their heads, but it was something, at least.

His phone rang before Melissa had finished. When he checked it, he saw his dad's number flashing on the screen. "Hey," He greeted casually, unsure of the news. It was entirely possible his dad was calling him to warn him before he came to tell Melissa bad news.

"No one was inside," His dad said, and Stiles relaxed.

"Deaton get anything?"

"He says he's still getting interference."

Stiles cursed and realized his knee was bouncing, the sound of rustling fabric echoing in the otherwise silent room. He saw Melissa watching him, faced lined and pinched with worry.

"Thanks dad. Any idea when you'll be getting back?"

"I'm sending Chris back with Deaton. I'll be stuck with this for a few hours."

"Alright. Be careful dad."

"You too kid. Keep an eye out on Deaton."

"Will do."
His dad was already talking to someone else when the line went dead, their voices cutting off and his phone blinking.

"The house was empty," Stiles said, seeing Melissa deflate a little, an infinitesimal measure of tension bleeding out as that particular fear was put to rest. "Deaton couldn't get a reading. He and Chris are on their way over."

"I don't want Deaton here," Melissa declared immediately, like the vet hadn't been sitting at her kitchen table half an hour before.

"I don't either," Stiles snorted, offering her a sympathetic shrug. "But he can help. The pack is his first priority. It'd be better to have everyone in one spot anyway. Plus Deaton knows the nemeton better than I do, if something's managed to insinuate itself in it, then he's our best bet for finding the source."

Melissa nodded reluctantly. "If he pulls anything, I'm going to make him regret it."

"If you're expecting me to protect him from a pissed off medical professional you really know nothing about my self preservation instincts."

"What self preservation instincts?" She asked in a flat voice, and then laughed. It was rusty, a little too sharp, but it was a laugh, and she looked as surprised by it as Stiles felt. They were still alone when she set the filled plates on the table. Stiles offered another quiet thanks before digging in, not really hungry but knowing he needed the calories.

"I need to make a key for Deaton. I'd prefer if one of us kept it between going in and out of the wards though," He said through a mouthful of food, wondering how the vet had gotten in to begin with. Probably Chris' ring, which he would have given any number of things to see happen.

"Any reason?" Melissa asked, pushing her food around her plate. Stiles fought the innate urge to tell her to eat. He doubted she'd appreciate it.

"Aside from the fact that he might leave with it?" He shrugged, chewing his lip. Deaton's first thought would be Scott, and so would Melissa's. It would be best if he held onto it, if only to keep it from falling into enemy hands because of emotional decisions. "Anyway, unless you've got some jewelry you don't care about sharing, I need to make something."

"I wish I had some of my stuff from the eighties," Melissa said with a slight smirk that even managed to reach her eyes. Stiles choked on a mouthful of eggs and gulped coffee to try and clear his throat.

"Something that looks like everyday wear that you wouldn't mind losing," He clarified. Deaton in chunky plastic jewelry was tempting, but ultimately futile.

"I wish I had some of my stuff from the eighties," Melissa said with a slight smirk that even managed to reach her eyes. Stiles choked on a mouthful of eggs and gulped coffee to try and clear his throat.

"I can do that," Melissa agreed, seemingly grateful for the excuse to end the charade of eating. Stiles frowned at her retreating back and then back at her plate. It looked mostly untouched.

Sighing, he grabbed his mostly empty plate and her mostly full one, despite feeling too much like a guest to actually be comfortable going through the domestic chores for the house. Muscle memory overrode nostalgia and he reached to the wrong side for the switch to the garbage disposal, turned right to the dishwasher when he should have turned left. Somewhere between guilt and anger, he was saved from a minor (very minor, miniscule really) panic attack by Melissa, who was holding a simple chain weighted by a crucifix.

"I always found them creepy. My ex, he got it for me. Very devout. Hypocritically so."
"Works for me," Stiles smirked, accepting the pendant and moving over to the bowl. Melissa walked over and took her time cleaning the empty mugs in the sink. Stiles wasn't fooled by the attempt at subterfuge, knew she was trying to keep an eye on him. Why, he wasn't entirely sure. He was fine, and she seemed alright with his presence.

Once finished, he stuffed the charm in his pocket and gave his best approximation of a smile.

It said something that he was waiting for Deaton and Chris to show up, anything to break the awkward tension hanging in the air. There was a lot going unsaid, things that he probably should say to Melissa, all of which were at best vague even in his head and at worst would be hopeless fumbling if he tried to articulate them. Considering how Melissa continued glancing at him, looking ready to say something and then stopping herself, he knew she had a lot to say to him too, no doubt most of it he deserved to hear, even if he didn't particularly want to.

When his phone chimed in his pocket, he slipped it out with the sort of gratitude drowning men reserved for a piece of driftwood and answered. Chris's clipped command to meet them outside with a key for Deaton was all he got before he was hung up on. He didn't even bother with an explanation before walking out of the room.

Melissa grabbed the front door when he tried to shut it behind him, and Stiles huffed a wordless rebuke before walking outside and out to meet Deaton at the road. Chris walked past him, face shuttering in a distorted mask before being blinked out of existence. It was worrying, how the town was already fucking with his perception. Stiles repressed a shiver and pulled the charm out of his pocket. Deaton was staring at the property with something Stiles would have once labeled satisfaction. Now it just looked smug and made Stiles want to punch him. He thrust the charm at Deaton and stepped back even as the vet stepped forward.

"I'm going to make this very clear," Stiles told him, voice hard. It was taking everything he had not to let one of his fists fly. His temper seemed to swell with the release of his words. "I don't trust you. You have a habit of keeping things to yourself. You're here to uphold your oaths to the pack. If I find out that you've been hiding anything, and I mean anything that even hints at being relevant, I will bind your gift and leave you a giggling, drooling mess in the process."

"I understand," Deaton greeted calmly, as though the threat hadn't even been spoken.

Stiles didn't deign to answer, instead watched the vet as he strolled towards the house. "I really hate him," He bit out, tracking the figure walking into the house before the door closed.

"Can you actually do that?" Melissa asked, once the front door had closed.

"I know it can be done," He growled, thinking about the ultimatum Deaton had given Lydia. "It takes skill to make sure you don't break someone in the process, but if anyone dies because he withholds information, I won't care about what sort of shape he's in once I'm finished," Stiles admitted, knowing he should feel some flicker of guilt. But Scott was missing, Melissa and his dad were not only worried, but possibly in the line of fire, and Derek at the very least was coming, if not Cassie and maybe Rick and Caroline. While he would normally love the help, he had no idea what would actually happen once they arrived.

All in all, playing nice with Deaton wasn't high on his list of priorities, regardless what part of him understood everything the man had done.

"Fuck. I hate Beacon Hills," Stiles muttered, striding back to the house. Melissa murmured something behind him, the words unintelligible for quiet. Knowing better than to demand explanation he didn't push for clarification, positive he knew the gist anyway.
Inside, Deaton was staring at the bowl. Stiles fought the urge to shout 'hands off', took a calming breath and cleared his throat instead. "Deaton, has anything changed with the nemeton recently?"

Deaton looked from the bowl to him, gaze shrewd. Stiles resisted the urge to threaten duct taping him to a chair until he talked. If he was correct in his assumption, the vet already knew he was thinking it anyway.

"The currents haven't been any more or less active recently, if that's what you're asking."

"I'm asking about any differences. And I mean anything," Stiles challenged. Deaton took a seat at the table, opposite Melissa, who was glowering at him, making no attempt to conceal her dislike. The hostility in the room was palpable. Chris looked appropriately neutral even though Stiles could see the question in his eyes. Deaton didn't seem in the least affected.

"Nothing. Aside from the fact that it's interfering with my ability to read anything."

"Everything or just anything pertaining to the pack?"

Deaton shifted, thumb moving against his forefinger as he leaned forward. "Some places are clearer than others, but for the most part it's a complete blanket. I can tell that it's based in the places where the currents converge, then spreads out. All I get is chaos."

"Have those spots been checked?"

"First thing we did," Chris confirmed.

"I felt something in the currents, when I tried to find them," Stiles explained carefully, noting Deaton's slight shift forward, the almost but not quite completely disguised sharpening interest. "It feels like someone is in them. A personality."

Deaton shook his head. "I would have known if someone had made a sacrifice. There's no hiding a shift of that magnitude."

"But there is something in there," Stiles told him, trying not to sound petulant and childish. Being around Deaton made him feel like a teenager again, completely at a loss and waiting for the oracle to hand down his ambiguous, obscure wisdom. That he couldn't figure out what was going on didn't do anything to lessen the feeling. He'd been called to help, and he felt useless.

"The sacrifices left a taint, it's possible that's what you felt," Deaton told him, and Stiles tried not to sneer at the condescension that rode on top of the vet's self assurance.

"No," Stiles muttered, shaking his head. "I felt fire before I came up. I didn't feel that last time. And the house was probably totaled before I was snapped out of it. That can't be a coincidence."

"Could a hunter have found a way to use it?" Melissa asked Chris, ignoring Deaton entirely.

Chris looked thoughtful, shook his head a fraction. "Maybe, but it would still require a sacrifice, wouldn't it? And there isn't an outfit in town."

"That you know of," Stiles interjected. "This place is known to be a pack territory, and you guys aren't on anyone's Christmas card list anymore. Also, Gerard's still here."

Chris had the grace to look mildly offended. "I questioned my father when Allison and Issac went missing. He can barely sit up anymore, much less organize a hunt of that magnitude. And I've kept my ear to the ground, your dad too. No new arrivals, no guests, no one passing through."
Stiles made a disbelieving sound, wondering how Chris could be so sure when he knew who his father was.

"Gerard is an actor. Trusting anything about him is a mistake," Melissa snapped. Stiles knew about what Gerard had done to her, but he hadn't expected the unadulterated hate fueling the vehement declaration.

Chris immediately tensed, looked ready to retort and Stiles cleared his throat, hoping to stop the impending argument. "If we're being thorough, it might not be hunters," He tried, ignoring the looks sent his way. He was already scrambling through everything he'd learned about sacrifices. Abram's information was by far the most plentiful, Amund's next, then Rick's. "Sacrifices are bridges," He said, sifting through information and theories. "What if someone could exploit an existing bridge?"

"Like you?" Deaton murmured thoughtfully, forehead creased in thought.

"Or Allison and Scott?"

"What do you mean?" Melissa demanded, worry giving her voice a hard edge.

"The currents converge, right? It's why this area is so desirable to the supernatural. It's got several smaller pools that all feed into a bigger one. Think of the nemeton like a fuse box for the earth's energy," Stiles explained when Deaton didn't speak up. "When Jennifer made a sacrifice, the person was bridge that completed the circuit and maybe even acted as a fuse, buffering her from overload." Which was smart, in the context.

"Then why the ritual?" Chris interjected.

"Every circuit has a function, right?," He guessed. It wasn't like he'd actively researched how the actual sacrifice worked, only the effects. "Maybe the ritual guides it. Or it could be that different paths have different rituals. But the more bridges, the more power. When we made the sacrifice, we became bridges."

"And you're all still connected," Melissa breathed, looking nauseous.

"Yeah, and when Jennifer died, it's possible we were left open?" He tried. "I don't know if someone can come along and use us though."

Deaton's bemusement would have been pleasing in any other circumstances. Except. And Stiles wished for different ones. He might have actually gotten a good laugh or two in. "Anything is possible. And if someone did find a way to use Allison, it would explain why I didn't feel anything."

"Or something is blocking you," Stiles supplied. It was probably unhelpful, but he was still sifting through information. "There are ways to hide shit from readers." It was difficult, but it could be done.

Deaton didn't even look affronted by the suggestion. "It's possible, but I can still read certain areas."

"Could be a diversionary tactic," Chris added.

"It all still points to someone that knows what they're doing."

"Or someone that gave in to their compulsions," Deaton countered.

"Come again," Stiles prompted, the words striking a chord and forcing his thoughts to a standstill. Chris bit out something garbled and unintelligible before getting up and leaving the room, each footstep an uncharacteristically heavy thud on the floor. The front door opened and slammed shut.
"The compulsions that the nemeton creates-" Deaton began.

"It doesn't create compulsions," Stiles swiftly countered, glaring at Deaton. "It offers a perspective. It can't force anything."

Deaton nodded once, heard Melissa's breath leave her lungs in a hash exhale before she leaned back and made an impatient noise. "The last time I spoke to Scott, he said the nightmares were getting worse."

Stiles knew he was staring, probably rather rudely, at Melissa before turning his gaze back to Deaton, accusations ready on his tongue.

"All three of you experienced the effects of the nemeton," Deaton reminded him. "Scott's pack has been unstable for months, making him more open to it's influence."

Stiles glared, feeling the implied accusation and resisted giving the vet the finger. "So that could explain Scott losing it as quickly as he did, but not Allison and Issac."

"Scott and Allison are close, his stress is her stress," Deaton countered. "On top of what she had to deal with on her own."

"If this is going to turn into a game of fingerpointing, I will put both of you in a corner," Melissa threatened. "I don't know enough about Allison's," Melissa waved her hand at the table. "Scar to know what she would do it if took over."

"It was the elimination of supernatural threats," Deaton explained calmly. Stiles heard the sharp intake of breath, didn't know who had made the sound.

"What constitutes a threat?" Stiles demanded. When Deaton didn't answer, he felt his stomach bottom out, felt something dark and insidious threatening to choke him. "Everything," He said, answering for the vet. Deaton nodded tightly and Stiles' world narrowed down to the angry realization that his fears had been right, that Allison had been a threat, that he should have done something back then-

"Fuck," He bit out, abruptly turning away from the beguiling whispers at the back of his mind, recognizing them for what they were. He pushed away from the table and shook his head when Melissa moved to follow him, stalking away from the table and out of the room. The silence of the house was bordering on suffocating, too thick to breathe in. Opting for outside, he slammed the front door behind him and sat on the front steps, staring at the yard and not seeing it. Cold, sharp air poured into his lungs, sank into his skin and cleared the furious haze that he had fallen into so easily, thoughtlessly.

His hand searched out the pendant resting against his chest, thumb following the circle of it as he tried to push away the memories that promised to overwhelm and drown him, each one threatening to shift and blur until it was Scott dangling from a ceiling, Scott pinned to the forest floor by arrows, Scott full of knife wounds. Scott burning alive.

"She wouldn't hurt them," A voice cut in, jarring him from the ever more vivid images boring into his brain. He turned to Chris, who was sitting on the far end of the porch and glaring at the road.

"Far be it from me to remind you, but her track record isn't doing her any favors."

Chris shifted, turned his glare on him. Stiles could see the frustration, worry, even the unease in the hunter's expression. Nothing about the man's bearing said he really believed what he was saying. Stiles wondered if that was why he was so angry.
"She would hallucinate sometimes," Chris told him, voice detached, cool and completely at odds with his expression. "The first time she saw my sister, I sat her down and showed her the pictures from the police report. The one on the Hale fire."

Stiles felt his stomach twist, the nausea that had been roiling only growing worse. The knee jerk demand to know where the fuck that folder had been when she'd been hunting them all down died in his mouth when he saw the weariness bowing Chris, pushing down on him.

"I made her read the whole thing, including the autopsies, and look at the pictures. She knows exactly what Kate was, what Gerard and even her mother were capable of. I know she wouldn't give in to whatever the nemeton tried to make her do."

"It's not that simple," Stiles informed him, feeling entirely too bitter about the situation to even attempt comforting Chris. "It's a constant feed into your brain. It's not a compulsion, it's a perspective. I think it's- It's that part of ourselves we don't like thinking about." Which was hard to admit, something he'd never said aloud to anyone, not even Rick. Knowing his own voice might have something to do with it had been uncomfortable at best, horrifying at worst. "Back when I saw them every day, I was tempted to put them down."

"The pack?"

Stiles shook his head. "Allison, the twins, Scott." He refused to mention how Chris' face sometimes changed, a reminder that while the man had changed, he'd still committed crimes that would probably never be forgiven. "I still see the people that aren't here, the victims. People they hurt, killed. Things they did that-" Stiles stopped, took a deep breath. "I wasn't allowed to forget the ones that are lost. I take it she wasn't allowed to forget the threat that the wolves represented. Right?" Or worse yet, she'd never been able to forget who and what had taken her family away and shattered her childhood.

"She said it was like having her mother and Kate whispering into her ear when she let her guard down."

"Coupled with the fact that she's human, that Scott and Issac are different and get each other in a way she can't-"

"She still wouldn't do this."

"How can you be so sure?" Stiles snapped.

"Because when she saw the bodies of children, babies, on an autopsy table, she knew that's where those thoughts would take her. She knows what real monsters are."

"Argents," Stiles muttered, a reflex born purely from thinking it so often.

Chris sighed, braced his elbows on his knees, nearly bent double touching his forehead to his wrist. Stiles watched him, surprised by the slump of the man's shoulders. "That night, when I drove you back to your jeep, you told me that if there were monsters in Beacon Hills, they were called Argents. That only Argents could justify killing children."

"Sorry, can't recall that bit," Stiles retorted, remembering the fall down the stairs, the feel of electricity burning his palms. "I was attempting to breathe after your dad beat the shit out of me." The car ride back to his jeep had been a blur of pain and anger, completely directionless because he'd been angry at everything, felt betrayed by everything.

"You were right." Chris paused, like he wanted to give the statement time to sink in. Stiles didn't feel
any better for the words having been said. "I've spent every moment since then trying to keep her from becoming like the rest of us. I know it's the easy answer, but Allison wouldn't hurt Scott or Issac. She'd kill herself before she let herself cross that line again."

It was the easy answer, and Stiles almost wanted to believe it, if only to shut up the whispering in his ear, the voice that promised retribution. But it was easy, and that bothered him almost as much as what Allison had been dealing with. Her situation had been no different from his own, rife with potential violence, and he'd never even had a clue. Fuck only knew what Scott had been dealing with.

Rudely shoving any sense of guilt aside for later, when it might actually be useful instead of a hindrance, he tried to think.

"Did Gerard know about her hallucinations?"

"No, we both knew it was imperative he never find out about them."

Stiles chewed on an already ragged cuticle. "He's resourceful though. And if anyone was going to set her up, it would be him."

"You really think he's been acting?"

"I think he's a bastard that should have been put out of our misery years ago," Stiles scoffed bitterly. "It can't hurt to cover our bases though. Try talking to him, take Deaton with you."

"You don't want to ride along?"

"I'd probably kill him," Stiles retorted bluntly. "Emissary, remember? Any and all supernatural threats are my domain." Gerard was just the only one he would actually look forward to, and damn whatever it might imply about his moral fiber.

Chris made a noise that was probably agreement, or even amusement. "You've changed."

"I did." Though probably not as much as he'd wanted to, not nearly so much as Chris seemed to think.

"You weren't the only one. Try to remember that."

Stiles shrugged, getting up and following the hunter back into the house. Melissa was glaring at Deaton, who was staring back, the epitome of unruffled peace. Buddha-like and calm, he turned to Stiles and Chris, waiting patiently.

"You go with Chris. Remember my warning," He threw in Deaton's direction, not bothering to look at him. "After we figure out if Gerard has anything to do with it or not, then we move forward."

No one spoke, but he watched Deaton follow Chris out, leaving him alone with Melissa, with tons of things to say but nothing he could actually articulate.

"I don't like trusting Deaton," Melissa informed him once the front door closed. He followed her back to the kitchen and sat, not knowing what else to do but sit, and hating that he didn't have any ideas.

"I don't either, but he's the only one that will actually know whether or not Gerard has anything to do with this."
"Will he tell us if he does?"

"He's got no reason not to. He needs Scott safe and stable as much as the rest of us do." And he was risking a hell of a lot if he didn't. Stiles had a feeling he would get back up if Deaton did anything to endanger any of them. Despite his reasoning, Melissa didn't look entirely convinced. "Caroline will probably kill him if he does anything that gets me hurt," He added. It was a sign of how much things had changed that Melissa actually relaxed a little at the information.

The moment of vague camaraderie passed, leaving him feeling awkward again. Melissa opened her mouth, closed it, looked from the table to him and back again. She probably blamed him for everything, which would be fair, in part. He was willing to accept that. Melissa had never really liked or trusted him, something else that was also fair.

"I know things have been screwed up with you and Scott," Melissa started, meeting his gaze and holding it. "But thanks. Having you here," She paused, then at an apparent loss, shrugged.

"Look Melissa, I know I'm probably the last person you wanted here for this, but-" He tried to think of what to say. Something, anything that would be right. But right was evading him, and he had no clue how to comfort, or if it would even be welcome. Empty platitudes never made anyone feel better.

"I think you underestimate me," She told him, expression weary but still concerned. "Stiles, I want you to be happy, as much as I want Scott to be happy. I'm old enough to- Don't you dare smile like that at me Stiles," She warned, mouth quirking at the corner a bit. He hadn't been smiling before that, but he felt the ghost of one tugging at his lips. "To know that you're doing what's best for you. Your dad says that's Portland, and I trust him," She told him, voice sincere. "I know things need to be worked out, but you came. Thank you."

Stiles stared at her, struck stupid by her sincerity. It took a moment for his mouth to catch up to his brain so he could formulate a response. "It's not a problem, Scott and I have our issues, but we're family."

Melissa nodded, the determined, almost grim expression she wore making her next words all the more surprising. "You and Scott have been pulling each other out of trouble since you were five. You can do this."

The (wholly undeserved) vote of confidence was oddly bracing, reinforcing something inside of him that had felt precariously fragile since the whispers at the back of his mind had breached his guard. He stared down at the table, trying to think.

"I hate waiting," He muttered, going over the facts again. There were so few. Despite the many implications, it felt like a tactical error to follow any of them with any degree of certainty. Not being able to go out and examine the crime scenes didn't help.

"I know sweetie," She sighed, running a hand through her hair. "But your dad's right, you know. Right now we need every advantage we've got. And they don't know you're here."

Stiles groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. She had a point. If they were lucky, whoever was orchestrating events might not know he was in town, at least. Knowing he was examining the threads didn't necessarily mean he was doing it locally. Paths could be traced from a distance. It was (supposedly) how people had kept track of the living and dead during long journeys.

"Oh shit, I'm a moron," He muttered, looking to Melissa. Amund's voice was bitching at him in Norwegian. "Like to like, blood calls to blood."
"That's a strange and morbid piece of information," Melissa said, frowning slightly.

"No, everything I've read, genetic bonds are the easiest to tap into," Stiles hummed, knee beginning to bounce. He wasn't good at reading, but this he could probably pull off. "Parents are the strongest. I need another map, and you have to help me."

"Like a magnifying glass?" Melissa asked, and Stiles felt proud of her, because she didn't do magic, but she grasped the concept immediately. Stiles grabbed his bag and shuffled through it, pulled out one of the surplus maps and one of the smaller boxes, sliding the top off and pulling out a raw piece of ash. Shoving things around, he found the ball of hemp he'd gotten from a craft store and pulled a length free. Melissa watched silently as he worked, tying the two together until he was satisfied.

"This will be a little different," He said, explaining to Melissa, knowing she needed to know what he was doing. "It's not what I normally do. I just need a little blood, alright?" He said, pulling a cheap pocketknife from the side pocket of his bag. He'd gotten it for carving, but it would do.

"Is that sterile?" She joked, offering her hand. Stiles held it carefully and stabbed the sharp tip into her index finger before closing it and dropping it, then swiping the wood across the welling red dot. Satisfied, he let it drop to the table, over the map, and started humming out a single rune, over and over, basic but the most effective.

The pendulum swung, a thin line of red starting at the spot he knew was the house and spiraling out. Stiles watched it moving, felt the chain begin to go slack and then taut again and it strained, the end of the spiral centering on lover's point, which actually made sense given Scott's emotional attachment to the place. The rush of exhilaration, of relief nearly broke him in half when it went slack again, the pendulum tipping over, inert.

"I have to get to the point."

"I'm going with you."

Stiles shook his head, shoving the pendulum back into it's box. "No, dad would kill me."

"He'd kill me if I let you go out alone," She reminded him, her look telling him exactly how little choice she was giving him. "Two seconds, let me grab my gun. If you leave without me, I'll shoot you in the foot myself."

Stiles opened his mouth and then slammed his teeth together. "Hurry. I don't know how long he'll be there."

Melissa ran out of the kitchen, leaving him behind to remind himself that his stepmother wasn't helpless. She'd fought against alphas before, and survived the Darach. And apparently, she could shoot. Despite that, the fact that Scott might recognize her and listen to her was the only reason he didn't run for his car. There was a distinct chance Scott might try attacking him, if not outright killing him. The consideration shouldn't have hurt, but it did.

The sound of sneakered feet slapping the linoleum pulled him out of his thoughts. Melissa was wearing a BSHD jacket and holding out a shoulder holster with two guns already weighing it down.

"Your dad's spares. He'll lock both of us in a holding cell if I let you go unarmed," She told him, watching expectantly. Stiles nodded, tugging at his hoodie before throwing it on the counter. Melissa rocked back and forth impatiently, something he was forced to ignore as he took the proffered holster and shrugged it on, making sure it was secure before taking the jacket. Urgency made his fingers tremble. Urgency, and not the quickly blooming sensation of fear or anxiety.
"Come on," He told her, already heading for the door. "Call Chris, he needs to know what's going on. Dad too, just in case."

Melissa was already tapping at her phone as he got into his jeep and slammed the door. She slid in, talking to either his dad or Chris and telling them where they were going, voice firm. When the call ended without an I love you, he figured it was Chris.

Gunning it, he took every shortcut he could remember, banking on the town's attentions being focused on the fire. Melissa ended the second call with assurances and a quiet promise of love before tossing the phone on the dashboard.

"How are we doing this?"

"He knows and loves you. Even if his instincts are focused on finding the others, he won't hurt you. Try to talk him down and into coming with us."

"And if he's fighting someone?"

"We try to take them down, but not kill, if possible. We still don't know where the others are. Any information is more than we've got right now."

"Will-" Melissa paused. "Will Scott try to hurt you?"

Stiles shrugged, attempting indifference. "If he does, I'll handle it. Don't worry. We're going to get him back. And we'll keep him in one place, even if I have to ward him into a corner."

"I know," Melissa said, not sounding sure at all. Stiles ignored the blatant staring and pulled onto the old service road that took them to the lookout. Nervousness made his keys jangle in his hands before he stuffed them in his pocket. Melissa followed him, staying inches behind while they moved forward.

He couldn't read the area around him, didn't know how to find Scott like Deaton or Rick would have.

"Call out for him," He commanded quietly.

"Scott!" Melissa shouted, sounded half panicked. "Scott honey, it's mom! Scott!"

She kept shouting, her voice cracking as they jogged through the trees and closer to the point itself. Scott's name echoed over and over, the desperation in Melissa's voice making his temples throb, the earlier headache returning with a vengeance.

The name was still echoing when Melissa's voice was cut short, ending in a pained grunt before she was rolling on the ground, a shadow blurring around her and disappearing again. Stiles tried calling her name only to feel pain blossom on the side of his face, sharp and hot before freezing. He stumbled, body trying to catch up with his equilibrium. Immediately he went for the gun at his side and pulled it free, checking the safety and then surveying the area.

"Melissa, you alright?"

A pained groan was her answer and shuffling as she tried to get to her feet.

A roar cut through the air, pushed into him. He recognized the sound of a wolf, furious and intent, commanding him to leave, to flee. Standing his ground, he shuffled closer to Melissa until they were almost touching. She was already steadying, her gun in hand.
"It's a wolf."

"Good thing the bullets are wolfsbane," She muttered, breath hitching.

Stiles didn't respond, looking for any hint of the werewolf. The trees in front of him were quiet, unnaturally so. The overlook was behind him, nothing there. He hoped.

A blur of movement caught his eye and he shot at it, a wordless shout tearing from his throat when the dark shape knocked Melissa back, towards the edge of the overlook. Her scream pitched in the cold air. Claws swiped at her, tearing the sleeve of her jacket. Stiles fired over their figures, terrified of hitting Melissa if he went for the form bearing down on her. A loud snarl erupted, the furry head twisting to look at him, red eyes glaring balefully.

Stiles knew alphas connected to their anchors could manage a shift to full wolf, or something between that and their beta forms. This one was something between, it's face like a Halloween mask, covered in fur with a long muzzle filled with rows of sharp teeth. The black pelt was clean but short, coarse and wiry.

"Come on," Stiles urged, moving back. He noticed Melissa's gun off to the side, between him and the quiet pair. "You want prey? I'm good prey. Wolves can't resist me."

The alpha kept low to the ground, legs and arms braced and tense. Stiles kept talking, goading and babbling even he didn't pay attention to as he kept stepping back. He glanced over at Melissa, saw her arm cradled to her chest and blood soaking through the jacket. Her gaze flickered between the alpha and the gun on the ground.

He tried to step to the side, hoping to reach her, get between her and the alpha. The first step and the second were allowed. The third forced the alpha's head to follow his gaze and he sprung, the tension in his body snapping. Stiles pulled the trigger and scrambled back, closer to his stepmother. Melissa shouted, darting forward for her gun. The alpha's roar was deafening, rattled in his skull and settled like a never ending loop as it shot forward again, knocking him down onto his back and pinning him down. The weight forced the air from his lungs, his body screaming under the pressure. Blood poured from it's shoulder, matting down the fur. The smell of wet and rot invaded his nostrils, sickly and putridly sweet. Claws pushed into his chest and down, ripping the skin open. He angled the gun up and shot at the creature's stomach. Not sure if he actually made the hit, he swallowed a deep breath and tried to prepare for the clawed hand that was sailing towards his head.

The sensation that pulled him up, made him blink against the light, was of trying to breathe, followed quickly by his body informing him what a terrible idea it was. His chest burned and throbbed, and worst of all itched incessantly. He groaned, moving his hand only to encounter layers of gauze.

His dream didn't fade in the light of morning, the taste of rust lingering in his cheeks. Allison and Scott batting him back and forth between them as he'd dangled from a snare. The splinters from the branch Allison had been using felt embedded in his scalp, and he reached up to itch at it.

"Don't," A voice snapped. Stiles swallowed, his mouth dry and throat thick, and blinked to clear his vision.
"Shit," He muttered, staring up at Derek. Who looked, probably understandably, pissed off. His palm moved to rest on Stiles' shoulder, warm and dry. Darkness tinted his veins and the pain eased until there was only the itch left behind.

"You got hurt."

Damn. It wasn't at all like he'd imagined greeting Derek. Then again, he'd avoided thinking about it right up until he'd had the excuse of unconsciousness.

"I'm fine," He sighed, pushing himself upright. He was in a bed, presumably in the guest room. The paint was different, but not much else.

"You're not fine," Derek snapped. Stiles shrugged and pushed himself to the opposite side of the bed. His duffels were piled against the wall and he tugged one loose and tossed it on the bed. Derek remained determinedly, pointedly silent while he opened it and pulled out a fresh shirt. The swathe of bandages started almost below his armpits and wrapped the majority of his chest and stomach.

"Is Melissa alright?"

"As can be expected," Derek said, leaning back in the chair. Stiles remembered the blood pouring from her arm, winced in sympathy.

"Everyone else?" Derek nodded once in answer, expression stony. Stiles continued on, like he wasn't being silently accused. "There's an alpha involved. I know I got him at least once, hopefully twice."

Derek's breath hitched and Stiles finished tugging his shirt down. "What?" When Derek looked at the wall behind him instead of at him, and he knew that expression, knew it signaled the shift from 'bad' to 'catastrophic'. He repeated himself, voice deepening in an attempt to sound forceful.

"Melissa-" Derek started, looking down at his hands. "After he knocked you out, Melissa tagged him again. She-The alpha started reverting. He ran off before he was fully human, but she got a look at him."

"Okay," Stiles said slowly.

"It was Scott."

A hysterical sound started high in his chest, maybe a laugh. Except it gurgled in his throat and choked, swelled until he couldn't breathe.

The door slammed open, a faint sound in his ears, and hands were pulling at him, pressing into his skin and making it hard to inhale. He swung an arm out, stumbled away from the press of heat and sound and life, needed to get away-

"Son, son it's alright, look at me," A voice echoed. "Come on, look at me Stiles-"

He blinked, saw his dad in front of him, Derek behind pushing Cassie back towards the door.

"Scott," He gurgled. Fuck, Scott had attacked them. Scott had attacked Melissa. He'd shot him, repeatedly. He'd shot his brother full of fucking wolfsbane and hadn't even recognized him-

"It's alright son. Count with me, okay? Let's do this by eights. Eight, sixteen-"  

Stiles started choking out multiples, focusing on the next number, scrambling to match his pace with
his dad's until his breathing began to slow and the gray haze of his vision dulled and gave way to color.

"Shit," He groaned, sliding down the wall, the burn of salt stinging his eyes. His dad's strong hands grabbed his forearms, pulled him up, away from the wall until he was swaying on his feet.

"Stiles, it's alright," His dad repeated, a calming litany. "Breathe. Come on, stay with me."

"Dad," He tried, words building up in his mouth but refusing to work, trapped behind his teeth.

"Stiles, we need you here and present." It was an order, barked out in the tone his dad always used with his deputies at a scene, had used on him when he'd been younger, hyperactive and reckless. It had the effect of pushing at the panic and stunning him into the moment.

"Good. Listen to me. Someone broke into Chris' place last night and raided it. The wolfsbane was gone, none of the weapons. He's alive. He was smart enough to break in and get what he needed."

Stiles nodded, taking a deep breath before the realization hit. "He attacked his mom."

His dad nodded grimly. "Yeah."

"Fuck. Does Chris know?"

"He does. We've been trying to figure out how to handle it."

"How's Melissa holding up?"

"She's doing better than any of us have a right to expect," His dad admitted. He looked ready to say something and stopped, shaking his head. "I'm going to head back down. We've got lunch ready."

"Lunch?"

"You've been out for about a day, give or take. Deaton said it's probably because you were putting your body through too much at once."

"Oh." Magic, sleep deprivation, adrenaline crashes, and the wards. He'd thought it would be longer before everything caught up to him.

"And on that note, you owe two people an explanation," His dad informed him, voice cheering as he slapped his shoulder. Stiles watched him leave and heard 'he's all yours' before Derek and Cassie filed in. Cassie looked furious, fists clenched tight at her sides and face twisted into a scowl. Derek was moving slowly, cautiously, like he was expecting him to have another panic attack if anyone moved too quickly.

"You lied to us," Cassie accused abruptly, breaking the silence.

Stiles sat back down on the bed, fingers absently tracing the tattoo on his arm. "This isn't your fight. It's Scott's."

"It's your fight, which makes it our fight," Derek reminded him, voice a low rumble. "You shouldn't have lied."

"I didn't want you to follow me back here," Stiles bit out, defensive.

"And you think I want you here?" Derek growled, voice rising. Stiles opened his mouth to protest but Derek went on, body tense like he wanted to hit something, maybe slam him into a wall again. "I
know what this place does to you. So don't act like it's any easier for you."

"But Scott's my family!"

"And you're not ours?" Cassie snapped, face flush with anger. She pointed a clawed finger in his direction and snarled, head shaking. "I get why you didn't tell mom. But you lied to us. You scared the shit out of me. All the weapons were gone and your phone was off. I couldn't even figure out where you were from your fucking accounts. You always answer and then you didn't." Her voice wavered, eyes burning gold. A hard sniff and she scrubbed her face. "And then we got here and you were hurt. We could have helped and you were fucking hurt because you didn't have us with you."

Stiles shook his head. "And if you had been there?" Stiles demanded. "Scott hates my pack. He would have killed both of you. That-" The words stopped, because he imagined Cassie on the ground, torn open. And it would have been Scott. Jesus. He couldn't begin to imagine if Scott got a hold of Derek, if any part of him remembered their history. "I can't let him hurt you." It would kill him, to see either of them dead. And it would destroy any semblance of sanity he had to be forced to hunt Scott.

A hand smoothed over his forehead. The bed dipped behind him. "It's our right to protect our own," Derek reminded him, fingers running through his hair. Cassie sniffed against his shoulder, arms circling his chest, barely putting any pressure on it in a careful squeeze.

"You're ours, remember?" She whispered into the fabric of his shirt. "God, we got here and you were just laying there and I can still smell the blood," She whimpered, her body jerking as she tried to hold back a sob. "You've just been laying there and we couldn't do anything."

He had no idea what to say to that, didn't know what to say to make it better, to remind her that he was alive, that he was fine. Mostly because it was patently obvious that everything was so much worse than he'd thought it would be. Never in a thousand years had he expected Scott to attack him. And Melissa- Shit. Everything was a clusterfuck.

"I'm sorry," He murmured several minutes later, covering her hands with his own.

"Don't ever do it again," She commanded. "Don't ever-I'll kill you. I swear to god. You're ours, and that means we do crazy shit together."

"Beacon Hills is pretty much all crazy, all the time," Stiles reminded her.

"Yeah, well, I'll use that excuse when we explain to mom why we ran into enemy territory," Cassie snorted, the words warm and moist through his shirt. Familiar, welcoming. Stabilizing.

"She doesn't know?"

Derek shook his head, leaning forward. Stiles spread his legs and wrapped his arms around the werewolf’s waist, breathing into his stomach. Sweat and sawdust and *Derek* assaulted his nose, comforting in an aching, stumbling sort of way.

"We're a banned pack. If she followed protocols, it would take too long, and she'd force us to wait. If she ignored them and came here, if any of the pack came here while the alpha is missing, it would be taken as a declaration of war. There's no way her pack wouldn't notice, not to mention the other hierarchies. She wouldn't take that chance."

Stiles nodded, hating that Derek was right, because there were rules and they were breaking all of them.
"So much for me being an authority figure," Stiles groaned.

"Pretty sure we're supposed to be your voice of reason," Cassie reminded him.

"Well that's stupid," Stiles chuckled, a brittle, mirthless sound. "When have I ever stopped to listen to reason?"

"Point," Derek muttered into his hair, sounding aggrieved.

Cassie nuzzled his shoulder and moved away, hopping off of the bed and heading for the door. "Meet you guys downstairs. Don't take too long." With that, she closed the door behind her and left them alone. Needing something to do with his hands, Stiles fiddled with Derek's belt loops, twisting them between his fingers.

"I'm sorry," He whispered into Derek's stomach. Sorry for any number of things. For lying, for dragging him back, for worrying him. Just-Christ, he'd fucked up in so many ways, and he didn't know if he would do it again or just ask Derek to come with him because this-This was probably one of the worst guilt trips he'd ever had, and he didn't know what he felt more guilty for.

"I know."

Stiles shuddered, knowing what Derek was trying to tell him. "You used the fail safe."

"We couldn't get a hold of you. I figured it was the best way to get your attention."

"It worked," Stiles said, looking up at him with a small smile tugging up one corner of his lips. "I was stuck in the currents. It pulled me out." Probably saved his brain from cracking open and frying like an egg too.

"Chris said you think something's manipulating them."

Stiles nodded. "There's someone there. They were intentionally trying to mess me up. I felt the fire, Derek. Right before dad got the call about Scott's house. It's not like last time. Someone was there with me, keeping me from finding them and trying to skullfuck me in the process."

"Then you're not doing it again," Derek told him. It was nothing less than a command, but Stiles had no clue how to agree when he didn't know if he'd have to or not.

"I'll try to avoid it," He said, answering as truthfully as he could. Derek frowned but let it go. Stiles knew he was saving it for when he suggested doing it again, if he had to. It was a definite change from Before, when Derek had been willing to let everyone run blindly into danger, had sometimes driven them into it.

"You need to eat something. Come on," Derek said, pulling him to his feet, as if physically trying to drag him out of his own ruminations.

Stiles was able to walk, although moving brought a host of aches and pains to the forefront, bruises and scrapes he hadn't been aware of for the dull throbbing in his chest. Derek walked behind him, a hand on his shoulder like he was afraid Stiles would collapse. Ignoring the urge to shift away, he allowed it. The stairs felt unusually uneven anyway.

The kitchen was crowded with people. Cassie was talking to Melissa, and Miles and Payton were leaning against a counter, plates of pizza in hand, talking to his dad. Chris and Deaton were speaking in hushed tones in a corner.
"Hey dumbass," Miles greeted, offering a lazy smirk and a wave.

"I'm not going to ask," Stiles said, heading straight for the coffee pot. Caffeine might make it easier to process everything. It was a long shot, but every little bit helped.

"We're not banned," Miles told him, like that explained everything. Stiles figured it did, or at least, half of it. He wasn't going to ask about the other half.

"Welcome to Beacon Hills, god save you," he muttered.

"Never thought I'd be working with an Argent," Payton smirked. Stiles saw Chris look sharply in their direction and resisted the urge to slam his head against something hard.

"To save an Argent no less," Miles snorted.

"Cool it," Derek told them.

"How did you guys get inside?" Stiles asked, changing the subject. Tact, he didn't care about it, since he knew no one else did.

"Cassie figured it was the fail safe. She let us use it."

"I'm proud of you Tink," Stiles said, smiling at her. He got flipped off in return and took a sip of coffee. "She was right. The fail safe allows you to pass through any wards with my DNA in the mix. I'll make you a new one when we get home."

"You never told us that," Derek hummed, loading a plate with pizza and handing it to him.

"I didn't think it would come up. Most wards don't require it. This one's just--"

"Hardcore?" Payton offered, staring at him. The smirk belied the way Payton seemed to stare right though him. Uncomfortable, Stiles looked away, busied himself with food.

"One way of putting it," he agreed before taking a bite of pizza. "So, any updates? New intel?"

"I couldn't get a read on the area when we picked you up," Deaton said. "It was distorted."

Stiles swallowed and regarded the vet evenly. "Are you sure it was a distortion?"

"Yes."

"Scott couldn't do something like that."

"No, he couldn't," Deaton agreed, looked pleased. Stiles resisted the urge to compel him out of the house and off the property. It occurred to him that Deaton was lying, trying to cover for Scott. It would be so perfect, suggesting that Scott was somehow not responsible for attacking them. But--

Stiles chewed his lip, trying to think about it objectively. Scott wouldn't give in that easily. Even with his instincts in freefall, he wouldn't attack his own mother. Stiles knew he was an interloper, but Melissa would never be a natural target.

"What the hell does that mean?" Miles demanded, setting his plate down and crossing his arms.

"It means someone is strong enough to block him from reading an area he's right in the middle of. That takes some heavy mojo. Distance reading is one thing, but once you make a physical connection?" Stiles said, looking around the room. "The only thing harder than distorting a reading is..."
"You think someone is using Scott's connection to the nemeton?" Chris demanded.

Stiles shrugged. "It's the only thing that makes any sense. If he's a conduit, it keeps the other person protected from the effects while giving them access to the power it generates."

"That means they might be using Allison too," The hunter muttered darkly.

"What about you?" Cassie asked, mouth pinched.

"It's possible, but not likely," He answered, praying it was true. "I've had more training, and my tie to the vé grounds me, sort of. It's not worth the effort. And I'd at least be able to tell, I think."

"I think your necklace has something to do with it too," Deaton added, staring at his chest. Stiles fingered the pendant through his shirt, thumb rubbing the outline of a circle. "As far as I can tell, it contains energy, adding to it with every generation that wears it. Like a circuit that keeps growing stronger with every rotation. I've never seen anything like it."

"Huh," Stiles hummed. That was more than either he or Rick had known before.

"If Allison is compromised-" Chris started.

"It's not her though," Stiles interrupted. "If something is using them, then it's not them doing it." And he was going to cling to that logic unless evidence proved otherwise.

"Regardless, she's capable of taking down anything supernatural."

"Wolf and skinwalker maybe," Payton hummed. "Not many of my kind around to really bother being prepared for us, not in the states anyway."

"And what are you?" Chris snapped, obviously frustrated at the lack of information.

"Good enough to hold his own," Miles growled.

"Unique," Payton supplied, smirking. Stiles rolled his eyes, trying not to think about Jackson.

"What about Gerard?" Stiles said, remembering where the others were supposed to have gone.

"I was able to read him. He's got nothing to do with this," Deaton answered. "His body is deteriorating from the damage of the mountain ash and the bite trying to overcome each other."

"Can we kill him anyway?" Stiles whined plaintively.

"I might consider letting you if you help me get my daughter back in one piece. He's mostly dead already."

"That just takes all the fun out of it," Stiles muttered. It didn't stop him from quietly plotting which vial of wolfsbane would kill the old man, regardless of whether the bite had taken or not. "And I can use you to find Allison. I was able to find Scott through Melissa. Surprised Deaton didn't try."

"I don't work with blood."

Stiles tilted his head and raised a brow. "Seriously? You're a vet."

"I'm a druid," Deaton said. Which was a hell of a change from his former tune. Stiles squinted at
him, hoping he was projecting his irritation.

"Druids totally practiced human sacrifice. A little blood offered willingly isn't a big deal."

"Everyone has their own rules, Stiles."

He shrugged and rolled his eyes. "Sure. Hey Chris, trust building exercise. Let me take a knife to you?"

"Sounds exciting," Chris drawled.

"We need keys first," Derek reminded him.

"Yes, okay."

"And you will finish eating," He added.

"Yes, sir!" Stiles saluted, his mouth full. Derek gave him a practiced look of disgust that didn't entirely hide the relief in his eyes. He swallowed before speaking again. "Hey, just a thought. I mean, you can say no and I'd get it. But when you give someone the bite, it's pretty much giving them a new parent, right?"

Derek blinked slowly. "Metaphorically?"

"Genetically."

Derek shook his head. "I don't know. I'm not sure people have done any testing like that. I've never heard of any, at least."

Stiles hummed thoughtfully, turning the idea over in his head. "Melissa still connected to Scott, but I thought we might try to use you to find Issac. I mean, you bit him, so he has to have something like a genetic marker that's yours, or-" He stopped at calling it a virus, because even he knew how offensive that would sound.

"That's not a bad idea Stiles," Deaton said, intrigued. Chris looked equally intent, and Stiles wished he wasn't being watched by the supernatural world's equivalent of intellectual scavengers.

"Just a thought. I don't know if Allison and Issac are in the same place."

"We can try it. Worst case scenario is that it doesn't work."

Stiles nodded and slumped, antsy for all the lack of decisive action. He still couldn't look at Melissa, afraid of what he'd see if their gazes caught for any length of time.

Scott. Feral Scott. Everything they'd worked to prevent, all of the things he'd done to try and keep it from happening, and it had happened anyway. Scott had attacked him, and Stiles knew from the already returning pain that he'd have scars from it this time.

His stomach twisted, and he sat the plate on the counter behind him. Ignoring the stares he knew were following him, he left the kitchen and the conversations behind, through the house and out the front door. The cold air hit like dozens of tiny needles, his thin shirt offering no protection at all. The steps were cold under him when he sat down, the sensation eerily close to wet as it seeped through his jeans and into his flesh.

The door opened and closed behind him, and heavy, booted steps creaked over the patio. Something warm settled over his shoulders and when he looked down, it was a black leather jacket.
"Thanks."

"You need it." Derek sat down next to him, elbows braced on his knees as he watched the street. "I feel weird, without it."

"Your jacket?"

"The fail safe."

"I'll make another when we get back," He promised again, not allowing himself to consider it as an if. (His lizard brain wondered in spite of himself.) "I think I have more of the blue obsidian. I can't remember."

"Anything is fine."

Stiles sighed, leaned into Derek's heat, desperate to steal some of it for his own. His body felt sluggish, lethargic. He wondered how long he could hold the wards without it affecting him adversely. His wound certainly wasn't helping.

"You really think we can pull this off?"

"If we do, we get to get rid of Gerard. Regardless of whether he's involved or not."

"Is it bad that it feels like a door prize?" Stiles asked, knowing that he shouldn't be actively looking forward to it. It had probably been Chris' idea of a joke. Hunter's humor and gallows humor were pretty much one and the same. But still. It would be a nice bonus.

"I used to be sort of ambivalent about it," Derek sighed, sounding like he regretted that ambivalence.

"What changed?"

"The basement," He replied, sounding distant. Stiles felt a wealth of meaning packed into those words, wondered if he should have mentioned Gerard kidnapping him at all. Secrets, even now, messed with his life. Somehow he doubted Derek would feel any more forgiving if he knew the truth.

"Aww, getting all medieval because he hurt me. I feel special," He said sarcastically, an attempt to bring themselves both back to the present.

Derek was quiet for a moment, staring at the road like he was waiting for someone to show up. "Stiles, you have to promise you're going to be careful."

"I'm always careful."

"Stiles-"

Stiles waved a hand and sighed. "Look, when I got here I knew I had my dad at my back, and that's more than I could count on back when I was a teenager, alright? Like, I always knew everyone else had other priorities. But now? I've got you and Cas too. And Miles and Payton, for whatever reason."

"It's because you drop off lunch for everyone."

"Seriously?"

Derek huffed and smiled. "Miles doesn't have a clan, and Payton's family isn't anywhere close. They
believe in protecting their own, though. We count to them, so they're here."

"So. We have people this time around. All of us can actually count on each other." It was foreign and aweing at the same time. And not a little bit depressing. Because he'd known Scott since they were four, and he'd stopped counting on him to have his back the moment Allison had come into the picture. The reason had changed over time, but he'd never had it again, had never counted on it after that. And to be back and have support, from multiple people- He shook his head and smiled sadly at the road. "Life is fucking weird."

Derek nodded in silent agreement.

When the cold was too much, even with the jacket, Derek nudged him and helped him to his feet. Stiles ran a hand through his hair and noticed the raised bumps of stitches along the line of his scalp for the first time. "I went years without stitches. Man, not even after ramming the jeep into every possible immovable object in this fucking town did I need stitches. I'm going to take this out of Scott's ass when we get him back."

"Or you could let Cas do it," Derek suggested as they walked back inside.

"Nah, Cas doesn't want to be an alpha."

Derek barked out a laugh, something that hit the air like a glass exploding against the wall. Stiles tried not to let it bother him and failed spectacularly.

The aforementioned werewolf was sitting at the table, grinning at her phone. "Lydia's flight is boarding, finally."

Stiles opened his mouth, first to ask why Cassie had her number, and then the statement hit. "Lydia's coming?"

"Called her after we hit the road," Cassie admitted with an unrepentant grin. "She's pissed you didn't call her first."

"Those time zones are a bitch," He muttered. "On a scale of one to thermonuclear war, how pissed off is she?"

"Defcon three." He heard a smile in the words and wasn't sure whether to ask when Cassie and Lydia had become so friendly or to break down weeping because redheads were truly going to be the fucking end of him.

"Three's a nice, round number." It was all he could really manage.

Cassie made a dismissive noise. "I'd worry more about mom."

"Just how bad is she going to kill us when we get back?"

"I don't see quick and painless being involved," Cassie snorted. Stiles thought she was being incredibly cavalier about getting her ass kicked. And he had absolutely no doubt she would. Derek too. Maybe even Miles and Payton. Whatever she dreamed up for him due to his weak, human body was probably going to be worse.

"I'm probably going to have to move," Miles groaned, rubbing his face. "Shit, I hate the city anyway."

"Okay. Well, we have a quasi plan, at least. Guys, I need to make keys. Personal object, jewelry is
preferred," He said, focusing on that because it was safe and didn't make him want to curl into the fetal position. Miles pulled a necklace over his head and Payton handed him a heavy bronze ring. Stiles dropped them into the bowl and hummed and waited, pulling them out and tossing them back. Derek handed him the chain that had held the pendant and Stiles dropped it in, watched it puddle on the bottom.

He could feel the wards, felt them tighten and go slack in response to the new keys. Every one was another piece ultimately tied to him. He rubbed his face and turned back around. Several eyes were fixed on him. It wasn't an entirely new sensation, the expectant weight behind each gaze, but knowing what was expected, knowing they were looking at him like he could somehow fix things instead of being the one to fuck everything up made them that much more terrifying.

"We wait until all three are located, right," Stiles said, spreading the map out. "Then we split into teams." Chris nodded reluctantly.

"You're still recovering," Cassie started. Stiles shook his head.

"I'm going," He declared, voice firm. She looked mutinous for a second, glancing to Derek for support. Finding none, she deflated, frowning but nodding her acceptance.

It was simple to use the still bloodied pendulum to locate Scott. It swung and tilted, drew over the map and stopped over the preserve.

The process of creating two new ones was mostly easy. Talking Chris into cutting his thumb was slightly more labor intensive, if only because Chris kept casting wary glances at Payton and Miles, like he expected the scent of blood to set them off. Stiles pretended to be scandalized on their behalf, but it fell flat. Chris was too grim, too focused, and in truth, Miles and Payton were watching Chris intently, like they expected him to make the first move, to throw a knife or pull the gun at his side.

The pendulum jerked erratically, moving from the same starting point and out, farther until Stiles was forced to move his hand. It steadied and slowed around the old industrial area.

"Goddamn sonofabitch," He muttered, immediately recognizing the street name.

"What?" Miles demanded.

"The loft," Derek bit out.

"She wouldn't go there willingly," Chris told them. "This is-" He paused, looking to Derek and then at Stiles.

"Speculation later," Stiles muttered, picking up the third pendulum. "Derek, I need some blood."

Derek accepted his knife and cut into his palm, deeper than he needed by any stretch. Stiles glared at him and muttered under his breath, a dozen epithets as he dipped the pendulum in and held it over the map, switching to the proper rune.

It stopped over the same area.

"Who goes where?"

"You're not going after Scott," Derek told him, tone leaving no room for argument.

"Because Allison is going to be any better?"
"Easier to stun and not as fast," Derek told him, already turning to Argent. "You should be on Scott."

"My daughter-"

"Because she's your daughter. If she is being manipulated, Stiles won't hesitate to stun her. You will. You're also experienced in take down and capture of wolves. We need Scott alive. Cas, Payton, you're with Stiles. Miles, with me and Argent."

He opened his mouth to protest because Derek and Chris? Horrible idea. Fucking terrible. "Dude, Scott."

"I can give him something to pay attention to while Chris and Miles trap him."

"You're playing the bait? That's a shit plan. Like, right up there with every fucking plan we had back in high school. It's worse than the arm thing."

"Arm thing?" Cassie asked, eyes wide.

"He wanted me to cut it off," Stiles bit out, right as Derek said "Wolfsbane poisoning." Cassie and Miles both made choking sounds while Payton groaned something in a foreign language.

"It'll work," Chris interjected, looking as displeased with the plan as Stiles felt. "John?"

"I'm with Stiles. Melissa."

"I know. Ankle's still swollen, arm's still a mess. I'll get the medical supplies set up. Deaton can help me," She said. Stiles wasn't sure if she looked relieved or just weary, her face lined with exhaustion. Considering the day before, he didn't blame her for wanting to stay out of the fight.

"Okay, let's go," Stiles muttered. Derek handed him the keys to his truck and followed Argent out.

"Stiles," His dad said. Stiles turned on his heels and flailed when the holster was almost shoved in his face. He slipped off Derek's jacket, almost called him back to take it and bit his tongue instead, needing the comfort. It was probably one of the more selfish things he'd done, but the door had also slammed closed and he had a feeling Derek wouldn't accept it anyway. The holster slid on, the movement coming too easily, almost like he was getting used to it. The jacket didn't feel as secure when he slid it on, not when he knew the scent of wolfsbane would seep into the material. He made a silent vow to have it dry cleaned. Surely the scent of strangers would be more tolerable than wolfsbane.

"Alright guys," He muttered, leading the way out.

They were halfway down the road when Payton asked, "Why is the loft so important?"

Stiles did his level best not to slam his foot down on either the gas or the brake, either would have satisfied him, really, and took a deep breath. "It's where Boyd died," He finally told them, voice quiet. Cassie whimpered, and Stiles felt his dad staring at him, probably waiting for a panic attack or something equally inappropriate.

"Friend?"

"Derek's beta."

For a minute he thought that would be the end of it, that no one would talk and he'd be safe from
answering any other questions. Then Payton spoke up again, looking uncharacteristically sober. "So this is personal."

Stiles chewed his lip and tried to think of an answer. It felt personal, felt like someone was purposely screwing with them. He wondered if the Hale house would have been a part of it if it was still standing. Where else would they be pulled?

"Someone's fucking with us," Cassie muttered.

"Yeah." Stiles grunted, leaning his throbbing head back against the headrest and keeping his eyes on the road. He'd gone back to the loft after Boyd's death, even after Derek and Cora had fled. Not often, but often enough to remind himself of what had happened there, to remind himself that people had lived and died there, that he hadn't imagined everything.

The trip was quiet, almost hypnotic as the truck moved in time with the headache accumulating behind his temples, steadily growing worse. His mouth still tasted bitter, the tang of old rust caught in his cheeks. Names circled in his head, each one a possibility. It felt incomplete, uninformed. If he'd had someone with him that knew before, that knew the players, he'd have asked. But he doubted his dad knew and he didn't want to bring up the past, the way Boyd had died, in front of Cassie and Payton. His time as an alpha was one of the few things that he knew Derek didn't talk about, rarely referencing it even with him. Which, fair, Stiles knew, because he didn't talk about it to anyone either. Even Cassie only had bare bones aside from what she'd gleaned from his sleep talking.

When they parked in the cracked, broken parking lot, Stiles tried not to think about the last time he'd visited, about desperately clinging to any sense of right and wrong and destroying the last vestiges of the alpha symbol by throwing dusty, cluttered items at all the windows so that even the outline had disappeared. Like it could somehow break that tie that the twins had had to it. (It hadn't worked.)

His dad took the lead, motioning for silence. It was a moot point, the stairs creaking as they made their way up, announcing their presence to whoever was there. And by the way Cassie and Payton are staring at the upper floor, someone was there, waiting.

The door was jammed, pulled open with a barely there growl of effort by Payton and cracking like stone and metal breaking before settling. His dad's gun was trained up, moving from side to side. Stiles was numbed to the realization that his was too, finding nothing but dust motes.

"Two sluggish heartbeats," Cassie said, voice quiet as she crept inside. Payton moved in the opposite direction, zeroing in on a lump of jacket and hair in the corner.

It was Issac, unconscious, his face and hair filled with dirt from the floor. Cassie got their attention and pointed at the stairs. His dad followed her, gun still moving easily to accommodate for the angle of the steps.

Stiles didn't know what he was supposed to be doing, so he watched the door, kept his gun trained on it. The sounds of harsh breathing and the creaking of the spiral staircase echoed and bore into his headache like glass being ground into his skull. Water splashed, the sound echoing like it was real, his sneakers wet and cold. Not real. He took a deep breath and forced his eyes to stay open, his gun steady. Payton came over to him, Issac slung over his shoulder and held carelessly, like the weight was nothing at all.

"They found the woman asleep upstairs," Payton told him, his voice sounding too loud in the hollow space. He was looking around like it might tell him something, maybe about Derek. But the room had never had much of anything in it, and what had been left behind was gone or deteriorated, chewed by rats or stolen by squatters.
A minute, five, ten later his dad was walking down behind Cassie, looking like he was itching to train his gun on the unconscious hunter, paranoid that she would wake up and start attacking. Which was almost sort of funny in distant way, considering the zipties around Allison's hands and feet, binding them together. He'd have probably laughed if it had been in a movie, or happening to someone else and not him.

It was easy and neat, and Stiles knew nothing in Beacon Hills was ever easy or neat. Expecting a hidden trap, an old enemy to spring out from the scant shadows laughing, yelling 'Got ya!' made him antsy, nervous. They filed out, Cassie and Payton between him and his dad. The stairs groaned in protest, their movements stirring up dust. The door leading outside clacked and clattered. But nothing else moved or made a sound.

"This feels like a trap," Stiles muttered, scanning the area. His dad, god bless his instincts, didn't watch Payton and Cassie arranging the two unconscious bodies in the truck, but watched the world around him.

"Too easy," The sheriff agreed.

"Then let's get inside the goddamn wards," Payton told them, pinning a foot against Issac's throat. Stiles saw Allison pinned between him and Cassie, slumped over like a drunk college kid. It occurred to him that his dad had been the one to zip tie Allison, and god, he hoped so. Cassie looked ready to kill something.

The whole drive back, he wondered if bringing Allison in was the trap, whether everybody realized it and that was why, instead of relief, it felt like he was waiting for someone to move, for some abrupt violence to explode right behind his head.

Getting Issac and Allison inside the wards was easier than he thought it would be. Melissa had the crucifix, slipping it into Issac's hand and then deftly pulling it free when he was within the perimeter, then repeating the process with Allison. Stiles stayed outside for a moment, standing next to his dad and staring at the house.

"I really don't like this," His dad admitted in a quiet voice.

"Me either," Stiles groaned. "But we have them now. Drawing Scott to us shouldn't be that difficult, and hopefully." He stopped, unsure of what he hope for, if he was asking too much for Allison to be herself when she woke up, for Scott to recognize where his pack was, for Scott to come back that easily.

"I'm keeping an eye on her," His dad promised.

It was probably the best he could hope for. Once Chris got back, god only knew if he was going to be able to see the potential problem. They walked back inside, followed the sound of voices to the kitchen, which had turned into the de facto gathering spot. Cassie and Payton were leaning against counters, expressions pensive.

"Deaton's checking on the McCall betas and making thoughtful doctor noises. The blonde one has traces of old magic on him, few days at least. The female barely any at all," Payton informed them.

"Really?"

Payton nodded, moving for the coffee pot. "If she's being used, it's subtle," He added, his voice conveying how little he considered it a possibility.

"Do you know what it's like when someone's being ridden?"
"Seen it a few times with my mother's people," Payton told him, frowning. "It's impossible to miss and leaves a hell of an impression after."

"One she doesn't have," Stiles concluded slowly. Payton nodded tightly.

"Fuck."

"Deaton is keeping her restrained and separated from the wolf until we know what's going on, but as far as I can tell, nothing's been using her."

Stiles nodded, chewing the inside of his cheek as he went over the information. "Is it possible it's more subtle?"

"Maybe," Payton conceded, looking doubtful even as he said it. "I've never seen a connection like the one she has, except for you. There's something wrong with it. Bad water."

"We were sacrifices," Stiles told him, ignoring the widening of Payton's eyes. "Actual death. Not a mock sacrifice." Bad water was a great way of putting it, the sensation of water invading his lungs still making him cold.

"That'd do it," Payton muttered, looking disturbed by the notion. "Christ, Derek wasn't kidding when he said this place was a fucking nightmare."

"So what does the cryptic stuff actually mean?" Cassie asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"It means either we're dealing with a hell of a witch or the Argent girl has lost it and was trying to kill her alpha," Payton informed her. "Not sure which I'd prefer at this point."

Stiles poured himself a mug of coffee and sat down at the table, eyes on the windows. "We have Allison and Issac. If nothing else, we can draw Scott to us with that."

"Is that a good idea though?" His dad murmured.

"If we can incapacitate him, I can keep him in one spot."

"What if Allison did give in?"

"We'll figure it out," Stiles sighed. "Do we want to wait to tell Chris?"

His dad looked genuinely torn at the question. It was difficult to remember that Allison and Chris were like him and his dad, that they loved each other that much, had survived so much of the same shit. Stiles admitted, if only to himself, that he was more comfortable thinking of Allison and Chris as a military unit of two, one in command and one following, with very little emotion involved. Mostly because he didn't know how Chris could have pulled her into hunting, could have allowed her to go so far off of the deep end otherwise.

"I'd want to know, but we really need to find Scott," His dad sighed, rubbing his forehead like he was warding off and oncoming headache. "And he'll probably shoot someone if we don't let him know."

"Send him a text. If he's smart, he'll have his phone on silent and won't leave."

"Parents aren't always smart when it comes to their children," His dad snorted.

"Say she's safe and under Melissa's care. Include Issac being safe. Hopefully he'll keep his eye on the big picture." They couldn't really afford for the hunter to act otherwise.
His dad nodded and pulled out his phone, tapping out a quick message and sending it with the air of a person silently praying for something they knew was impossible.

"I hate waiting," Cassie sighed, eying the door like the others might burst through it at any second.

"Once Deaton's done, I need to talk to him. Payton, you too. I'm going to email Abram and pray he has an idea about what's going on. I'll try getting in touch with Amund too."

"I can call Matthias," Cassie murmured, looking strangely vulnerable. Payton watched her with a sympathetic expression as she left the room, her phone already in her hands. Stiles shrugged when his dad gave him an undecipherable look. Cassie and Matthias were deadlocked. He didn't want to leave Norway and she wouldn't leave Portland, not if it meant leaving behind Stiles and Derek.

"Relationships are hard, apparently," He offered, silently vowing to email Leif anyway. He'd learned better than to trust lovebirds to get anything done.

"You'd know that if you just stopped being such a commitaphobic moron!" Cassie shouted from across the house.

Stiles mouthed 'girls', rolling his eyes. Payton choked on a snicker and his dad rolled his eyes to the ceiling like it might actually provide some sort of answer. Or he was thanking god that he'd been given a son instead of a daughter.

"How are you holding up?" His dad asked several minutes later.

"The bandages are fine, itches a little."

"So. When did you get tattoos?" It sounded nonchalant, conversational. Stiles hadn't even thought about his dad seeing them. Thank Christ he'd been unconscious for that moment. He doubted his dad's first reaction had been so calm.

"Part of my apprenticeship." It wasn't a complete lie, but it wasn't the complete truth either. His father eyed him skeptically and he offered a grin in response. "Amund hand poked the one on my back."

"Bullshit," His dad shot out without hesitation.

"The base was," Stiles said, feeling a little proud of it. "I did the design. He said," He paused for a moment, remembering what felt like a dream, the sensation of something being promised to him. "Amund told me it was an offering of myself to myself. A vow."

"One of those," Payton said, his smile tinged with nostalgia "My dad did mine. Traditional for my line."

"Seriously? How does that work? Like, I know wolves use wolfsbane and a blowtorch."

"What?" The word erupted, strangled and cracking from his dad's throat. "Derek has a tattoo," He added, looking vaguely ill.

"Yeah," Stiles said, grimacing. That was one thing he wouldn't look forward to, if he decided to learn. "Supernatural tattoos are one of those things that make me so, so happy I'm human."

"My father cut mine in, needs old black sea glass for it. We have to use iron and salt to set the ink."

"Sounds needlessly painful. I still support the idea of beer and orgasms for spiritual advancement, just saying."
"If only," Payton laughed, beginning to relax. "Dad said the pain is the cost, otherwise it would just be words." Stiles nodded, seeing it align with what Amund had told him.

"So what-" His dad started, then stopped. He was staring at Payton, curious and a little uncertain.

"Na fir ghorma," Payton smirked. "Minchian."

"Oh shit," Stiles breathed, feeling stupidly excited. "You're a fucking unicorn." His dad made another strangled noise and Stiles laughed breathlessly. "Not an actual unicorn," He corrected. "Just, like, there's nothing on you guys. I didn't even know you left Scotland."

"My mom was visiting family and met my dad. She refused to immigrate, so he followed her back here. He went back after she died, took a couple of my brothers with him. Me and Tavish stayed."

"So what's a-" His dad stumbled over a butchered pronunciation that made Stiles flinch and Payton laugh.

"Crossbreeds, mutts really. Kelpie and sea witches."

"And a kelpie is?"

"Water horse. Don't believe anything you read," Payton added, chagrined.

"Depends," Stiles said, giving Payton a curious side eye. "Stories come from somewhere."

"Maybe those freshwater cousins, they keep inbreeding," Payton said, grinning. "We started flirting with witches a long time ago and have kept that tradition ever since. It's the only reason we look human at all."

"Huh," Stiles said, smirking. "I never knew that."

"You're telling me you look human because a woman had sex with a seahorse?" His dad asked bluntly.

"Oh my god," Stiles groaned, covering his face to try and hide the embarrassed flush burning his cheeks. Payton and Cassie howled with laughter, Cassie's echoing from across the house. His dad snorted and somehow, it broke the dark pall that had latched onto him the moment he'd decided to come back. Stiles felt himself laugh, the sound bubbling up unhindered. Really laughing, for what felt like the first time in months, even though it had only been days.

They were still laughing when Deaton and Melissa came downstairs, staring at them like they'd all lost their minds. Which, fair. It wasn't like there were two unconscious bodies upstairs and a feral alpha meandering about the town.

"Sorry," He said, wiping tears from his eyes. "What's the diagnosis?"

"Their vitals are steady. It looks like they've been drugged. I can't tell with what," Deaton said. "There's some fading magic around Issac that I can't pin down as anything specific, but it doesn't appear to be harmful."

"Any idea when they'll wake up?" John asked.

"It's anyone's guess. Shouldn't be too long though."

"Okay," Stiles said. "I need a computer. Deaton, Payton, you're with me."
His dad led them to his office, a small room with a gun safe and a set of locking cabinets on one side, a desk and computer chair with a couch shoved in the last bit of wallspace. Stiles was patient, waiting for his dad to log on and clear his passwords before stepping back. He logged in to his email and switched his keyboard to Russian before looking over his shoulder.

"Abram knows more about the currents and power sinks than anyone I've ever met. So any information, theories, whatever. I need them."

Deaton started, repeating a lot of what Stiles already knew and offering little that felt like new information. Stiles bit back the urge to hold a gun to him to see if he would give anything else before Payton started.

When he was finished typing out the letter to Abram, he didn't know anything more than what he had before. Either Allison was being used or she'd given in to her darkness. Scott might be serving as a bridge for someone to access the power generated. He felt something in the currents. The hard facts they had amounted to almost nothing, disheartening and almost panic inducing. Broad strokes would only get them vague results. With Scott on the line, vague wasn't going to cut it.

He clicked send and then switched back to his English keyboard and wrote a short email to Leif, asking for Amund to get in contact with him, leaving his skype name and his cell phone number. He didn't hold out much hope for it though. Payton and Deaton filed out, leaving him alone with his dad.

It only took his dad sitting on the couch and patting the cushion beside him for him to practically throw himself at it. It was the old couch from their living room, from the old house, and it was a familiar comfort.

Cassie slipped in minutes later looking exhausted. Stiles lifted his arm and she was diving in next to him, snuggling into his side. A hand slipped under his shirt, like she normally did. Instead of resting over his scars, he felt her pulling some of the pain, making it a little easier for him to breathe.

He didn't remember dozing off, but at some point weight shifted and he was allowed to stretch out, Cassie wedged between him and the back of the couch. When he noticed that he was being shaken, he blinked up at Derek's concerned face.

"Melissa said it's time to change your bandages."

"Lovely," He groaned. "How'd it go?"

Cassie mumbled and came to when he pushed himself upright. She glared first at him, then at Derek.

"Bandage time," Derek told her. Cassie's gaze grew dark and she nodded, leaving them behind. Stiles tilted his head in askance and Derek shrugged uncomfortably. "She looked under them when we got here and Miles had to tackle her to keep her from going after Scott. Took awhile to get her calmed down."

"Oh," Stiles mumbled, following Derek out and into the downstairs bathroom. It was barely big enough for the two of them, but supplies were already laid out, packets of gauze and medical scissors, sterile wipes and paper towels. He divested himself of the jacket and holster, laying them over the back of the toilet, then followed with his shirt.

Derek's touch was clinical as he turned him around, bordering on impersonal. Stiles stared at the wall, felt the cold metal press against his skin and shuddered. A soothing palm pressed against his tattoo as the scissors snipped up, splitting the gauze in half. He kept them gathered to him until Derek was finished, then balled them up and dropped them in the trashcan.
"Can you wash them, or do you need me to do it?"

"I'm fine."

And he was, but only because Derek had a hand pressed to his side, resting over his old scars to steal the pain.

Derek stared at the lines of sutures, mouth pinched in a frown.

"Hey man, it's fine. They're good. Not too much seepage or anything. Unless you can smell infection. Can you? I never asked anyone, but Scott could smell cancer so-"

"They're not infected," Derek told him, voice quiet. "I hate this place."

"I feel ya," Stiles tried, keeping his tone light. It didn't seem to do anything, and he looked up at the ceiling, raising his arms. "Come on, I'm ready to go to the ball."

"I'm not your fairy godmother," Derek muttered, rolling his eyes. He reached for the gauze anyway.

"Huh, true. I'm the magic one so-" Stiles started, keenly aware of Derek's hands pressing against his skin as he held the gauze in place.

"You're not my fairy godmother Stiles."

"Lies. You're totally my princess," He teased, trying to keep his voice even. It helped that Derek seemed more focused on the wounds than on him, personally.

"I don't attract singing woodland creatures."

"No, only the violent ones. Just my luck."

"Wouldn't that make you my knight? Or does the magic stick you with the fairy part?"

"Obvious allusions to my sexuality aside, maybe."

"You suck at your job."

"You're just jealous that I can rock a tiara."

Derek huffed on a laugh, looking almost amused, almost relaxed. Stiles leaned against the sink and watched him tape the gauze, curious as tanned skin moved over the stark white of the gauze. The pain was gone, even the itching dulled, and he could observe it in an impersonal way, how Derek's hands moved, deft over the cotton.

When he finished, Derek looked up at him, expression closed.

"Hey, it'll be okay, right? We're going to be fine."

"You never leave this place without more scars," Derek told him, voice quiet. "I never leave without," He slammed his mouth shut and looked back down, brow furrowing.

Stiles knew immediately what he was thinking, because it was true. Derek lost someone every time he came to Beacon Hills. Lost family and loved ones, pack and friends.

"It's not going to happen this time," He promised, sliding his arms over Derek's shoulders and linking his hands, pulling him closer. "We're all going to finish this in one piece, and then we're going to
Marl's to gorge ourselves on curly fries and burgers. We'll eat so much he'll run out of food and cry. It almost happened when Cas and I went there," He said, smirking at the memory. "I'll even let my dad order whatever he wants. And then we'll go to Shaw's, because we need to regroup before we try to face Caroline. We'll be lazy and drink his hot chocolate and cuddle and we're going to be fine." He pushed as much faith and belief into the words as he could, even knowing it was a futile endeavor. But he'd always been the patron saint of lost causes, and Derek's arms circling him and holding him like he would break was painful. "We're all going to be okay."

Derek finally nodded, a slight movement Stiles barely felt.

"Come on," He urged, knocking his hip against the werewolf's. "We can try and plan with Chris and outvote him."

Derek huffed and nodded again, stepping back. "Caroline and Marianne are going to mother you once we get back."

"Nah, they're going to come down on me like the fist of an angry god," Stiles snorted. "Rick too." He smirked at Derek, taking a steadying breath because the laughter was already bubbling up in the back of his throat.

Derek covered his mouth with his hand and shook his head. "Don't say it."

"It's a dog joke. No."

Stiles rolled his eyes and shrugged, then huffed a sigh against Derek's palm in acquiescence. Derek slowly dropped his hand, like he expected it to be said regardless.

"You're just mad I thought of it first."

"I'm really not," Derek groaned, opening the door and walking away. Stiles pulled on his shirt and followed, hands shoved in his pockets. The smell of Chinese takeout drew him to the kitchen, where everyone was gathered except for the notable exceptions of Chris, Allison and Issac. Stiles looked at the open containers of take out and grabbed a plate, loading it up with lo mein and beef.

Melissa got up and walked over to him, her gait marred by a slight limp. He moved away from the counter and let her lean against it, eyes on his plate.

"I've been thinking," She started quietly. "What if someone wants Scott to kill his pack?"

Stiles thought he did a good job of not dropping his plate. The sudden absence of sound, the abrupt halt of all conversation and the normal din that accompanied eating, meant that the others had heard her and were paying attention. Small wonder, considering it felt like the floor had dropped from under him. Ignoring the part of himself that said he needed to eat, he sat his plate on the counter and regarded her evenly.

"That's a possibility," He agreed. "Given the context." It made a scary amount of sense, actually.

"I remember why-He told me about the power an alpha gets, if he kills one of his betas," Melissa said, sounding worried. Rightfully so, considering the implications.

Stiles resolutely stared ahead at her, didn't risk glancing over at Derek even though a part of him wanted to tell Derek to leave, to get out of the room, wanted to cover his ears and keep him from hearing the conversation. "It's two fold," He admitted. "Scott will have that extra power and destroy
his anchor. Chances are he'd stay feral."

Derek cursed, quietly and viciously.

"But feral wolves are crazy," Cassie interrupted, confused. "Why would anyone make someone do that?"

"Because he has cheat codes," Stiles explained, rubbing his forehead. "If he knows how to use the nemeton, he can control Scott using that. The only thing keeping him from creating the perfect guard dog is the pack. As long as the pack is alive, there's a chance he can come out of it."

"You sound like you have a good idea of who we're dealing with," Miles observed.

"Deucalion," Derek spat, like the name was poison. Stiles understood, more than he wanted to. Because Derek had let Deucalion live, he'd allowed him to go free in a bid to be better, be more than a killer. And fuck if it wasn't exactly as bad as Stiles had always thought it was, but he wasn't going to say 'I told you so' now.

"He wanted a true alpha as part of his pack. Shit-" Stiles muttered. "The twins."

"You think he did that?" His dad asked quietly.

"He knew them well enough," Stiles reminded them. "He knew the best way to take them down was to hit them when they weren't together. The timing, I mean, it fits. They betrayed him, he wouldn't let that slide. And he knows enough about us, about everything that happened here-" Stiles shrugged, not sure how to explain to them that things slotted into place, all of them dredging up memories he'd buried under a new life.

"Is Morrell still his emissary?" Derek asked, looking over at Deaton.

"My sister died."

"Because that's stopped anybody before," His dad quipped, expression uncompromising. Stiles realized their lives were a joke that that comment actually meant something.

"Her ashes were interred in our family's vault," The vet said, voice hard. "If his emissary is aiding him, then it's someone else."

Stiles worried at his thumbnail, tried to remember what he knew about the 'alpha of alphas'. There wasn't much, he hadn't rated that high on the wolf's list of priorities as a simple human, so he'd never had much contact with him.

"This is good though," His dad said into the quiet. "We know who's doing it."

"Now we just have to find him," Stiles muttered.

"Is it possible to cut whatever is connecting them?" Payton asked. "Keep him from connecting to the currents?"

"Abram mentioned that it was possible," Stiles agreed. "But I'd have to find him in the currents, figure out how he's exploiting the connection. I'm not the best at reading to begin with, and when I tried yesterday he managed to pin me down."

"You can't push him out?" Miles asked, brow furrowing.

"I don't think so," Stiles sighed. "He's everywhere in them and I don't know enough to pull
something like that off." If it was possible, and he wasn't sure it was.

"Could you trace it back to where he is?" Payton suggested.

"Maybe."

"Wouldn't that leave you open to attack?" Derek asked.

"Maybe," Stiles repeated.

"Well, gotta say Derek. When you pick a fight you don't screw around," Payton snorted. "Hell of a Christmas."

"It's not Christmas. I will not be anywhere in residence on Christmas. I will be somewhere that does not involve my past coming back to bite me in the ass. And said past will be dead, cremated, mixed into a cement brick and languishing somewhere in the bottom of the ocean."

"Specific," Miles smirked.

"I even know this nice little bed and breakfast right on the beach," Stiles muttered. It sounded like an amazing plan. Provided they all survived.

"Miles has a cement mixer," Payton offered.

"I want it."

"No."

Stiles turned to Derek, frowning. "No?"

"You are never allowed near a cement mixer."

"I can use a bread maker. Can't be that much different."

"It's really not. Bread maker's probably more complicated," Miles told them.

"See?" Stiles pointed out.

"Alright," His dad said, shaking his head. "First things first, we wait for Allison and Issac to wake up and see what they know. Then we come up with a plan. And until we do find him, if you're outside the wards, I want everyone on a supernatural buddy system. One human to one whatever."

"Nice," Miles quipped.

The sheriff didn't look in the least apologetic for the generalization. "And I want people to sleep tonight. We can take shifts, but I want everyone at their best tomorrow."

Stiles resisted the urge to salute, but only just. The more pressing question was where they would all sleep. Even in shifts, the three bedrooms were taken, and he doubted anyone would feel comfortable sleeping in the living room. It was too open, too exposed. With Allison and Issac still working as unknowns, no one would want to be vulnerable.

"Derek, you look like ass. Go get some sleep," Miles commanded. "I'll take first shift with Payton."

"Stiles needs sleep too," Payton added. Stiles gave him his best bitchface but relented when he saw the knowing gaze directed at him. Shit. "And finish your dinner."
"Yeah yeah," Stiles grumbled, picking up his plate. If anyone found the exchange odd, they didn’t comment on it.

"I'll bring down some blankets and pillows so you guys can set up in the office," His dad groaned, half stretching as he got up. "We should probably figure out showers too."

There was grumbling and coordinating as he ate, the food on his plate already cold and greasy, unappetizing. But Payton was watching him. It wasn't obvious, but he noticed it, wondered how long he had before anything was said, if anything would be said at all. After people claimed time in the shower and worked out shifts for watch the room slowly cleared. Chris presumably went to Allison, his dad and Melissa retreated, Deaton slipped out to somewhere and Stiles made sure he had the crucifix still in his pocket from earlier, a reflex of distrust.

Derek left, followed by Miles, who said he was going upstairs to keep an eye on the Argents. Stiles wondered if he was included Issac in that and decided he didn't want to know. Payton left without saying anything, leaving him alone with Cassie.

"Deucalion," She started, breath hitching. "He killed his betas?"

Stiles dumped his plate in the sink and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah."

"Just for power?"

"Derek told me the first one tried to kill him after he'd been blinded," Stiles explained. "So I get that one, I guess. But he got the beta's power or whatever. I guess he went crazy or something, I don't know." He did have a lot of theories though. "He was supposedly a decent alpha, once. But yeah, he killed all of his betas, and then persuaded other alphas to do it and create a new pack."

Cassie whimpered, hugging herself. "I don't understand how anyone could do that. How-" She shook her head, like it could clear the thought from her brain. "I've never heard of anything like that."

"Your mom is a good alpha, one of the best," Stiles told her. "She doesn't have to do awful shit to gain power. She has a huge, stable pack because she works to earn people's loyalty. And it helps that she's not bug fucking nuts," He added.

Cassie choked on a laugh, nodding in agreement. "I know that there are territory disputes and fighting, hunters. But all of this," She said, looking straight at him. "I didn't know things like this happened anymore."

"Beacon Hills has the distinction of being made of batshit insane. Think of it as a hellmouth. I do." "Explains a lot," She said, a small smile dancing on her lips. "Come on, Derek's waiting."

He followed her back to the office where Derek had already spread out several blankets and pillows in the limited available floorspace. Cassie ignored the floor and flopped on the couch, pulling up a blanket and rolling in it without a word. Stiles huffed on a laugh and toed off his shoes and setting them by the neat pile of Derek's jacket and the holster.

Derek watched him as he eased himself down, careful of the bandages. He'd barely settled under the cover when a hand slipped beneath his shirt and he felt the pain recede.

"Wake me up for watch," He mumbled, turning on his side and throwing a leg over Derek's.

Between his full stomach and the warmth the werewolf radiated, he was out in minutes.
When he woke up, it was to the smell of coffee wafting into his nose. Blinking tiredly, he tried to focus, the light from the corner of the room throwing shadows everywhere.

"Cas?" He mumbled, red hair curling over his face. He blinked again and saw "Lydia?"

"I should grind my heel into your nose," She quipped.

"Missed you too," He groaned, turning over onto his stomach and immediately regretting it when pain flared in his chest. "Damn it."

"You deserve more," She snapped, sitting on the couch. He pushed himself upright and looked around. Cassie and Derek were gone, and from the clock on the desk, he'd slept for about nine hours. He still felt tired. Instead of answering, he waved his hands at her until she handed him the mug. After the first swallow scalded his throat he slowed down, holding it under his nose to try and will the caffeine into him.

"Derek filled me in on the situation," She started. "I'd say 'I told you so', but I don't think it needs to be said."

"Sure," He mumbled, dragging himself off of the floor and onto the couch to sit next to her.

"Idiot," Lydia told him, but there was no heat to it. Especially not as she was blatantly scanning his injuries.

"I didn't think you'd want to come back," He admitted. "This whole thing is way worse than I thought it would be. At first I thought someone got Allison and Issac and Scott was just looking for them. Now," He said, shuddering. He didn't know how to explain that he didn't know what to do, where to start. The sensation of being completely lost had devolved him back to his teenage years, and he didn't have a clue what the right move was anymore. That he was shit terrified went without saying. But people were depending on him, and he was utterly at a loss.

"First thing's first. You're creating new wards," She told him.

"I am?"

"Yes, and you're going to do them at my house, and tying them to me."

"Why am I doing that?"

"Because you're exhausted and healing. The wards are diverting energy that could be going to that. That should be going to that. Then, you're going to take a shower and put on clean clothes, because you look and smell rancid. We're going to get everyone to my house. And then we're going to wait for Issac and Allison to wake up, and we're going to plan."

"I forgot how amazing you are," He smiled. It was relieving, having her back, knowing they were on
the same team for once.

"You wish. Nothing about me is forgettable," She quipped. "Hurry up, Derek already loaded all your crap into the truck."

Stiles nodded obediently, knowing there wasn't much point in trying to stop whatever was happening, and he was too tired to try. After draining his mug, he pulled on the holster and jacket and shoved his feet into his shoes. After a moment of consideration, he folded the blankets the best he could manage and dumped them on the couch.

When he got into the kitchen, Cassie and Payton were hovering over a pastry box and drinking coffee.

"Payton, I need a favor."

"Maybe," Payton said, eying him cautiously.

"I need like, roughly four or five drops of blood."

"Any particular reason why?"

"I'm going to key the wards into you so you can dismantle them before you leave." He was pretty sure Payton was capable of it, given his heritage.

Payton nodded, following him over to the bowl. Stiles watched, not a little fascinated as Payton bit at his thumb and held it over the bowl, blood dropping down into it. The drops bloomed and then sank. Stiles traced his finger in the water and formed the stave. Almost immediately he felt the pull that had been slowly draining him ease slightly, saw when Payton felt it begin.

"The wards are in each corner of the yard, Chris knows where. Dig them up and dump them in this," He said, nodding at the bowl.

"I can finish it from there," Payton said, nodding.

"Thanks."

"It's fine, it's suspended in water so it's easy enough," Payton said, leaning against the counter. Stiles gave him a grateful smile and drifted over to the pastry box, grabbing the thing closest. The danish was still warm and tasted like heaven.

"You sound like porn," Cassie laughed. "Come on, Derek and Lydia are waiting."

Stiles' only response was to moan louder, following her down the hall and outside and onto the porch. He almost slammed into Cassie's back before catching himself and saving the danish. Lydia was speaking to Derek, her arms crossed over her chest and foot tapping. By the look on Derek's face, whatever she was saying was pissing him off. Immensely. He interrupted her, waving a finger in her face. Lydia didn't look at all impressed with anything coming out of his mouth.

"What's going on?"

"I think it's the equivalent of the shovel talk," Cassie said with barely restrained mirth.

"What?"

Derek's gaze snapped to them, the glower only intensifying. Lydia smiled at them, her grin almost predatory.
"Do we have to get in the car with them?" Suddenly running into the preserve felt like a sound strategy. Maybe after setting himself on fire.

"Yes," Cassie said, walking down to the truck. Feeling like he was walking into a minefield, Stiles dragged his feet and finished his danish, licking his fingers clean before opening the door and getting in the front seat.

The entire ride was quiet and tense, whatever conversation Lydia and Derek had been having obviously over. Stiles draped his arm across the seat and settled his hand at the nape of Derek's neck in an attempt to soothe whatever damage Lydia had managed.

He tried to get a sense of something, anything, tried to read the world around him as they drove through the town. It was quiet, eerily so. There was nothing to be found, either muffled by whatever was manipulating the currents or because he didn't have the skill to pick up anything. But the world felt empty. Not inactive, deserted.

"We were able to keep everything contained," Lydia said, voice quiet. Stiles wondered if he was that obvious or if she could read his mind. "It's been awhile since they've seen anything really bad."

"What do you mean?" Cassie asked. Even she seemed to feel it, her voice subdued, quiet.

"There weren't any murders or anything, not for years. I think the fire reminded them of what it was like before."

Stiles willed calm into Derek, into himself, tried not to think about how easy it would be for things to slip back into the same patterns. No one said anything else until they pulled into Lydia's driveway, all of them breathing a collective sigh of relief.

The house itself was just like he remembered it. Too big, too empty. The only thing that had changed was the accumulation of dust and the staleness of a home locked tight against the outside world and ignored. Lydia led him up the stairs and straight to her workroom. Derek and Cassie stopped outside the door, looking at the entryway like it had done something to offend them.

"The entire thing is lined in rowan," Lydia told them, smiling. Stiles nodded in appreciation, wondering how badly she'd abused her parents credit cards. The floors were tiled slate, the walls smooth wood panels. Lydia walked to the far right and pushed at one of the panels, then slid it to the side. She flicked a lightswitch and nodded, satisfied with what she found. Stiles gaped in pure appreciation.

"What do you need?" She asked, disappearing from view.

"A bowl, nothing specific, water, and something you're okay cutting yourself with."

She returned with a ceramic bowl and a bottle of water. When she sat the bowl on the floor, he saw the small ivory handled knife in it.

He started pouring the mixture into the vials, explaining what he'd done to create the powder that tied it together, the resonances and how he allowed his gift to slip into the words. Lydia hung on to every word, obviously fascinated with the magic slash history lesson, and he felt a little surge of pride, mostly because he'd gotten to a place where he could teach Lydia something actually worth knowing. She made the cut without complaint, and he held the vials to her arm. Once he corked them, he walked over to Cassie and Derek and handed them the vials, telling them to go bury them in the four corners of the yard. When the werewolves hesitated, he reminded them that they were sitting in a room surrounded by mountain ash.
"Nothing's getting in here," he reminded them.

Once they were gone, he sat back down on the floor and started pouring water into the bowl. Lydia was studiously quiet as he poured the powder in, then nodded. Her blood touched the surface and spread out, then sank in tendrils and swirls. When Cassie shouted that they'd finished, he started tracing the stave on the surface, singing into the water and pulling at the loose threads.

Lydia drew a sharp breath when they connected and solidified into a whole. Stiles sat back and offered her a weak smile.

"It's beautiful, how you do that."

"Do what?"

"Change things, create them. It's like seeing an equation forming and solving itself."

"Magic and math." It was one of Lydia's favorite topics, one he could barely keep up with on a good day.

He showed her how to make a key using his mother's engagement ring, dropping it in the water and making sure it recognized the key. She repeated the process, not as easily but still managing, with a pendant she'd been wearing under her shirt. She didn't need a key, not since she was the base, but he knew she wouldn't want to make the first attempt in front of other people.

Derek and Cassie were watching intently from outside the door, still decidedly unhappy that they were locked out.

"I'll make a few temporary keys in a minute," Lydia said. "Come on, you can have the room with the en suite. God knows you and Derek are the ones that always end up covered in blood."

He grabbed his bags and followed her out without complaint, down the hall and to one of the corner rooms. It was across from her old bedroom and looked like something out of a magazine spread, color coordinated and perfectly arranged. He could only wonder why anyone would put that many pillows on a bed, because half of them were purely decorative, encased in thick brocade.

"I'll get you some towels. Get a shower. Toothbrushes are under the sink."

Stiles nodded and watched her leave. Derek was behind him, already going through one of the duffels and pulling out clothes. Stiles dropped the jacket on the bed and followed it with the holster before pulling off his shirt.

He'd forgotten the bandages somehow. He took his knife out and was getting ready to cut them himself when Derek took it, staying in front of him.

"What were you and Lydia arguing about?" he asked, feeling oddly lightheaded as Derek pulled the bandage from his chest and cut through a layer with careful precision.

"Nothing. She was just running off at the mouth," Derek muttered, cutting through another layer. Stiles nodded, not really understanding anything other than Derek didn't want to talk about it. Each strip was a slight tug until his torso was bare, the dark lines and knots of the sutures standing out in stark relief.

"Careful about getting them wet," Derek told him, folding the knife and tossing it onto the bed. Stiles nodded and heard the door open.
"Nice tattoo," Lydia said, walking into the bedroom. Stiles hugged himself, feeling strangely vulnerable, like he was on display when Lydia walked back out, eyes skittering over his ribs. He'd never let her see the results of his self harm, even when she'd point blank asked to see them. Even knowing that she understood what he'd done, he shied away from her gaze.

The low level growl that filled the room made her roll her eyes and walk out without a word.

"Thanks," He murmured.

"Get a shower," Derek commanded, voice still caught in a rumble. Stiles fled to the bathroom and carefully closed the door behind him, afraid of slamming it and drawing attention to himself. Lydia's penetrating stare remained fixed every time he closed his eyes.

Shaking he his and glaring at his reflection, which looked haggard and worn down, like he'd been awake for days, he toed off his shoes and stripped down.

The hot water hitting his skin forced some of the aches and pains he'd been ignoring to the surface, forcibly soothing them. Stiles closed his eyes, took a deep breath and focused on the sound of each drop spattering the walls and floor of the stall. He didn't think of water covering the floor, splashing and soaking into his shoes, didn't try to make it anything other than what it was.

His back began relaxing, and he was acutely aware of the water hitting the still new tattoo, remembered the pricking of the needle, of Amund and Rick both working on it, creating it and touching it up. He wished he knew how to do what they had done, wished he'd taken Rick up on his offer to learn the moment he'd made it instead of putting it off. He might have been able to do something for Cassie and Derek, maybe even Lydia, if he knew more about embedding magic into ink and then into skin, how to protect people directly instead of just constantly reacting.

When he got out, he felt marginally more human. The thick towels were plush but carried the scent of disuse, like everything else in the house. He sorted through everything under the sink and found the toothbrushes and toothpaste stashed behind designer soaps and shampoos.

When he walked back into the room, Derek was sitting on the bed. Most of the pillows were on the floor, and clean clothes were piled on the mattress, a roll of gauze and tape next to them. Derek went to the bathroom and left him alone to change into boxers and pants. It was only when he began unrolling gauze that the werewolf came back out, taking it from his hand before he could protest.

They were halfway through when he felt the old wards collapse, the thread that had been draining him crumbling into nothing. He breathed a sigh of relief before panic set in. They were all in transit, and even with Payton and Miles guarding them, he couldn't help but worry, imagining Deucalion finding the truck and ramming it off the road, his dad still inside.

"What's wrong?"

"They're on their way," He mumbled, staring at the ceiling. "I felt the wards drop."

"They'll be fine, they have Miles and Payton with them." The assurance didn't help, not like it should have. Derek reached for the tape and secured the bandage before stepping back, eyes on the rows and layers of gauze.

Stiles gave a shaky nod and grabbed the shirt, tugging it over his head. By the time he'd uncovered his eyes, Derek was gone. Ignoring the strange hurt that settled low in his stomach, he shouldered the holster and went back to the bathroom to shove his feet into his shoes.

The weight of the holster was familiar, and he hated that he hadn't even noticed it until he saw he
reflection in the mirror, the black straps standing out against the gray of the shirt. It was one of Derek's, he realized. Slightly baggy in the shoulders and arms, and it smelled like pine and sawdust.

That way awaited madness of a completely different variety, and he turned away from his reflection, flipping the light off behind him.

When he finally found Lydia and Cassie in the living room downstairs, they were going over what little information they knew. Lydia was frowning and Cassie looked confused, which was understandable because Lydia was talking about the currents surrounding the town using scientific jargon even he didn't understand, and he spent a decent portion of his time researching them.

"Any idea for a plan to capture Scott?" He asked, ignoring the glare she leveled at him when he interrupted her diatribe.

"I say we use his beta," Cassie proposed. Stiles wondered if she was purposely refusing to use names, because he knew she'd heard Issac's several times in the last twelve hours alone.

"Problem. He's trying to kill his pack," He reminded her bluntly.

"Sedate him," Lydia offered.

"And when he wakes up?"

"Contain him."

"Two problems. One, he's able to cross mountain ash, so I'm not sure if regular barriers will work. Two, what about Allison and Issac?"

"He's feral and trying to kill them," Cassie reminded him. Lydia made a disgusted sound and Stiles rolled his eyes.

"Allison and Issac are stupid for Scott in a special way that has absolutely nothing to do with his alpha status," He explained. "There's no guarantee they wouldn't try to free him."

"Except we also need them to bring him back to himself," Lydia pointed out, sounding annoyed. "And we can't accomplish that unless they're cooperating."

"You think they will?"

"I think Allison will listen to me," Lydia said, dipping her head. "Issac's still a follower. If he won't listen to us, he'll listen to Chris. As long as Chris is on board, we should be okay."

"Shouldn't be a problem. Argent doesn't seem all that fond of us, but he's been following our lead. I don't think he wants to kill McCall unless he has to," Cassie murmured, uncharacteristically serious. Stiles hated it, hated that she was helping plan at all. Cassie had never wanted responsibility, and he was forcing it on her again. Once it was over, he'd build a bonfire on the beach and get her drunk, try and get Matthias stateside. Serious didn't suit her, made him worry about the potential future.

*One day at a time. One problem at a time.*

"He's holding out hope because his daughter is in the same position as Scott," Stiles reminded her, leaning back into the couch and tilting his head to look up at the ceiling. "So he'll probably do everything he can to bring Scott back, if only to prove it can be done. As long as humans aren't hurt, he won't hunt to kill."
"Humans were hurt," Cassie growled. Stiles didn't have a response, ignored it and continued turning information over and over in his head, attempted to build a plan, even a vague idea of one. There were dozens of ways to incapacitate a werewolf, but to keep him contained was another matter entirely. He shied away from the idea of electricity on principal. Wolfsbane was a slightly better but no less horrifying option. Any amount would have to be counteracted, and he doubted Issac or Allison would allow it.

Cassie looked at the front door and got up, announcing that the others had arrived. Lydia followed her out muttering about the keys. He looked up at the high ceiling, contemplating possibilities and rejecting them as soon as they presented themselves. When his dad's voice filtered through, he felt himself relax, the tension in his chest easing and allowing him to breath. Melissa's joined it, then Payton and Miles. Lydia's grew to cover the sound of shuffling feet and questions as she took over and began directing people to bedrooms.

The house filled with noise, with doors opening and closing and the sound of voices. A sense of déjà vu washed over him, the past colliding with the present to remind him of how much things had changed. Voices were different, new ones replacing the old, absent and dead. Even Lydia's commands sounded deeper, less breathy as she organized and guided things, fulfilling whatever standards she had, and he had no doubt she had them, not when he heard her saying 'no, not that room, that one' loud enough for it to echo downstairs.

He realized Deaton had been absent, and didn't know if the vet had slipped away or if the others had let him go. He'd probably been off work too long. It occurred to him that he should probably call Jane, but he didn't know if she'd call Caroline, or if Caroline had already guessed that something was wrong.

Lydia came back down, cheeks lightly flushed. From anger or frustration, he couldn't tell and she didn't explain.

"Issac's coming to. He was groaning when Payton dropped him into the bed."

"You think a beta's howl will draw him to us?"

"If he's looking for him, for whatever reason, it's our best bet," Lydia agreed. "But not here. There's no telling what kind of shape Scott's in."

"He was in the preserve, so it's probably best to try there," Stiles murmured. "We have enough people to subdue him."

"We have to stay split up though," Lydia disagreed. "We need a couple of people to watch Allison. And Melissa said she had a shift tonight."

"Fuck. I don't like this."

"She can't keep calling out."

"I know. But-" He pinched the bridge of his nose. Scott had targeted Melissa once. She'd probably be safe in the hospital unless another storm forced an evacuation, although at least now she knew well enough to stick with a crowd. Even feral, it would be instinct to avoid that many people.

"I've got some stuff that will dull her scent," Lydia told him, scooting closer and leaning into him. "We've used it before."

He nodded, feeling slightly better about the situation knowing there were options that didn't include sending her out without any protection. "I can mix up a sedative, if you're okay with me raiding your
"Feel free," Lydia gestured. "We can compare notes."

"You still use that powder that you drugged Derek with?"

Lydia smirked. "I didn't think he'd ever tell anyone about that."

"I asked him how Peter came back to life. He was generous enough to provide details. Angel trumpet, right?" And that had been an interesting conversation, made no less interesting because he remembered Derek admitting it was Lydia's scream that had drawn him back to Beacon Hills when he'd been intent on getting Cora to safety. Lydia was still smirking and nodding, looking proud of herself. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if it had been Peter's recipe at all, but asking about it seemed rude at best. Lydia didn't talk about her time in the dark any more than he talked about his nightmares.

He saw the door to his room closed when they walked by it, didn't know if Derek was there or talking to one of the others. When they got to the workroom, Lydia surprised him by gesturing at the pantry and walking over to the window seat and curling up in it.

Everything he needed was in tightly sealed jars, labeled in Lydia's sloping round hand script. "Fancy," He called out, pulling down jars. The response was lost to him, too quiet to carry into the closet. When he came back out, Lydia was examining a small mirror, the tip of her finger circling the edge. He made another trip back into the pantry to retrieve the mortar and pestle, then left her alone with he couldn't find empty vials.

Derek was sitting on the bed, Cassie's head in his lap and a hand tangled in her hair. Stiles paused, noticed their pointedly neutral expressions and didn't say anything as he grabbed the two duffels containing his supplies and left them alone, closing the door gently behind him.

Lydia had abandoned the mirror in favor of sitting at the small table, organizing her own supplies as she worked. He pulled out two of the small, decorated boxes and sat them down. She picked on up and examined it, fingers tracing the inlay.

"This is gorgeous," She murmured, examining the knotwork of wolf heads forming the sloping lines of a triskelion. "I need to commission some work. Tessa would probably lose her mind from jealousy."

"Christmas is coming," Stiles reminded her. "If you've been a good girl Santa might work something out."

"I doubt anything I've done qualifies as good," Lydia snorted, setting the box down and returning to her work. "Maybe good at it."

"Probably counts," He joked, scooping out a few yellow petals and dropping them into the mortar. "Isn't Tessa in the Irish mob?"

"No," Lydia muttered, rolling her eyes. "She did tell me to strangle Scott with a rosary if he was an asshole though. And Deaton on principle."

"Remind me never to visit you."

"She'd probably love you," Lydia grinned, smiling like a shark. Stiles refused to feel hunted by that expression and the easy confidence of the declaration. "She would have made a great mob boss though."
"No kidding." Death by rosary. Of course Lydia would fall in with a woman as terrifying as her.

"She's sort of like you, she can change things, but she's more traditional. Not a druid," Lydia corrected hastily. "She's not as warm fuzzies as Deaton can be, but she's not a complete bitch either. And she doesn't really understand the scientific aspect of everything."

Stiles listened to Lydia explain her theories on magic, one of her favorite pastimes. Her way of working landed somewhere between alchemy and particle physics, and even when he couldn't keep up, he nodded like he understood, if only to see her relaxed and in her element. He was struck, once or twice, by the realization that he was in her workroom, the one she'd warned him to never enter, and he was working side by side with her. It was surreal, to be back where he'd started, neither of them in Scott's pack, neither of them taking cues from anyone except each other.

When he began pouring the sedative into several vials, enough for two to every human, she paused and nodded with approval. He was almost finished when a roar boomed through the house, startling him and making him spill powder. He and Lydia both ran for the door and he jerked it open, stopping short and keeping her behind him at the sight that greeted him.

The door to one of the bedrooms was halfway off of its hinges and Issac was pinned to the floor, squirming beneath Miles. Both of them were snarling, unintelligible, angry sounds that only got louder as they struggled.

"Issac!" Chris' voice cut through the tangled dissonance of sounds, hitting the walls and bouncing back in a stern echo. Issac stilled, his eyes widening as he started to tilt his head and stopped, refusing to bare his throat to Miles.

"Chris," Issac grunted, not looking away from Miles, who was still glaring down at him, a set of impressive, sharp teeth on display.

"Issac, calm down. Miles, let him up."

Miles shifted and stood with obvious reluctance. He shifted to the side and Stiles realized he was putting himself between Issac and them.

"What's going on?" Issac demanded, turning to look at everyone. "Why are they here?" He added, and Stiles flinched at the glare that pinned him down.

"What do you remember?" Chris asked, voice gentling. Stiles tried to step forward only to feel Lydia fist a hand in his shirt and keeping him within the boundary of the room, safely protected by the mountain ash.

"I was studying with Allison, then-" He shook his head. "I don't remember anything. Why are they here, they're banned," Issac repeated, voice growing hard, unforgiving.

"Everyone, we'll meet down stairs to fill Issac in. Issac, grab a shower, you need it," Chris told them. Stiles saw Issac ready a protest when Chris lifted a hand and shook his head, negating any argument before it started.

"Come on," Lydia whispered, pulling him back into the room. Her voice broke through the quiet and pulled Issac's gaze back to them. Stiles had been subjected to annoyed glares, black looks, and more than one furious stare. But Issac's gaze conveyed unmitigated hatred, pure and refined.

"He's not allowed in our territory."

Lydia reeled him back and pushed him behind her before stalking out of the room, shoulders thrown
back and fists at her sides. Stiles watched her, already moving forward to protect her. She ignored Miles' warning growl and stopped in front of Issac, her voice echoing off of the walls when she spoke, her voice cold. "You will do as Chris says. You will take a shower and get dressed, and before you come downstairs, you will think very, very carefully about how you're going to apologize to the man that put his ass on the line to save yours."

Issac growled, lips pulling back to reveal fangs. Lydia stood her ground, not flinching when he snapped at her. "I'm not impressed," She sneered. "I've faced far worse than a puppy with a misguided grudge."

Issac snarled again, only stopping when Chris said his name, quiet and commanding. He followed the hunter into another room, slamming the door behind him with a resounding crack.

Stiles felt himself exhale, saw the others, his dad and Melissa, Payton and Miles, even Cassie relax and sag. Derek was nowhere in evidence. Stiles didn't blame him.

"Come on," Lydia said, walking back into the room with a grace that belied her clenched fists and the angry energy he could see practically buzzing under her skin. "We need to finish."

They worked in quiet tandem, their movements jerky for the sudden tension. After cleaning up the wasted sedative, he finished stopping up the vials and slotting them into the box. Lydia dumped the liquid concoction she'd been working on into a plastic spray bottle and twisted it shut.

"Should I take this downstairs?" He asked, his voice hushed in deference to the mood that pervaded the room.

"Yeah. I don't think we'll need it, but-"

"I was worried he'd try to destroy it once he knew our idea," He explained dumbly, more stunned that she considered sedating Issac an option at all.

"If he tries, one of the others will stop him. Or you can shoot him," She quipped, voice tight. "Could be cathartic."

"I think I'm done shooting werewolves for now," He muttered, closing the box and following her out into the hall. Somehow he suspected it would be more cathartic for her than him. Miles and Payton were standing outside the door to Chris' room, making no attempt to hide the fact that they were guarding the door.

"Derek and Cassie are downstairs with John. Melissa is trying to get some sleep," Miles told them, his lip still lifted in an approximation of a sneer. Stiles wondered if he could hear whatever Chris and Issac were saying and that was what he was sneering at, or if it was just Issac in general.

Derek and Cassie were sitting at the island, perched on barstools and drinking coffee. Stiles sat the box between them and moved to pour himself and Lydia each a mug. His dad was leaning against one of the counters, his posture hunched as he contemplated his coffee. He looked like he wanted it to be a bit more Irish than it was. Stiles empathized.

"He's not going to like working with us," Derek declared into the silence, staring at the island.

"I don't see how he has much of a choice," The sheriff remarked in the same no nonsense tone Stiles remembered from childhood.

"He'll do as Chris says," Lydia announced, punctuating the statement with a sip of coffee and ruining the entire effect by grimacing. "When we take Melissa to work tonight, we're stopping by the
grocery store for some staples. At the very least we're getting milk."

"I really don't want to be here that long," Stiles groaned, finishing his coffee and leaving his mug on the counter.

"Too bad. We're halfway there, at least."

"We're like a quarter of the way there. Halfway is finding Scott. Then we have to deal with-" He waved a hand. "Deucalion and whoever he has working with him."

"Do we know if he has any more alphas?" His dad asked.

"Dunno. They can hide themselves, but if he did, wouldn't he be a lot more proactive?" Stiles wondered aloud. "He doesn't mind making sacrifices, so it probably stands to reason he'd have sent some after us by now."

"At least while we were out yesterday," Derek agreed. "When we were split up. Easy targets."

"Maybe they were doing recon?" Stiles suggested, pointedly ignoring the term 'easy targets'. Otherwise he might sedate Derek and Cas and hide them in the basement, if only for his mental well being. "Deucalion would want to know all the players. Miles and Payton are unknowns."

"If he had anyone to spare, he'd have thrown them at us though, to see what we'd do," Derek argued. Stiles nodded, because that was what Deucalion would do. He doubted the alpha had gotten any more empathetic over the years, and making his pack fight them would give him the sort of intel he'd want.

"I don't think it's safe to assume anything," Lydia cut in. "He's smart enough to use different tactics this time. He could have a pack waiting for him to give the word."

"Yeah, but when?" Cassie demanded. "The best time would have been when the others were on their way here."

"We have to look for Scott," Stiles reminded them. "And he probably thinks we'll all go."

"We aren't?" His dad asked, frowning.

"Allison needs someone here to watch her. We still don't know if she's under someone's influence or not."

"If Scott's already trying to kill them, why would they waste the energy manipulating her?"

"Because if Allison kills Issac, it would ensure that Scott would kill her," Lydia said when he hesitated to explain. "If they're smart, they'll want to cover their bases. Which means we have to keep an eye on Allison."

"You really think it can force her to do that?"

"Allison almost shot me once," Lydia informed them, like the announcement wasn't a nuclear bomb on his peace of mind. "She was hallucinating. It wouldn't be a matter of whether or not she'd shoot Issac. She might be shooting at something else entirely when she kills him."

"She hasn't had any that bad in years," Chris' voice said from behind them. He walked into the room, Issac trailing closely behind. Miles and Payton followed close on their heels, and Stiles couldn't fail to notice how they positioned themselves close to Issac.
"It doesn't matter," Lydia told him, not without a hint of scorn. "Because this is what's going on now."

Stiles glanced over at Derek and saw that he was studiously avoiding looking at Issac. Cassie had no such problems, her glare at full force and her hands clenched tightly around her mug.

"And you're here to help?" Issac scoffed derisively. There was such an air of resentment, of disdain to his words. And Stiles understood why Issac resented him and Derek. He did. But at the same time he hated Issac, hated that he was staring at him like everything was his fault. Stiles could accept Scott's hatred, and maybe even Allison's, eventually. They'd all been in the same boat. But he'd be damned if he was going to accept Issac pretending to have a genuine grievance.

"Nope. Just here to risk my best friends lives for the thrill of adventure. Obviously," He snapped.

"Stiles," Chris warned.

"Don't even think about it," Miles snapped. Stiles blinked, surprised at the undisguised animosity in Miles' tone. "Pup, you need to shut your mouth. Right now we're all you've got, and I don't care if you want us here or not. Button up your bullshit and be a useful, cooperative team member, or I will lay you out so you don't get in the way."

Stiles vaguely remembered telling Miles to behave himself. He remembered harassing the fuck out of Miles at work and even sneaking a hug when the skinwalker hadn't been expecting it, just to be obnoxious. He remembered clearly that he sure as hell hadn't gotten that sort of response, even though he'd been positive Miles had wanted to feed him through a planer for the hug. He hardly recognized Derek's boss, his usual gruffness gone and replaced with something darker, harder.

"We don't need your kind of help," Issac spat, already on his feet. "Unless Derek decides to start dating. At least then we'd know who was after us."

"Stop," Stiles commanded, intent clamoring inside of his skull and begging for release like a dam had been opened, too quick to stop. It sparked below his skin, ached to bleed out over his tongue and into the air, riding the hot surge of anger that burned through him. Violence itched and ached in his bones and he wanted to open Issac, to make him bleed because that was a wound that was still open and raw for Derek, would probably always be a gaping mess. More than anything he wanted to make Issac feel that mess, to make him hurt.

"What? Telling the truth?" Issac growled, face flush as everyone gaped at him. "All we need is for him to fuck someone-"

"You sound like your father." The words were out, unforgiving and brittle like ice falling from his tongue. Issac's mouth was hanging open, mid-sentence, and Stiles went in for the throat because if he had to, he'd whittle Issac down to an incomprehensible mess before he let another accusation hit Derek. Shadows gathered around him, slipped from the corners until he could hear the shouting, indistinct but blindingly sharp. "He liked to make you feel like shit for things you couldn't control, right? Because I'm sure you went out of your way to make his life harder."

The room was deafening in it's silence, Issac's pallor broken by the blinding sheen of blue eyes and too red lips.

"We're here because we have to be," He added, none of the steel and violence leaving his voice. He made sure the words hit the air and stuck, hanging like a threat. "I will finish this and make sure my family is safe, and then I'm going to leave your pack to lick it's wounds in peace. You can choose to help us or you can try to save the day on your own. I'm not going to stop you, but if you do choose
to work alone, get out now and don't expect to be welcomed back in."

"And Allison?" Issac challenged. "She won't work with you."

"Allison is currently incapacitated and in Chris' care," Stiles replied smoothly, nodding at Chris, who looked ready to pull out his gun and shoot someone, most likely him. "If he wants to go with you, then I assume she's going too. But that's if he decides to leave." He knew he was being a bastard, but he also knew it was going to work. Issac wouldn't leave Allison, not even to go looking for Scott, and Chris wasn't going to put Allison in danger. Lydia had been right, Issac was ultimately a follower. With Scott out of the picture, however temporarily that was, he would look to someone. Hopefully that someone was Chris.

"This is the only place in town that nothing can get to her," Lydia hummed thoughtfully, taking over and twisting the knife with savage precision. "And Stiles has a better idea of what's going on with the nemeton. I'm willing to lay odds that Chris is going to want to keep her right here. But you can we ask him," She added, voice venomous and sweet. Stiles tasted her rancor and wondered how bad her break with the pack had been, if he'd heard even a measure of it. Given the barely banked fury vibrating beneath her words, he doubted that she'd gotten past whatever pain the schism had caused her.

Issac fled the room, there was no other word for it. Chris stood up, frowning at all of them. "That was uncalled for, Stiles."

"Don't," Lydia warned. "Don't try to protect him after what he just did. What Stiles said was the exact truth. If Issac can't handle being compared to his father, then he shouldn't act like him." Stiles felt the rage in her twisting into something worlds more dangerous. That settled that, at least. Lydia was beyond pissed. And terrifying. "You should probably go check on him," She added, her tone dismissive but her eyes hard and focused, watching Chris like she had found the weak spots and was debating which one to hit first.

Chris strode from the room on stiff legs, and Stiles felt the hand smoothing over the back of his neck, bracing him and the tension bled from his spine. He wondered when Derek had gotten up, how he could even stand to touch him when he felt like he was radiating darkness.

"Remind me never to piss you off," Payton said, staring at him. "Jesus. And you too," He added, giving Lydia a cursory glance.

"Impressive, aren't we?" Lydia said, her smile predatory.

Stiles marveled at the change. What the hell were those witches teaching her?

"Terrifying would probably be a better word," Payton muttered. "Fucking Christ and all the saints, I felt what you could have done. Jesus," He repeated.

"Are you a reader?" Lydia inquired, curiosity roused as she went back to drinking her coffee, like the room hadn't just been a timebomb of magic and bad memories.

"Minchian."

"So you can read and use magic?"

"A bit. Comes from our line mixing with the sea witches."

"Stiles you find all the interesting people," Lydia mock pouted.
Stiles was still having trouble breathing. "You that bored at MIT?"

"They're more traditional about self segregating." Lydia huffed, rolling her eyes, expressing her opinion on the subject.

Stiles looked up, saw his dad watching him with obvious concern. When he jerked his chin at the door, Stiles nodded and followed him out onto the patio, shivering in the cold air. The afternoon sun did nothing to warm him, was mostly hidden behind ominous, thick clouds. His dad didn't sit, chose to walk down the steps and towards the covered pool.

"You want to tell me what just happened?" His dad asked, eyes fixed ahead.

Stiles started to hug himself, stopping short when he felt the brush of leather and metal from the guns at his sides. "No."

"But you're going to anyway, because I'm asking."

His exhale misted the air before fading again. "You know Kate Argent?"

"What about her?"

"She used Derek to get information on his family."

His dad breathed a quiet 'Jesus' when the implications settled in. Stiles allowed it to really hit his dad before he continued. "And Miss Blake too."

"The Darach," His dad clarified. At Stiles nod he pinched the bridge of his nose like he could ward off the onset of a tension headache. "Christ. That explains a lot."

Stiles grimaced and nodded. "Issac-I'm an asshole dad," He admitted. "Because I'm not sorry. I won't let him throw that in Derek's face." Even as he said it, he remembered snarling at Derek in the hospital, doing the exact same thing. He wondered if it made him a hypocrite, or if he'd grown at all.

"Comparing Issac to his father wasn't much better."

"I'm not a nice person." Obviously. He doubted that sin was going to keep him awake though. Everything else? Yeah, he wasn't escaping Beacon Hills without new nightmares. But being a prick didn't even come close to the fact that he'd shot his brother. Multiple times.

"I think your protective instincts go into overdrive when Derek's involved," His dad said. It wasn't absolution, but it was understanding, maybe. Recognition that there were things he'd say, things he would do, just to shield the people he cared about. His dad had gone into the army. Stiles had endured werewolves and hunters, kanima and witches. Death, torture, and more death. Somewhere, he'd veered off the path his father had managed to stay on, despite years of facing the harsh realities of life. Stiles couldn't stop himself from wondering if maybe he wasn't a little bit broken, a disappointment to his father for being so quick to cruelty, no matter the cause.

They finished another lap around the pool before walking back inside. Lydia was sitting at the island next to Cassie and they were perusing take out menus. Derek and Miles were watching the entrance, and he could hear Payton talking on his cellphone in the hallway.

"Do we know what we're doing about Scott?" Stiles asked, claiming one of the barstools for himself and poking at the take out menus, desperate for something to do with his hands.

"Issac is going to be bait," Lydia said, making it sound more like a reminder than anything else.
"Payton's going to stay here with Chris and watch Allison. I think you should stay too, John. That way if we don't come back in time Melissa will have an escort to work."

"Can we trust Issac to do what he's told?" His dad asked, and Stiles allowed himself the sickening gratitude of not being forced to.

"I'll sedate him if I have to," Lydia shrugged.

"It would be easier if he could howl for Scott."

"Shooting him will wake him up. He won't have to fake being in distress either," She added blithely. Stiles gaped at her, jaw hanging open until she looked up. "It's a last resort."

"Oh my god," He mumbled, cradling his face in his hands. "Lydia."

"Look," She told him. "We know the rules, and we're breaking them. There is a feral alpha running wild and we're trying to save him instead of put him down. The only reason this hasn't blown up in our faces is because no one's noticed. But Scott's house burned down," She reminded him. "And if that gets out, other creatures, other packs included, will think the territory is up for grabs. At the very least, they'll think it'll be an easy fight. I am here to find Scott and take care of whoever is manipulating the power of the nemeton. I am not going to let it turn into a supernatural free for all."

He-Hadn't thought of that, actually. And from the frustrated look on Lydia's face, tinged with exasperation, she'd noticed.

"Alright," He said, nodding in agreement. "Who wants to tell Issac the plan?"

"I'll tell Chris," Lydia said, getting up. "And he can tell Issac."

"Are you sure Chris won't shoot you?"

"Chris and I have history."

"I don't want to know what that means," He grumbled.

"He is a silver fox," She purred, slipping off the barstool and walking away.

"She's going to be the reason I'm institutionalized someday," He informed Cassie, ignoring his dad's snort of aborted laughter.

"Remember when you wanted her to notice you?" His dad managed to say, grinning at him.

"I have no idea what the fuck I was thinking."

"She's right," Derek said, joining the conversation. Miles was smirking at him like he'd just seen something particularly hilarious. "If the news gets out, it'll be blood in the water. We can't afford to let that happen."

"And I can't suppress the news," His dad sighed, going for another cup of coffee. "Something about freedom of the press and fascist police states."

"What kind of time frame are we looking at?"

"Depends on who is watching. As long as Scott is officially missing, it's anyone's game."

"I fucking hate this town," He groaned, scrubbing his face. "All supernatural shitshow, all the time."
"It actually hasn't been that bad," His dad informed him quietly. "It was a mistake to relax, I guess. But it's been a couple of years since anything of this magnitude."

"Huh. You think it's connected?" Stiles mused, looking at his dad. "I mean, Beacon Hills is a supernatural hotspot. For nothing big to happen, either the pack was intimidating enough people didn't want to try or-" He paused, trying to figure out if it insane or not. Given that it was Beacon Hills, it didn't seem so crazy.

"Or?" Derek prompted.

"Or someone was taking care of it first."

"That makes absolutely no sense," Cassie interjected, squinting at him like she could see the wheels turning in his head.

"It actually does," Miles offered. "If he wants a true alpha under his control that badly, he'd probably do anything to ensure that it happened. And the poetic justice of it probably doesn't hurt. Revenge is-" The skinwalker paused, looking inward. "It's one of those things that can consume your world until there's nothing but the goal. He wouldn't want to let someone else take it from him, especially not if he's been waiting so long."

Stiles really hated that he could picture that scenario in the context of his life.

"I feel like I should be worried about the kind of people I hang out with," Cassie said, an attempt at levity that fell flat. Miles shrugged indolently and smiled, his demeanor at odds with how he'd looked seconds before. Derek's glare leveled at Cassie was the only clue that there was something more going there.

"Anyway," Stiles said, looking back at his dad. Miles' history could come later. Preferably with booze involved. "Would it be pointless to check out unsolved cases in the surrounding counties? I mean, I don't know if it would help or not, but it would be nice to know what level of crazy we're dealing with."

"I can try," John agreed. "Can't hurt. It might give us a better idea of where to look for him, at least."

Stiles nodded, chewing his lip to keep from bouncing his knee. "I want Melissa armed tonight."

"She's got her pistol."

Stiles shook his head. "I've got enough sedative to two doses per person. And you have to be really careful with it, it's a sedative for alphas. It'll kill a human. Those are both last resort if you're in a crowd. I've got some stuff with me that won't get her in trouble."

"I'm all for subtle," His dad acknowledged. "And I won't say no to everyone having more than one weapon on them."

"I'll go grab it-"

"I'll get it," Cassie said, already off of the barstool. "The bag with all the sharp pointy stuff, right?" She teased. Stiles nodded, watching her flounce out of the room. Payton came in looking tired.

"Dad said we're SOL."

"Wonderful," Miles snorted. "Tell me something I don't know."
"He thinks you're all insane and that I should wash my hands of you."

"Same old, same old then," Miles smirked. Stiles refused to ask, even if it was tempting. Some things were better left unknowns. Payton's family was probably one of them.

Cassie slipped back in, Lydia right behind her, wearing twin expressions of murder.

"Chris said it's a good plan," Lydia quipped.

"I sense a but," Stiles groaned. The sound of the duffel hitting the island made him flinch.

"Issac is being a little bi-" Cassie started, stopping when Derek cleared his throat. "Brat. Whatever. If that's McCall's second, no wonder his pack tanked."

"Can we not," Stiles bit out, opening the bag. "Issac is Chris' problem. We'll work around it if we have to."

"He'll do what Chris says," Lydia agreed, eyes on the items he was laying out. Most of them were the results of paranoia, one Cassie had teased him for and Derek had regarded with quiet understanding.

"Nice," Lydia said, pulling out a tactical knife he'd treated with poison only a week before. "Baneberry?"

"Yeah," He admitted. "Same as the sedative."

She nodded in appreciation. Most of the weapons were knives, either treated with poisons or spelled to stun or kill. He ignored the spelled blades, piling them to the side. Payton whistled, eyes fixed on the pile. It looked like he'd knocked over a pawn shop. To be fair, he had cruised a lot of them. They were cheaper than buying new.

"Impressive collection."

"I learned at the school of hard knocks," Stiles muttered. And he looked like a survivalist nut.

"Don't doubt it," Miles added. Stiles made a point of not looking at his dad, instead parceling out different blades with what Melissa and his dad could carry. Lydia ignored him completely and pulled two spelled knives out of the pile, pausing to slide each one out if it's sheath for examination and then nodded, satisfied.

"A bat?" His dad snorted.

Miles and Payton both chuckled, and Derek looked ready to walk out.

"It was a joke."

"That's not a joke," Lydia said, staring at it.

"It was," Stiles stressed, not acknowledging the bloom of warmth at Lydia's curious admiration. "Derek made it. I modified it."

"Sounded like an asthmatic for a week too," Miles chortled. At the sheriff's blank expression, he snorted again. Stiles refused to elaborate. "It's mountain ash with a steel core. He inhaled some of the sawdust on accident, even though he wore a damn respirator."

And that had been a fun week. Derek had avoided him initially, and when Stiles had finally gone to
the house, Derek had been vomiting black sludge. Stiles had freaked out and threatened to use the bat on him.

They still didn't talk about the ensuing argument. Even Cassie refused to talk about it, and she hadn't even been present at the time. But the fallout had been spectacular, with Caroline finally being forced to sit them down in her office. He shuddered, remembering how pissed she'd been. (Then he realized how pissed she was going to be, and shivered again.)

"So what's all the-" His dad said, waving at the bat. Stiles rotated it so his dad could examine the staves he'd carved into it.

"It won't explode on someone's head this time," He shrugged. Maybe, he hoped. At the very least it wouldn't just explode.

"Thank god for that," Derek muttered.

"Come on, you loved the chance to save me last time," Stiles told him, smirking.

Derek glowered. Stiles felt the intense gaze of-Yep, that was his dad, matching Derek's glare and then some. "What did you do, Stiles?"

"I was impulsive," He offered gamely, hoping to bypass the oncoming argument.

"He went after the twins while they were combined," Derek bit out. Stiles glared at him, baring his teeth in a quiet snarl. Derek didn't look the least bit affected by it.

"Derek, please make sure my son doesn't do anything stupid while you're out," John muttered.

"I'll try," Derek sighed.

Cassie snickered.

Stiles flipped them all off.

"I really hate this," Stiles said, still itching from whatever had been in the spray Lydia had used. Derek and Cassie both were staring at him, frowning and looking like they wanted to tackle him. "It itches."

"It'll stop in a few minutes," Lydia bit out. He'd sprayed her moments before, and she still looked like a cat that had been sprayed in the face with something offensive. His only comfort was that Chris looked ready to ignore their plan and follow them outside. For once he was being forced onto the sideline, and Stiles couldn't help but appreciate the irony.

Everyone began filing out the front door, Issac pointedly ignoring them. Miles rolled his eyes and followed Lydia out, Cassie and Derek next. Stiles was at the door and almost out when his dad clamped a hand on his shoulder. It was obvious how much he wanted to tell him to stay, to let the others handle it. It was a measure of how far they'd come that he didn't.

His dad pulled him close, his arms uncomfortably tight. Stiles allowed him the embrace, didn't
complain when the pain in his chest throbbed in protest.  

"Take care of Cas and Derek, alright?" John demanded. "And let them take care of you."

"No problem dad," He said, offering a grin he didn't feel. The sheriff didn't look placated in the least, but nodded tightly and stepped back. Stiles hurried out the door, closing the door behind him. He wouldn't make his dad watch him walk away when he was stuck behind, watching Allison. At least he had Chris and Payton there. Payton would keep things interesting.

Miles and Issac were in his truck. Cassie was with them, Lydia staying close to her. When Stiles slipped into the truck, Derek was already putting it into gear.

The ride to the preserve was quiet, tense. When he moved to rest his hand on Derek's neck, seeking the familiar comfort, Derek's whole body flinched away. Stung, Stiles withdrew and stared resolutely ahead. Despite every attempt at empathy, the ache intensified. Dejection followed, reminded him of times he'd been pushed away before. It had been years since Derek had retreated, and logically, Stiles understood. But that didn't make bearing it any easier. The air inside the cabin only grew more dense, heavier, as they drove through town.

It was getting dark by the time the pulled off to the side of the access road. Stiles got out, grateful for the fresh air. Issac was glaring at everyone around him, his fingers tipped in claws.

"We need to take this off the road," Miles told them, already striding towards the treeline, long legged steps purposeful. Or pissed off. Stiles was willing to lay decent odds on the latter being the case. Cassie and Lydia both appeared to be suffering the same moods, stalking ahead of Issac and leaving him behind.

"When we find him, I want you both gone," Issac bit out, eyes glowing gold in the dwindling light of day.

"When he's sane again, we'll leave," Stiles muttered, already ahead of him. Derek remained quiet, but Issac's glare was almost verbal, scratching unpleasantly over his back. Stiles ignored it, moved deeper into the woods and tried to imagine how nice it would be to spend another Christmas on the beach.

Once they'd moved in far enough, Miles stopped and turned to glare at Issac.

Issac tipped his head back and howled, the sound echoing through the woods. Stiles knew wolf howls, had learned to distinguish pitches and melodies to discern at least basic meanings. Issac's howl was anguished and furious. A call for help and for bloodshed. It rolled down his spine like a threat. Ignoring the instincts that told him to plant a knife in Issac's gut, he tried to read the world around him. It was a dismal failure, the world itself dampened and cold. Muffled by a fog that felt too thick to breathe.

Minutes passed in tense expectation. Issac howled again, then again.

Stiles was ready to give it up when Miles tilted his head and sniffed the air. Derek tensed, and Cassie shifted in response. He unsheathed the knife from his right arm and hefted it in his palm, made sure it was spelled only to briefly paralyze.

Issac's next howl was cut short when a figure barreled into him. Too fast for Stiles to track, the dark blur was on Issac and then gone, the sound of leaves rustling the only sign that whatever it was, it was circling.

Issac was gasping wetly, blood pouring from a hole in his shoulder. The high pitched keen of pain
burst and faded, shock clamping the beta's jaw shut before he was out. Stiles mentally sneered. Christ. He'd seen Issac take worse and keep walking.

"We were right," Lydia bit out, eyes scanning the woods around them. Stiles didn't feel better for the confirmation.

"Bastard's ripe," Miles growled, sounding offended.

Another blur and Lydia was on the ground, the knife still clutched in her fist. Useless.

"Shit."

They moved in closer, forming a ring around Issac and Lydia. It was every bad horror movie he'd ever seen, the monster hiding in the growing darkness as true night crept into the place between the shadows, filling them in. Cassie and Miles were both snarling, challenging the threat. Derek was silent, eyes moving back and forth. Stiles felt his heart pounding a steady tattoo in his chest, threatening to break out of his ribcage. Sweat rolled down the back of his neck, felt too warm in counterpoint to the cold around them.

Another rustle and Miles roared, the sound crashing into the darkness. Stiles watched in horrified fascination as the skinwalker shifted, his body growing and fur sprouting even as the dark blur tangled into it. The wolf (Scott, oh fuck it was Scott) bit down only to find fur and thick hide, the bear swiping a paw and sending it careening into the dark.

Miles barreled after it, quicker than anything that size had a right to move, but Scott was too fast, moved too quickly. He took advantage of the opening left by Miles and Stiles felt pain explode in the back of his head. Stars danced in his vision as he collapsed to his knees, fought vertigo that made the world swim and pain that stabbed into his brain and down his neck.

Miles continued to roar and move, his noise drowning out the rustling of leaves and growls. Cassie and Derek were on either side of him, forming a protective wall. Lydia and Issac were completely forgotten, and Stiles tried to remind them that Issac was the important one because if he died, Scott would break, but the words were barely coherent in his head, much less able to escape from behind his clenched teeth.

He clenched his eyes shut, fought the dizzying spots in his vision. Stiles hated the cacophony of noise and colors, hated that every fight he'd ever been in was just a tangle and never the graceful dances he'd heard espoused by martial artists and books. It was just messy, nothing but explosions of sound, ribs cracking like gunshot and he hated that he had to choose who he hoped was the one getting hurt.

When he opened his eyes again, Cassie was in the air, suspended from a huge, clawed hand. Blood poured from punctures in her throat, wet gurgling echoing even over Miles' outraged snarling. Derek tried to get close and was batted away like he was nothing more than an insect, hitting a tree with a wet smack and cracks that registered even over the echo of the ocean in Stiles' ears.

Stiles watched Cassie fall, her neck a mess of blood and ruptured flesh. Miles was halfway through the transformation when he knocked Scott to the ground, his face a grotesque parody of a bear's. Derek was already on his feet when Miles went sailing through the darkness, a mockery of what he'd done to Scott. (Jesus, it was Scott-)

There was a tangle, a blur of limbs and snarls and fur as Derek fought Scott. Rage fueled, Derek was vicious, half feral as he used claws and teeth to rip wounds open on the alpha. Then Derek was on the ground, a hole in his stomach bleeding out onto the leaves.
Stiles didn't realize the gun was in his hand until he was taking aim, pulling the trigger. The sound didn't even register, the blood in his head throbbing in time with his pulse. Pain ratcheted down his spine, made his hands shake. He missed, almost hit Miles when the skinwalker tackled Scott again.

Scott slashed at him, pushed him off and away and then he was gone. Another shadow bleeding into every other shadow.

Stiles whimpered, crawled over to Cassie. The gun was still in his hand, wouldn't drop because his hand felt cramped, the joints fused. Blood poured from the wound, her throat savaged. He put a hand on her sternum, felt it barely rising, falling, rising again.

Miles was naked and scrambling over to them.

"Stiles!" Miles shouted at him, making him blink. He looked up at Miles and tried to figure out what he was saying. For a minute the skinwalker's mouth moved but nothing coming out of it made sense, just vowels and syllables, disjointed sounds.

The fist that grabbed his shoulder and shook had claws, needles that pricked into his skin and burned through the static in his head.

"We need to get them out of here."


"I thought we didn't trust him," Miles grunted, picking up Cassie. Stiles got to his feet, bursts of light dancing in his vision. He lurched towards Lydia. "Stay here and watch them," Miles commanded. "Keep your gun up."

Stiles nodded, not caring that Miles was already out of the clearing, Cassie in tow. He stumbled away from Lydia, looked around wildly and felt his stomach churn at the sight of Derek.

"Jesus."

Derek's stomach was a gaping hole. He was pale, unnaturally so. Stiles dropped to his knees, fought the bile surging up his throat. When his hand found Derek's it was cold and stiff, unyielding.

Issac came to hissing with pain. Stiles dimly thought 'convenient' but felt Derek's hand twitch in his and focused on that, felt for his pulse and found a wild, fluttering thing that did nothing to assuage the sour taste in his throat, the tightness of his chest.

"Oh god."

Stiles barely paid attention, his eyes on Derek's stomach. The bleeding was already slowing down, an encouraging sign except there was a hole in his fucking stomach, and Stiles wasn't sure if he was seeing intestines or something else. And Scott had done it. Godfuckingdamnit.

"You, get Derek," Miles snarled. Issac didn't protest, ambled over on unsteady legs. Stiles bared his teeth at Issac when the beta bent over and pulled at Derek's arm. Gold eyes flashed back at him and the gun in his hand was pointed at Issac's head before he knew what he was doing. Every instinct screamed 'threat', made his sweaty palms itch, his finger tight on the trigger. Issac had called for a fight, had brought Scott to them demanding an attack and Scott had barely touched him and almost killed Cassie, had tried to kill Derek. Issac-

"Stiles," A voice growled. "He won't hurt him, or I'll kill him. We need to get Derek somewhere
He turned, saw Miles holding Lydia to him. Blood made her hair look darker, wet and stringy. When he turned back to Issac, he saw that the hatred had vanished, lost in confusion and fear. Buried.

He lowered the gun and nodded slowly. Issac pulled Derek up into a fireman's carry with a grunt of pain and followed Miles. The woods were dark enough that he tripped and stumbled several times. Or maybe he was concussed. With his free hand he checked the back of his head. Just a knot, no blood. Which was a good sign, he supposed.

"Can you drive?" Miles snapped at him.

He nodded even though he wasn't actually sure.

"Do we go to the emissary?"


"Lydia's." Stiles confirmed, heading for Derek's truck. He realized he didn't have the keys and walked over to Issac, who was watching him like a bomb about to go off. Stiles didn't blame him, he felt tight and coiled, ready to explode out in violence at the slightest touch. Sensitive. He ignored the chill of Derek's skin and checked his pocket, pulled out the keys and worked on unlocking the back door.

"Derek goes across the back seat," He commanded, voice hollow. Issac did as he said and stretched Derek out before slamming the door and moving around to the front passenger. When Stiles looked back to Miles' truck, he saw him tucking Lydia into the front seat.

Stiles swallowed, took a breath and got in the truck. Issac was leaning back, eyes tightly shut.

They were almost out of the preserve when Issac started talking.

"You would have shot me."

"Yes." There was no point in lying. His intentions had been clear, the action itself instinctual.

"For Derek."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He's pack," Stiles snarled. Because he's mine, because he's the only thing that's keeping me from killing everything. Because if he dies I'll burn the fucking city out, tear it down and bleed it dry until there's nowhere left for anyone to hide.

It was tempting to do it anyway, to make a ruin of the place that had taken, was taking, so much from him.

The idea was viscerally cathartic, amplified his fury and made it possible to focus on something besides the sandpaper rasp of breathing coming from the back seat. Rage was clarifying, bracing, kept his hands steady on the wheel.

Derek groaned in the backseat, and Stiles jerked so quickly the truck swerved violently, eliciting another groan. Issac's 'watch the road' was half lost, the beta turning and draping himself halfway
over the seat to check on Derek.

When a snarl erupted in the back and Issac twisted back, settled into his seat, Stiles felt a flash of satisfaction. Derek still scared him, obviously. Even wounded. Issac looked like he was going to crawl into the floorboard to get away. Fucking good.

By the time they arrived at Lydia's, Miles had found pants. Somehow. Stiles wasn't going to ask, too focused on Payton and Chris running out, expressions a mix of anger and fear. Chris was handed Lydia before Miles was focusing on Cassie. Payton snapped at Issac, pushing him away from the truck as he grabbed Derek.

Stiles watched everyone marching into the house, leaving him alone with Issac.

He was breathing.

How was he breathing?

Issac took a step towards the house, then back, a keening wail rising in his throat, rattling out in a broken sound that made Stiles ache. It was eerily close to what he felt building in his chest, a sound that wanted to escape and join the lament. He pushed back his sympathy, buried it under a chilling wave of calm.

Calm. He had to be calm. Had to take care of everything.

"Stop," He snapped, gaze zeroing in on Issac. "Go inside and stay out of the way." He ignored the wounded look Issac gave him and stalked back into the house. Blood dripped through the foyer, down the hall and into the kitchen.

Derek was laying on a counter, blue eyes focused on the table, where Cassie lay, silent and unmoving. Stiles didn't know where to go first, didn't know if he should go to Derek or try to help with Cassie. His dad was gone, fuck, his dad-

Derek rasped, groaned. It could have been a word, but the word was lost. Stiles moved to him, eyes drawn to the hole in his shirt, the mess of his stomach. Stiles felt claws digging into his arm, looked down and saw Derek gripping the appendage, blood beading when the beta let him go. Derek tried to speak again and could barely manage a rattling exhale before tilting his head at Cassie.

Stiles understood immediately, took a spot between Chris and Miles and tried to take stock of the damage.

"She's breathing," Payton said, hands covered in blood. "She's starting to heal."

It didn't look like it, the savaged flesh still split and torn.

"And you're sure it was Scott?" Chris demanded, voice steady. Stiles looked up at him, surprised by the mask of regret tightening the man's features.

"It was an alpha," Miles growled. "I don't know if it's McCall or not. But the little shit took it hard. Difficult to imagine he'd mislabel his own alpha."

Lydia stumbled into the room, a hand held to her head. Her face was almost white, the smears of blood gruesome paint across her cheek and down her jaw and neck. Stiles remembered the winter formal, remembered how pale she'd been then, pale and still. Now she was pale, pale and still, but contained. Energy pulsed through her, easy to see as she projected her fury.
"There was a distortion in the area," She snapped, incensed. "An intentional one. Someone's pulling all the old magic out, feeding it. I couldn't get anything while we were out there."

Stiles moved back over to Derek, ran a hand through the wolf's hair. Blue eyes drifted shut as Derek accepted the touch, tilted his head into it. "Does that mean it wasn't actually Scott trying to kill us?" He mumbled, not taking his eyes off of Derek's face.

"It means I can't tell, which is a good indicator that someone is controlling him," Lydia informed them. "Chris, call Deaton. I want him here now. And do you still have your medical kit?"

Chris nodded, already tapping on his cell phone as he strode out of the room.

"Where's Issac?" Lydia demanded, voice sharp.

"Probably upstairs, I told him to stay out of the way."

"Issac!" Lydia shouted, voice carrying through the house. There was a thump and then Issac was in the hall, hovering behind her. She spun on her heel, finger jabbing into his chest. "You will stay in sight at all times. You will not go in Allison's room." Issac opened his mouth to protest, looking completely wrecked. Lydia shook her head and then steadied herself, gripping the doorframe. "No. If Scott was willing to do that, then we're not taking the chance that Allison is free of influence."

"What about him?" Issac snapped. Stiles glared at the finger pointing at him.

"He is not Scott's anchor. He is not part of your pack. So far, he's shown remarkable restraint in not killing you, unlike your alpha. Not that I blame him right now!" Lydia's voice carried, angry and pitched, through the house.

"He pointed a gun at me!"

"Because you're a dick and his packmate is injured," Miles growled. "You think we didn't notice that you were calling him to a fight?"

"I didn't-"

"Maybe not intentionally," Miles snapped. "But it was there all the same. Pull another stunt like that and I will force feed you your own intestines."

"How do we know it wasn't Derek or Stiles that set him off? You notice the members of the banned pack got the worst of it," Issac snarled.

"I noticed you got hit and went down rather conveniently, while two of mine got fucking savaged!" Miles snarled back, looking ready to put Issac through a wall.

"Stop it, both of you," Lydia shouted, voice hoarse. "The wound was close to Issac's heart, that's enough to put a wolf down for a few minutes. But he's right Issac, your howl was for a fight. I am tired of your childishness. If we were doing this by the book, we'd hunt Scott and execute him. So be thankful it's us and not someone else."

"Execute?" Issac demanded incredulously.

"Scott's hurt multiple people, including humans. Now stop behaving like a ten year old or I'll throw you out of the wards myself."

The front door slammed, punctuating her statement, and seconds later Chris was setting a black
duffel down and opening it, medical supplies spilling out.

Chris and Issac were both shoved away, out of the room by Lydia, who was biting out commands. Miles and Payton were working in tandem, completely at ease with setting up an IV bag and running the drip. Dimly, Stiles wondered where they'd learned.

Derek groaned and started pushing himself upright before grunting and dropping back down again.

"Hold up for two goddamn minutes Hale," Miles snapped, not looking up from what he was doing, hands steady as he slid a needle into Cassie's arm.

Stiles put a hand on Derek's shoulder, applied light pressure to keep Derek down. It was as much to keep Derek from moving as it was to assure himself that Derek was alright, his eyes closed and breathing shallow. But he was breathing, and Stiles could feel it, could feel his blood pulsing just beneath his skin. Proof of life.

His lungs expanded.

Miles moved around him, didn't try to push him away when he started cutting Derek's shirt up the middle with a pair of medical scissors. Stiles chewed the inside of his cheek, tasted blood. He didn't feel any pain as he watched Miles check the wound.

"Can you clean this?" Miles demanded, pointing at Derek. Stiles nodded once, neck aching at the movement. It was enough for Miles, who wordlessly picked Derek up and began walking. Stiles followed, dazed, as Miles took him upstairs and past the sound of Lydia and Issac yelling at one another, to the bedroom they'd been assigned.

'You and Derek are always the ones that end up covered in blood.' Lydia's voice seemed to echo from the walls. Stiles did his best to ignore it, to focus on the task at hand, which was Derek. Miles laid him out on the bathroom floor and nodded tightly.

"Get him cleaned up. He's already starting to heal."

"He is right here," Derek muttered sourly. Stiles choked on a hysterical bubble of laughter. "I can do it myself."

And that—That was familiar, enough to break through the daze and bring him back into his own skin again.

"You know that powder Lydia used to sedate you," He said, grabbing one of the rags from the pile next to the sink. "She has more. She'll probably let me use it on you."

Derek growled quietly, the sound echoing off of the bathroom walls. Miles snorted, a sarcastic sound that Stiles ignored in favor of continuing.

"It's Angel's Trumpet, which is known for it's suggestive properties. It's how she got you all the way out to the old house. No wolfsbane to inhibit your healing."

"You're enjoying this," Derek accused. Stiles knelt by him and started wiping down the area. If he ignored that it was Derek's stomach and that Scott had done it, it was entirely possible he could avoid a psychotic break. The rag was navy, but he could still see the stain of blood seeping into it.

"Sure," He lied, getting up and rinsing the rag out. The water ran red, then pink. It only grew to a light pink before he gave up seeing it clear again. "I can't wait to see how you'll explain your car. Whoever does your detail work will either call the cops or break down crying."
"Did you actually point a gun at Issac?" Derek asked, once he'd resumed cleaning around the jagged edges of skin. It was already healing over, the skin almost visibly knitting together. Derek was still pale, his veins and arteries standing out from his skin like a map, but he wasn't bleeding anymore. Stiles considered it a plus.

"Yeah. Pretty sure he thinks I'm going to kill him anyway. Unless Miles gets there first."

The wound was covered in a thin layer of skin, shiny and plastic pink. Stiles stared down at it, stupefied. He couldn't remember Derek healing that fast before. Careful, treating the new skin like tissue paper, he patted the area down and threw the rag at the sink.

Derek tried to get up on his own and staggered back before falling into the counter, face a grimace of pain. Stiles grabbed his arm and slipped it over his shoulder. It was probably the most useless attempt at support ever, since he felt like a stray breeze could probably knock him over, but it was something he could do, and Derek's grumbling, unintelligible and familiar, was a sign that he wasn't hallucinating. Derek was healing.

They stumbled to the bed and Derek dropped, electing to ignore his boots and pulling himself onto it. Stiles saw exhaustion and pain lining his features, took note of his clenched fists.

The memory of Derek flinching away from him came back, making him step back from the bed. Derek didn't notice, because he'd already passed out.

Stiles chose to kneel next to the bed, arms crossed on the mattress and pillowing his head. He couldn't close his eyes without seeing Cassie dangling, couldn't stop seeing the ruin of her throat. Derek's stomach broken open, blood pouring everywhere.

ScottScottScott

He didn't know how much time had passed when he finally got up and walked out. Payton spun on his heel, forehead creased in worry. He'd been standing guard. Christ.

"Stay with him. I need to--" He shook his head. "I'm going to the workroom." He'd figure something out. Maybe-

Payton nodded and slipped inside, shut the door behind him with a soft click. Stiles looked at it, wished he could see through it, wished-And couldn't have, because everything was falling apart, and as usual, he'd dragged people he cared about into it.

Lydia was in her workroom, running a candle flame over a large piece of carved volcanic glass.

"Scrying?" He asked, staring.

"I need to prep the mirror, but yeah. It should see through the magic."

"You said earlier someone had pulled the old magic out," He said, walking to the open pantry and pausing outside of it.

"Payton agrees with me. They've managed to amplify the old magic, and that's what's causing the distortions. It's almost like memories are being brought back to life." She sounded like she admired the craftwork, and if he hadn't been fighting against it, Stiles might have appreciated it too.

Stiles hummed, watching the mirror. "All the bad stuff, right?"
Lydia nodded absently, hands moving in sure patterns. The flame licked along the surface of the glass. An idea occurred to him, Amund's and Rick's voices echoing in his head.

"What if I can use them?"

Lydia's hands continued to move, but he was positive he had her attention, her back straightening as he moved to crouch next to her. The black glass reflected their images, echoed the blank television screen that had shown them their tired eyes months before. Amplified.

"How?"

"I need a decently sized piece of hazel. A few feet at least."

Lydia frowned. "I don't have any, but Deaton should."

"Is he here?"

"Downstairs."

Stiles murmured a quiet thank you and left the room. When he found Deaton, the vet was sitting in the living room, staring at the window.

"Hey doc."

"I have what you need. Both items, actually."

"It's rude to read people."

"It's difficult to ignore you when you project so loudly."

"You managed it before," Stiles bit out. "Do I need to go get Payton or Miles?"

"This seems extreme."

"Cassie and Derek were hurt." It was the only argument he needed, and he knew Deaton knew it. "Unless you want them to die next time, and for Caroline to come down here and kill Scott herself, something needs to change."

Deaton heaved a sigh, looking tired. His nod was one of defeated acceptance. "Payton will probably be the best choice. I'll meet you outside."

Stiles ignored the stairs and walked to the kitchen. Cassie was still on the table, the IV bag almost empty. She was pale, her hair matted with dried blood, her green shirt soaked. The skin around her throat was patchy, like a healed burn. Like Derek's stomach. Miles looked up, dark smudges beneath his eyes hinting at his exhaustion.

"I have to go to Deaton's to get a few things," He informed him, voice dull.

"I don't think anyone should leave the house right now."

"If we don't find Scott, he'll kill someone."

Miles looked like he wanted to argue, but nodded quietly. "She'll want to see you when you wakes up."

"I'll try to be here."
"Take the beta too."

"That's not a good idea." Bringing Issac along was asking for trouble, and the last thing he wanted to do was deal with the petulant beta. If anything, he knew he wasn't going to put his all into protecting Issac, not after he'd pointed a gun at him.

"I can't keep an eye on everyone. Argent's watching his daughter, I've got Cas and Derek. Lydia's busy. And having Issac out of the house will keep him away from the woman."

"And give Scott a better target if he comes after me," Stiles snorted. Miles shrugged, unashamed.

"McCall isn't my concern, or his beta. You and Payton are. I get that he's your brother, but if things don't change soon, we're going to have to look at other options."

"That's what I'm trying to do," Stiles muttered, already turning away.

"Don't forget to reload."

Stiles saluted, earning a tire, quite epithet before going back upstairs. He checked Chris' room first, saw it empty and figured the man was with Allison. It was easy to ignore the voice in his head telling him what a bad idea it was to be rooting through a hunter's things. The ammo box was self evident, and he unlatched it to find an array of items. The wolfsbane bullets were easy to spot, lined up neatly in a wooden box.

He'd forgotten that both guns were still holstered, that the sedative was still in the pocket's of Derek's jacket, that he had a knife strapped to his back. Now he remembered, and wondered how long it would be before he felt safe without them.

Chris came in while he was filling both clips.

"Going somewhere?"

"Deaton's. I need supplies."

"You have a plan."

"I do."

"Better than baiting him?"

"Yeah." Not by much, but it wouldn't end in bloodshed. Maybe. He just hoped Lydia didn't kick his ass if it interfered with her reading.

"Take these," Chris told him, reaching into the box and pulling out two cylindrical tubes. Stiles recognized them as stun grenades, wondered if they would affect Payton.

"I don't have anything to carry them in." Because jacket pockets would be a monumentally bad idea, and he wasn't sure he'd need them.

"I've got you," Chris said, and Stiles would never, ever get used to that. It was abjectly surreal to be working with Chris in any capacity, but to hear 'I've got you', like they were partners, like Chris was trying to be helpful, would probably always register as a hallucination brought on by stress. Better left ignored, unmentioned. He doubted anyone would believe him anyway.

Chris's idea of help was a tactical belt. Stiles pulled his own out and slipped it through a few of the loops, reluctantly appreciative as Chris handed him pouches to slide on, two filled with flashbangs,
two with extra clips.

"When I said I was ready to go the ball, this wasn't what I had in mind," Stiles grumbled, thinking back to his earlier conversation with Derek.

"Would you prefer tactical boots?" Chris asked, voice edged with exhaustion as Stiles tightened the belt.

"My boots survived Norway," Stiles told him, like it meant something.

"Someday you'll have to tell me about it."

"Sure." Hell was close to freezing over, it was entirely within reason that he'd calmly discuss his apprenticeship with an Argent.

Chris followed him out, splitting away and heading back to what he assumed was Allison's room. When he opened the door to his and Derek's room, Payton was in a chair (where the hell had it come from?) with his feet propped on the bed.

"Field trip. You've been chosen as our designated chaperone. Congratulations."

"Goody," Payton groaned, getting up.

"Miles said we had to take Issac."

"Bastard just doesn't want to deal with him."

"Could you go get him? Tell him Deaton's waiting in the car. I need to talk to Lydia really quick."
Payton nodded and pulled on his jacket before leaving the room. Stiles glanced at Derek, still pale and drawn in sleep. The skin on his stomach looked better, was beginning to match the skin around it.

It was too tempting to crawl in beside him and pretend, to shut his eyes and forget where they were. So he turned on his heel and walked out before he gave in to the impulse. Lydia was finished with the candle when he walked past the barrier and into her workroom.

"We're about to head out. I might stick there to put everything together, so it'll be a few hours."

"Derek and Cassie will freak if you're not here when they get up." She reminded him, like he wasn't aware of how pissed they be if they woke up and he was outside the wards.

"I'll pick up some food on the way back. Expect a disturbance in the force later."

"What kind of disturbance?"

"Not entirely sure, I've only read about it."

Lydia huffed, sounding almost amused. She was obviously exhausted, too tired to pull off anything sounding like actual laughter, but it was enough. "Don't do anything too stupid." It almost sounded fond.

"Try getting some sleep."

"After you," She quipped.

"The wards are drawing on you, and now you're recovering from an injury. If you don't get some
sleep, I'll divert them onto me." Her glare was pure venom, and he offered her a smirk. "Just like old
times."

"Go play with your pole," Lydia snapped waspishly. At least she had an idea of what he was
planning.

He saluted and clicked his heels. "Yes, ma'am."

She was still grumbling when he closed the door and left her alone.

Deaton was waiting behind the wheel of his SUV, Payton and Issac in the back. Issac looked sullen,
Payton aggravated. Deaton was blank, even his exhaustion not in evidence any longer. Stiles got in
the front seat and pointedly ignored the glare boring holes into the back of his skull.

"So, care to explain what we're doing?" Payton asked as they pulled out of the drive.

"You ever heard of a nidstang?"

"No."

"It's a curse pole. It's supposed to work by stirring up the wights and sending them after someone."

"You're going to curse Scott?" Issac growled. Stiles saw the flash of gold in the rearview mirror.

"No, I'm going to drive him to a location of my choosing."

"And that's different from what you did before how?" Payton demanded.

"I'm going to lead him into a barrier and then close it."

"Scott can get past mountain ash," Issac reminded him, sounding petulant even as he gloated. Stiles
wondered if wolves could reattach toes shot off with wolfsbane bullets.

"Not all barriers are mountain ash. It's just the most common," Deaton explained calmly. "Ash itself
isn't a barrier like rowan is, it channels magic."

"And what are we doing with the crazy, feral alpha wolf once he's trapped?" Payton demanded
flatly, blatantly ignoring the gold eyes focusing on him.

"I'm going to sedate him. I've got enough on me to last a few hours. We can construct a new barrier
once we get him back to the house."

"It sounds too easy," Payton muttered.

"What he's suggesting isn't easy," Deaton said, before Stiles could get out a sarcastic response. "He's
going to be using the distortions to guide Scott to us. In effect, he'll be turning the territory against
him."

"And we're supposed to let him?" Issac snapped.

"If you have any input, I'm open to suggestion," Stiles bit out, looking back at him. "We could
dangle you from a tree and wait."

"If you hadn't left, this wouldn't be a problem."

Stiles tilted his head. "You actually believe that, don't you?" He huffed, stunned because Issac really
He turned back around in his seat and kept his gaze focused ahead of them.

"You were part of Scott's anchor," Issac replied mulishly.

"How are you still alive?" Payton asked seriously, staring at the beta.

"God protects fools and small children," Stiles grumbled, earning a low, rumbling growl.

It wasn't until they turned into a residential neighborhood that he realized they weren't going to the clinic at all.

"You have a house?" He asked, just as Deaton turned into the driveway of a two story that was exceptional only because it was so normal. Nothing about it said that a druid lived there, that the vet was anything other than a man that kept his yard neat.

"Contrary to popular belief, I do have a life outside of work," Deaton told him, voice devoid of emotion. Stiles made a sound of disbelief, but got out and followed him up the stairs. Payton and Issac followed, Issac grimacing as he got closer.

"Barrier," He muttered.

"It's so nice not to have that problem," Payton chuckled.

"Seriously?" Stiles couldn't help himself. Once it was over, he was grilling Payton. It would be glorious.

"Sons of sea witches," He reminded him. "Not much bothers us."

"What are you?" Issac demanded as Deaton unlocked the door and knelt. He slid a piece of wood out of place before stepping inside. Payton smirked but said nothing.

"Nice," Stiles murmured as he strode in. Payton and Issac followed. Deaton replaced the piece in the frame before closing and locking the door behind him. Issac was still watching Payton warily.

"My basement will have everything you need."

Deaton's basement was almost as sterile as his clinic, the floors tiled in white and the tables and cabinets made of steel that reflected the light in the room, making it that much brighter. Stiles watched him as he moved to a tall cupboard and opened it, revealing several lengths of wood.

"Hazel, correct?"

"Yeah."

Deaton pulled out what could have been a staff, the wood bare of any decoration. Stiles accepted it and waited patiently, watching as Deaton opened another cupboard and pulled out a skull.

"How is it you don't work with blood, but bone is somehow okay?"

"The animal died a natural death," Deaton said, as if it was enough explanation. "Will you need a knife?"

"Something for carving, yeah."

Issac and Payton watched as Deaton pulled down other items, some Stiles had been ready to ask for, others that would just make his job easier.
"So wights are distortions?" Issac asked as Stiles began drawing runes in a spiral down the pole. Just writing them made him feel guilty, made him think of the stories Rick had told him. Even Amund had cautioned him about them, though it hadn't stopped the man from teaching him how to make one.

*The world will not hesitate to strike. Neither must we.*

"Traditionally, a nidstang is used to anger wights, which are elementals. Very few actually exist within Beacon Hills, the pollution of the currents makes conditions unfavorable, even for the nastier ones. Instead of accessing the currents, Stiles will be tapping into the old magics that are being amplified."

"Using their own play against them," Payton added, voice tinged with admiration. "And avoiding the currents."

"Will it hurt Scott?"

"Physically? No. It's sort of the same idea behind the Chris' emitters," Stiles answered absently, continuing to write. "Just a psychic version."

"Those aren't pleasant," Issac growled.

"This won't be either," Deaton said, voice firm. "But Stiles is correct, it's probably the only way to get Scott to walk into a barrier without endangering anyone else."

"I will never get tired of hearing that," Stiles muttered, checking the lines of runes.

"That you're right?" Payton snorted. "You're Rick's apprentice, the man thinks you hung the moon."

"I was largely ignored when I lived here," Stiles said absently. "Something about not being a supernatural creature or a manipulative asshole."

"And you flourished in Portland," Deaton added, voice still calm despite the barb. "Whereas here you would have probably died."

Issac's breathless 'what' wasn't as gratifying as Stiles wanted it to be. He ignored the question hanging in the air and began to carve over the markings on the length of wood. Knowing he wouldn't have time to do it once he planted it, he began to sing, moving along the potentials and creating ties, using the physical vibrations he created to help guide him along the threads he couldn't see. Payton sucked in a deep breath and shuffled back, away from him.

Magic reached out, incomplete in it's grasp. Stiles felt the force behind it, the purpose that swelled and stopped short. There was a gap, left intentionally. Stiles built and braided power along the paths until he came to that spot, moving from the bottom of the staff and up to the top.

When he finished, Deaton handed him a glass of water. Stiles couldn't remember him leaving the room. Payton was standing stiff, frowning at the length of wood in his hands, and Issac looked lost, confused.

"I can wake it up once we get there," He said after draining the glass. His throat hurt, felt sore and achy. "How long was I working?"

"A few hours."

"Alright. Deaton, you got any true ash?"
Deaton nodded at a box sitting on the table. Stiles couldn't remember him pulling that down, either. Apparently he'd been oblivious while he was under. Hopefully that was a good sign, an indication that he'd created something-Not good, precisely, but strong. Something that would work like it was supposed to.

"I really don't like that thing," Payton muttered, glaring at it like it was a snake, poised to strike.

"Then you're really going to hate what it's going to do."

"I'm glad you're on my side."

"Is it that bad?" Issac asked quietly, blue eyes wide. He looked almost innocent, curiously childlike compared to the rest of the room, to Payton and especially Deaton. He wondered what he looked like in comparison. Hell was probably an apt descriptor.

"It's a curse. There are little curses and big curses, and then there are the unforgivable ones. Think Harry Potter," Stiles muttered, rubbing his eyes. He hoped the implications were enough because if he had to spell it out, he might hit Issac with the damn thing and break it.

Payton cursed in a lilting tongue that made the obvious ire sound almost pretty. Stiles shrugged and accepted the swath of white silk Deaton handed him. He noted that no one was willing to touch the staff, taking pains to stay away until it was wrapped. The horse skull was already in a box (he'd missed so much, he needed to work on his awareness before Derek strangled him).

"Onward," He muttered, heading for the stairs. Deaton paused long enough to grab a duffel bag and sling it over his shoulder.

Deaton drove them, navigating the town with ease. Stiles recognized the area, instinctively knew where they were headed. Biting back a curse, he tried not to remember the pictures from his dad's case file. Shit, the nemeton itself would have been better, regardless of personal feelings.

"The area is filled with sinkholes after the collapse of the cellar," Deaton said. "This is the closest convergence."

"Stop reading me," Stiles muttered.

"You're projecting again."

"I'll work on it once I get back home," He bit out. His anger at the intrusion was a welcome distraction from the memory of the case file, of the crime scene photos of a young girl tied to a tree. Dead because she was a virgin.

When they parked and Deaton began walking for the treeline, Stiles looked over to Payton and Issac. Issac looked spooked, ready to bolt. Payton was still frowning, the boxes in his hands held tight to his chest.

"I hope this works the way you want it to."

Stiles pulled out his gun in response, jerked his head in Deaton's direction.

The vet was solemn as he led the way, steps purposeful.

"How do you stand it?" Stiles asked him once he'd caught up. "Lydia said the magic was like memories being brought back to life."
"The first lesson is always control," Deaton replied calmly. He stopped abruptly and nodded at a tree. Stiles looked to it, saw a girl superimposed over the surface. He shook off the image, brushed the phantom away. Psychosomatic. There was nothing there, not for him at least. God only knew what Deaton and Payton might be seeing.

He leaned the pole against the tree first and took the box of ash dust from Payton. It had nothing written on it, was just a simple metal box, as unlike Rick's (and his own) as it could be. But the dust was the same, finely ground sawdust that got under his chewed nails and clung to the sweat on his hands.

He made the circle large, probably too large. Scott would have room to pace and move, but he doubted he could make it any smaller without compromising the space. A clear space of about four feet was left in the perimeter, broken, open. Syllables poured out, guiding him because he needed every scrap of focus he had.

*Please let this work.*

He used the knife strapped to his back to dig the hole, deep and narrow enough that the length of hazel stood straight when he put it in and tamped the ground around it down with his heel. The horse skull was narrow, looked all the more sinister for it's missing jaw when he propped it on the staff. Reaching into his back pocket, he took out the knife Rick had given him.

Rick would probably kill him if he knew what he was about to do.

He cut along the seam of his hand, wondered how much he'd bled the last few days, how much more he was going to bleed.

*Blood calls to blood. Blood can bind what evades shackles. Blood can carry what breathe and stone cannot. It flows where all else can find no path. It is the source of all life, the bearer of memory and thought.*

The stave on the skull stood out, the blood almost black in the darkness. When he swiped his thumb along the disjointed, broken row of teeth, he took a deep breath and began to chant. It wasn't a smooth rhythm, didn't find a beat like he'd always done. The words pulled themselves out of his throat in guttural, harsh tones that grated on his ears, reached down into the world and rasped unpleasantly at threads he couldn't see, the resonances guiding him along the path.

He felt them stirring, felt the dissonance growing into a cacophony as he used the converging sounds to guide him to where the magic was strongest. Over and over, he chanted, pushed and pulled at the magic that hung in the air like mist. Old magic bled into new, the memories resisting, pushing back at him. He nudged, tried to slip into the cracks. The command was simple, aiming the sensations of dread, of fear and hate, giving them a new focus to rest in the hollow spaces former intentions had left behind.

Old deaths and terrors gave in, rose up and echoed themselves. Stiles felt them getting louder, allowing his purpose to fill them. They moved, reached out and grabbed, greedy and desperate. It was sickening, the ghost stench of decay filling his nostrils. Illusions took form again, freed from what had anchored them in place.

He followed the runes down, pushed until he felt himself reaching too far, almost snapping in half somewhere along his line of consciousness. When he came back, reeled himself in, he made sure the area around the nidstang itself was clear, an island of quiet in a world that was clattering with hostility and pain.
Issac was a ball of tension stuck fast just outside the line of ash, Payton's breathing was harsh, heavy, and Deaton looked like he was standing up through sheer force of will. Stiles felt the air pressure change, felt the press of the world outside the ash grow thick and soupy. Violence sang in the darkness, pressed at the boundary he'd created.

A howl pierced the distance, agony clear in the sound.

"That was Scott," Issac whimpered.

It took longer, so much longer than he'd wanted it to, minutes marked by pained, echoing outcries. The world was lightening, between night and dawn when he heard the howls coming closer. The pain in the sound ripped through him, made him want to fall to his knees because he'd done something fucking awful. He'd caused Scott to make those sounds, had intentionally set his own territory against him like a weapon.

_He'd done it._

When Scott was in view, he was only shifted to his beta form, dirty and clothing torn. Issac keened when Scott ignored him and ran straight at the nithing pole. Payton moved quickly, closing the circle. Stiles jumped over the boundary and watched as Scott stopped like he'd hit a wall, then sagged and took a breath.

Human intelligence was coming back as Stiles pulled a vial free from his pocket and opened it.

"Stiles?" Scott whispered, voice breaking, cracking over the name. Disbelief and hope. Stiles looked over his brother and saw sunken cheeks and eyes, exhaustion and panic, dirty hair filled with leaves and dried mud.

It was suddenly so hard to remember the night before, hours ago when he'd been shooting at him. Scott wasn't the broken, feral alpha anymore. He wasn't even shifted, the lines of his face weary and human.

"This is a sedative," Stiles told him, lifting the vial. "Will you take it willingly?"

Scott didn't demand to know why, didn't immediately burst into a frenzy of anger. That more than anything terrified Stiles. What if he'd been aware? What if he knew, remembered what he'd done? To Derek and Cassie, Issac, to Stiles. Shit, what if he remembered attacking his mother?

Scott moved forward, stopped at the boundary and frowned. Instead of demanding answers, he put his hand out.

Payton made an angry sound when Stiles reached into the boundary and handed Scott the vial. But Scott took it, flinched when Stiles jerked his hand away.

"It's an inhalant, or you can swallow it."

Scott surprised him by upending the vial in his mouth and pouring it down. He swallowed convulsively several times before opening his mouth and lifting his tongue. The vial was empty.

In the two minutes it took for him to drop, he didn't say anything. No questions or demands, no accusations. Just relieved, exhausted silence punctuated by a dull thud and the rustle of leaves.

Stiles broke the boundary and Deaton moved forward, dropping the bag with a heavy thud onto the ground. When he opened it, he pulled out two widths of rope, both of them making Issac reel back.
"They've been soaked in a wolfsbane infusion," Deaton explained when Stiles stared at the coils in his hands. "He won't be able to break them."

"Handy," Payton grumbled, warily watching the vet.

Stiles walked over to the nithing pole took a deep breath. He started at the bottom, threw himself down and into the darkness, reached out until he felt thin and taut. It was harder to pull the spell out, the cracks he'd slipped in filled by the purpose he'd instilled. The magic resisted, for all that he was the caster. It had slipped into the currents, poured into the land and taken a life of it's own.

He'd expected that, navigated away from the tendrils rooted into the currents, fought against the old magics and forced his way inside of them.

When it stopped pushing, he felt a brief flash of panic. The world pulled him in, sucked him down into it until he was getting lost. Rot and earth poured into his mouth and nose, buried him in sludge and mud. Bones broke as he fought the sensation, tried to swim up even though the world was quicksand.

The taste of brine filled his mouth, overpowered the decay. Cold and wet swept over his skin, buoyed him and pulled him up, back to the spiral he'd followed out.

It was easier after that, the water finding the cracks more easily than he ever could, carrying his intent, hollowing the memories and magic out until only traces remained, rooted in places he couldn't go.

When he came to, Payton was slumped against the tree Emily (her name had been Emily, hadn't it?) had been tied to.

"This ride is shit. I want off."

"Too bad. You're stuck until it's over," Stiles groaned, picking himself up. "Thanks."

"Don't make me do it again and we'll call it even."

"I'll try," Stiles promised, walking over to the nithing pole and lifting the horse skull off. Deaton took it, regarding him evenly.

"That was very dangerous."

"I know," He muttered, pulling the staff free from the ground. Issac was watching them with something that could have been fear. It wasn't the reward he'd always imagined it to be. Payton picked Scott up and slung his prone from over his shoulder. Issac trailed behind him, eyes on his alpha.

"I have an incinerator at the clinic," Deaton offered.

"Once this is over," Stiles sighed. It needed to be destroyed, and he wouldn't be entirely comfortable until it was. "Until then, I can keep it stashed at Lydia's."

"She'll want to examine it."

"And then she'll probably cave my skull in with it," Stiles muttered, already walking away. He doubted Lydia could actually recreate it, or that she'd want to at all.

Scott was already laying across the floorboards of the back seat, his neck below Payton's foot. Stiles
walked around to the hatch and saw the horse skull sitting innocently, the stave he'd drawn dried and flaking from the bone. He laid the staff down and made sure the silk covered it before slamming the trunk closed and walking back to the front.

The sky was light by the time they stopped outside the house. The door was jerked open and Derek strode out, expression thunderous. Miles followed, trademark smirk firmly in place. It didn't bode well.

"Fuck," Stiles groaned. He was too tired to deal with being yelled at.

"Any chance it's because we forgot breakfast?" Payton sighed.

"If only."

Stiles held up a hand and got out, walking over to the pair. He saw Derek readying what was probably the mother of all tirades when he stepped forward and hugged him. The contact banished the sensation of dirt that clung to him, made it easier to ignore the whispers that lingered, a too quiet radio station fading out in his skull.

"He's out cold in the floorboards. No fighting, no blood." Except his, but Derek would know the difference between a battle wound and a self inflicted one. Stiles took a steadying breath, inhaling the scent of wet forest, leather and sawdust.

The tension drained from Derek's body and arms circled him, squeezed too tight and made him wince beneath the pressure. Derek didn't let up, didn't give any hint of relaxing at any point in the foreseeable future.

"How's Cas?"

"Better," Derek rasped, burying his nose in his hair and inhaling sharply. "That spray is wearing off."

"That probably means I smell like shit."

"Pretty much."

"While this is touching, we really need everyone inside," Payton reminded them, carrying Scott past. Stiles saw Miles taking his necklace back from Deaton and offering it (with obvious disdain) to Issac.

"How did you do it?" Derek asked, finally letting go and stepping back, holding him at arm's length. Worried eyes moved down his form and then back up, nostrils flaring while checking for blood. His gazed fixed on Stiles' palm until he offered it for inspection.

"Some day I might explain it. Just never, ever tell Rick."

Derek's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Stiles."

"Nithing pole. Fuck Derek, he-" Stiles felt his jaw tighten. "It's a fucking curse. And when he got there he was just-He took the sedative willingly. He looked-" Stiles shook his head. Exhaustion was making it difficult to remember the proper order of words. Half of his vocabulary had just vanished.

"Let's get inside. Cassie's still asleep, but your scent might help."

"I need to get the stuff out of the car first. Dangerous woo shit doesn't need to be outside the barrier."

Derek nodded and walked with him outside the barrier and took the horse skull with obvious
confusion. Stiles shrugged and grabbed the silk bundle and slammed the back shut. The doors locked, and when he looked at the door, Deaton was watching them.

"A horse head? Really?"

"Think of it like the Godfather if it helps," Stiles groaned, trudging up the driveway. "Lydia's workroom will be the safest place for these."

Deaton was still frowning when they walked inside. "Allison is awake."

"Okay."

"She's completely mundane. She'll be able to break the normal barriers."

Stiles groaned again, a wordless, frustrated sound. "One thing at a time. I take it Chris is with her."

At Deaton's nod he continued. "Have him keep her in her room. Where did Payton stash Scott?"

"The room next to the workroom."

"Awesome. And Issac?"

"He's in the living room with your father."

"Alright. Let me put this shit away and we can figure something out."

Deaton nodded and closed the door behind them.

"I never thought you'd work with him again," Derek admitted as they climbed the stairs.

"Needs must," Stiles muttered. "I'm pretty sure I'll still dream of using a nail gun on him after this is over, but right now we need all hands on deck. Just because we've found Scott doesn't mean much."

Derek was silent, no response forthcoming. Stiles opened the workroom door and moved like an automaton, stashing the staff in the back of the closet and then searching for more silk. He could only find black felted wool, but it would do. He went back and carefully wrapped it in front of Derek before storing it next to the wooden staff.

He paused before leaving, looking at the black mirror still propped against the wall. Instead of reflecting the light, the smooth sheet of obsidian sucked it in, a hole of darkness that sent a shiver rolling down his spine.

"Is Lydia awake?"

"Haven't seen her this morning," Derek said as he closed the door behind him. "You look awful."

"I feel awful," He admitted. "I should probably shower before going to see Cas. I don't want to wake her up with my stench."

"Your dad brought back some groceries when he got off shift. I'll make something."

Stiles' stomach rebelled at the thought of food, the image of Cassie laying across the table making him tremble. Or maybe he was just that tired. He felt hollowed out, like he'd lost something creating the nidstang.

"Go shower," Derek commanded quietly. "I'll check your stitches once you're done."
Stiles nodded mutely and stumbled to his room. When he got to the bathroom, he stared dumbly at his reflection. Thank fucking god they hadn't been stopped. Derek's shirt was splashed with blood, stiff spots dried to a dark rust color. He still had some on his face, probably from his hand when he'd woken up the nithing pole.

He looked like he'd been up for about fifty hours and battling shadow people. He pulled off the jacket and followed it with the holsters, then Derek's shirt, pausing long enough to pull at his bandages. Blood dotted the inside from where they'd pulled, from what he wasn't sure, didn't remember.

The bandages went in the trash, the black threads standing out against his too pale skin. More scars on his torso.

Ignoring the voice in his head looking for something to blame (no good would come of it until they found Deucalion and his emissary) he toed off his boots and pulled at the tactical belt. The pouches fell with heavy thunks. He shimmied out of his pants and draped them over them, not wanting to see the flashbangs or be reminded that Chris had thought he'd need extra ammo. That he'd accepted extra ammo.

The shower was warm, moved over his skin and stung the raw skin of his chest. He cleaned himself, movements perfunctory, mindless.

Now that they had Scott, it was possible to call Caroline. Shit, he should have told her from the beginning. Derek and Cassie had almost died and it was his fault. He'd been so fucking shortsighted, so sure that he would be enough. Guilt ate through him, filled the hollowness that had echoed in the wake of the curse he'd created and pulled back. He'd almost failed, had only succeeded because of Payton. Even Deaton wouldn't have been able to help him. Everything thus far had only proved how ill prepared he was, reinforced how little he actually knew.

By the time he got out, the world felt dim and dark. Shadows curled at the edges of his vision, tried to sneak up and grab him. He blinked once, still saw them and shook his head. He'd need to sleep soon, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to manage it. Not until Cassie was awake again, at least. Maybe not until they left Beacon Hills.

Derek walked into the bathroom carrying clean clothes. When his hand moved to rest on the back of his neck, Stiles flinched from the warmth, saw Derek's expression darken. "I can't right now," He choked out, wanting to feel the steady reassurance Derek's presence offered while fearing it, knowing it would only make the thing coiling around his heart, burrowing into his lungs that much worse.

The door shut with an decidedly final click.

He dried himself off, pulled on the boxers and pants and ignored the shirt, walking back into the bedroom. Gauze was laid out on the bed, scissors and tape. Derek was nowhere in evidence.

A knock sounded and his dad peeked his head into the door.

"Derek said you might need some help."

Derek probably knew what he needed better than he did, the sight of his dad allowing him to take a deep breath.

"Yeah."

John said nothing as he methodically began to wrap his torso, making the bandages just shy of too
"That's not-Inaccurate."

"He also said if he ever had to do that again, he'd take the first flight to Scotland."

"Okay." Stiles hadn't thought it was that bad. He'd definitely dealt with worse. Then again, it was all a matter of perspective. His worse included ritual sacrifice and drowning himself. Payton's probably didn't. Always fun to set a new bar in someone's life.

"So what was 'that' exactly?"

Stiles managed to avoid the question long enough to pull a shirt (how was it another of Derek's?) on and go back to the bathroom. His dad followed, apparently intent on getting an answer. Stiles deflected by bitching about the tactical belt and the pouches, then the gun holster as he adjusted them needlessly.

"Stiles. I'm waiting." Which was code for 'I'm really not'.

"It was magic."

"Figured that. Why is Payton swearing up and down he's going to 'forsake the land and keep his ass in the damn water where it belongs'?" John was smirking a little as he said it, but the declaration sounded like Payton.

"Because it was hard, and it sucked, and I can't wait to never do it again."

His dad took a deep, fortifying breath and nodded. "You're alright though?"

"I'm fine." He wasn't fine, but he'd get back there. Eventually. "Do we have a computer here? I need to check and see if Abram messaged me back."

"I have no idea."

Stiles nodded tiredly. Par for the course.

"Derek made some breakfast. Kid looks ready to kill something."

"Probably pissed I ran off while he was unconscious," Stiles muttered, running a hand through his damp hair. His dad looked like he agreed with that sentiment, but he graciously remained silent on the matter. Stiles followed him out and downstairs, almost doing an aboutface when he saw Allison sitting next to her father at the table.

Cassie was gone.

"Where's Cas?" He demanded sharply.

"Miles is with her upstairs," Derek informed him calmly. Stiles thought he was doing an incredible impression of Deaton considering Allison was glaring at him like she was trying to figure out how many knives she could get in his back before someone stopped her. "Here."

Stiles accepted the plate covered in bacon and eggs before shifting away. He didn't even try to get close to the table, choosing to lean against a counter instead, Allison and Derek both in sight.

Allison's face twisted, the anger there chilling into smug cruelty. Her lips were too red against her pale skin, her eyes dancing with merriment. Shadows flickered and danced at the corner of his
vision, seemed to slither closer and closer in the jittery, disconnected movements of a flip book or a strobe light.

Stiles blinked and the image was gone. Just pissed off Allison remained. He was keenly aware of the guns resting below his elbows.

"So we've found him," Payton sighed. "What now?"

"Now you all leave and let us handle it," Allison snapped.

Stiles had a feeling the conversation was hitting round two. If the tired groans were anything to go by, at least two people were already fed up with it.

"I'll speak to Scott when he wakes up," Stiles said, not looking at anyone in particular. "Unless we have any new information?" No one spoke. "He's probably been going nonstop for the past few days. I don't know if he'll wake up when the sedative's worn off or if his body will take time to recuperate."

"How long does it normally last?" Chris asked quietly.

"About three hours on a typical alpha. Scott's been under for about two. It's safe to give him a few more doses, but I don't want to keep taxing his healing if we can avoid it."

"Caroline let you test it on her?" Derek asked, looking up from the stove, where he'd been flipping bacon.

"She saw the wisdom of having something that wasn't made from wolfsbane," Stiles admitted.

"And Rick was alright with this?" His dad asked, voice flat.

Stiles winced. "We didn't tell him until we'd finished."

"Jesus," John muttered. "You will not bitch at me about eating bacon for the next month."

Stiles didn't try to argue, felt Derek's incredulity without having to look directly at him.

"So we wait," Payton said, voice flat.

"Might be a good idea to get some rest," His dad interjected. Stiles was barely able to swallow the food in his mouth, choked it down and sat the plate on the counter before going to the cabinet and pulling down a coffee mug. An indignant sputter tripped out of his mouth when Derek took it from his hand and walked to the fridge.

"No coffee," The werewolf told him as he poured orange juice into the mug and held it out expectantly.

"I'm not five."

"Drink the orange juice Stiles," His dad said from behind him. "Payton, did one of you bring a laptop?"

Payton shook his head tiredly. "We hauled ass when Derek called. Didn't cross our minds."

"What do you need John?" Chris asked.

"Stiles needs to check his email."
"Not sure how I feel about checking my email on a hunter's computer," Stiles admitted. Russia or no, he didn't know what Chris would do with the information.

"I'll wipe it if you want," Chris offered. "It's this Abraham you keep mentioning, right?"

"Abram."

"He's the one who knows about the currents. If it helps Allison, I'll do whatever makes you feel comfortable."

Allison stood abruptly, her chair scraping, screeching on the tiled floor. Stiles watched her, wary of how she continued glaring at Derek. Shadows slipped over her skin, but the changes themselves miniscule. Just a little tilt, it seemed, and she was that person again, ready for her crossbow. He sat the mug down and crossed his arms over his chest, hands ready to grip one of the guns. It wasn't in the least bit surprising that she was too pissed off to notice. Or maybe she didn't actually perceive him as a threat. It was a tossup, really. And he didn't know if it was nice to be underestimated or if he wanted to shove it in her face, force her to acknowledge that there would be consequences if she stepped over the edge again.

He couldn't tell if the hallucination was gone after he blinked once, twice.

It terrified him to realize he'd probably shoot before anyone else even considered restraining her.

"They don't belong here."

"Stiles' father is here. I'd imagine you understand that," Chris said, voice calm.

"And now we have Scott again," She bit out, voice hard. "We have Lydia too."

"Lydia's only here because Cassie called her," His dad interjected. "And Scott was only found and brought in unharmed, unlike others I might add, because Stiles figured out how to find him. More to the point, he's here because I asked for his help. As the acting sheriff, I'll do what's best for my town."

"And we don't need them anymore," Allison said, voice cold. Stiles could see the beginnings of a matriarch in her, but she was still too quick to anger. There was potential there, to become something, someone, like Caroline instead of Kate. But it was being burned out by her temper, Kate dancing somewhere beneath her skin, waiting. He blinked again.

Still off, still unclear whether or not he was hallucinating. Damn.

"Do you remember how you got from your house to the loft?" Stiles asked, keeping his voice deceptively light. Allison's gaze fell on him, the same hatred Issac had exhibited making them fever bright. "No?" He asked when she didn't answer. "That means we don't know if you're under someone's influence, just like we're not sure about Scott. That means that outside help is your best shot at ending this without someone dying."

"This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been so selfish!"

The pan clattered on the stove and a low grade rumbling swelled and rolled through the room. Stiles glanced over to Derek, saw the tense set of his shoulders and his clenched fists. Moving carefully, Stiles walked over to him but didn't try to touch, hoped his presence would register and help.

"We're not doing this now," He said, trying to keep the edge from his voice and failing. "And I'm not getting into it with you. You just have to accept that we all had our ways of coping with what
happened." Apparently distance had only allowed the insinuations to fester. He was forever the bad guy to Scott's hero. Maybe that's what happened to side kicks. They got fed up and left, made enemies of themselves.

"You coped by rejecting your brother's pack and running away, you lied to us. And now you're back acting like you're the answer to our prayers?" Allison spat sarcastically. "You keep talking about being under the influence of the nemeton, about being controlled through it. What about you?" She snarled. "What if you're the one doing this?"

Stiles thought he was doing a remarkable job of not reacting to the constant barrage of accusations and images feeding into his brain. Violence itched under his skin, adrenaline pushing wanting reaching for action.

"Because if I was, I would have used the myriad opportunities presented to kill you," He answered easily, ignoring the stunned silence that bloomed in the wake of his declaration. "Or Scott, even Issac. If I was being controlled, I would have used wolfsbane powder instead of the sedative. Fuck, I would have shot him while he was in the barrier. Like fish in a barrel," He continued, ignoring how his father was looking at him. "Given his actions, I could have even justified it, you know, for the greater good. And yet Scott is upstairs, recovering. Unlike you, I can say with complete certainty that I'm aware of where I've been and what I've been doing for the past week."

Allison stalked from the room, taking the opposite entrance. It was very dramatic, her gait purposeful and quick. Predatory, almost feline. He shuddered, remembering the inhuman quirk of her lips. Not real.

It didn't stop the buzz of restrained movement, making him feel restless, twitchy.

"That went well," Payton said a minute later, breaking the silence.

"You're making a habit of pissing people off in this room," His dad observed.

"Last time I visited it was in the formal dining room," He shrugged, walking back to his plate. Derek was still tense, but he didn't look like a coiled spring ready to snap in half. "Much more Judge Judy then."

The eggs were cold and the bacon had gone chewy, but he ate everything and washed it down with orange juice. "Chris, you still up to letting me borrow your laptop?"

"Whatever it takes," Chris said, nodding.

Stiles bit back the comment that at least one of the hunters had their priorities straight, if only because he didn't want to lose access to the laptop. Instead he watched Chris walk out on quiet feet, leaving him with the weight of three stares resting on him.

"You know, one thing bothers me," His dad said, watching him carefully. "Not that I'm complaining, but you are an asset. If the others are being controlled, why not you?"

Stiles looked into his empty mug, wishing for coffee. "The only thing I can think of is that I wouldn't be worth the effort, either because I'd probably have the best chance of resisting or because I'm not close to the pack anymore," He said slowly. The alternative loomed, and he didn't want to think about it, couldn't, because that meant facing not only Allison, but Scott too.

"He's got a point, Stiles," Payton sighed. "If I wanted to wipe the local pack out and could control someone via their tether, I'd pick you before anyone else. Your gift is temptation enough, but you
also have an in that they don't. And-" Payton shrugged apologetically. "I still can't get any sense of her being ridden. Or McCall, for that matter."

"What about me?" Stiles asked.

Payton shook his head. "No. And I know that's not what you want to hear, but we have to consider that maybe she-" He waved a hand when the front door opened, the sound reaching them.

"What about the old magic, you felt that," Stiles reminded him. "Someone amplified echoes to confuse where magic is being used. Allison is completely mundane. She couldn't do that."

Payton conceded the point, but crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. "And if something triggered her, made her give in to her compulsion?"

"Perception," Stiles corrected mechanically. "And I don't know of what could do that. Even after last night, I didn't force feed Scott wolfsbane." And if there was ever a time he would do it, it would be after his brother had mauled Cassie and Derek.

"But she's not you," Payton reminded him.

"If you're done discussing my daughter," Chris said from the doorway. Stiles scrubbed his face and stared longingly at the coffee pot. Derek shook his head.

"Hypocrite, you totally gave my dad bacon," Stiles muttered.

"You poisoned your alpha, repeatedly, you're not allowed to whine about my health, especially when I need to check in at the station," His dad said, taking a pointed bite of the aforementioned food. "You, on the other hand, will check your email and then get some sleep, before I sedate you."

"Pistol whipping causes brain damage," Stiles reminded him, watching as Chris began setting up the computer. "It's what, eight thirty? It'll be eightish there too."

"He's had time to reply," His dad grumbled.

"No, I wanted to try and skype. It'll be easier if we don't have to play tag bouncing ideas back and forth." 

"I don't have skype," Chris said, looking at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Are you adverse to installing it?" Stiles asked, brow arching indolently. If he couldn't bitch at Derek or his dad, sniping at Chris came in a close second. Especially when he knew the outcome.

"I can," Chris growled.

Stiles took a moment to savor one of the few victories he'd be allowed while in Beacon Hills. It would be depressing, but then, Shaw's was waiting. He still had the prepaid debit and the burner phone. Caroline wouldn't be able to find them and they'd be safe while she cooled down.

The laptop was set up with several odd gadgets that probably qualified as 'spy shit'. None of it looked particularly necessary, but despite learning plenty of other things, he'd never learned what was required to set up a secure connection to the net.

Once it was done, Chris gestured to the chair, sweeping a hand like he was offering a throne. Stiles rolled his eyes and sat down, booting up the web browser and going to his email account. He had two letters, one from Abram and one from Leif.
Leif couldn't help him, Amund was currently out on the land doing something, although what could be important enough to face the Norwegian forest in December was completely beyond him. Stiles cursed the man's timing but didn't expend more effort than that, already opening the email and scanning the information presented.

"You read Russian?" Chris asked.

"Fluent," Stiles said with the same mindlessness he always did. Most of the information was as general as the vague bits and pieces he'd sent. Nothing concrete, nothing useful. He switched to the Russian keyboard and typed, asking to set up a video chat at eight, which would give the emissary time to read the email and get some sleep. He closed the browser out and sighed.

"I asked him to meet me on skype tonight."

"Sounds like a hot date," Chris mocked. Stiles decided to forgive him, because if Allison was his daughter, he'd be an asshole too.

"Chris, stop harassing my son," His dad muttered. "Stiles, sleep."

"I want to check on Cas first," Stiles said, doing his best to delay the inevitable. His dad nodded in understanding, but the look Derek gave him said he smelled bullshit. Stiles fled the kitchen, paused at the foot of the stairs when he heard Allison and Issac arguing with Chris.

The words were indistinguishable, knots and tangles of sound that carried through the house. Stiles had a feeling his presence was being debated and shrugged it off. Scott would be awake soon, and he could ask him personally. Given what he'd seen back in the grove, he was willing to lay odds Scott wouldn't try to force him out. And however much they disliked it, Allison and Issac would listen to the alpha.

When he opened the door to Cassie's room, Miles was stretched out across the divan at the end of the bed.

"She woke up for a minute about half an hour ago, mumbled for you and Derek and passed back out," Miles informed him quietly.

Cassie was able to talk. Stiles felt his eyes burn and nodded thankfully for the information. It did more to soothe his fears than seeing her throat healed.

"Dude, go get some sleep. I'll keep an eye on her," Stiles said, taking stock of the skinwalker's appearance. Miles looked like hell, dark bruises shadowing his eyes from lack of sleep. He nodded and got up, groaning loudly in a stretch before ambling out.

Stiles knelt next to the bed, eyes scanning Cassie's throat. She'd been changed, and someone had washed the blood out of her hair, or done a passable job of cleaning it. The skin was still shiny, but it had lost the unnatural pinkish hue, faded into pale white.

The door opened and closed quietly, Derek walking in and dropping to kneel beside him.

"If I'd shot sooner," Stiles said, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop them. He slammed his teeth together, closed his eyes and tried to push the doubt away. The guilt that had been building seemed to reach a tipping point with that awful statement.

If he'd shot sooner-

"It's not your fault," Derek said, eyes fixed on Cassie's prone form.
"Dude, you guys followed me here and then I almost got you both killed because I didn't think of the nidstang sooner."

"Payton says it almost pulled you in," Derek murmured quietly. It wasn't an accusation, but the quiet belied the words.

"I had to undo it, or he would have been under constant attack." Maybe even inside the wards. Lydia's home was steeped in magic and pain, with very little to redeem it.

"Like Portland."

"Worse than Portland," He muttered, cradling his face in his hands. The damn compulsion, which had been removed. "Even Rick settles for keeping people out, not haunting them and driving them insane."

"And you ended it," Derek stated, voice curiously hollow. Stiles looked at him from the corner of his eye, saw only a chilling blankness. Derek was being quiet in deference to Cassie's rest, Stiles realized. Otherwise he'd probably be getting yelled at, or worse. They might only be having the conversation because neither of them wanted to leave Cassie's side.

"Payton pulled me out," He reminded him. The words only made Derek tense, his jaw ticking in response. "Derek, I had to do something."

"You should have waited."

Stiles knew they wouldn't see eye to eye on it, would probably never agree with what he'd done. Paradoxically, he felt guilty, just not for what Derek wanted him to feel guilty for.

"I attacked my brother." He'd shot him, more than once, and cursed him. Even if the curse had been removed, there was no telling how long it would take for the magic to completely dissipate. The land had a habit of remembering things.

Derek remained silent, impassive.

"He almost killed both of you. I-What he did-"

Derek shook his head. "No, he had the chance," He said quietly. "He didn't take it."

"Then what was he trying to do?" Stiles snapped, feeling like Derek was trying to make him feel better, playing at semantics and grasping at straws to try and deny the obvious. He hated being patronized, had given Derek more credit than that.

"I don't know," Derek finally admitted, standing. Stiles thought he was about to leave, but Derek surprised him by toeing off his boots and climbing onto the bed, shifting so that he was spooning Cassie. "Come on, you need to sleep."

He paused, the sensation of guilt making him hesitant. He'd put Cassie there to begin with. Did he really deserve to be there at all?

"She'll want to see you when she wakes up," Derek reminded him.

Stiles moved slowly, waiting for Derek to change his mind, for Cassie to wake up and yell at him. But by the time he'd divested himself of the holsters and belt, the knife sheath and his boots, Cassie hadn't woken and Derek had closed his eyes, an arm draped over Cassie's waist. Moving carefully, he lowered himself onto the bed and turned to face Cassie, her profile only blocking half of Derek's
face from view.

His eyes burned when he thought about how close he'd come to losing them.

"We're here," Derek reminded him, as if he'd read his mind.

Stiles closed his eyes and exhaled, felt like he was drowning. "I don't know what to do."

"We'll figure it out."

It was minutes or hours later when he heard Derek speak, his voice quiet, worried.

"I won't let it take you too."

He dreamed about Heather in her parent's basement, waving an open bottle of wine at him and smiling. She walked backwards, never turning away from him. The bottle of wine was always just out of reach, even though she was offering it to him. His mother's voice echoed, the words forming a song about famine and the barren spring.

He woke up to Cassie flailing and rasping quietly, trying to speak. He took one of her hands and didn't allow himself to feel the pain shooting up it when she squeezed too hard.

"We're here," Derek said, voice quiet. "We're both here."

Stiles hummed quietly even as Cassie started crying, loud, ugly sounds coming from her still healing throat. Guilt washed through him when she reached to touch his face and wouldn't stop, hand moving over it as if to assure herself that he was really there. She did the same to Derek only a second later, desperate keening sounds filtering into the dark.

"Thought we were gonna die," She finally whimpered, the words mangled but clear enough for Stiles to feel another wave of guilt crash over him.

"No," He promised, hugging her. "Derek and I have survived worse and we're not letting anything take you from us. Nothing. No one."

He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed the vow wouldn't be tested.

When they stumbled downstairs, it was to the sound of arguing. Stiles heard something break and amended the observation, switching it to fighting. Cassie had an arm wrapped around his waist, practically had her nose in his armpit in an effort to get closer. Derek led them, although Stiles knew it was more out of desire to act as a meatshield than anything else. Especially with the sounds of Allison's shouting growing louder.

"What did we miss?" Stiles asked as he walked into the kitchen, taking note of the broken glass leaking water onto the table.

"Like you don't know," Allison hissed.

"I've been asleep, so no, not really," He drawled, immediately heading for the coffee pot. Derek cut
him off, pulling two mugs down. Cassie glanced around and, being satisfied with whatever she saw, pulled away from him and began hunting for a glass.

"Dad poisoned Scott."

"I thought you guys were civil now Chris," Stiles said, not bothering to pay attention to anyone. A coffee mug appeared in front of his face, making him crosseyed for a moment before he wrapped his fingers around it. The heat seeped into his fingers and palms, moved up his arms. The smell alone was enough to begin waking him up, blurring the edges of Cassie's night terrors.

"It was the sedative," Chris said, sounding exhausted.

"Have you slept yet?" Stiles asked, choosing to ignore the accusations of poisoning and the person making them.

Chris shook his head.

"Go to bed. We've got it covered for now."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Chris said, even though he looked ready to collapse.

"Allison, look at your dad. See that? That's exhaustion. He's been up, probably since the moment you disappeared. Micronaps do not count," He added when Chris opened his mouth. "I'm going to talk to Abram later and then we can figure out a plan of attack. Until then, there's no reason for you to be awake and pretty much every reason for you to get some sleep. I'm sure Allison can restrain herself for a few hours."

"And what about Scott?" Allison demanded, voice sharp. "Are we just going to hook him up to the generator and hope for the best?"

The mug clattered against the counter as he sat it down. "Run that by me again."

Allison sneered. "Dad brought the generator-"

"No," Stiles snarled, turning on Chris and pointing angrily. "Don't even fucking think it."

"Stiles-"

"You actually still have that thing?" He demanded. "I thought you two turned over new leaves and shit. I can't believe I fell for that line of bullshit."

"When the pack began to fracture I thought it would be best to be prepared," Chris admitted calmly, like he was admitting to stocking up on flashlights and batteries in case the power went out.

"Dad! How could you-" Allison started, all indignant outrage. It pulled at something dark, ground into his skin like a treaded boot pressing into his sternum. Allison's face shuttered, shadowed, the darkness making her fury brightened eyes all the more manic. Cold and sharp danced along his skin, the barbed tip of an arrow tracing the soft skin behind his ear.

(Had she taunted them, like Kate had toyed with Derek?)

"Considering the last time I saw werewolves plugged into one was on your order, I fail to see how you can be so surprised," Stiles snapped, the words cracking through the air like a gunshot.

"Stiles-" Chris started, the warning in his voice clear.
"Dad what is he talking about?" Allison demanded, face going pale. A wounded, animal grief replaced her fury, made her look almost innocent.

Stiles bit back the accusations trying to come out and shook his head. The broadhead slipped down the line of his jaw, making him shudder. "Fuck it. No. I'm not doing this. Chris, the generator is the last, and I mean the last option."

He left them there, poised in the kitchen like someone had hit the pause button on a remote. He stalked through the house, needed to get away, needed to be anywhere but inside walls, walls that went on forever but never long enough, never tall enough to let him breathe. The front door slammed behind him and he hit the cold air hard, feeling like he was cracking at the edges, would become nothing but shrapnel at the slightest pressure.

Soft and cold chapped lips replaced the sharp blade. Stiles inhaled sharply, pushed back at the phantom touch. Not real. It wasn't real. It wasn't her.

"It was Erica and Boyd, wasn't it?" Derek asked, voice quiet. Stiles didn't turn to him, hugged his chest tighter. "The night Gerard took you."

He needed to ground himself in Derek but didn't know how when Derek was asking him for that truth. That night, Jesus, everything about that night had been fucked. He'd kept secrets, better than anyone had ever given him credit for. And now he didn't know how to let them go.

"Stiles," His dad started. And how many people were going to ask? (Not as many people as wanted to really know, he was sure. Who would want to carry that weight?)

"Yes," He hissed from behind clenched teeth. Electricity buzzed beneath his skin, made his hands tense, fingers stiff. "Yes, it was Erica and Boyd. I tried to free them and I couldn't and then they went missing," He finished, voice shaking, trying not to think of Erica straining to try and help him, even unshakable Boyd looking afraid. The tension in his muscles hurt as he clenched his fists, braced them against his ribs. Fury vibrated through him, made him tremble from trying to keep it in, to keep his voice down, to hold back the angry tears that threatened when he remembered Erica snarling behind the gag, bleeding from still open wounds. Pain in his ribs. Dull and thudding, a ghost ache from a steel toed boot. She'd been so determined, even wounded and scared out of her mind. For him. She'd tried to save him, had thrashed and growled even when Gerard had turned the knob up higher and the buzz if the generator had pulsed in time to his blood throbbing in his ears. Throbbing in his face, pain blossoming along his cheekbone. He remembered their whimpers and tears as he'd told them he was alright. Even gagged and faces frozen in fear, it had been readily apparent that they hadn't believed him.

He remembered both of them nodding frantically when he told them to go back to Derek, both of them so fucking young and scared, looking at his bruised and battered body. He'd promised them Derek would take them back and they'd looked relieved for the few seconds they'd been alone, before he'd been pulled out of the basement. They'd had hope in that shithole. "She wanted to help me while Gerard had his fun and neither of us could do a fucking thing and then she was just gone."

The word broke inside of his throat, felt like it was being pulled free instead of released.

She'd never made it back to Derek. By the time Boyd had, he'd already been broken and lost. Stiles still didn't know if he'd done the right thing giving them that hope, given how things had progressed after that. It still taunted him, the question of trying harder, wrapping his hands, shit, being smart and turning off the generator or disconnecting the wires. What could have happened differently if he'd been half as smart as he'd thought he was? If he'd told someone, found Derek or even Peter, told his dad-Would they be alive, would the alpha pack had gotten them if he hadn't been so determined to wallow, a self centered child.
(Boyd had blamed him, he knew. Boyd had hated him, and he'd never tried to fix it because he'd earned that hatred.)

"Allison didn't know you were there," Chris said quietly.

"It doesn't change anything!" Stiles shouted, turning to see Chris and Allison standing in the entrance to the house, Allison ashen faced and wide eyed. His words seemed to echo in the winter air, to continue forming indefinitely until there was only the simple truth. For a second he wanted to hurt her, to tear into her and make her remember exactly what she'd done, what she'd had a hand in doing. Except Derek was right there, and he'd only hurt Derek trying. "Five fucking minutes. Just-Go back inside."

Allison vanished from view like so much smoke, Chris following her slowly. Cassie looked torn, unsure if she should leave but equally unsure if staying was a good idea. He turned away when he saw his dad's arm slip over her shoulder as he guided her to the front door.

He stared at the road, wondered if he got in the car and just started driving if he would be allowed the time alone. His body felt tight, needed to move, needed to crash headlong into something and sleep before he collapsed in on himself like a house of cards finally toppling.

"You never told me," Derek said, voice quiet. The grass crunched under his feet, shards of frost breaking beneath the pressure. Stiles ached, felt like things inside of him were crunching, grinding together and screeching to a halt.

"There was no point." It would have only hurt Derek in the long run.

"Boyd told me about Allison when he came back," Derek admitted. "He never said-" He stopped, eyes fixed ahead, unseeing.

Stiles didn't know if that made it better or worse.

"It felt wrong, to say anything to you about it," Stiles finally admitted. To anyone, actually. Somewhere between his mother's death and his father's descent into the bottle he'd missed the lesson on grieving properly, on expressing pain and fear. "I didn't know her that well. You-She was your beta."

"I wasn't much of an alpha."

"She was still yours."

"She considered you hers, in a weird way," Derek told him. "She-When I told her to pick between seducing you or Scott, to try and get Scott to join the pack, she picked Scott."

Stiles remembered, doubted he'd ever forget how pissed off Allison had been, how hunted Scott had looked, being the focus of so much attention.

"She didn't want to use you like that."

Stiles didn't know if that actually mattered. He'd been no better than Lydia, blind to who Erica was until she'd shown up in a leather jacket, the proverbial Eve proudly biting from the apple, a more subtle (but telling) demonstration of what she'd done, who she'd become.

"Besides Boyd, you were the only one that seemed to get her."

"She hit me in the face with my own carburetor."
"She was mad that you still weren't flirting with her."

A harsh, broken laugh escaped, puffed into the air and misted out. That made a scary sort of sense for her. He couldn't even think of her as older than a sixteen year old girl anymore, and that was strange, how old he felt compared to her memory. Maybe that was the tragedy. Some day he'd be too old to relate, to remember how significant she'd actually been.

"She made me want the bite for awhile," He admitted several minutes later. Derek said nothing, still staring at the road. "She seemed so much more- Everything. Like she actually became Catwoman."

"And you still wanted to be Batman?"

Stiles nodded, shrugging helplessly. "Scott had Allison and was bonding with Issac even then. And the Gerard thing," He said, shaking his head. "I didn't have much of anything. Erica made it seem like I'd have something." And Christ, it had been tempting, in the long hours when he'd been alone in his room, his dad disappointed in him, Scott sneaking around with Allison and saving the day, the kanima running lose, the pneumatic lift hissing in his memory, strangled helpless cries. The idea of pack, of being included in something, having people he could count on, had almost decided him more than once.

"You never asked."

"Every time I was around you, I was too pissed off to consider it."

Derek actually looked vaguely amused by the admission. "I didn't know her like I knew Boyd, or even Issac," He finally stated, the words lingering in the air. "I got the chance to know them as more than just betas. But Erica-" Stiles realized how lost Derek looked, the haunted shadows darkening his eyes again.

"I think you gave her a chance to be the person she wanted to be," Stiles told him, solemn.

"And she died."

"She did," Stiles agreed. There was no use denying it, trying to alleviate the guilt. "But you gave her more than she'd ever thought she'd have. And that has to be enough." Or else they'd both lose it, and it wouldn't do any good, years too late.

"You need to get back inside," Derek told him. "You're freezing."

He was shivering, although his skin was numbed to the cold. The pistols were also visible for the world to see. Thank god Lydia's neighbors were either at work or vacationing somewhere warmer. Snowbirds, the rich of Beacon Hills were useful for getting the hell out of the way, at least.

Derek led him in, not moving to touch him. Stiles took note of the sun in the overcast sky. Night would fall soon, and he'd have to get online and wait for Abram. That was going to be entertaining.

Allison and Chris were still absent when they walked into the kitchen, likewise, Issac wasn't present, probably with them. Stiles didn't question the wisdom of it, decided it wasn't his problem. Scott's pack wasn't actually his problem, just Scott.

Cassie and his dad were talking to Miles at the table. Someone had draped a tablecloth over the stained wood, hiding the blood. Melissa, Payton and Lydia were absent too, probably asleep or working on something, He stopped trying to guess, let Derek lead him to the table and sat down next to Cassie.
Derek sat a mug down in front of him, fresh coffee sending up a waft of steam that served to remind him that he was in a kitchen, surrounded by people that actually gave a shit about him, people he could trust to have his back.

He hoped he didn't fail them too.

"Where's Deaton?" Derek asked, moving around the kitchen behind him.

"Work, said he couldn't keep the clinic closed."

"He should be fine, the place is made of mountain ash," Stiles hummed. "And he probably needs some space from all the angst." God knew he was tired of it. Much more and he'd probably try to escape to his dad's house. It was possible he could ward it and keep everyone out, just for some peace and fucking quiet.

"Is there anything we can do now?"

"Besides wait?" Stiles asked, shrugging. "Not really. We've done this half cocked so far, and it hasn't worked. We need a better idea of what to do. Was Lydia able to find anything out?"

His dad shook his head. "I haven't seen her since last night. Figured she needed the sleep. Everyone's been running on fumes."

Stiles hummed noncommittally, weighing waking Lydia up against Lydia waking up and being pissed she slept so long.

"I checked the local reports, by the way," John added. "The numbers here dropped pretty steadily, but the crime rate spiked in the surrounding counties. A lot of unidentified bodies and a decent share of animal attacks. Chris looked over them for me and identified the ones that stood out. No wonder people voted me back in."

"It's not your fault dad," Stiles told him, chewing his lip. "Someone's pretty dedicated to this, whatever it is. How long has the ratio been shifting?"

"Noticeably?" His dad asked. "Since your senior year."

Derek cursed bitterly. "I should never have let him go."

"It's not like you knew he was going to go all Monte Cristo on you," Miles interrupted. "Like I said, revenge is a consuming thing."

"Trust me, we know," Derek muttered.

"Still, it says something, doesn't it?" Stiles murmured. "It means he intends to set up here once he's finished."

Everyone stilled. "You think so?" His dad asked, brow furrowing. Stiles noticed more wrinkles forming. At least he hadn't been the direct cause this time.

"It's what I'd do," He admitted, pragmatic. "He's been unofficially policing the area for years. If anyone tried to question it, it would be easy enough for him to say he was offering alliance to a young, inexperienced alpha that gave him clemency. It's reasonable from a diplomatic standpoint, so it's likely no one would have dug any deeper, and he was able to keep an eye on everything here. When things started deteriorating, he took his shot."
"That makes sense," Miles said, nodding thoughtfully. "If he's got someone plugged into the currents, they'd want to stay near the power source."

"But by wolf law, he could have done this at any time," Derek said. "He could have challenged Scott and no one could have done anything."

"Scott beat him before," Stiles pointed out. "He could be playing the long game out of caution. Maybe he wasn't able to build a pack after losing the last one. Or maybe he really wants an easily controlled pet. Even feral, Scott would be an asset. And revenge, you know. Scott destroyed something he'd been building for years. I don't think he wants revenge for the actual people so much as for how we ruined his plans."

"Sounds charming," Miles said, voice flat. "And his pet witch?"

"I don't know," Stiles admitted. "I haven't-I mean, aside from the Darach, I haven't really had to fight one. And even then I wasn't really fighting, I just operated as a mundane standby. I didn't even know about my gift until I was in Portland."

"Payton said you turned the land against McCall. That doesn't sound like typical emissary work."

Stiles chose his words carefully. "Rick and Deaton both operate in the parameters emissaries are trained to follow. It's mostly advising and defensive measures. It's just..." He winced. "I don't think the way they do." Despite their differences, it was the one thing that seemed to apply across the board. Emissaries did not proactively attack, that was always the responsibility of the pack. Amund had been different, but he'd also been trained during the Reformation. Even so, Amund was not pack, or even particularly close to it.

"Could work to our advantage though," Miles said, thoughtful. "If they're expecting someone that remains in a mostly passive role, you being here throws a wrench in their plans."

"Having everyone in the house, behind the wards, does too," His dad pointed out. "If he wants Scott to lose his anchor, then right now he's got to be pissed."

"It's why Argent needs to keep an eye on his daughter," Miles agreed. "The wards, will they keep influence out?"

"I don't know," Stiles admitted. "Amund never told me."

"This feels like running in circles. I don't know that we can do anything without knowing more," Derek told them, finally speaking up.

"True enough," Miles said, getting up and stretching. "Anyone up for a burger run?"

"Seriously?" Stiles muttered.

"We need food," Miles told him, voice pragmatic. "And if we have enough people and stick to the car, we should be fine."

"Should be," Stiles muttered. "We don't know if he has a pack or not."

"Pack won't do anything in public. They're probably scrambling for a plan as much as we are."

"Not as comforting as you think it is," He told the skinwalker, but waved a hand. "Dad, you know where everything is, you feel up to going? I'm going to wake up Lydia and see if she managed to find anything."
"I'll go with you," Derek said, already getting up. "Cas, you up for a ride?"

Stiles almost protested, the shiny skin of Cassie's throat suddenly looking like a target. But she looked-Grateful, appreciative of the offer. Stiles watched her nod, though she still wasn't trying to speak. Derek gave him a look that probably tried to convey something, but Stiles couldn't understand it, didn't want to.

"Be safe," He said, giving in gracefully. Three shifters would hopefully be enough to protect his dad.

They strode out, a shuffle of boots and jackets. Stiles felt incredibly alone, even knowing the upstairs was packed full of people. When he finished his coffee, it was tepid sliding down his throat, doing nothing to warm the chill in his veins.

Taking the time to wash his mug and set it on the counter (time to brace himself to wake up Lydia) he checked the pistols at his sides and his pockets for keys. Just in case.

That came to a screaming halt when he started up the stairs and Allison slipped from her room, closing the door behind him. She was watching him carefully, looking guilty. Stiles was immediately on guard, because the last thing he needed was to rehash the argument, not when the others were out and he was walking the knife edge of having a panic attack. Despite knowing that, he couldn't actually make himself turn around and go back downstairs.

"Stiles," She started, moving down the stairs until she was two steps above him. Even with the extra height, she wasn't much taller than him. Except he knew enough, or maybe he was just that paranoid, that he recognized someone using a height advantage. Allison was used to being an authority, had carried herself like someone to be listened to. Almost belligerently, he remembered that she hadn't done anything that should allow her that comfort.

One step up, closer to her and he wanted to bolt, but they were at eye level. It took every ounce of willpower he had to relax and not reach for one of his guns. Knowing equally well how uncomfortable silence could be, being intimate with the concept, he remained silent.

Her face shuddered, flickered. His eyes remained fixed on her, determined. For once he wasn't going to back down, wouldn't give the inch because he was tired of allowing it, was tired of flinching back. Allison was dangerous, but so was he. The shadow slipped away, revealing her normal face, the face of someone he barely recognized anymore.

"Stiles I didn't know about Gerard," She told him, looking wounded. He knew that she was trying, and he hated her suddenly, hated how innocent she looked, how some part of him wanted to believe in that innocence when he knew the truth, when she was still pretending like 'sorry' would cut it.

"It's been years. It hasn't been important enough to get into before, and it certainly isn't now. Now excuse me, I need to speak to Lydia." He shifted, ready to move past her.

"But I didn't know," She tried again, face flushing as she moved to block his way. Her lip wobbled, actually wobbled. It was a Scott expression, and he hated her for adopting it, hated the blatant manipulation. Like looking pathetic and sad would change anything.

"No," He repeated, voice quiet. Otherwise he might start screaming, so much volume buried in his chest he felt fragile, rattling with it. "I need to speak to Lydia."

She didn't try to block him again when he stepped past her, but when he felt long, callused fingers circle his wrist a snarl ripped itself from his throat. Allison was staring at him, eyes widening.

"Let me go." Breathe. Inhale. Exhale. It was that simple, wasn't it? So why did it feel so difficult?
"Stiles you can't do this."

"Do what, exactly?" He growled, pulling his wrist. Allison held tight, and he was prescient enough to remember that they were on a flight of stairs, and even if it was an accident, if she fell, Issac or her father would probably kill him.

"Act like it was my fault."

"I don't blame you for what happened to me," He bit out, feeling vicious. It would be so easy, so simple to just let go, to remind her that she didn't need Kate or her mother whispering in her ear, because she'd been that person, and no amount of werewolf fucking would erase it. The dark thing in him was poised and ready, promising freedom, whispering that he'd feel so much better if he just said it. The ensuing fight would be-

It would cause more problems than it would solve. Temporary satisfaction, long lasting consequences.

"Now let me go."

She dropped his hand, visibly stung by the accusation. Stiles continued up the stairs, not looking back. Issac was standing in the hall, eyes fixed on him. He didn't look happy. And he was in the way to Lydia's.

Stiles made an abrupt turn and walked to his room. His blood was too loud in his ears, pounded too loudly. He needed to calm down before he actually shot someone. The door slamming echoed behind him. Whimsically, he expected plaster to fall from the ceiling. It didn't, but it would have been a welcome distraction.

He dropped onto the bed and braced his elbows on his knees, cradled his face in his hands and tried to breathe. His face felt hot, his body tensed, ready to move, to act. His gift reached, his wants clashing with his will.


"Push back," He muttered. "That's all you're good at. Push back."

His hands were still shaking when Cassie slipped into the room. She knelt at his feet, he could feel her there, waiting, worried. Eventually, she pulled his hands away from his face, made him look down at her. Concerned eyes stared into his.

"You okay?" Her voice was still raspy, like a smoker's voice. He couldn't look below her chin for fear he'd snap, break open and the voice inside of him would escape and drag him along with it, over a cliff and headlong into a place he would never come back from.

"I'm so fucking angry," He admitted in a whisper, eyes stinging. "I just want to tear it all down." Make a clean slate of everything, stop hiding, stop dancing around issues. Giving in promised the freedom of saying all the things trapped in his skull and he still couldn't do it. Damnit.

Cassie whined softly in the back of her throat, even that sound tinged with the rasp of sandpaper. She let her head rest on his thighs, whined into the denim of his jeans. He automatically ran fingers through her hair, combed through it until he hit tangles and snags.

The door opened again and his dad stepped in, holding two bags with grease spotted bottoms. Derek and Payton filed in behind him looking exceedingly pissed off.
"I regret saving the Argent girl," Payton said, voice abrupt. "I vote we take her back."

"What did she do now?" Stiles dared to ask. Because he was a masochist at heart, obviously.

"Ranting about the past and how unfair it is that you're holding it against her," Payton replied blithely, opening his bag and pulling out a handful of curly fries. "Given what I've heard, she's damn lucky the pack will have anything to do with her."

"We've all got problems," Stiles muttered, not meeting anyone's eye. His dad tossed him a burger and he unwrapped it, resolutely not thinking about how much he wanted to pick a fight with her. "What time is it?"

His dad checked his watch. "Seven."

He took a huge bite of his burger and barely chewed before swallowing. "I need to talk to Lydia, see if she saw anything."

"Eat first," Derek told him, voice suspiciously flat. Stiles glanced at him from the corner of his eye. Derek looked fine, but that didn't mean much. And even though he was as in tune with Derek as he was with Caroline (more so, if he was being completely honest) he couldn't read anything from him besides the baseline tension that would be expected for the situation.

"The magic's worse," Payton added conversationally, right as Stiles was taking a bite.

"Seriously?" Stiles asked around a mouthful, earning exasperated looks from everyone in the room.

"It's thicker than this morning. Darker."

"It might be lingering bits of the curse. Some of it got into the currents."

"You mean it could last?" His dad asked, frowning. "I thought you undid it."

"I got most of it, but magic isn't just a plus b equaling c. The currents and the way they're feeding the old magic affected the equation."

"So it went from addition to calculus?"

"More or less," Stiles admitted, feeling a new seed of guilt taking root. "But once this is over, Lydia and I can find the old magics and pull them out completely. Between the two of us we should have enough to manage it."

"And until then, it's possible the territory and all the magic in it will attack Scott?" Derek asked, forehead creased in thought.

"Not enough to do what I did before, no. It might be uncomfortable, but it shouldn't pursue him."

"Can they amplify your curse?"

"I don't think so," Stiles said, shaking his head. "I mean, the parts in the currents aren't the whole, and I pulled a majority of it back into the staff." The remaining traces could linger like the other old magics, but at most it would be fractured.

"Anyone else concerned by the lack of activity?" Payton added. "I mean, I'm not complaining, but it was pretty much nonstop for a few days, and now it's quiet. Aside from the increase in the old magics, which may or may not be our doing, there's nothing."
Stiles shrugged and finished his burger, balling the wrapper and tossing it to his dad. "Gonna go wake up Lydia. Pray she doesn't eat me."

"I'll be sure to ask Thor to protect you."

"I'm an atheist dad, Thor wouldn't save me."

"No such thing as an atheist in a foxhole."

"Maybe," Stiles told him, walking out of the room and closing the door behind him. Lydia's room was at the opposite end of the house, and when he tried the door it was locked.

Two minutes of knocking and he gave up, pulling his wallet free from his pocket and slipping out a credit card. It took less than a minute for the latch to slip and the door to open. After stowing his wallet back in his jeans, he peeked his head in cautiously.

Lydia's room was no longer the pink hell it had once been, painted instead in shades of green. There was a defined lump on the bed, definitely her. He tried calling her name, a little louder, and still no answer.

Braving whatever retribution was sure to come, he slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Lydia, wake up. We've got food."

No answer.

"Lydia, I'm about to conference with a Russian emissary."

Still no answer. That was worrying. Lydia would have latched onto that even in sleep, he'd seen her do it. He gave up and sat next to her on the bed. She didn't groan or shift, and when he shook a shoulder through her duvet, she didn't stir.

The first stages of worry were slipping into panic, and he shook her harder. Still nothing.

"Lydia!" He shouted it right into her ear.

Nothing.

"Derek! Dad!"

He was checking her pulse when the door banged open, Derek and the others spilling into the room.

"She's not waking up."

"I'll get Melissa."

"Payton, can you read anything?" Stiles demanded, pulling open Lydia's eyelids to check her eyes and immediately recoiling.


When he'd been younger, he'd put Lydia on a pedestal, dehumanized her in the process of memorizing every feature. Obsessed. He remembered the way her eyes had changed with the color of her outfits, her makeup. Varying shades of brown and hazel. He'd been stupidly, selfishly infatuated with how her eyes had changed. Brown had never been a boring eye color to him. But now-
They were red.

"Her eyes are the wrong color." Red. Alpha fucking red.

"What?"

"Hey eyes are normally brown. They've always been brown," He repeated dumbly.

"Is she wearing contacts?"

Lydia would never, ever wear red contacts, just like she would never wear blue contacts. But he moved forward, needing the confirmation, needing to see. Stiles lifted a lid again, hoping it was a mistake, that it wasn't anything.

"They're brown," He muttered, her eyelid still pulled open as he stared down at her eye.

Melissa and his dad rushed in, and he was pushed to the side, staring blankly.

"I thought you said nothing could get past the wards," His dad said. It wasn't an accusation, but it felt like it. Stiles swallowed thickly and ran a hand through his hair, eyes still focused on Lydia's prone form as Melissa took her pulse, counting against her watch.

"Nothing-" He swallowed thickly. "Nothing can. But-" He scanned his memory, tried to think over the low rumbling in his ears that was purely his imagination. "She's the base of the wards. If something tried to mess with them-" He didn't know. Nothing should have been able to touch the wards at all. "I don't know."

Helplessness settled in, bore down like stones.

"Her pulse is steady, but she's completely unresponsive," Melissa said, face pinched in worry. "Do you know how long she's been like this?"

"The last time I saw her was last night, before we went to Deaton's."

Everyone else shook their heads. He'd been the last to see her. Shit.

"I can check the wards, but I'm not feeling anything," Payton told him, frowning. "Not even her connection to the wards, which is strange."

"Shit," Stiles muttered. "But they're still there, right?"

Payton nodded. "They haven't changed since you put them up. I don't-" Even Payton looked at a loss.

"And Stiles was the last one to see her?" A new voice said. He turned, saw Allison glaring at him from the doorway.

"You need to leave," Cassie snarled, moving between the bed and the door. Between him and Allison.

"Stiles found all of us. Stiles was the last to see Lydia. He can apparently turn the territory against Scott now. And this is normal?" Allison demanded, voice growing louder. "You all think that it's not the least bit suspicious?"

"I think a woman throwing accusations while people are trying to figure out what's wrong is suspicious, but don't mind me," Miles drawled, sounding tired. "I'm just the person being forced to
listen to your inane bullshit when there are bigger problems."

Stiles didn't know if he wanted to thank Miles or punch him in the face.

"How do we even know he's really the one doing everything?" Allison shouted, gesturing in his direction. "So far he's trapped all of us inside of a magical barrier, used magic to find us, cursed Scott, and he was the last one to see Lydia. He let Scott be attached to a generator," She snarled. "The real Stiles never would have done that."

Stiles didn't tell her the real him had probably never made it out of the water.

"Scott is currently compromised. Even he knows it. He took the sedative willingly," Stiles snapped impatiently. "And I'm breaking every rule I've been taught by letting him live after what he did. So back off."

"After what he did?" Allison demanded incredulously.

"Issac didn't tell you?" Stiles snapped, getting up. "About how Scott attacked him? Or what about his own mother? He attacked my packmates, he almost killed Cassie. I swore vows that don't give me the kind of breathing room your fucking code does, and I am breaking them for Scott!" He snarled. "Now get out."

"Lydia is my friend."

"In line with the accord between the Minot Coven and the Valdyr Pack, Lydia is under our protection," Derek said, voice quiet but hard. "As she is here under at the request of both the alpha's heir and the emissary apprentice. If you continue to interfere in Melissa's ability to aid Lydia, it will be considered an act of aggression from both the McCall pack and Argent family."

Stiles stared at Derek. He'd known about the accord, but he'd never thought it could be used to freeze someone out, much less that Derek would know how to use it.

"That means the alpha and the magister can take it out of your hide. Or McCall and your dad's," Miles explained bluntly, after everyone else had gone silent.

"You can't do that," Allison said, voice cold.

"That's politics. Pays to have friends in high places, apparently," Miles chuckled mirthlessly. "Now get, or do you care more about your grudge than your friend getting medical treatment?"

"Allison," A new voice said, quiet. Stiles saw Issac still in the hallway, looking more uncertain than he had in years. Unsure of himself, small. He recognized the behavior, remembered it from before, when Issac had been worried about his dad, his packmates, about surviving. "Allison come on."

Stiles didn't know if it was because Issac was calm, or because Allison expected the room to turn on her at any moment, but she left, stepping past Miles and making no attempt to conceal her disgust.

"Does she need to go to a hospital?" Stiles asked quietly.

"I don't know," Melissa admitted. "She suffered a concussion, but I don't know if this is a result of that or magic. We'd have to run some tests."

"Then we can't just let her sit here until it's over," Stiles said, rubbing his face. "If there's a chance it's physical-" He shook his head. "We set up a guard. Two people with her at all times."
"Payton and Allison," Derek said, voice firm. He didn't flinch at the looks being shot his way. "The longer she stays, the worse the fights are going to get. If she tries anything, Payton is probably the one person she won't know how to kill, and he can read magic. So if someone tries something, he'll notice."

"That could work," Melissa said, nodding thoughtfully. "It also puts some distance between her and the pack."

Derek nodded, as though he'd thought it but hadn't wanted to say it aloud. "Melissa, you had a shift, didn't you?"

"I go in at ten, but I can work the admission."

And like that, the room was moving, Payton carefully lifting Lydia from the bed and following Melissa and the sheriff out of the room. Stiles watched, numb.

"I need you to be honest, Stiles," Derek said, voice still quiet. "Is it pushing at you?"

"It's always pushing at me," He said, voice growing hard. They'd had the conversation before. It was just harder to ignore it when the past was steamrolling him. "It's why I've been trying to avoid Allison and Scott."

"What about Lydia?"

Stiles turned, his body protesting the whiplash of pain the movement caused. "You think I did this?"

Derek shook his head. "No, but you were the last one to see her. Was she doing anything that could have caused this? Changing the wards, casting anything?"

"She was going to scry with her fucking mirror," Stiles bit out. "I left while she was still doing whatever to wake it up."

Derek rubbed a hand over his face. The front door slamming echoed through the house. "Could she have seen something?"

Stiles opened his mouth, hesitated.

"What?" Derek asked, latching on to his dubious silence.

"Her eyes, when I first checked them. They were red."

"Like an alpha's?"

Stiles nodded. Derek exhaled, a short, terse sound that sounded older than it should. Stiles resisted the urge to reach out, to touch. Derek looked like the slightest pressure would trigger the violence tensing his muscles, coiling inside of him patiently.

"Can you use the mirror?" Derek finally demanded. "See if there's anything of what she saw in it?"

"Deaton would have a better chance," Stiles said, sitting back on the bed. "I'm not a reader."

"But can you try, just to get a sense of what happened to her?" Derek asked again. "Not to do the same spell she did, but find out what it was?"

"Maybe," Stiles admitted. He'd been intent on creating a barrier that could contain Scott and keep Allison out, but Lydia-
He thought about the lowgrade humming noise of a generator, the burns he knew he would see on Scott's wrists.

Miles interrupted. "What about your date with the Russian?"

"Fuck," Stiles muttered, rubbing his face. He'd actually managed to forget Abram entirely. Three important things to do, and he didn't even know if he was going to be able to manage one.

"Abram first," Derek said. "He might be able to help with Lydia too."

Stiles almost protested, but Derek was right. Abram might know how to help Lydia, and they were working on his timetable. "Okay."

It felt suspiciously like defeat when he followed the others out. Cassie leaned against him, supported him down the stairs and into the kitchen, where all of Chris' computer equipment was still set up. Issac was waiting, expression closed.

"Scott told me to go away," The beta said, voice quiet.

"Considering the past few days, that might be the first sane thing he's done," Miles quipped, sitting down on one of the barstools at the counter.

"Do you think it means he's coming back?"

Stiles waited, pulled up Skype and typed in his information before responding. Coming back, like he'd been on vacation. Issac was either hopelessly optimistic or suicidally naive. "Maybe."

"Is it true, that you're breaking your vow?"

Stiles didn't know how to answer that, didn't want to answer it.

"An emissary's oaths are considered binding and sacred. No one is recognized as an emissary until they've made all of the vows. Sometimes months can go between each one as they study and come to terms with them," Derek said, summarizing, dumbing down things Stiles had whispered when they'd been alone and he'd been afraid of reality. Vow sounded so much less sinister than initiation. Maybe that was the point. "The first is to work for the protection of the group they advise."

Stiles had made that oath before he'd even known it was considered an initiation. Asking Rick if he could help, if what he learned would make him useful to the pack. Rick's quiet happiness hadn't seemed abnormal, but in retrospect, knowing what he'd done, Stiles appreciated it more. He'd volunteered himself, however unknowingly. Rick had called it an auspicious beginning, even after the clusterfuck of the year before.

"One of the vows was-Is," Stiles corrected, when Derek didn't continue. "It's the one that was partially responsible for Lydia leaving. If a pack, or other creatures, can't or won't take care of a-" He didn't want to say problem. God, it would be so self righteous to say it that way. "If someone loses control, goes feral or rabid, and their pack or whatever won't or can't do it, an emissary is supposed to."

Because despite everything else, the concealment of the supernatural world took precedence. A feral or rabid wolf, a crazed witch, a ballsy kelpie, they all attracted notice. In a world growing smaller with every new invention, secrecy was paramount. Anything done, even if the person were completely out of their mind, could lead to more than just discovery. Wars had been started over a feral wolf killing someone. Scott had come dangerously close to doing the same thing.
"And you—You made that promise?" Issac asked, tilting his head up to look at him.

Stiles nodded. It went without saying that he was breaking it, had broken it the minute he'd decided to sedate Scott instead of shooting him. Because even under someone's control, nothing really changed. Dangerous. He was completely off book and he didn't know if he'd be able to justify it when the time came. (And it would come. He wasn't lucky enough to avoid it.)

"Lydia never said anything."

"Lydia thought she had to sacrifice everything she'd ever worked for or go crazy," Stiles shrugged. "Most of us didn't get a new pack and a girlfriend and a new best friend when it was over Issac. We got to choose between bad and worse. To be fair," He added, seeing the argument readying itself. "Most of us chose worse."

The chime on skype pinged before Issac could formulate an answer, and Stiles accepted, watching Abram's face appear on the screen.

"Dobroye utro," Abram said, expression curious as he stared at Stiles. Stiles noticed that Derek and Cassie were in view of the camera and nodded, hoping it was a signal that they were alright.

"Dobryj vyechyer," Stiles murmured. He continued on in Russian, ignoring the obvious feeling of frustration from everyone that couldn't understand him. "I'm in a tight spot."

"So I read," Abram said, nodding. "Unfortunately, I can't offer much in the way of information off of what you gave me, simply theories."

"I'm willing to take whatever you can give me," Stiles admitted. "We're working off of almost nothing."

"In theory, it's possible to exploit an existing tie," Abram told him. "But to access that tie, you have to create a bridge in the first place. You said there had been no sacrifices."

Stiles shook his head. "None. There's a reader that lives in the territory, and he didn't feel anything."

"Blood magic is the only thing strong enough to create that kind of access. Even with magical interference, the creation of a new bridge can't be disguised. Even if it could, it would have happened before the latent magic in the area could be augmented, so the reader you mentioned would have noticed."

"So," Stiles said, letting the word hang.

"If you are dealing with the manipulation of the currents, and given your experience, it almost certainly is, someone has found their way in."

Stiles ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "How is that possible?"

"It shouldn't be. If I had to dare a guess, I would say that it has to be one of you three, or the reader that you mentioned."

"I don't think Deaton would do this."

Abram shrugged. "It has to be someone."

"Okay," Stiles said, putting that disturbing thought to the side. "What can I do about it?"

Abram looked dissatisfied with his disregard of the potential enemy, but followed along, if with an
obvious sense of reluctance. "You can destroy the connection," The Russian started, looking grave. 
"But I don't know if that will trap the presence there."

"I'd really like to avoid finding out, if possible," Stiles muttered, remembering what he'd been told
before. Pulled in. Would the witch or Deucalion linger there, another whisper in his skull? Would
they exploit them even more, if given the opportunity and few options? "It could backfire
spectacularly."

"There is a consideration," Abram admitted reluctantly. "If they're bridged, they are connected."

"Yeah."

"As you are connected."

"Okay. If you're implying that he can manipulate us through it, we've already gone over that page.
It's yes, and it sucks."

"No path is truly one way," Abram reminded him. "You are both connected to the same base, but
you need to complete it. You require a-" Abram paused, looking for a word.

"A circuit," Stiles muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose, an idea already forming.

"I suppose, if you want to see it that way."

"This is going to be painful, isn't it?"

"It's a risk," Abram agreed. "But I don't see many options if you want to deal with it now."

"Yeah," Stiles sighed. "Thank you. I also have another problem."

"Another one?" Abram asked, brows shooting to his hairline. "Bad days there, Gena."

"A reader under our protection, she's been serving as the base of a complete warding. Something got
to her. She's completely disconnected from everything, including the wards. They're still standing
though."

Abram looked surprised. "That should be impossible."

"That's part of the problem. We don't know what happened."

Abram shook his head. "I don't know much about wards."

"It uses blood as a bridge and ties to a person."

"Dangerous," Abram said, clucking his tongue. "It sustains itself by draining a person, am I correct?"

Stiles nodded. "Yeah. It's part of the reason I'm worried. One of my people can't find the connection
between her and the wards anymore, but they're still feeding from something."

"I don't know," Abram admitted. "It's a puzzle, one that should not be possible at all. Blood magic is
personal, by it's very nature. Nothing should be able to interfere with that."

"Shit."

"I'm sorry," The emissary apologized. "I'll attempt to find an answer, but until then," He raised his
hands in defeat.
"Thanks anyway," Stiles sighed, rubbing his face. "And for the advice."

"Some day we will have to meet face to face and discuss what you experience."

"Will it involve vodka? Because I'm more of a whiskey kind of guy."

"You've never had good vodka," Abram said, offering an encouraging smile.

"I'll keep that in mind," Stiles said, trying to smile back. It was probably a total failure, but Abram didn't call him on it. If he made it out, he'd tell Abram anything he wanted to know, as long as he could be drunk while he did it. There was no way the conversation was happening sober.

"Dadźbóg keep you safe, Ginnadiy" Abram said, growing serious again, any trace of humor gone. "I'll pray for you."

"I'll need it."

The link went dead between them and Stiles leaned back, groaning and running a hand through his hair.

"That seemed short," Miles commented. "And were you guys talking about vodka?"

"Not all of us require ten tons of metaphors and shit to get a point across," Stiles sighed, trying not to think about the obvious answer. "And at some point in the future, he wants to sit down and discuss the experience. It will most definitely involve excruciating amounts of vodka."

"The Bratva will be visiting. How exciting," Derek said, deadpan.

"Hey now, they are not like that. And who knows, I might go to Russia."

"No, you won't, because they're exactly like that," Derek countered mulishly.

It was a long standing argument, one Stiles couldn't really argue against because he didn't know. What little he'd learned about Russia's supernatural world made it sound, yeah, a little like the mob. But he didn't know, and frankly, he wanted to keep it that way.

"Bratva?" Chris asked, walking in. "You've got friends in the Russian mob?"

"No," Stiles groaned. Chris busied himself making a cup of coffee. "He's not Russian mob. And he may have given me an idea, but I need to check Lydia's mirror first."

Because her alpha red eyes bothered him. Not because they'd looked so out of place in her face (although they had, they'd been terrifying) but because what their presence had implied.

"Where's Allison?" Chris asked, switching topics.

"Hospital with Payton and Melissa. Lydia got hit with something, we think. Or it could be her concussion," He added, even though he didn't believe it. "I'll be back down later."

"I'm going with you," Derek said, frowning. "If it managed to hurt Lydia, it might get to you."

"I'm not recasting the spell, just trying to peek in on what happened. Like you asked me to," He reminded him.

Derek shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Besides, your dad instated the supernatural buddy system."
"It's not like I'm leaving the house," Stiles argued. "And Lydia's room is made of mountain ash."

Derek's frown deepened. "And yet she's still in the hospital."

"Derek, you can stay outside the door. If something happens, you can call for me," Chris said, punctuating the statement with a sip from his mug. He looked better for the sleep, despite how little he'd actually gotten. Stiles knew every little bit helped, but it felt like after the whole mess was over, they'd probably sleep through Christmas and straight on to New Years.

Derek followed him upstairs, stopping him when they got on the landing.

"What are you planning?" He demanded, voice quiet.

"I need to check this out first," He hedged, not because it was the truth, but because he had to figure out how to word everything without making it a lie. Having said it, and ignoring the blatant disbelief on Derek's face, he pulled away and walked into the workroom.

After rooting through his bag, he gave up. He only had chalk and sharpies, neither of which were going to work. Chalk wouldn't stick and if he sharpied Lydia's mirror she might actually kill him. Scrambling through her pantry, he finally found chalk pens, made a note to buy them when he saw 'water soluble' printed neatly on the side. Lydia's sense of overkill was making his life infinitely more convenient.

The structure of the spell itself wasn't difficult. In the attempt to learn (one that had been an abject failure) he'd tried all sorts of structures, each one tweaked slightly to try and imitate Rick and Deaton's abilities. The closest he'd ever come was the eight ball Derek had destroyed, and even that had taken weeks.

He didn't have weeks.

Five minutes later, Stiles started chanting out the runes, forcing himself to follow them, to connect to then. He had enough trouble examining his tie to the nemeton, but trying to look back or forward was still entirely beyond him. His head ached as he kept speaking, trying to follow a path that he could barely feel. Even if the past was solid, lacking the myriad potentials of the future, he still didn't know how to see, and his frustration crept into his voice, making the syllables harsher than he intended. The further he went, the more his head ached, like a vice clamping down on it. That thought reminded him of Scott, hand clamped around Cassie's throat. Scott, fist covered in blood from Derek's stomach, from his internal organs-

Derek was fine, he reminded himself. Derek was sitting five feet away, breathing, healed. Derek was alive and watching over him. Derek would pull him back, had somehow always managed to pull him back. Somewhere in the back of his mind he heart the heartbeat and knew instinctively who it belonged to, knew it was buried in the sound of the ocean and water was like glass, a reflection in a mirror, ripples and light-

He choked out something that was supposed to be the incantation when the pain in his head disappeared and the resonances echoed and thrummed, bringing the past to him.

Jennifer's face, her healed face, stared at him in the mirror, eyes flashing from red to blue to red again. The phantom traces of her real face, the one she'd hidden behind magic, drifted like mist over her skin, an aura that made his stomach twist.

"Can't you hear it, all those voices? All that pain?" Jennifer said, her mouth was twisted in a vicious smile, completely predatory. She looked ready to say something when the mirror went dark, rippled
like water. For a moment the play of shadows and dark made his eyes hurt and they tried to focus
when he realized the ripples weren't moving in, like a stone had been dropped, but out. It moved
slowly, like roofing tar, with a disturbing lack of sound.

There was no sound.

Turning around, he opened his mouth to call out for Derek, to tell him to get Chris, but the doorway
was gone, revealing only the wall.

"Derek! Guys!"

"My my my, haven't you grown up so fine," A voice purred. Stiles turned, stumbled back two steps
when he saw Jennifer standing in front of him, eyes flashing red. The room was gone, and he was
standing in the clearing surrounding the nemeton. The stump was gone, replaced by a tree, a white
oak the stood taller than any of the other trees in the forest, the branches reaching out into the
surrounding forest like fingers. "You really shouldn't have come back."

Jennifer was stepping forward, her hips rolling seductively. Her smile sent his hackles up, made him
want to use a brick to bash it in, until even her torn, claw ravaged face would look beautiful in
comparison. "Were you looking for me, sweetheart?"

Stiles closed his eyes and exhaled. Jennifer was dead. He'd been there when her body had been
cremated. He'd watched Deaton purify the ashes before Scott and Lydia had scattered them in a
running stream outside of town.

"You're not real."

"I'm hurt Stiles," Jennifer cooed. "Of course I'm real. Haven't you felt me? I've felt you," She added,
and he could feel her breath on his cheek. Her nose nuzzled his chin and he could feel her lips-

"You're dead. I'm being fucked with," He muttered, trying to step back. The world held him fast,
reached up and wound around his feet, up his ankles and calves until he was unable to move. Pain
needled his flesh, the rough surface of bark pushing beneath his skin.

"You know people can die and still be alive. Just like you," She whispered. "That's why we're so
close, Stiles. We died, and it fed the world. We gave ourselves and now we're the same. Gifted
people, betrayed by those we considered most dear."

"You're not real," He said again, scrambling for something, anything to push himself out, away, to
break whatever he was trapped inside. Roots grew out or in, tugged and broke with each movement.
Veins and arteries pulling taut, snapping.

"Don't I feel real?" She asked, pressing her body into his. Stiles smelled the damp rot of old leaves
and the sharp of evergreen in her hair. He opened his eyes and stared down at her face, saw her coy
expression below the fragile layer of the Darach's face, felt his stomach roil. Don't look. The lines
formed behind his clenched eyelids, his brain tripping over the simple angles.

He stuttered it out, past the taste in his mouth. Dead meat, rotten and putrid. The syllables burned his

Jennifer pushed him away with a snarl even as her face shifted and changed. The snarl deepened,
echoed around him in the darkness.

The world shattered at the stave completed itself, swept around him and washed the illusion away.
When he blinked, he was inside Lydia's workroom again, the mirror sitting in front of him. The white chalk still marred the perfect surface of the darkness, reflected in the depths of the glass.

"Stiles?" Derek asked, concerned.

He blinked again. Jennifer's shifting face transposed over another flashed, tried to hide beneath the tissue paper thinness of the Darach. A multiple exposure in motion.

He got up on shaky, sleep deadened feet and took a deep breath. "Derek."

"Are you okay?"

"What color were Jennifer's eyes?" Christ, he hadn't meant to be so blunt, but words were hard when his head was swimming. The ghost sensation of his circulatory system pulled to and fro, stretched tight like a rubber band ready to snap made his limbs feel too light, too confining.

Derek's sharp inhalation hurt, and he hated himself for asking. But if anyone knew, if anyone would know, it would be him.

"Green."

Stiles exhaled and fought the urge to cry.

"Jennifer was the sacrifice used to create a bridge," He said, voice shaking. It was difficult to meet Derek's gaze, to hold it. "We should have suspected something when we found her on the stump."

He should have thought to suspect something. But no, he'd just thought it was Deucalion and his fucking revenge fantasy. Not once had he considered the possibility, the one that had always been staring him right in the face. Jennifer would have been a hell of a sacrifice, and they'd been too caught up in the changes to notice. Even Deaton could have missed it in the upheaval.

Shit. He moved forward, his knees not bending correctly, feeling stiff and old, remnants of the vision. Derek followed him, concern obvious. Stiles ignored it, took the stairs feeling like he would pitch forward at any moment.

Stupid. Stupid mistakes. Assumptions.

Issac was still sitting in the kitchen, watching Cassie and Chris speaking in quiet tones.

"Issac," Stiles started, his voice cracking.

"What did you find?" Chris asked, pausing when he actually looked at Stiles. Stiles saw the concern there, the immediate onset of paranoia. Chris' shoulders straightened, his body tensed.

"When he attacked you, are you positive it was Scott?"

Issac looked confused by the question. "I-It smelled like Scott."

"Like Scott's alpha form?"

Issac shook his head. "He's never tried to take it, not in front of us at least."

That was an oddity to be examined at a later date. "But the scent, was it exactly like Scott? Was there anything-Did you notice anything off?" Alphas smelled different depending on what form they took, it had been one of his first lessons in werewolf lore. Scott shouldn't have smelled like his human self, or even that of his beta form.
Issac shook his head. "I didn't really notice. He hit too fast. And after-" Issac actually looked guilty. "There was too much blood, I wasn't paying attention."

Stiles ran a hand through his hair.

"Stiles, what are you thinking?" Chris asked, watching him intently.

That if he was right, he'd done a number of fucking terrible things to Scott, and Scott hadn't deserved them.

"We were wrong, there was a sacrifice to create a bridge. It was Jennifer."

"Miss Blake?" Issac asked. "But she died years ago."

Stiles nodded grimly, letting them absorb the significance of that statement, of how bad it actually was.

"Not that this isn't good information to have, what does it have to do with Scott attacking Issac?"

Chris looked wary, rightfully so. Stiles knew he was acting weird, but coherent thought was still difficult, much less actual articulation.

"Because I don't think it was Scott. I think it was Peter."

Derek made an angry noise, one that sounded like a dozen epithets and accusations tangling, vying for the first chance to escape.

"I'm sorry," He repeated. "Look, I'm sorry. But this makes more sense than Deucalion and a random witch fucking with us."

"How does Peter make more sense?" Derek snapped, eyes glowing blue.

"Because when I tried to see what Lydia had done, Jennifer appeared, and then I was pulled into an illusion. When I broke it, I saw him. Christ, Derek. You know I wouldn't say this unless I had a reason."

"Then list them out," Chris said, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Li-Are you serious?" Stiles sputtered incredulously.

"You just admitted you were caught in an illusion. Whatever Lydia did with that mirror, it could have just as easily done something to you."

Stiles hissed a breath out through his clenched teeth. "We all know Peter is patient and smart. He's good enough to hide in plain sight and divert attention. Derek's mom knew what the nemeton was, so chances are he did even before the sacrifice. He grew up around here, he probably knows more about this place and the nemeton than any of us combined. We never confirmed who killed Jennifer, we were just glad she was dead. And if he used her, he has access to her knowledge and maybe her gift, which included illusions, fucking with people's perceptions of reality." He paused long enough to let that sink in.

"And if I'm right, he might have tried to frame Scott. Every time we were attacked, he took out the people that would recognize Scott first. Issac, then Lydia, who is probably the biggest danger to him. The thing with the mirror? Maybe the mirror didn't have as much to do with it as we thought. He was connected to her, remember? He skullfucked her for months. Rule one of magic, once a path is open it's almost impossible to close. If she saw him, he could have used whatever was left from his
resurrection to knock her out."

"It makes sense," Chris admitted slowly, cautiously. It was clear he didn't entirely believe it. "Getting her out of the way would have to be a priority."

"Peter's not an alpha," Issac reminded them.

"The twins," Stiles said, realization dawning. "If Peter's been planning this, the twins were probably the perfect targets."

"If he's an alpha, why would he come after Scott?" Derek countered.

"Power? Revenge? Shit Derek, to fuck with us? I don't know. But he is the one doing it. I know how he talks. 'My my my, haven't you grown up so fine'? That was one hundred percent Peter. Creepy innuendo was his thing, not Deucalion's."

"What if Deucalion is trying to throw us off?" Derek argued, voice growing louder, echoing through the kitchen.

"I know how much you don't want it to be Peter. But it makes the most sense," Stiles started.

"Don't-" Derek snapped.

"Don't what? Pretend that I know exactly what you're going through? I've been on eggshells because I thought Scott tried to kill Cassie and if he tried to go after either of you again, I-Shit. I know how fucking hard it is."

"Peter doesn't have a reason to be doing this," Derek started.

"He's never needed reasons. What if we were wrong, Derek? What if Peter was the one that killed Jennifer? What if he's the one that's been fucking with us? Deucalion was patient, but he wasn't Peter. Dude, Peter bit Lydia knowing she could bring him back, before any of us knew she even had a gift. He played around in her gray matter for months until she drugged everyone, including you. He's that kind of strategist."

"Why would he reveal himself now though? If he's so patient and smart?" Derek snapped.

"My best guess is we changed his plans. Lydia coming back would have been one thing, but we came back too. He told me I should have stayed away. We're a completely different pack, and if we were killed, it would bring Caroline in. That's why he didn't kill us. Remember, you said he had the chance and he didn't take it."

Derek was watching him carefully.

"Are you sure you're not being tricked by the nemeton?"

"Am I-Dude!"

"If we're worried about Allison and Scott we have to worry about you being influenced too."

"I can't believe this," Stiles snapped. "Are you that desperate for it not to be Peter?"

"You've been so sure it was Deucalion, and then Scott attacking us. What else am I supposed to think?"

"You're supposed to remember that unlike those two, my anchor is stable and I've got shit to balance
me out. You're supposed to actually consider the possibility that I wouldn't say this without reason, because I know how fucked it is for you!"

"You're completely changing your opinion from what it was!"

"Bullshit! Nothing is different. Peter still wants the pack to self annihilate for whatever reason, just like we thought Deucalion did. I know you don't want it to be him, but you have to at least consider the possibility that it is. He disappeared, and unless he settled down and opened a nice s&m club and you didn't mention it, no one ever heard from him again," Stiles tried. Derek's frown deepened. "He could have easily killed the twins. He knew to hit when they weren't together, and he had a better chance of approaching as an old war buddy than Deucalion did. The twins were violent, not stupid. One whiff of Deucalion and they would have bolted. But Peter had an in.

"He knows magic, he knows this area and he knows the local lore. And he knew us, at least back then. He knew us better than Deucalion ever did. He would have known exactly when and how to get the maximum effect. Deucalion wouldn't have known how to play us like this."

"Why?" Derek demanded angrily, spreading his arms like the answer would physically manifest between them. "Peter had no reason to come back, no reason to go through all this trouble. We let him live. Why would he risk it?"

"I don't know, alright? Yes, Deucalion has the obvious motive, but all of this screams Peter. You know I wouldn't say it unless I was sure. You know that."

Derek stared at him, and Stiles hoped he saw how much he didn't want it to be Peter either, that he didn't want to suggest that another person in Derek's family had to die. That Derek might have to go up against him again.

"I'm sorry Derek. I'm sorry," He whispered, feeling the guilt gnawing at him. First Cassie almost dying, Derek getting hurt, cursing Scott, forcing Derek to chase him back to Beacon Fucking Hills, all of it culminating in accusing his uncle of murder, knowing what it meant when he said it. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I brought you here, I'm sorry you're here dealing with this again. I'm sorry."

Derek shook his head, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

"It does make sense," Derek admitted, moving to lean on a counter. Stiles glanced around the room, saw the pitying looks they were receiving. Cassie looked ready to cry, Chris looked pained, and Issac-

Issac looked dumbfounded. Not entirely surprising.

"Look man, I don't-I know you don't want it to be him. I know why you don't want it to be him. But-But if it is, we can't run away from this. He's got the keys to the kingdom and they don't stand a chance."

Derek looked up, his eyes focusing on something in the distance.

"What if that's what he wants?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if he wants Beacon Hills?"

Stiles shook his head. "He could fight Scott for it the normal way, one on one. By the time he became an alpha, Scott's pack was destabilized. He's had the power of the nemeton backing him."
"Except Scott is in a relationship with an Argent and his stepfather is the sheriff. He's your brother, and you're connected to Caroline-"

"But I couldn't interfere," Stiles protested. "If he followed the protocols and won in a fair fight, there would be nothing we could do."

Derek looked at him like he was stupid. "Even you don't believe that," Derek told him. "There would be some sort of backlash from it. But if he got the pack to turn on each other, if he manipulated Scott into taking his beta's life, Chris couldn't step in. If Scott killed Allison, he'd know Chris would do the dirty work for him, leaving the territory unclaimed. Peter could step in without anyone ever suspecting a thing."

Stiles stared at Derek, horror quickly swamping the tiniest bit of admiration he felt at such a neat plan.

"Argent would probably book it out of town and dad would just be glad someone was around to guard against anything the nemeton draws in, especially since he and Melissa weren't there when we fought him," Stiles added. "But why? I mean, I get that this was your family's territory. But he's never seemed overly sentimental."

Derek shook his head. "He was, once, at least with some things. And it's not just the family territory. The nemeton is here and he has a way of using the power it generates. He'd need to be close to it, wouldn't he?"

"I don't know," Stiles admitted. "Rick thinks distance helps because there's interference from other currents, that sort of thing. But he's not positive. Abram thinks the tie remains the same wherever you go, and Amund says that no one actually know how it works, that it's all theories. So," He shrugged. "It's in the air. I still don't understand why he's so focused on this place. You guys lost everything here. He doesn't strike me as the type to embrace the whole phoenix metaphor. This place has been shit for you ever since the fire."

"Before that," Derek muttered. Stiles flushed, remembering Paige again and making an apologetic sound before bumping his shoulder against Derek's, allowing himself a measure of comfort when Derek didn't pull away.


"Melissa is completely mundane, and wouldn't have known the illusion for what it was. I only saw an alpha. I didn't know if it was Scott or not, because I've never seen his alpha form. That's why I need Issac to remember if he smelled like Scott. In his alpha form, he wouldn't."

Chris shook his head. "Scott hasn't been cleaned up since he was brought here. It was too dangerous."

"Okay," Stiles said slowly, not connecting the dots Chris was presenting.

"He'll have blood on him if he did any of it, even trace. At the very least, he'll smell like one of you."

"His clothes, were they the same as the ones he wore the day he disappeared?" Stiles asked.

Chris nodded in assent. "They should be in worse shape than they are."

Stiles blew a breath into his hands, thumbs pressed against the bridge of his nose. "We need someone unbiased to check his scent."
"Miles has the best nose of everyone here," Derek said, voice quiet. "He's downstairs with him."

"Chris, this is your call," Stiles said, staring down at the counter. He couldn't be the one to decide, didn't know if he could trust his own mind anymore. Jesus, he didn't have the right to make decisions, not if he'd fucked up so spectacularly.

Chris left them alone, and Issac made no attempt to hide the fact that he was following him.

"I'm sorry," Stiles choked out again. "I'm so fucking sorry I got you into this."

Derek shuddered violently, his whole body wracked with movement. Wordlessly, he left the room.

Stiles didn't try to follow him.

Cassie got up, her chair scraping on tile sounding loud in the room. He watched her walking from the corner of his eye, saw her pause next to him.

"I'm going to go talk to him," She said, voice quiet. Stiles didn't protest, just felt hollow. Even when she wrapped her arms around his waist from behind and hugged him, her breath lost in the layers of bandages beneath his shirt. Just-Empty.

God, he was such a colossal fuck up.

"I love you," She whispered quietly.

"I love you too," Stiles mumbled, feeling close to tears.

She slipped away slowly, her touch lingering even after she'd gone. The warmth dissipated, was almost gone when he heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Not sure if he would break down entirely, he didn't look, was afraid that Scott would be there or worse, that he wouldn't.

A strong hand gripped his shoulder and spun him, and he was being held in one of the tightest embraces he'd ever experienced. Scott. It was Scott. Awkwardness descended, because Scott was hugging him, and they hadn't hugged since-Jesus, in years. Not since the wedding.

"Thank you." It was said with such blatant relief, so much undisguised gratitude that Stiles couldn't stop the salt sting of tears burning his eyes, the noises in his throat. Words failed, were lost entirely because what was he supposed to say? He'd led them all around like he knew better, and he'd done nothing but get them hurt or hurt them. Even Chris had listened to him, and in the end he'd been wrong. Stiles bit back a sob, because he wasn't supposed to have this again, hadn't expected to have it, certainly didn't deserve it.

When Scott finally pulled away, they were alone in the room, Chris and Issac absent.

"Thank you," Scott repeated, face wet. Tracks of clean skin cut through the dirt and grit. "Stiles-God, thank you so much."

"I didn't-" Stiles gulped, shaking his head violently. "I didn't do anything." Except make things worse.

"You found Allison and Issac. You found me."

"I cursed you and let you get plugged into a fucking battery."

Scott shook his head. "You did what you had to do. You kept my pack safe," Scott told him. "Miles told me what happened. Chris-He could have killed me. You figured it out. You-I didn't want you
here and-" He paused when Stiles flinched and reeled back. "No, not like that dude. I-You were safe in Portland. You had your pack. I didn't want you pulled into this nightmare. But you came, man. You still came through for me. I'm so sorry. Everything- You came." Scott said it like it was a wonder, a miracle Stiles had shown up at all.

It didn't erase years of pain, or bridge the void that had formed between them. Stiles doubted anything would ever fix what had happened. But he took comfort in Scott's hands on his arms, strong and steady. Even with the bubbled, burned skin on his wrists, it was something.

"Chris said you think it's Peter," Scott finally said, pulling back an increment, like he knew he was invading Stiles' space but didn't want to let go.

"We'll wait until my dad gets back," Stiles said, exhaling. "You need a goddamn shower. You smell like the ass end of a kanima."

"I thought the kanima was all ass," Scott said without thinking. An old, shared insult. Not the past, but reflex. It felt like someone had tested it by slamming a bat into his knee.

Stiles needed a shower too, still felt the remnants of Peter/Jennifer clinging to his skin, and the added dirt and muck Scott had transferred in the hug.

"After that though, we talk?" Scott asked.

"Yeah," Stiles sighed. "We'll all sit down and talk."

Like Issac had been listening (and he probably had) he swooped into the room and guided Scott out, rubbing against him to take on his scent, to reassure himself of his alpha. Stiles leaned against the counter, stared at the ceiling.

Booted steps were noticeable on the tile, if only because Stiles had dreamed of heavy rubber tread too many times to ever forget the sound entirely. "I'd almost hoped we were being influenced."

"I considered it," Chris admitted, moving around, pouring himself another cup of coffee. Stiles was positive they'd all be pissing caffeine by the time the situation was over. "You found all of them, knew exactly what to do."

"Then why did you listen to me?" Why did you let me do this to everyone?

Chris paused before answering. "You were the only one talking any sense. After we found you and Melissa-" Chris looked remorseful, almost bitter. "When your dad explained what the effect of the nemeton was on you, and I saw what you'd done trying to fight it, all the measures you'd taken to protect them," The hunter shrugged. "You've learned how to resist it, you had buffers. Of the three of you, you were the best candidate for fighting it. Ergo, the most rational option."

Stiles felt his face burn with mortification. He'd never considered anyone else seeing his sides. It felt like a violation, Chris and Melissa knowing, seeing him for who he'd been, what he'd done to himself.

"If I'd known, I would have tried to help," Chris added. "I don't-I didn't know."

"Why? You hated me."

"I didn't hate you Stiles. You were a kid that knew just enough to make you dangerous and had absolutely no sense of self preservation. But you also tried to do the right thing. I know how difficult that can be."
Stiles hummed. He'd forgotten that while Chris was a hunter, an Argent, he'd turned his back on his family because he'd believed in something too, something bigger. And he'd lost more than just his reputation by holding to that ideal.

"You were the one that let them go, weren't you?"

"Would it change anything?"

Stiles thought about it, thought about Allison growing into a new Kate, about two scared teenagers strung up in a basement, bleeding and shivering. Derek biting Gerard, Jackson dying. Too little too late. Story of their lives. Or Chris' in particular.

"Probably not."

He left Chris standing alone in the kitchen, headed up the stairs. There were hushed whispers coming out of one room, Scott and Issac reassuring one another. The door to Miles' room was closed, the skinwalker probably taking advantage of the time to sleep, or even just trying to escape the roller coaster of angst. When he opened the door to the room he'd been sharing with Derek and Cassie, they were both laying on the bed, their eyes closed.

Stiles throat shrank, felt like an invisible fist had gripped it tight. He ignored them both and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

He pulled off the shirt and started working on the bandages.

The lines revealed took on a new significance. Pink and puckered, the skin looked like plastic coming together. It was worse than anything he'd done to himself, by far worse than anything that had been done to him before he'd left.

They didn't look quite so awful, anymore. Scott hadn't made them. Scott hadn't tried to kill him.

That knowledge made it a little easier to breathe, despite how messed up everything else was. He shed the rest of his clothes and got into the shower, turned the knobs and flinched under the spray of cold that came out.

Peter. Stiles absentely scrubbed himself down, tried not to think about Jennifer rubbing against him. It had been Peter, and Jesus, he'd known Peter was an unpredictable variable. Smart, vicious, and utterly committed. The werewolf had backups for his backups, always knew how to stay one step ahead. Ruthless. His plan, for all that it was fucking horrifying, was still a good one. A chessboard where he'd patiently waited for most of the pieces to move into place on their own before he'd started to push them. Neat, tidy. Almost perfect. Relentless. His dedication was—Either truly insane, or inspiring. Stiles didn't want to acknowledge the amount of genius contained, but he couldn't ignore it either. And it would be a mistake to label Peter insane. None of them could afford to underestimate him.

Which was going to make his plan that much more difficult.

When he got out, he toweled off, started dressing. They'd run out of clean clothes. Jesus, he hadn't even thought he'd be there that long. In and out. He hadn't expected half of the shit that had happened. He hadn't expected Peter, the conniving bastard.

After he'd pulled on his pants, he looked around for the never ending supply of bandages. Huffing a frustrated sigh, he walked back into the bedroom, steeling himself against the sight of Cassie and Derek.
He was blessedly alone, and breathing a sigh of relief, saw the medical kit on the vanity. He was sorting through items when the door behind him opened.

"Never took you as the type for tattoos," Issac said. Stiles flinched, didn't reach for the gun that wasn't there.

"Knocking is generally the polite way to announce yourself when the door is closed."

"Cassie told me about why you left."

Stiles took a deep breath. Intrusion, vulnerability, exposure, violation. Words drifted through his mind, accusations he would probably never utter. Maybe it was karma for almost getting Cassie killed. "I'm not doing this right now." And certainly not with Issac. Maybe never. Never sounded perfect.

"You're leaving after it's over though, right?"

Stiles nodded. Even though Scott's gratitude had been sincere, there was still too much history to ignore, too much anger and betrayal. The crisis made it easy to forget, but he knew once the dust had cleared, they'd need to the space to think objectively. Otherwise, they'd just gloss over it, imagine it fixed, and it would simmer, come back to bite them in the ass. As much as Deaton had been at fault, so had they, and it couldn't be ignored. Peter was a bandaid, nothing more.

"Derek's different," Issac observed, changing the topic abruptly. Stiles gave up on trying to bandage himself and looked for a shirt instead.

"People change, Issac. He's been gone for years. Did you expect him to stay the same?"

"Yeah," Issac shrugged, affecting an air of indifference. Stiles tilted his head, unsure of what he saw bleeding through the obvious attempt at apathy.

"He didn't. None of us did." The last folded shirt in the duffel was one of Derek's, again. Stiles wondered where the hell all of his had gone.

"Didn't think he was capable of it."

"And now?" Stiles snorted, pulling on his shirt. He saw Issac's gaze lingering on his ribs even after the shirt covered them. Prying. Stiles didn't cross his arms again, refused when Issac looked back up.

"Some things are pretty self evident."

Stiles was going to ask Issac what he meant, but the werewolf was already out of the room, his mission, whatever the hell it had been, apparently accomplished. He had no idea what the werewolf had been trying to say, and shrugged it off, going back downstairs and to the kitchen for more coffee.

Everyone was already gathered when he walked in. Issac was moving through the cupboards, pulling out pans. A carton of eggs and a pack of bacon were laying on the counter. Derek was leaning against a counter next to Miles, neither of them speaking. His dad, Cassie, Chris and Scott were seated at the table.

"So. Peter Hale," His dad, sighing. "I really wish I could say this is strange, but I think the seahorse thing sets the bar."

"Payton will probably be proud of that," Stiles sighed, making himself a cup of coffee. The room was surprisingly tranquil despite the people occupying it.
"Who's Payton?" Scott asked quietly. Apparently the seahorse comment was going unexamined, which was probably a good indication that he needed new friends. Mundane, human ones that would survive first contact with Cassie and Derek. If that was possible. (It probably wasn't.)

"The guy that was there when we trapped you," Stiles explained, taking a seat across from him. "He's unique."

"Okay," Scott said, looking lost. Unique could mean any number of things, few of them pertaining to his species.

"The plan you mentioned," Chris said, reminding him. "Is it still feasible, or has Peter knocked it off the board?"

"Nothing's changed, really. It'll still work. Since he's a wolf and he's using borrowed powers, it might not be as hard," He hedged. It wasn't a lie, technically. He said 'might'. Qualifiers were everything.

"So what is this ingenious plan?" Miles drawled.

"We trap Peter. You guys can get in and out of the barrier so he's stuck until I weaken him via the nemeton, everyone gets a body part to savage in the manner of their choosing and we all go home."

The room was quiet.

"That's your master plan?" Cassie asked, obviously unimpressed.

"Basically. You, Miles and Payton book it out of the territory. It might not fool Peter completely, but he will take advantage of the fact that an alpha's daughter and the unknowns aren't there. Plus, fewer people to deal with. He's got to be chomping at the bit right now guys. He's patient, but if we offer ourselves up on a silver platter, he'll take it."

"And he totally won't suspect a trap," Scott said with false cheer. "Seriously dude," He added, voice going flat.

"Wolf law. Now that we know who we're dealing with, we can call him out. I'm willing to bet Peter doesn't have a pack, he wouldn't trust one until he'd claimed the territory. But he's going to operate under the assumption that you are the noble true alpha we all know you to be. Or he won't, but he'll still come. Dude, Peter can't resist good drama, and this is pretty much the height of it."

"That's an outdated law that no one pays attention to anymore," Cassie sputtered indignantly.

"What law?" Scott asked, looking completely bewildered.

"You seriously need to read a fucking book," Stiles admonished. "It's the old pistols at sunrise or high noon or whatever. One on one, winner takes all."

"He won't buy that," Derek said, shaking his head. "He's avoided it this entire time."

"Doesn't have to, he just has to come within that general area. He's got the power of the nemeton backing him, so he won't be so afraid as to avoid us. As long as he gets within range and a barrier can be erected, that's all that matters. If anything, he might feel confident killing us and saying we broke pack law, which we would be. No one would be able to touch him, not really."

"What about you weakening him?" Derek argued. "How are you going to manage that?"
"I can reach him through the currents and depower him."

"Depower him," His dad repeated flatly. "Through the currents."

"I know what I'm doing," He told them, meeting their gazes one by one. When he reached Derek, the werewolf's eyes narrowed, but he nodded slowly.

"Are you guys serious?" Scott demanded. "How do we know he can't sense the barrier? If he even catches one hint of it, he'll run."

"The barrier will be keyed to Derek," Stiles told him quietly. "I've got some ideas, and Derek can activate it once he's there."

"So this is our plan?" Chris asked, staring at him. "I assumed it would be a lot more elaborate and convoluted."

"It's not high school," Stiles snorted. "And Peter can out think us any day of the week. Besides, weakening him isn't going to be a fucking walking in the park."

"How dangerous will it be?" Cassie demanded. "Last time you went into the currents he almost trapped you."

"Mild to moderately spicy," Stiles smirked, false bravado to ward off the question. "I won't get trapped, no worries."

"So when are we doing this?" Issac asked quietly.

"Tomorrow night. I want Cas and the others out in the morning. I can spend the day setting up the barrier and getting a feel for everything. I think the best place is somewhere out, in the open, but definitely away from people."

"The preserve," Scott supplied easily. "What about-I mean, what about your alpha?"

"Pretty sure the only reason Peter didn't kill us when he had the chance is because it would bring Caroline here on the warpath. I think another alpha's presence would send him rabbling, too much risk. That's why I want Cas, Miles and Payton out too. Lessen the risk, raise the chances of him coming out."

"So if we asked her to wait outside of the territory, as backup?" Derek asked. "Far enough away Peter can't get a sense of her, close enough to help once he's trapped in the barrier?"

"It can't hurt anything," Stiles admitted.

"We should call her," Miles said.

The table was silent for a beat, and Stiles looked around. "Oh, by we, you all mean me, don't you?" He asked flatly. No one volunteered themselves.

"You're not a beta, and I don't have a clan backing me, so, yeah. Pretty much," Miles agreed. "Unless you want the hunter to do it."

Chris shook his head in the negative. "Bad idea."

"Cowards," Stiles accused weakly. Derek handed his phone off and stepped back, like the damn thing was a bomb ready to blow at any moment. Stiles took a deep breath and scrolled through the contacts before hitting the call button and putting it on speakerphone.
Four rings in and Caroline picked up. Stiles had almost been hoping for her voicemail. It was close to midnight, it was plausible she'd be asleep. "Hello Derek, what can I do for you?" Nope, not asleep. Perfectly awake and alert.

"Hi, Caroline," Stiles said, wincing away from the phone. She honestly had no idea. Shit, she was going to kill him.

"Stiles? Is everything alright?"

"Not really."

"Stiles," She said again, and he recognized that voice. Fuck, he was in trouble.

"Hello Caroline," His dad said, cutting in when he took too long to speak.

"John, what a pleasant surprise," Caroline said, the timbre of her voice making it sound like anything but.

"I called Stiles down here because of an emergency with the local pack."

Oh, his dad was a fucking lifesaver. Caroline might let him live after all.

"And he didn't inform me?"

Or not.

"It was a problem with the McCall pack. Due to the circumstances, Stiles worried that the red tape would delay him."

Civil servant. Maybe he needed to add some speech classes to his schedule. Or just take lessons from his dad. His dad had spent years talking to government officials and reporters. He was obviously doing something right.

"Tell me one thing, John. This is Derek's number, so he's there, which means my daughter most likely is as well. Is everyone alright?"

"Alive and breathing," John told her honestly. "It's been a rough few days. But we have a better idea of what's going on right now."

"Give me a moment please," She said. Stiles heard a muffled call for Rick and Marianne to meet her in the office. Stiles waited, chewing the ragged, torn cuticle of his thumb. Fuck, Rick was going to let him have it.

"We're all here now," Caroline said. "Stiles, will you please explain what's going on."

He and Derek both took turns explaining the situation, from what they'd gathered about Peter's motivations to the plan and where they wanted Caroline to be waiting. Stiles remained mostly silent about his role in the endgame, hoping Rick wouldn't catch on to the potential necessity of a plan b. When they'd finished, there was a long, stretched out period of silence that made him antsy.

"Alpha McCall," Caroline finally said.

"Yes?" Scott asked, speaking for the first time since the call had started.

"I understand Stiles and Derek's reasoning for me to remain outside of the territory, but-"
"You're welcome here," Scott said, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "Just keep an ear out. If Derek gives the signal, or if you hear me or Issac, please. I-" Scott shuddered, looked desperate, almost afraid, as if Caroline would suddenly say no. "I don't want anyone to get hurt. I don't want anyone to die. Do whatever it takes."

"We will," Caroline promised. "I love them all very much, McCall, and I trust that they can take care of themselves and each other. But I am trusting you with them as well."

"I understand," Scott said, staring pensively at the phone. Stiles wondered if Scott actually comprehended the significance of the exchange, what he'd just agreed to.

"Stiles, I'll see if there's anything I can do to weaken Peter, or his connection to the currents without it raising any alarms. You should speak to Abram, and I'll contact Herleif."

"I've spoken to Abram, and Amund's out on the land doing something. But any help would be appreciated," He said, doubting Rick would find anything he and Abram hadn't thought of.

"Be safe everyone," Caroline's voice said. "We love you." Marianne and Rick echoed the sentiment.

"Love you too," Stiles and Cas echoed. Derek hummed quietly.

He shut off the phone and handed it back to Derek.

"Abram?" Scott asked, brow furrowing in confusion. "Em-Amund?"

"Emissaries. Abram is in Russia, he knows a lot about sacrifices. Amund is an emissary in Norway I studied with for a couple of months."

"Norway?" Scott asked. "You went to Norway?"

"With Cas," Stiles sighed, missing it a little. "Cas went for wolfy things and I went for a 'working vacation,'" He said, using air quotes and making Cassie laugh. "Fucking cold there, but Amund is a good guy. Looks like a tattooed Santa. I think he likes me, even if he did try to pull a Hansel and Gretel on me."

"He likes you. I think the whole bell thing really made you two hit it off," Cassie smirked.

"Bells?" His dad asked, brow arching.

"Amund believes in the norse gods, apparently. According to Matthias, there were some priests that wore them back when in honor of a fertility god. It was a sort of homosexual thing, supposedly."

Everyone was staring at him like he'd grown another head. He wasn't sure whether to feel amused or vaguely pissed off.

"Then you wore it out of spite. I think it made him respect you a little," Cassie chortled.

"No, he started respecting me when I spent the night outside in forty degree weather and survived," Stiles snorted. "Then he used a sewing needle to tattoo me. Sadist."

"You weren't complaining when he dropped you off," Cassie snickered. "You were acting like Amund had fed you special brownies. Lief thought it was hilarious."

"Endorphins," Stiles muttered. "Anyway, moot point. Now that we have a plan, and we have to wait for Caroline to get here, it sounds like a good time to do laundry, rest, whatever."
"Laundry room is that way," Scott said, throwing his thumb over his shoulder. "Everything should be working."

"I need a shower," Cassie grunted. "I reek of other wolves. Mom might actually smother me to death when she sees me."

"Pretty sure she's just going to skip to the death part," Stiles hummed. He'd gotten off way too easily. Caroline would probably spend the drive mentally scripting the perfect tirade and figuring out the allotment of punishments.

"Think we can outrun her, hole up at Shaw's until she stops being pissed?"

"Can't hurt to try," Derek added, stretching and getting up. "I'll get the laundry together."

"Argent, food run," Miles said, getting up. "What sounds good?" He asked, directing the question to the room at large.

"Whatever's open, just get a lot," Stiles told him. He doubted they actually needed food. Then again, it was just after midnight, and Scott at least had been going for days. Bacon and eggs probably wouldn't begin to cover it.

"I'll go with you guys," His dad said. Stiles almost protested, but Issac of all people was cutting in.

"I think I need to use the restroom," The blonde werewolf said, in what was the least subtle attempt in the history of werewolf overacting.

Stiles listened to the door closing, the water moving through the pipes as the shower turned on. Scott remained silent, and when it seemed like they would leave it alone, Stiles closed his eyes and tipped his head back.

So far, so good. No one had questioned his idea. The most trouble he'd get would be from Derek, who hadn't entirely bought the plan. Stiles knew better than to expect complete reprieve, if only because Derek knew him well enough that he wouldn't remove himself from the fight entirely. Still, at worst it was plan b, and plan a had a fairly good chance of surviving first contact.

Stiles nodded, his eyes still closed as he sorted through patterns and possibilities, layering and layering until a cohesive whole formed, perfect and not a little beautiful.

"Is it bad that I wanted it to be manipulation?" Scott asked quietly.

"Hmm?" Stiles asked, the lines of script in his head shattering and the echo of his earlier sentiment. "What?" He looked over at Scott, surprised to see his brother practically staring holes into the tabletop.

"It's just-" Scott shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "If it was, then that meant it wasn't all us."

Stiles heaved a sigh and shrugged. "It would be nice to have the excuse," He admitted.

"Would it help anything?"

"I don't know. Things-" Stiles shook his head and tilted forward, resting his elbows on the tabletop. "We were kids, Scott. We're still young and stupid. Back then, we didn't even know what we wanted to do with our lives and we were tying ourselves to this place forever. And now-"

"It's like we don't know each other."
"Yeah. I don't-I have no idea what you're studying in school, or what you want to be, or if you still ride a shitty little street bike. I didn't even know you had a house." Until it had burned down. He flinched, wondering if Scott knew. But the werewolf didn't shift or frown, didn't give any indication that he'd been told.

"You've been to Norway and you're an emissary and I guess you got over your needle thing because you have a tattoo. You can apparently shoot really well," Scott said with a wry twist of his lips.
"You live with Derek. He does your laundry," Scott added, wrinkling his nose. "And I have no idea if you're even in school anymore."

"Everyone changed. Even if we were being manipulated-We're different now." There would always be those words between them, angry and bitter. A gulf Stiles wasn't sure they would capable of fully crossing.

"Not completely," Scott told him, finally looking up from the table. "You're here. I didn't want you to come. I wanted to call you, you know? It was the first thing I thought of. 'Stiles would know what to do.' But I didn't want you dragged back into this. After everything-You didn't deserve to have it forced on you. Especially not by me."

Stiles gaped, floored by the quiet admission. Something uncomfortable and sharp stung his eyes and he looked at the ceiling, groping for something to say.

"I'm here," He agreed. "Although, I did get to curse you. So it could have just been for my sadistic jollies."

"Oh my god," Scott muttered, rolling his eyes. "No, you definitely haven't changed that much."

"Meaning?"

"You're still like-You can't just have a moment. You have to deflect when anything gets too emotional."

"You're taking a psych 101 class aren't you?"

"Stiles," Scott muttered, but it wasn't a denial.

"Look man, this-All of it is shit to figure out later. If the nemeton reacts to stress, then we do our best to not let it get to us until then."

Any more 'feelings' and he'd probably break down crying, and he really, really wasn't up for that. Maybe when they were actually alone and not under threat. Or when they were forty and could look back on it and laugh. Maybe.

"Do you ever regret it?" Scott asked a few minutes later.

"No," Stiles answered immediately, remembering hugging his dad in the cellar. "I'd do it again."
Even if it meant never coming back at all.

"Me too," Scott sighed.

Derek walked in a few minutes after that. Stiles had his eyes closed, was sifting through ideas while he listened to Derek moving around in the laundry room. A few minutes later, when the washer was starting, he felt someone sitting next to him and didn't flinch when a hand rested on the nape of his neck. Derek's thumb smoothed circles at the base of his skull.
"Okay, this is weird."

"Hmm?" Stiles asked, half hypnotized by the movement of Derek's thumb and the spell structure he was tracing out in his head.

"Derek's touching you. Nicely. And you're humming." Scott said it like it implied the apocalypse or pod people.

"I was humming?"

"Triglav's song," Derek said. Stiles didn't fail to notice that Derek hadn't stopped the motion of his thumb. Or that Derek could differentiate between the songs, knew which melody was what.

"People change," Stiles sighed, closing his eyes again. "I feel weird, sitting here doing nothing."

"We need to rest and think. Jumping in is what had us thinking it's Deucalion," Derek murmured.

"It might still be," He countered.

"Maybe. Probably not," Derek retorted. "Deucalion wasn't as patient as Peter."

"I have no idea how to handle this," Scott sighed. Stiles opened his eyes and stared at his brother.

"Handle what?"

"Everything?" Scott tried, looking helplessly at him. "Like, I know we changed, and that you two are friends, but, dude, you two are practically cuddling."

"You should see them in bed," Cassie said as she walked into the room, Issac on her heels. She had a towel around her shoulders, and she looked better than she had in days. Stiles wondered if the news of her alpha coming allowed her to finally relax, her burden beginning to ease. "I have pictures on my phone."

"I hate you," Stiles muttered. "My bedroom is a camera free zone."

"What if it was my room?" Cassie chuckled, sitting down.

"So we're officially in the Twilight Zone," Issac quipped, looking so awkward and ill at ease Stiles wondered how he was managing to breathe.

"Lighten up, at least now you don't have to worry about him trying to kill me."

"Our lives," Scott said, blinking slowly. "Are long drawn out jokes with nonsensical punchlines."

"How about we avoid talking about back then and stick with now?" Stiles suggested carefully, mindful of how Derek's thumb increased the pressure. He doubted Derek even realized he was tensing. "And someday we can all get really drunk and talk about how we got to be the stand up citizens we are today?"

"You're hardly a stand up citizen," Cassie informed him primly.

"Says the girl that got us kicked out of at least five bars in one night."

"It wasn't five. We left the first two willingly."

"You were waving your flask around like it would get you beads. I'm like, ninety nine percent sure
you planned the whole thing. You got Derek drunk. That takes planning. Last time you tried I got a
black eye."

"He hit you?" Issac asked, gaping.

"Stiles was defending Derek’s honor and the human hit him, he hit back. The bar called the cops. My
twenty first roiled," Cassie preened.


"Listening to you two I feel like I've missed out on a lot of typical college shenanigans," Scott said
lightly, looking strangely happy. Odd.

"Don't let us fool you, we're actually very serious students. Besides, you're the ones blowing up
houses," Cassie retorted. Derek's thumb stilled for a moment.

"We didn't blow up any houses," Scott said slowly, looking at Issac, confused. "If you're talking
about the house on the preserve-" He trailed off. Stiles gave his brother points for not saying 'Hale
House'.

"That would have been us," Stiles said, raising his hand slightly before dropping it.

"You helped with that? I thought it was just Derek," Scott admitted, chagrined. "Maybe Cora. It
seemed like a Cora thing."

"Mmm, sledgehammer was too slow and the tunnels needed to be caved in too," Stiles deflected.
Cora was still a tense subject for Derek. Four years of no contact did that to a relationship. Stiles was
sure he preferred his and Scott's issues to Derek and Cora's.

"Dude," Scott muttered. "I can't believe you did that."

"Sometimes you need to destroy things before you can build something better," Cassie said, echoing
what she'd said years before. "Their next project turned out better. Big closets."

"Hagall," Stiles responded automatically, flinching when he realized he'd spoken aloud.

"What?"

"Nothing, just part of my training for my gift. Runes provide a path to follow instead of letting me
flail blindly. That sort of thing. Hagall is just one of them."

"What is your gift?" Scott asked quietly.

"Changing things."

"Dad calls you a catalyst," Cassie said.

"Amund said that too," Stiles murmured thoughtfully. That word seemed to keep coming up, and he
had no idea if it was the official name for his gift or if there was some sort of creepy hive mind
mentality between emissaries. "I just sort of make things do things. Small shit."

Cassie and Derek both scoffed, rolling their eyes.

"Do you think you could make Peter show up somewhere, or weaker?" Issac asked. "Like with the-
The ni-" He tried to repeat the word and tripped over it, shaking his head. "The horse thing?"
"Peter's the one controlling the old magic to begin with, so I doubt I could effectively turn them against him. If I try to turn the territory on him, he might be able to fight it," Stiles admitted. "And as much as I'd love to, I can't turn Peter into a rat." Yet. It had to be possible. There was too much lore for it to be a complete fairy tale.

"The horse thing?" Scott asked, frowning lightly. "I remember a horse skull, I think. Back at the grove."

"I cursed you," Stiles said, voice blunt. "It was awful, on both ends. Zero out of ten, would not curse again."

"Sounds like a plan," Scott sighed. "I feel like I've been through a blender."


"Blow jobs help even more," Cassie said, pointedly looking at him. And the hell was that look for?

"Sorry, I'm spoken for," He replied, attempting droll to cover the flush that wanted to turn his face into a mask of burning mortification. "I apparently belong to the cult of a norse god. Very exclusive, lots of rules."

"A fertility god would encourage good head. Like an offering in his name."

"And I'm out," Issac said, standing abruptly. "There are some things I never, ever want to know about. Stiles' sex life being at the top of the list." He was taking quick steps away, Scott getting up to follow.

"Dude, I know we're-But. Yeah, no, I never want to know. Ever." He looked so uncomfortable Stiles couldn't help but pursue it.

"I know where Allison's mole is," Stiles called out as Scott retreated. "You over sharing hypocrite. It's my turn. I'm the bisexual high priest of a norse sex cult. I have an altar covered in dildos. Vagina is amazing. I totally like dick. It's delicious!"

"Cannibal!" Scott shouted, right before a door slammed.

"You should look up the völsi cult, much more extreme than I am!" Stiles called out loudly. "That went surprisingly well," He admitted a minute later. The lack of bloodshed was encouraging, made him hope a little for his future.

"I hope he looks it up," Cassie snorted, smirking widely. The quietly vindictive part of himself agreed with her. Cassie and Derek's reactions had been tepid at best. With Scott he could probably count on full blown hysterics. Things changed, but that much probably hadn't.

"Come on," Derek huffed, exasperated. "You didn't replace your bandages."

Stiles felt like he heard an 'idiot' implied in that statement, but he got up and followed Derek upstairs. He had actually relaxed, which he supposed was a mistake the moment the door closed and Derek was advancing on him, his body tensing and readying for a fight. He should have known better.

"What aren't you telling us?"

"About Allison's mole?"

"Stiles-"
"Derek," He replied, grinning unrepentantly. Derek pulled one of the notebooks out of his bag and tossed it onto the bed. A pen followed.

"Are we sketching? Is this pictionary?" Stiles asked.

Derek sat across from him and frowned. It was suspiciously close to a concerned frown, and Stiles tried not to look at it. He failed, but the effort had to count for something.

"It's nothing dude."

Derek leaned forward and captured his hands between his own. Stiles stared down at them, his hands, long pale fingers, covered in myriad little calluses and scars, between the smooth, tan skin of Derek's.

"Please," Derek whispered quietly.

"This is really unfair of you."

Derek stared at him.

"You're supposed to use your powers for good, Derek. Remember, we had this conversation."

"What are you not telling me?"

Stiles pulled his hands away and rubbed his face before grabbing the notebook and pen.

You can't say anything.

Derek gave him a skeptical look but nodded slowly. Stiles began to write down what he had figured out, looking from Derek to the notebook every few sentences. Derek's expression went from surprised to worried to enraged.

"No," Derek hissed.

Stiles wrote again, underlining it to emphasize his point.

Derek got off the bed and began pacing angrily. Every time he turned and looked at the bed, he looked ready to open his mouth and let him have it, to inform the whole house of his plan. A few times he looked ready to punch something, probably Stiles. So when he sat back down on the bed after several minutes of furious pacing and raising a pointed finger, then dropped it, he took the notebook and began writing.

Stiles wrote back, not sure if he could say the words without them being a lie.

Derek pulled the paper out of the notebook and he panicked for a moment, sure that Derek was going to show it to Scott, or worse, Cassie. He'd be fucked in every bad way there was. But Derek walked to the bathroom and ripped the paper up then let it all drop in the toilet. He flushed it after, completely destroying the evidence.

"I hate this," Derek muttered.

"I know," Stiles sighed.

Derek passed by him, and Stiles fully expected him to walk back downstairs, but he went to the bedroom instead, and Stiles followed. Boots hit the floor with noisy thunks and Derek curled up on the bed. Stiles carefully laid down beside him, unsure if Derek wanted to be touched at all. His
whole body was tense, ready to snap.

"I can get Cassie," Stiles offered quietly.

Derek shook his head and draped an arm over his waist before pulling him closer.

"You have to come back," He demanded, voice thick.

Stiles nodded, not trusting himself to speak without Derek hearing it as a lie. Derek only pulled him closer in response, his hold almost suffocating. Stiles didn't make a peep, clinging to the feeling of Derek, the sound of Derek's breathing.

"I meant it, about going to Shaw's," He finally said, when Derek's hold had eased to bearable.

"I haven't finished your Christmas present."

"You built me a workshop. I think you're covered for like, the next twenty years. I can bitch when I'm forty and you forget," He murmured. "And I totally got you an awesome present. For the record."

"I think I'll be happy if we make it to Shaw's," Derek muttered. Stiles looked up at him, squinting in what he hoped was a glare.

"Dude. Waldport. After Marl's, yeah? I want to make him cry. We can take the whole gang. It'll be hilarious." Derek hummed and Stiles sighed. "I need to make the barrier. You'll have to carry it."

"I don't know how."

"It'll be tied to something you can wear."

"Like the failsafe?"

"Something like that," Stiles murmured into his shoulder.

"This is going to work, right?"

"It'll work," Stiles promised.

They stayed that way, neither of them moving. Stiles didn't point out that Derek's hand was under his shirt, mimicking what Cassie did any time he had a nightmare. The smooth pad of fingertips traced over the hypertrophic map on his side, moved up and down with no real intent. Derek didn't seem to mind the hand over his heart or the fact that Stiles was nuzzling into his neck.

When the door opened and Cassie peeked her head in, she gave them both a smile that looked like she'd won the lottery. Stiles smiled back, trying not to think about how pissed she was going to be when she realized the truth.

"Everyone's back," She told them, leaning against the door frame, still smiling. "It looks like they raided a diner. And Issac looks constipated. Scott looks uncomfortable. It's hilarious."

"Unless they're going to kill something, I don't want to know," Stiles sighed. Between Miles and Cassie, there was plenty of 'personality' present to wind Scott and Issac up.

"We'll be down in a few," Derek told her. Cassie nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

"How does a road trip sound?" Stiles asked quietly. "Like last time, but no dune buggies."
"I like dune buggies."

"I want to see the redwoods, the ones close to the sea," He said instead, not knowing where the idea came from, only that he sort of knew them but didn't. He'd grown up with field trips to the redwood parks, but he hadn't been in years and something in him just wanted to pack up and go.

"Sounds like a plan," Derek finally said.

Stiles nodded again and hoped he actually made it that far. If he survived the next twenty four hours without frying himself he was going to be happy.

"Come on," He finally said, knowing everyone downstairs was waiting. "Food, or else everyone else will eat it all. And I really need to eat." His stomach growled petulantly. Magic. He was still amazed he managed to keep muscle mass.

Derek didn't say anything as he followed him downstairs. When they walked into the kitchen, there were nods of acknowledgment, but nothing being demanded or shouted. Just polite greetings, as if the world hadn't been upturned. When they started loading down plates, the chatter resumed, and Stiles was surprised to see everyone speaking civilly. The atmosphere was lighter than it had been in days, as though they felt the end of the tunnel was near, and it would be over in twenty four hours. Stiles wanted to believe, but the cynic in him wouldn't let him ignore the ragged edges, the places that couldn't be filled with light chatter. The gaps reminded him of how far they actually had to go, the absences striking home.

As he ate, he wondered, unkindly, if it would be so easy if Allison was present. Somehow he doubted it. War made odd bedfellows. Though, at the very least, Scott's relationship with Melissa and his dad would be better. Stiles would make sure of that. And maybe-Maybe he and Scott could start working on theirs, provided Caroline didn't murder them both.

Derek finished before he did, stayed glued to his side, uncharacteristically clingy. When he finished, he ignored the others and tugged at Derek's hand. No one remarked on them leaving together, and Stiles decided he wasn't going to read anything into it. Things were too off, everything in his head too left of center for him to see everything as he knew them to be in reality. Desperation gave everything an indistinct edge, one he didn't (couldn't) trust.

"I'll meet you in the bedroom," He promised quietly, walking to the workroom. He started in the pantry, pulling items from the shelf, knowing what he'd need. Then he sorted through his bags, finding the box with the last of the powder he'd created.

He hesitated, thinking about the stones he'd been given. They were perfect for magic, but even so, he doubted anything he had would be exactly what he needed. A deep breath and he put that box back down, leaving it with his duffel, and walked back to the bedroom.

He filled the wooden bowl and sat down on the bathroom floor. Derek sat in the doorway, watching him carefully. Stiles ignored the quiet rumbling when he opened the wound on his hand -just a little, he promised himself, and soon he wouldn't have to worry about it anymore, wouldn't have to bleed for anything ever again- and then held out his knife for Derek, explaining in quiet tones that they'd both need to do it. When their blood commingled, he nodded and continued working. Derek glared at the vial like it was the source of their problems as he poured in the last of the ash he'd brought with him, just enough left to pour into the bowl. When he pulled off his necklace and slid his parents wedding rings off, Derek stared, pale eyes wide in the harsh light of the bathroom.

"These are the best for it," Stiles admitted quietly. "They're linked." And they were perfect, linked, because love was a magic in it's own sphere, and if he was a reader he knew he'd be able to see an
entire history in his parent's rings. Even blind, he could feel something that wasn't just whimsy. Strong. Stable. Pure. His parent's love for one another had created the perfect conduits.

They remained quiet when he drew spirals and knots around the rings and his blood, didn't interrupt when he began singing, a mix of languages that slipped in and out of each other seamlessly. Feeling the weight of expectation vanish, of being with people he trusted, he allowed himself to lose himself somewhere in the words, allowed them to roll and fall off of his tongue. It wasn't something that needed to be done to make the spell work, but it felt better to follow the words down into himself. For awhile he was in his workshop, doing nothing important.

When he came back to himself, Derek had a vague sort of half smile on his face. Stiles reached forward and tugged at the chain around his neck silently. Derek slipped it over his head reluctantly and Stiles wove the chain through and pulled, forming a square knot. He gave the chain back, watched Derek look at it before slipping the necklace back over his head.

Stiles pulled his pendant off, slipped his father's wedding ring into the chain, let it rest over the engagement ring. The necklace didn't feel wrong, for all that he thought it would. Derek seemed amazed by the addition, his hand rubbing the spot where his necklace tented his shirt a little. Stiles would never admit, aloud at least, to the strange twisting hiccup his heart made when he thought about Derek wearing the ring. The one his dad had told him to give to someone he loved. Fuck. The current scenario had never been a consideration.

Derek sighed, his hand dropping down to his side. "Are you sure-"

"It'll work," Stiles repeated, if only because Scott had reclaimed his place as hero, and Scott could and had made mistakes, but he never lost. Stiles wasn't sure Scott knew how to lose.

"Not about that. About-" Derek stopped, actually looking uncomfortable. His glaze shifted down to the bump under his shirt, the ring resting there.

"I trust you."

Derek didn't seem to know what to say to that, and Stiles, needing something to do, something to end the awkward silence, started fiddling with the boxes and the bowl, pouring out the excess water and packing things away.

"These have to be buried, and the space needs to be-We'll figure it out, I'm sure Chris has a decent map of the preserve," He babbled. "And I can activate it once he's there. It shouldn't be too difficult to draw him in, and then you can call."

"Stiles, we've gone over this," Derek said, setting the box on the counter. "Come on. You look tired."

Stiles followed him to the bed, allowed Derek to move him like a doll, remove his shirt and lay him down. Fingers traced his back, a quiet comfort for them both.

"I wish I had been there," Derek admitted. "I wish that you hadn't been alone for this."

Stiles hadn't felt alone while he'd done it, had spoken to Derek like he'd been right in front of him the entire time. Amund's presence had only come through now and again, Derek being the focal point that had held the pain at bay.

"I wish I'd been with you when you made the shift," Stiles answered, turning his head to face Derek. "I feel like I should have been there."
Derek offered a bemused smile. "Sum presentialiter absens in remota."

Stiles tried to parse the words and failed, some of them not making any sense. He shook his head, frowning. Derek didn't offer a translation, instead continued to watch him, fingers moving over his back.

He didn't bother with pretending he was doing anything but searching out the ring. He'd fiddled with the failsafe, though with Cassie's more often. Derek never seemed to give hint that he wore a necklace at all. But Stiles sought it out for assurance, for comfort, finally understanding why Cassie had always fiddled with his pendant. Derek didn't stop him as he pulled it free of the shirt and rolled the ring between his fingers.

Derek's hand slid over his forearm to cover the tattoo there.

"Ždi menja i ja vernus, vsem smertjam nazlo."

"That's not what you said last time."

"Because I said something different," Stiles replied petulantly, eyes fixed on the ring. Derek didn't demand a translation, let his fingers trace the Cyrillic letters as Stiles' thumb circled the rim of the ring.

"We're really bad at this, aren't we?" He asked. Bad at it because they weren't the heroes anymore, and it was only the heroes that were allowed zero hour confessions.

That startled a laugh out of Derek, a fragile sounding noise, but a laugh all the same.

"My tattoo," He started. "It means-"

Derek shook his head. "Tell me when we get home."

Stiles stared at him, wondering if it was possible to admit that home wasn't so much a place as it was a collection of sensations. That the scent of sawdust and leather, the taste of sharp, damp forest was home more than the house itself was.

He rolled onto Derek, straddled his waist and stared down at him, surprised to see something between faith and desperation looking back at him. Needing to ease the naked vulnerability that blanketed it all, he leaned down, pressed his mouth to Derek's and exhaled sharply through his nose.

It was nothing like what he had imagined, thought he hadn't let himself imagine much of anything. He'd never thought he could have before.

And for a few seconds, he was sure he still couldn't, that there was a line he'd crossed.

Derek's hands wove into his hair and pulled him closer, his mouth opening and tongue sliding over his lips. Stiles groaned, felt Derek's tongue sliding, hot and wet, against his. Their teeth clicked when they tried to get closer, rushed, anxious need making the kiss sloppy, messy. Derek's hands moved down, his arms slipped around him to pull him closer, tightening around him almost painfully. Grunts and whimpers mixed with growls, echoed into his mouth and lungs. Stiles keened, felt his lips bruising and pressed in, felt Derek's heart beating in his chest.

The warmth only seemed to exacerbate the raw edges inside of him, scraping along the too sensitive surface of his flesh. He grasped at the sound of Derek's harsh breathing, the pounding of his heart, anchored himself in the present so he didn't fall down, away. Claws pricked his sides, dotting the spaces between his scars and rooted him in his own skin. A shudder ratcheted down his spine when he ground his hips down, sensation sparking harshly between his nerve endings. Derek pulled back,
almost like he was wrenching himself away. His eyes were clenched shut, his teeth grinding together.

Stiles whispered his name over and over, braced his elbows on Derek's chest so he could palm either side of his face, run his thumbs over his cheekbones. Derek's hips moved, shifted below his to find a matching rhythm.

"Derek, Derek, Derek," He whimpered, nosing at him, terrified at the helplessness of the werewolf's expression. Recklessly, he bit down on Derek's lip, knew it was on the wrong side of too hard but couldn't feel guilty for it when Derek finally opened his eyes. Blue stared back at him, the unavoidable truth of the past stretched out behind them while they tried to balance on the knife edge of the moment.

"Stay with me," He whispered hoarsely, unsure of he was asking him to keep his eyes open or for more. Knew he wanted both, needed both, needed Derek to hold him down, to keep him from falling into the void of the future. Knew Derek needed him to keep him from being burned up in whatever was coursing through him, to try and fix what he'd broken when he'd brought him back, when he'd said Peter's name, when he'd written down the plan.

Even as they moved against each other, needy, desperate noises filtering into the air, Stiles was afraid he was only making it worse, cutting Derek on the broken edges of himself as he clung to the present. Derek's hold on him became unbearably tight, the pressure of his mouth too hard. Stiles took it, threw himself headlong into the discomfort and rocked against Derek, panted against his mouth and ran his tongue over inhuman teeth.

The orgasm that pulled itself out of him wasn't release, didn't ease the pain. Instead he felt drained, twisted and knotted in a dozen ways he was too tired to undo. Derek stilled only a few seconds later, and Stiles felt fists against his sides, knew Derek was trying not to hurt him, letting the claws dig into his own palms rather than add to the scars already decorating his ribcage.

Breathing came in shallow pants and heaving, sharp movements of their chests.

Suddenly he wished he'd waited, even though what he'd done hadn't really been a conscious decision. But he wanted-He wished it had been anywhere but where they were, anywhere but in Beacon Hills.

The arms around him loosened, but only marginally, enough that he could shift and rest his head on Derek's shoulder. It took him a moment to realize that he was shaking, his whole body trembling in either aftershocks or exhaustion, maybe both.

"When we get home, you're teaching me Russian," Derek said quietly, lips pressing against his hair. The words soothed the unease, the regret into something softer. Home.

Stiles nodded and closed his eyes, inhaled, exhaled-

And he was out.
feet being lost in all the greenery brushing against his knees and thighs. Salt lingered in his mouth, the sound of the sea echoed dimly in the back of his mind. After trying to stretch and failing, he realized that he was still next to Derek, literally tangled, and he'd always thought it was shitty writing, when he read about people being tangled up in each other. But he and Derek were a mess of limbs and blankets, Derek's body heat almost but not quite stifling.

"How long was I out?" He yawned, the world still fuzzy around the edges.

"It's morning," Derek murmured, sounding sleep muzzy. "Everyone's awake, downstairs."

"Coffee?" Stiles mumbled, not wanting to move. Derek-He had no idea what had happened the night before. Something had changed, but he wasn't up to discussing it. Not yet. If he was lucky, Derek wasn't either.

In a rare show of kindness, his prayer was answered. Derek stretched and detangled himself. Stiles got up and winced. He'd rutted against Derek and come in his pants like a teenager. Raking his fingernails over his scalp, he thought about facing everyone downstairs in come stained jeans.

It would be suspicious, he decided, how there were clothes folded in a neat pile on the dresser, except he was grateful that they were there. Maybe they'd been there when he'd fallen asleep, and he hadn't noticed. The universe seemed auspiciously kind in the light of morning.

Derek came out of the bathroom, toothbrush still in his mouth. His eyes followed Stiles' line of sight and lit on the clothing. Not sure what to say, hell, not wanting to say anything (he could admit to cowardice) he pulled clean jeans and boxers from the pile before slipping into the bathroom.

He had his pants unbuttoned when he felt a palm, smooth and warm on his back.

"Are we okay?" Derek asked, voice quiet.

Stiles nodded, swallowed thickly. "Yeah."

And that was it. Stiles stripped down and got in the shower while Derek finished brushing his teeth.

It was disturbingly normal, given the night, or morning, before. Stiles refused to examine it, just got out and dried off, Derek climbed into the shower and he got dressed and brushed his teeth. He'd consider the silence a ploy to get him to talk, except he knew they were both fucking awful at feelings, and their bigger, more pressing concerns would allow them both the excuse to avoid it for at least another twenty four hours.

Derek was still showering when he walked out of the bathroom and found a shirt and pulled it on. Voices echoed from the kitchen, and he followed the smell of coffee into the room.

Everyone was seated around the table or at the counter a few feet away, talking and chattering amongst themselves. Stiles didn't fail to notice Scott stopping midsentence to stare at him, openly gawk if Stiles was being honest with himself, and he wasn't willing to deal with that on top of Cassie's megawatt grin.

"Mom owes me fifty bucks."

"I don't want to know what for," Stiles muttered. "You will let me remain ignorant for at least the next six months."

"That's a bullshit rule," Cassie muttered.
"That your mother instated because of you, and your father insists on."

"Yeah but you can't break furniture," Cassie reminded him.

"It's alright Cas," Miles said, smirking. "John owes me a hundred."

"Dad, what-Actually, no, I don't want to know," Stiles groaned, pouring himself a mug of coffee. "What's the status?"

"Lydia's still unconscious, Caroline's waiting outside the territory and out of range of the nemeton, Deaton's hiding in his basement, we think," His dad said, pointedly taking a bite of a doughnut. Stiles knew with ever fiber of his being that it was a trap, and refused to pursue it. His dad would win either way.

"Everyone at the hospital been filled in?"

"Melissa's staying there until this is over," His dad said firmly. That was another statement he wasn't going to touch with a ten foot pole. That way lay memories and uncomfortable comparisons, psychological trauma all around. "Chris will get Allison on the way there."

"We'll pick Payton up on the way to Caroline," Miles said before draining his mug of coffee. "Can't wait to have that conversation."

"It won't be that bad," Cassie said, but she didn't sound like she believed it.

"Thank you guys," Scott said, abashed. "You didn't have to help, but you did."

Miles snorted. "Of course we did. Stiles is one of ours."

Scott nodded glumly, staring down at the table. For all that the declaration had hurt Scott, Stiles allowed himself a measure of comfort in the easy way Miles had said it. Thoughtless, unquestioning.

The mood seemed to sour after that. Cassie and Miles didn't bother to pack their things, instead pulling on their jackets and walking to the door just as Derek was coming down the stairs. Stiles was with them, tried not to flush in Derek's presence.

Cassie glowered, obviously unhappy. Miles' expression was downright surly. Both looked ready to protest, to ignore the plan and say they were staying. Stiles stood his ground, felt Derek at his back and took strength from that.

"Listen for the call," He told them. "And then haul ass."

"Yes mother," Miles sniped before cuffing him on the back of his head. He held out a hand to Derek. It wasn't a normal handshake, almost formal actually, their hands clasping one another's forearms, something Stiles had never seen them do before, but their ease spoke of familiarity. Cassie hugged him one last time, eliciting a squeak despite every attempt not to.

"I love you."

"Love you too," He murmured into her hair.

He watched them walk out of the barrier and get into Miles' truck, watched them drive away until he lost sight of them entirely before closing the door and leaning into it. Derek squeezed his shoulder before walking away, as if sensitive to his need for a moment alone.

The house felt emptier, which made sense. Almost everyone else was gone. But the emptiness
seemed to echo without Payton's sarcastic quips or Miles' gruff quips. Cassie's jokes and taunts seemed to linger, ghostly in the quiet. Even Allison's yelling would be a welcome reprieve from the sudden blanketing stillness.

When he finally went back to the kitchen, Derek was cooking breakfast, focused on it in a manner that suggested how little he wanted to talk. Stiles knew he was sensitive to the need for the calories, almost regretted ever mentioning it in the first place. The scene was entirely too domestic for Lydia's house, for any house that wasn't theirs. He sat down next to his dad, pointedly not looking him in the eye or fiddling with the rings resting over his pendant.

When Chris came downstairs and struck up a conversation about the pack in Norway like there was nothing unusual going on, Stiles thanked the lucky star smiling down on him for providing a distraction from the impending chaos. He and Chris batted ideas back and forth on the structure of not only wolf hierarchy, but that of other supernatural communities, nationally and foreign. Derek finished cooking and sat down, even offered a little of what he'd learned from his time in New York. It wasn't until Stiles had gotten up to take their plates to the sink that he realized his dad, Scott and Issac were still there.

"I never realized everything was so-" Issac started.

"Political?" Scott supplied.

"It sort of is and isn't," Stiles shrugged. "Most of the official stuff is for the sake of having a set of parameters to work inside of in case something blows up, which isn't that often. Beacon Hills is an anomaly, for obvious reasons. Most of it's internal policing. The biggest worries I've heard about are when one of the hierarchies changes leadership and the new head is an unknown variable. There are a lot of worries about suitability and territory disputes."

"Like if someone challenges an alpha and takes over the territory?" Scott asked.

"Pretty much. Most lines are pretty solid, like Martinique has a second she's chosen and trained, and Caroline has four kids that will potentially inherit, all of which she's groomed for it." Regardless of how much they resisted.

"What if there's no hereditary line?"

"If the alpha dies naturally or-" He paused. "If they're not killed fighting another wolf, it still shifts to someone in the pack."

"How is that chosen?"

"Not really sure. Skinwalkers and wolves both have that problem, there's no sure way to tell who the next alpha is. Vampires choose their successors and from what I've heard covens are a lot like local government, lots of politics there."

"Sounds like the right place for Lydia," His dad interjected, smiling fondly.

"Political shark that she is, she'll do us proud," Stiles nodded. "It doesn't hurt that she's got ties to two packs and the Argents, all of which owe her a favor at this point."

"Should we be worried?" Chris drawled, looking amused. Stiles smirked.

"We both know the Minot Coven is literally one of the oldest in the United States, and they're also one of the more well connected ones, both in the supernatural community and in the mundane world. Combined with Lydia's goals and her personality," He shrugged, still smiling. "She could become
magister, someday. She'd have to be adopted though. It's entirely possible she'll buck the system and start her own coven." Time would only tell on that one. Magisters typically came into the position in their forties. He wasn't going to place any bets on where she'd be by then, except for 'successful'. Then again, Lydia Minot had a nice ring to it.

"So she is going to rule the world," Scott said, sounding impressed.

"Probably."

"You sound so calm," Issac muttered, looking horrified.

Stiles shrugged again. "I've learned that when it comes to her, it's best to just go with it. Lydia's one of the most resourceful people I know. And not a bad ally to have in your corner. Drafting an accord with her could be a silver lining to this."

"Right now you'd have to deal with Minot though," Chris said, sounding aggrieved. "And that woman does not like us at the moment."

"Oh?"

"She's Lydia's emergency contact. Lydia told her enough that I was the best candidate to call."

"She threaten you with a rosary?" Stiles asked, unable to help himself. A witch calling Chris. The hunter was probably going to be changing all of his phone numbers in the near future.

"Crucifix."

"I'm like, ninety percent positive she was Irish mob before taking the family name. Lydia told me she wasn't, but I think she might be lying."

"It's unsettling how easily you all talk about organized crime," His dad groaned. "Should I be aware of anything else? The Italian Mob? Triad, maybe?"

"There's Yakuza on the edge of town, but they're mostly legitimate now," Chris said conversationally.

"Seriously?" Stiles demanded. When the hell had that happened?

"Triad tends to stay south," Chris added. "The motorcycle gangs prefer areas that don't have a history of serial murder, too much attention from the feds."

"Stiles is friends with Bratva," Derek added.

"He's not in the mafia," Stiles hissed, turning back to Derek.

"He has bodyguards."

"He's an emissary."

"You don't have bodyguards."

His dad and Chris both snorted on laughter. Stiles waved a hand at him and glared. Derek glared back.

"So, to be an official supernatural creature of the night, I need to make friends with a crime family?" Scott asked, interrupting the glare off Stiles was having with Derek. Stiles turned and opened his
mouth to refute it when Chris shook his head.

"The supernatural community forms it's own. Eventually, after your pack stabilizes again, it'll happen organically."

"It's like any family that stays in one town," Stiles added. "You already sort of have it here. A medical professional, a sheriff, and an arms dealer, and so on. Most mafias started with less."

"That's sort of terrifying," Scott muttered. "I'm the head of a gang."

"Could be worse," Stiles said. "You could be Peter's beta."

"Fuck the police," Scott said, horrified shock registering almost as soon as the words had left his mouth. A quick glance at the sheriff proved that the sheriff was palming his face, his shoulders shaking from silent laughter.

"Scott, saying that was Adam West would be doing a disservice to the sixties."

"Harsh," Scott said, but he was grinning.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and stretched, joints popping loudly. "Christ, I can't wait for this to be over."

"You and me both," Stiles snorted. "I still say we flee to Shaw's," He added.

"Think he has enough rooms?" Derek asked, brow arched incredulously.

"We can just pile up like last time."

"Miles and Payton sharing a bed?" He snorted indelicately.

The amused sounds coming from most of the table completely bewildered Scott.

"Images I never wanted or needed. Thanks man."

"Payton's got a thing for Lydia," Derek said, rolling his eyes.

"Now that's a match made in hell. My personal hell," Stiles said, but he couldn't help imagining the red headed hellions the pair would spawn. They'd run Payton into the ground. It would be hilarious. Right up until the children started manifesting. Then it would be armageddon. "Besides, Lydia's not a sea witch."

"But she's a witch," Derek said, shrugging. "And Payton's not like the rest of his kinsmen."

"I'm missing something," Issac said.

"Seahorses," John muttered, walking out of the room. "I thought werewolves were strange enough. But seahorses." Stiles and Derek watched him disappear before Stiles couldn't contain his laughter.

"Seahorses?" Scott asked, bewildered.

"I'm going to go clean my gun," Chris muttered, aggrieved. Stiles just laughed harder, leaning against Derek for support. It was edged in hysteria, the hours whittling down, closer to the time Derek would be gone and he'd be alone in the house.

"So," Scott started conversationally, looking at them.
"No," Stiles said, shaking his head.

"I haven't said anything."

"Whatever it is, no. I need to go upstairs and make sure everything's set up."

"Come on, seahorses?"

"Think sea unicorns, only full of murder."

"Payton's a murder unicorn?" Issac replied flatly.

"Distant cousin of, at least," Stiles threw over his shoulder. Derek followed close behind, expression intent.

"I really hate this room," The werewolf admitted when he was stopped at the threshold of the workroom.

"Yeah, but you have to admit that it's the safest place for me while I work."

"I still think someone should be here with you, just in case."

"And we both know why that's not a good idea," He argued, fiddling with the chalk marker from the day before. He promised himself he'd buy a set when he got back to Portland. They were more precise and didn't make his hands feel gritty. Lydia, he reminded himself, was a genius. It was the little things.

Derek slid down against the wall and sat on the floor, legs angled and bent as he peered inside. Stiles ignored the prickling sensation of being the focus of such intense scrutiny and began drawing on the slate tiles.

When Scott and Issac joined Derek, he huffed in exasperation.

"I've never seen you do this," Scott defended.

"It's not a big deal," Stiles said, still focusing on the floor. "It's just writing."

"In another language."

"They're runes."

"You say that like it's simple," Scott replied, voice flat.

"They are."

Derek's amused huff cut through the silence and Stiles paused long enough to shoot a glare at him.

"You whined for months about the rune poems."

"Because they were hard."

Derek looked satisfied and leaned his head back against the wall. Stiles stuck out his tongue and continued to write, ignoring Scott and Issac's quiet shock. Maybe they only remembered him and Derek as constantly arguing with one another. But Derek was there, quiet. Anchored, he felt comfortable slipping into the easy rhythm of Derek's breathing, let the beat in his head begin to match it, his hand moving in time to that.
The spiral started wide. Vendetta. Stiles knew it was the perfect symbol, always seemed perfect for anything, everything in Beacon Hills. He started at the end, knew that it was appropriate, because the past was coming full circle, slowly moving back to the beginning. Carefully, he followed the narration written out on the floor, entranced. It was the structure of a spell and a story.

When he finished, he stared down, impressed with himself. Even though he’d planned it, plotted the details out behind his eyelids, it hadn’t really hit him how intricate and precise it was. The only thing he’d ever created that could trump it was his tattoo.

"That looks complicated," Scott said cautiously. Issac nodded in agreement and even Derek looked concerned.

Stiles shook his head, unsure of how to articulate what it was, precisely.

"What's in the center?" Derek asked. Stiles looked down next to his hand and looked at the geometric symbol. It was similar to his tattoo in that it was several components, but the resemblance ended there. The shape was sharp angles and hard lines, rigid and uncompromising. Each meaning was stacked and packed too tightly together to separate, like Derek did when he traced patterns in the tattoo.

"Miǫtvið. The fate tree. Seemed appropriate."

"Some day we're going to find a better symbol than a tree," Scott muttered, expression dark. "Like a dolphin or something."

Derek was still staring at the symbol, focusing on it with an almost unnerving intensity. "Derek?" Stiles tried, stepping closer. The beta twitched, looked up at him with hooded eyes. "You okay man?"

"Is it a stave?" Derek finally asked.

"Technically, yeah. Custom order for the occasion."

"Would it be okay to put on something?"

"It's-I mean yeah, symbols are just guides," he admitted haltingly. Although he didn't want to see it put on anything. Symbols didn't hold or create power, were only a focus for his gift. They remained inert unless somehow charged. But he doubted he'd ever draw it again without something going into it. It was personal, and would probably always be powerful because of that alone.

"Hey, didn't vikings draw runes on themselves for luck?" Scott asked, sounding curious and inexplicably expectant..

Stiles felt the tension break, huffed on a laugh. "Seriously?"

"We've got the time," Scott said, offering an unsure smile.

"I was not trained to pull rabbits out of hats on command." Besides, why would he want Stiles' magic on him? Derek-Derek he would understand, even if Derek would never ask for something like that. But Scott? Scott had absolutely no reason to trust him, and every reason to be suspicious.

"If you're not up for it, I understand," Scott started, actually sounding shy. Stiles stared at him, was faced with his brother's hopeful expression.

"Oh my god, quit with the anime eyes," Stiles growled, palming his face. "I must have sucker written
on my forehead in neon lettering."

"You really do," Derek chuckled softly.

"Let me grab a pen. We'll do this downstairs. Reaching across a doorway is bad luck, and I don't care how superstitious I sound, I don't feel like chancing anything today."

The others waited while he rooted around in his bag for a sharpie. Scott raised a brow askance when he pulled it out. "Expecting me to carve it in dude?" Stiles asked, smirking when Scott blushed. "It's not always blood and animal skulls."

"Thank god," Derek muttered, already heading for the stairs.

"Is that why you built the workshop?" Stiles called out, zipping up his bag. "You got tired of all the stray animal bits in the house?"

"Stray what?" Scott yelped. Stiles allowed himself a laugh, following them out and closing the door behind him. They filed downstairs, Derek perching on a barstool while Stiles chose the kitchen table. He'd been at it longer than he'd realized. It was easily mid afternoon, if not later. The sun was already low in the sky.

"Alright, so," Scott started, sitting down across from him.

"Arms," Stiles said. Scott obediently, trustingly, slid his arms across the table. "Palm up," He added, staring at his brother's hands. Scott did as he was told, exposing his palms and the vulnerable area of his wrists. He stared, knowing, logically, that Scott trusted him. He'd come back to help, even if he had made mistakes. To Scott, he'd been trying all along, and maybe that counted for more than it should.

"Are you sure about this?" Stiles asked, looking up to meet Scott's eyes. "It's magic. I've already cursed you this week."

"Issac said you did it to find me," Scott replied evenly. "And it worked. Obviously you're good at this. So yes, I'm sure."

As if Stiles' motivations didn't even factor into it. Stiles knew Scott understood what he'd been asking, and he was either foolishly naïve or possessed some heretofore unknown well of faith. Faith Stiles found himself wanting to affirm, no matter that he knew it wouldn't, couldn't last once the ordeal was over.

There were dozens of options, some more obvious than others. But Stiles discarded them, immediately knew what to draw.

"An eleventh I know," He sang quietly, drawing on Scott's wrists, willing the symbols to take, the hold fast and keep his brother safe. "If needs I must lead to war my long loved friends; I sing to the shields, and in strength they go. Whole to the field of fight, whole from the field of fight. And whole they will come home."

He finished, the staves standing out, stark on the pale insides of Scott's wrists. He was about to cap the marker when Scott grabbed his hand, holding it tight. Stiles looked from their joined hands to his brother's face, inherently afraid of the intimacy implied. Brown, honest eyes stared back solemnly. There were no shadows, nothing that flickered and twisted Scott's expression. Just Scott, different than the teenager he'd known, but not so different that he was a complete stranger, foreign and remote.
"Thanks."

"Not a problem," Stiles said, meaning it for the first time since he'd arrived.

"Was that a spell?" Issac asked when they'd released each other's hands.

"Viking poetry, available at your local library or online for perusal," Stiles said, offering a smirk he didn't entirely feel.

He was actually worried about Issac, because even though he wasn't being outwardly hostile, he'd never been close to him, never formed a bond of any sort. If anything, he'd resented the beta, for any number of things. It wouldn't make for decent magic, even though he told himself it would be for Scott. But Issac didn't ask, and he didn't offer. It was relieving, even if that measure of relief came with a fraction of guilt.

When he turned around, needing to make a joke, needing a distraction, Derek was gone.

"He went upstairs while you and Scott were having your moment," Issac said, attempting apathy and failing. The beta looked almost jealous, and Stiles couldn't stop the swell of animosity that threatened.

He settled for flipping Issac off as he got up and left Scott and Issac alone. Scott, never good at dissembling, looked fragile, and he wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't do something to upset that. Feeling off balance himself, he walked upstairs, seeking out Derek in an attempt to bring himself back to the moment.

Derek had opened the door to the workroom, was staring at the spiral.

"What does it mean?" He asked quietly. Stiles hooked his chin on Derek's shoulder, staring at the spiral. He knew Derek was referring to the stave in the center, but that was chock full of symbolism he wasn't entirely sure how to explain without going into the sagas Rick had practically shoved down his throat. Stories that hadn't ever meant as much to him as they had to Rick, stories about gods and giants he didn't believe in.

"It's a spiral."

"Stiles," Derek said, tensing.

"Why are you so interested?"

Derek shook his head, his hair tickling Stiles' nose. "It's just interesting to look at."

Stiles hummed. "It's the end coming back to the beginning, full circle. All of it."

"That seems simple for everything written on the floor."

"It is, but I could probably spend a couple of years deconstructing it for you." Not that he wanted to. Two years might not even be long enough to fully understand everything he'd built into the design.

"Sounds exciting."

It really didn't.

"So, do you want an exciting viking warrior charm?" Stiles asked, changing the subject abruptly.

Derek huffed, the sound hinting at a chuckle. "You've been tracing something on my back since you
Stiles pulled away, realized his thumb was tracing something, though he didn't know what, conscious thought shattering whatever the unconscious movement had been. "Sorry," He muttered, face heating. Derek most of all had reason to be edgy about nonconsensual magic. That Stiles couldn't even say what he'd been doing was even worse.

"You're nervous."

"I'm freaking the fuck out," He admitted, walking over to the stairs and sitting down. Derek strode over and sat next to him, their shoulders brushing. "It's Peter. Peter's always scared the hell out of me."

"You didn't show it much, after he came back."

"Because I was too busy being afraid of the alphas or the Darach," Stiles snorted. "But I never stopped being afraid of him, even when we were working together. He-" Stiles shook his head. "I couldn't wrap my head around him. At the same time, I always saw how similar we were."

Impossible to ignore. If Peter hadn't been a psychopath, they might have been friends. In some other life, where rocks hadn't fallen and everybody had lived instead.

"On the surface, maybe," Derek said, looking at the window across from them, set high over the door. Twilight was coming, the sun itself beginning to set. "But other than that? You're nothing alike."

Stiles leaned into him, offered silent support. It was all he could do. When the phones began ringing downstairs, Stiles knew it was time for them to go. He made no move to get up, settled for hugging himself, afraid he'd reach out for Derek, pull him back, demand he stay. The plan would still work with Derek there. Peter was after Scott's pack, after all. But-

Derek needed to be there. Whoever ended Peter, Derek would need to see if for himself. Stiles wasn't selfish enough to deny him closure. Even if he really, really wanted to.

Derek only made it down three steps before turning on his heel and bending at the waist, bracing his palm against the step behind Stiles. It was softer than the night before, lips brushing over his hairline. Stiles saw the chain resting below his shirt, felt his heart trip over itself painfully, stuttering in his chest.

Scott and Issac were opening the front door, and Derek was suddenly jogging down the remaining steps. Stiles realized he still wasn't wearing his leather jacket.

"See you!" Scott called out. "Don't blow up the house. We're already down one this week!"

Stiles choked on a laugh that almost turned into a sob. Issac waved on his way out. Derek didn't look back at all.

The door closed, and he was alone. The house felt cavernous, an empty, echoing thing. It struck him that maybe there'd been a reason for Lydia to have so many parties. Even if her parents had been there (and they rarely had) the place still would have felt too big, devoid of life. The sort of place the Lydia he knew now might treasure, but not the sort of place teenage Lydia would have liked. Not for long stretches of time, at any rate.

He shook his head. God he hoped she was okay. Getting rid of Peter would hopefully solve the problem. If not-
He had Rick and Abram, even Amund and Deaton to help him. Not to mention her coven.

In a matter of minutes he was antsy, fidgeting. His phone was in his pocket, waiting for the moment Peter was trapped. His thumb circled his pendant restlessly. Giving up on waiting patiently, he walked back to the workroom and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

The tree caught his eye again. He hadn't been entirely upfront with Derek, but that was because he doubted Derek would want to hear the endgame said outright. Nemeton. Yggdrasil. Skuld's Net. Urdr's Well. Symbols of universal ideas. Layer upon layer of meaning, settling like the weave of what had been and what was, all of the threads coming together. Layer upon layer of meaning to guide what he wanted to happen. Míðvið. Gallows Tree.

Stiles was almost certain he'd draw it, give it to Rick, and ask to never see it again. He was equally certain he'd never actually forget it, would probably always be able to draw it from memory.

He sat down, stared at the spiral, retracing it, going over it for flaws and imperfections. Outwards in, center to tip. Nothing presented itself, just a structure that he could follow. A unobstructed path.

The waiting though, the waiting was driving him insane. The light coming through the window dimmed. Needing an excuse, he flipped on the lightswitch and moved over to the windowseat, drew the curtains across it.

After that he started going through Lydia's pantry, being incurably nosy. She'd invited him to use it though. The horse skull and the hazel staff, both obscured in fabric, kept drawing his attention, a flicker of guilt sparking along his spine. Scott's face came back, the man he'd become staring at him with trust and faith. It was unsettling, how Scott still had that, still felt that for him. Stiles knew that it could be the adrenaline, the battle buddy mentality. Once they gained some distance, once they'd both calmed down and settled, they'd have to hash things out. Once that conversation started, there was no telling how it would go.

Still-

He was startled from his musings when the front door opened and closed. Brow furrowing, he sat a jar of orris root back on the shelf and walked out.

"Everything okay?" He called out, walking out of the room and to the landing. The moment he passed the corner the blood drained from his face, from his head, making him feel dizzy and nauseated.

Peter. Peter was there. Peter was in the house. Smirking at him from the foot of the stairs.

He stumbled back, away, ran into the workroom and slammed the door shut, locking it before taking several steps back, all the way across the room. Trembling, twitchy fingers dug through his pocket for his phone. His hand shook as he tried to scroll through his contacts, jittering over Derek's name before finally connecting.

"Stiles?"

"He's here," Stiles stammered out, throat tight. "Derek, Peter's here."

"Stay in the workroom," Derek commanded. "Stay on the line."

*Think, don't react.*

"I can go ahead with the casting," Stiles bit out.
"Stay on the phone!"

"I'll leave the line open, but I can do it now."

"That's a stupid idea!"

"I won't have to go so far for plan B now," Stiles reminded him. "Now quiet, I need to-"

Something slammed into the door, flinging it open, the frame splintered from the lock. Peter tossed the chair behind him like it weighed nothing, the wood crashing on the landing behind him.

"Stiles!" Derek shouted.

A howl echoed over the phone. Panic, fury, violence. Stiles hadn't heard a howl like that in years, not since the alpha pack had still been whole.

"Hello Stiles," Peter said, smirking. He made no move to come closer, instead tracking Stiles' movements as he moved across the far wall.

"All that magic and you're still stumped by mountain ash," Stiles taunted, pressing his luck and praying. -No such thing as an atheist in a foxhole.- Maybe not, but he was praying to Derek, to his dad and Scott and Rick and Caroline, to Cassie and Miles and Payton. He didn't have a god, just people. People were more reliable than any deity. He trusted Derek and his dad more than he trusted a random lightning bolt from the sky or divine intervention. "Must suck."

Peter pressed his hand into the threshold. Lightning sparked, malevolent and bright even in the light of the room.

"Derek, he can't get in. I can still do it."

"He got into the barrier!" Derek snarled. Stiles opened his mouth, glaring at Peter.

"I bound my spark to Lydia's a long time ago," Peter replied smugly.

"Son of a bitch," Stiles muttered, realization dawning. "You could have gotten in any time."

Peter looked inordinately pleased with himself.

"Stiles!"

"I'm still doing it," Stiles said into the phone. "You know, I always wondered it was like to be the burnt end of a matchstick," He snapped at the alpha, glaring when Peter continued to smile indulgently. Ignoring the alpha's amusement, he turned his back and sat down in front of the spiral, starting from the outside. He kept his eyes focused on the line of runes. The first tripped over his tongue, guttural and harsh in the air, made more severe by his barely controlled fear.

"I'm so glad you didn't take the bite," Peter said, cutting through the air.

Stiles leaned forward, let his finger trace the rune. He started again, his voice growing steady. Howls echoed on the periphery. Derek, Scott, Caroline. Cassie. They were coming. He needed to get it done before they tried to take Peter down, not unless Derek could trigger the new wards. Then again, he'd be trapped with Peter. Shit. Shit.

"You've always had amazing potential. And look how far you've come."

Stiles started on the second rune, pitching his voice louder to drown out Peter's self satisfied remarks.
"Your bag of tricks might even rival mine." The voice would have sounded impressed if Stiles didn't know Peter was mocking him.

He began the third, felt his intent begin to flow out, to fill the channel he was creating. Walls sprang up, kept Peter's grasping, greedy fingers out, protected Stiles from traps. He slipped, his eyes closed. The spiral stood out, a memory seared into his retinas. Deeper and deeper, he followed the tie that connected him to the axis of the currents.

Peter's voice was gone. Instead there was only the fourth rune hanging in the air, resonating with the past three. False trails sprang up, a thousand paths spreading out away from him to create a labyrinth. Echos of himself took residence, ghosts that would carry memories but not him.

He found her when he uttered the fifth.

The bridge was Jennifer, but there was no consciousness, no sense of his former teacher, the woman that had tried to kill his father. There wasn't even feeling, just energy. An entire life comprised of other lives, compressed into a single purpose. A dark thread that seeped into the currents around him, pulled into the axis of power, lost in the whole. The other end reached, stretched thin to what he knew was Peter. Bridge. Buffer. Safeguard.

The sixth breathed out, bled into the seventh. His heartbeat created a rhythm to follow. Songs echoed into the breach, resonances began to push and pull at Peter, to knot and tangle him into the world, into the thread of the Darach, pulled him deeper, down into the darkness. -eight to nine-

Then he smoothed over the knots and tangles, blended them until there was no difference between Peter and Jennifer. -ten eleven- Edges blurred until Peter was no more distinct from the nemeton than he or Scott or Allison were. Inexorably connected with nothing to safeguard him from the effects, no way to escape without breaking himself. -twelve-

Done.

He pulled himself out, away, sensed Peter as much as tasted the burnt ozone in his mouth and knew they were one and the same. Chasing the sound of the ocean, the scent of sawdust and leather covering sharp, wet earth, he threw himself headlong into it and gasped, coming back to himself, eyes stinging and throat aching and raw. Lungs filled, oxygen starved.

Just a moment, just long enough to keep from forgetting, from getting lost in the maze of himself and the currents converging together.

His hands were clutching the pendant through his shirt, and he stared down at it, feeling like he was still outside of his skin, that it didn't fit right. Memories slipped through his fingers like water, like sand and bits of glass.

A loud crashing sound echoed through the house. Distantly, he could hear someone calling his name.

The thirteenth rang through the air, punctuated by a heavy vibration beneath him. Still disoriented, listing, he closed his eyes, focused. Knowing he only had minutes before the others arrived and burst in, he held to the feeling of Derek's heartbeat pounding through his skull, the sensation of fingers tracing his tattoo, and firmly anchored an infinitesimal shred of himself to that feeling, trusted it to hold him as he dove down, followed his thread to the center of the currents.

He shucked himself of the buffers and protections, had to to slip into the roots tangling around him, trying to pull him in and under. Fourteen filtered out, hung heavy like fog and resonated. He opened himself fully to the thing he'd always run from. Fifteen reverberated, poured out as the currents
poured in.

The world around him juddered violently, his body rocking in time to an earthquake. Sixteen.

Eternities passed in seconds. When he felt Peter, he traced a whisper over seventeen to pull at the currents, to will the nemeton to pull from the world around it, to grow stronger, darker. The world swelled in answer.

A sharp crack almost broke through his consciousness, a gunshot in his ear. Eighteen bound the noise, smothered it. He exhaled into the resonance.

*Alter.*

People were screaming in the distance. He felt his body tilting, a distant sensation that made him mentally sway back. Stiles grabbed at the threads of Peter and held tight, took the power from the nemeton and forced it into Peter's body, more and more, through him and into Peter, the two of them completing a circuit that grew brighter and hotter. Nineteen rippled, a rock dropped into a pond. Stiles thought about Caroline, about how he'd given her power to save her, found her spark and cradled it, sung to it.

He fueled Peter's spark, made it too big, too much for Peter's body to hold, twenty pushing, amplifying the other echoes, making them louder, stronger. His own body seized, bile and blood souring his throat and mouth, his muscles tensed and snapping inside of himself. The roar of the ocean was lost to the sound of Peter howling, the wind whistling in his ears, piercing into his skull. Twenty one felt like razors in his throat, hit the air and made it too thick for his lungs.

Peter tried to drive him back, used his limited knowledge, and it was limited for all that he did know, to try and block it out, to reverse what was being done. Stiles bore down, twenty two screaming out of him, hoarse and vitreous. Peter was like fire blooming out. The burn seeped into his bones, made his skeleton brittle in his flesh, cracks forming inside of him. He pushed back, because that was all he was good at, pushing and white knuckling until it was over. Twenty three fell like water being forced out of his chest, his ribs compressed to force it free.

It wound, the spiral tightening, coiling like a spring, a vortex, a whirlpool trying to pull him down. Threads wrapped, twisted together, forming a noose. Pressure suffocated, drowned, filled his mouth with the taste of charred wood and fetid earth.

Twenty four was a roar to match the cracking sound of his body falling, shattering, syllables encompassing the resonances in a single echo before stilling completely. The void was a silence between them, stretching on and on forever. Stiles felt the world balanced on a pin, ready to tip one way or another. Pain tried to knock him back into his skin, out of the spell's structure. He held to Peter's thread, knew him, every inch of burnt memory and cold cunning, knew Peter was seeing him just as completely, bared open to reveal all the scars and broken pieces. He gasped for breath, felt something wet dribbling over his lips. Expectation made the air thick, a paste in his throat.

The stave stumbled off of his lips, linking the present to the past with the end somewhere between them, patterns realizing themselves in the only logical outcome.

His world went nova, collapsing and expanding at once. Ties snapped, shattered, burned into nonexistence. The loss was indescribable, a hole opening up inside of him. He gasped, felt himself reeling from the sudden, agonizing emptiness where there had been presence, where songs had lingered. Gone. Jagged edges were left behind, a yawning breach that converged on him, swallowed him down until there was nothing.
Notes. So many notes.

First of all. Thank you for being so patient and following this to the end (of this part, at least). And I know it's a cliffhanger. But. You know. Drama. ::waves fingers:: The sequel will be started in a couple of days, once it's polished.

You have Beebs to blame, because she got me into TW in the first place. This is just one big thank you letter to her for being the most kickass enabler in the history of fangirling.

Also, thank you for all the reviews and comments! They've been reason to keep grinding at this even when I wanted to set it on fire. Seriously, you guys have been awesome.

Translations

Stiles and Abram:

Dobroye utro- Good Morning

Dobryj vyechyer- Good Evening

Stiles and Derek:

Sum presentialiter absens in remota- I am close to you, even when I am far away-Carmina Burana-Author Unknown; Stiles had trouble translating because the medieval latin is also considered incorrect due to artistic flourishes. Here is one of (many) translations.

Ždi menja i ja vernus, vsem smertjam nazlo- Wait for me and I'll return in spite of every death-Konstantin Simonov; It's one of the most famous Russian WW2 poems about coming back to a loved one, and worth the read.

Magic stuff

Magister- One of the many terms for a coven leader. I imagine Lydia would be completely secular, her practices centered around math and science, so priest/priestess didn't sit right with me. Also, atheist Stiles makes sense to me. Stiles' faith has never appeared to be in a god so much as select people. Runes/staves/galdr etc are just tools to help focus his gift.

Payton is a Blue Man of the Minch(Na Fir Ghorma) A storm kelpie legend from the Hebrides in Scotland. There's not much on them aside from their origins being Picts, Moors, or uh, angels. Most of it's based off of kelpie/fae concepts.

The Thing With The Bells -Amund wasn't actually insulting Stiles. Matthias' explanation is based on flawed understanding. But some priests of Frey did wear bells, and it was considered 'unmanly'. Amund just gave them to Stiles for a different reason.

Völsi Cult- It involves a horse penis. Of course Stiles would know about it. It's Stiles. (you can look up the rest on your own.)

Scott's Song- The song Stiles sings while writing on Scott is stanza 155,156, OR 157 of the Hávamál, referencing 18 charms Odin learned. (It varies by translation.)

Miotviđ is a weird word. But, it translates to 'tree that measures out the extent/limits of the world' or 'tree that metes out fate' depending on context. I really couldn't help myself. It will also be explored more in BFBOtF.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!