

Their Mixed Feelings

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Characters: [Stiles Stilinski](#), [Peter Hale](#), [Allison Argent](#), [Derek Hale](#), [Scott McCall \(Teen Wolf\)](#), [Chris Argent](#), [Victoria Argent](#), [Kate Argent](#), [Gerard Argent](#), [Sheriff Stilinski \(Teen Wolf\)](#), [Sean Walcott](#), [Deucalion \(Teen Wolf\)](#), [Nogitsune \(Teen Wolf\)](#), [The Nemeton \(Teen Wolf\)](#), [minor canon characters](#), [Minor Original Characters - Character](#), [Alan Deaton](#)

Additional Tags: [Spark Stiles Stilinski](#), [Empath Stiles Stilinski](#), [but not a normal empath which is an important distinction](#), [this is simply a way his magic manifested](#), [don't expect the normal empath crippled by feeling other people's emotions as their own thing](#), [this is not that story](#), [BAMF Stiles Stilinski](#), [Morally Ambiguous Stiles Stilinski](#), [BAMF Peter Hale](#), [Peter burns alive even when he doesn't](#), [a pretty graphic description of burning alive](#), [Vomiting](#), [murders](#), [Murder Husbands](#), [Underage Kissing](#), [you'd think the age gap tips the power balance in Peter's favor but you'd be wrong](#), [Werewolf Allison Argent](#), [Non-Consensual Werewolf Bite](#), [Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism](#), [Child Neglect](#), [Emotional Manipulation](#), [both direct magical manipulation and the old-fashioned one via words](#), [a whole huge lot of emotional manipulation](#), [You Have Been Warned](#), [Warning: Kate Argent](#), [Alternating Stiles/Peter POVs](#), [I put some canon and a magical Stiles into a blender and this is the result](#)

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by [MarInk](#)

Summary

Everyone, Stiles discovered, is a slave to their emotions. And every emotion in Beacon Hills lies in the palm of Stiles' hand. It's a lot of pressure, no matter whether the order of the day is diplomacy or murder, and Stiles always keeps Reese's peanut butter cups on hand in his super secret people larder basement hideout.

Peter wants to kill whoever's responsible for the fire that destroyed his pack. These days his desires and ambitions don't really go much further than that—that is, until he meets a peculiar boy in the woods, makes a deal and finds out that he can, after all, still want something else beside his revenge. Something after that.

Provided they both survive the Argent family long enough for any of that to matter, of course.

Notes

Hi there, hello, this is a brief author's note, just wanna say two things.

1) Please heed the tags. I think I've mentioned everything important, although if anything else comes up, I'll add it up there.

2) I put together a playlist for this fic that I listened to throughout writing. You can find it [here](#).

Chapter 1: Jedi Knights Can Go Suck Their Lightsabers

There are two empty Jack Daniel's bottles in the kitchen.

Stiles eyes them with distaste, throws his backpack into a corner and goes up the stairs, following the sound of Dad snoring. It's not quite his daily routine but it's more of a routine than not.

He hates it.

Dad is sleeping starfished on his back, and the acrid, sharp post-drinking smell makes Stiles gag. He pokes his head out into the hallway to take a deep breath, then holds it as he makes his way across the clothes-littered, dusty floor towards the window. He can't properly pull away the tall, heavy curtains but he's figured out a sort of tug and pull system, and it works most of the time. It's better than what he tried at first, at least: getting up on a chair, moving the curtains a bit, then hopping down, moving the chair and repeating. That was really tiring.

Not that he can escape the chair entirely, of course. Being just under 4 feet, he lacks the leverage to work the window latch when he's standing on the floor, so off he goes to drag a chair in.

Dad keeps snoring, oblivious to Stiles and the world at large.

Stiles opens the window, and the wave of fresh air is a relief.

Now, to turn Dad over to his side. Stiles read that intonx... in-to-xi-ca-ted people can die if they start throwing up while sleeping on their backs and the vomit has nowhere to go except into their lungs. Gross. He doesn't want Dad to die a gross death, or any death at all, so this is part of the new almost routine.

Turning Dad over is hard. Stiles can huff and puff all he wants but he's not moving Dad under his own muscle power any time soon, not until he himself is a grown-up, and he can't ask another adult for help because another adult will report it to the government that Dad is not looking after Stiles and it's Stiles looking after both of them instead, and the government will take Stiles away. The first time Stiles thought he might be able to push Dad to turn over by himself and only got tired and dizzy from the effort, and also slipped on a discarded shirt and fell hard on his elbow.

It hurt so much. Stiles sat there, cradling his elbow, crushed under the newfound understanding that Mom would never again come and soothe his hurt with a band-aid, and a kiss, and a silly story about talking cats saving the world. He felt like crying, and then he did cry, loud, gasping, lost in his grief, and Dad snored the whole time. So when Stiles was empty of all tears, he got up and went to the attic where their old camping equipment was, found their tent ropes and rigged a pulley system kind of like in that old movie about a boy who skipped school and sang in a parade.

He rigs it again now. All the kinks have been worked out of it by the many times of use, and he smoothly turns Dad on his right side (Stiles read that sleeping on one's left side is bad for the heart). Then he goes back downstairs to clean up in the kitchen a bit and figure out what to cook for dinner.

Stiles is not a very good cook. That's okay, though, because they don't have anything to make fancy food anyway. There's some pasta, and some instant noodles, canned beans and things. Stiles doesn't like cooking proper pasta very much because it involves hauling the heavy, sloshing pot full of very hot water over to the sink where the strainer is, and he scalded his fingers once and dropped the pot which only meant that he had to clean it up and start over after he took care of the burns on his fingers. Instant noodles are easier and safer, and, when he adds some Kraft cheese slices to them, almost tasty, so Stiles settles on those.

By the time Dad wakes up, it has gone dark outside. Stiles has eaten, done his homework, fended off a call from Scott's mom offering to drop by and help with cooking or whatever else they needed and done a pile of laundry. The remaining noodles have congealed in their pot on the counter but they're gonna be more or less edible if reheated in the microwave.

Dad comes into the kitchen bleary-eyed, still reeking with that eye-watering, sour post-drinking smell. He stops at the door and looks at Stiles, who is reading at the kitchen table, like he can't remember who Stiles is at first.

"Hey, kiddo," he says. He sounds groggy and tired. "Back from school already?"

Stiles wants to throw his book at Dad. Yes, of course, he's back. Yes, he's been doing things that his parents used to do, like taking care of the house. Yes, he's been lying to the nice Mrs. McCall that everything is fine. Everything is not fine. Stiles hates it but he doesn't know what else to do. And he can't tell Dad that because that makes Dad feel guilty, and feeling guilty on top of everything else Dad is feeling just makes him drink more.

It's like Stiles' Dad is melting into those bottles bit by bit until one day, Stiles won't have a dad, just like his mom melted into her disease, little by little, day by miserable day, and now he doesn't have a mom anymore.

"Yeah," he says and nods at the stove. "There's some noodles."

Dad frowns.

"Noodles? Kiddo, you didn't try cooking, did you? You're too young to operate the stove."

Stiles wants to scream. He squeezes the edges of the book cover until it hurts.

"Scott's mom made them," he lies. "There's plenty left, you can reheat some."

Dad scratches the stubble on his chin.

"Not really hungry, kiddo," he says.

Dad crosses the kitchen and opens one of the high cabinets, the ones Stiles can't reach without climbing up on the counter. That's where Dad keeps the whiskey.

Stiles tried throwing it all away once. Dad went out and bought more.

He watches silently as Dad opens a new bottle with shaking hands, then takes a glass from the drying rack. It's like watching a nightmare where you can't do anything but let it happen. There's nothing Stiles can do or say that will stop Dad from wanting to drink. Stiles is not enough to make Dad want to be a dad again, not when Mom is not here anymore. Stiles looked it up, lots and lots of things on drinking problems, and he knows that no matter how much he hates the whiskey, how much it disgusts him, Dad has gotta feel that for himself, or he will never stop.

Dad will probably never stop.

Stiles stares at the whiskey pouring into the glass and despises it. It's horrible. It has replaced Stiles. It took his dad away. He never, ever wants to see it again. The hot, angry revulsion beats in his temples and flips his stomach.

Dad sets the bottle aside and takes the glass.

"No," Stiles whispers under his breath. He's so tired of the new routine, the new Dad, the new Stiles. He wants to come home to a house that doesn't stink. He wants a Dad that remembers when the school lets out. "No, no, no, no."

Dad raises the glass.

Stiles, desperate, *flings* his revulsion at Dad. Dad shudders with his whole body and drops the glass on the floor.

The revulsion has left Stiles entirely; he's feeling drained in a weird way and his head starts aching something fierce out of nowhere. A few feet away from him, Dad feels... more than ever before. He feels like the revulsion that Stiles threw at him, and he feels like confusion, and he feels like an ocean of sadness.

Stiles rubs his temples. It doesn't help the headache at all.

"Don't get down from your chair, Stiles," Dad says. He starts feeling less like confusion and a little like determination. "You've only got socks on, and there's glass everywhere. Let me clean it up."

Stiles nods and stays where he is as Dad cleans up. He doesn't say a word, and Dad keeps sending him these glances tinged with spikes of worry, more often the more time goes by without Stiles speaking. Stiles used to babble a lot about everything. He fell out of the habit with Dad because Dad never seems like he's listening at all these days.

He might have said something, maybe, if he wasn't too distracted with the way how in the back of his mind he is slowly starting to feel more and more of their neighborhood. It's not seeing, or hearing, or smelling. It's a whole new strange sense. One by one, his neighbors light up in the space of his mind, nebulae of cool, sweet contentment, scorching anger, scratchy annoyance, slimy sour guilt, tingly curiosity. He knows who they are, too, he can recognize them that way. There's a feel to each person that is unique to them.

Stiles' head keeps aching. His awareness keeps expanding. He fumbles, trying to assign tastes and textures and colors to all the things people are feeling, even though it's not really the same, like a sweet melody doesn't actually taste sweet or a soft voice is not something you can touch.

He's not sure if he's asleep, or going crazy, or something.

“Stiles?”

Stiles looks at Dad. The kitchen floor is clean and safe now. The bottle is still standing on the counter, open, but Dad isn't paying attention to it. He is looking at Stiles, with more recognition and care than Stiles has seen in weeks, and something inside Stiles trills and preens, and another something is angry at Dad because it took all this, this craziness or sickness or whatever, for Dad to remember he still has a son.

“Are you gonna get another glass and drink?” He asks.

Dad winces. The revulsion Stiles had thrown into him has been dissipating; Stiles can feel there's a lot less.

Dad looks at the bottle. After a moment of hesitation—is he crazy? Is it real? Does it actually do anything?—Stiles throws disgust at him. It's easy. Stiles knows very well what disgust feels like. He doesn't know what this, this emotion throwing thing is but he might as well try it.

He's tried everything else he could think of, and nothing has worked.

Stiles' disgust slides into the churning well of Dad's emotions and bonds with the revulsion from before. They flare for a second, bright and strong.

Dad closes the bottle and puts it back in the cabinet.

“No,” he says, sounding surprised with himself. “Come on, kiddo, let's get you to bed. You look kinda dead on your feet.”

Dad steps closer, arms going up like he's about to pluck Stiles off the chair and carry him upstairs. Stiles wriggles away.

“You stink,” he tells Dad.

Dad always says Stiles should be honest. Stiles will be honest... to a point, at least. Some lies are too necessary to let go.

A deep-seated shame blooms inside Dad. Stiles sighs. He's not a little kid anyway, he doesn't need to be carried anywhere. But he's really tired, and his headache is bad. His head is so heavy with it.

“Go take a shower,” he tells Dad and lowers his head on the table, pressing one cheek to the cool surface. It's nice. “I'll... be here.”

Dad reluctantly goes to shower. Eyes closed, half-doing, mind encompassing what seems like a good third of Beacon Hills buzzing and fluttering with thousands of feelings, Stiles listens to Dad's emotions.

Dad is worried, and guilty, and angry at himself, and grieving.

But he is also sober.

* * *

"Hey, nerd!"

Stiles stops. Not because he answers to Billy calling him names but because Billy has stepped in front of him.

"Hey there," Stiles says cautiously. He and Billy aren't friends. Billy doesn't really have friends at all, just the people he beats up and the people he beats up other people with.

Stiles is a little small for his age, yet to hit the same growth spurt as everyone in class, but Scott is pretty tall, and normally that's enough for Billy not to get in Stiles' face. But Scott had an asthma attack earlier which was bad enough that he had to go to the hospital, so Stiles has spent the last two periods alone and trying to sense Scott's emotions all the way in Beacon Memorial. It's not very easy because of how many people there are in between and 'specially in the hospital itself but Stiles knows how Scott's emotions feel very well by now. It has been three months since he first felt them, that evening in the kitchen.

"Don't you hey there me," Billy says. It sounds like something Billy heard from his parents. "It was your dickbag dad who arrested my ma!"

Stiles hefts his backpack further up his shoulder and shrugs.

"If he arrested her, that means she's a criminal," he says. He doesn't give a rat's ass (which is a word he is not supposed to say but knows anyway) about Billy and Billy's mom. He's only happy that Dad is back to work, catching the bad guys, and that four weeks of Stiles sticking to Dad's side as much as he could, sending waves of disgust every time Dad so much as looked at any alcohol, actually worked.

One day Stiles came home from school and the whiskey was gone. The wine Mom and Dad used to drink with dinner sometimes was gone. The six-pack of beer was gone from the fridge. All of it. Stiles cried then, staring inside the fridge, and shook so much that the vinegar and ranch bottles on the door shelves rattled.

He's so busy thinking about Dad that he completely forgets Billy is even there but Billy hasn't forgotten about Stiles. Billy's fist smacks into Stiles' stomach.

"She's no criminal!" Billy hisses. "Ma's a businesswoman!"

Stiles would have said something snarky to that if he wasn't doubled over, trying to catch his breath. Billy kicks him in the knee, and Stiles, already off balance, flails and falls.

This is a really bad position to be in. There are many more places Billy can kick now. Fear spikes inside Stiles, unpleasant and shocking like icy hands against feverish skin.

Billy raises his leg again, radiating mulish anger and gleeful violence. Stiles can't fight back like this, still dazed from the blows he's already received.

But maybe he has a different way to fight.

He narrows his eyes at Billy and throws all the fear Billy's way.

Billy freezes in an awkward position, one leg behind him. Stiles manages to sit up, even though it feels like he has at least eight very uncoordinated limbs, and grins up at Billy. It worked, and it worked so well!

There's no fear in Stiles himself now but there's some in Billy. Stiles concentrates on it and tells it to grow.

Billy's fear rises like a dark tide, taking away all of Billy's bravado, swallowing up all of his anger, robbing him of his violence. It's not, Stiles thinks, only what Stiles himself threw at Billy. It's also Billy's own fears. Some of them taste petty, like maybe they are about buttoning his shirt wrong in the morning, and some are big and shadowy. Maybe Billy is secretly afraid that his mom really is a criminal and will go to jail. That would be a really big fear.

Stiles laughs in delight. He had no idea he could do that! It feels amazing. He feels powerful, not just because he is doing it to a big bully but also because the power of it, his will, is roiling through his body like a hurricane. He can feel it beating under his skin alongside his blood, its low, rumbling thunder drum.

It feels like magic.

Billy crumples on the cold ground and curls into a ball, sobbing. The sharp smell of fresh urine wafts off of him.

Stiles automatically wrinkles his nose at the smell and only then realizes that he did that. He made Billy pee his pants in front of the school porch.

He feels bad about it. Not too bad because Billy hit him and would have hit him more if Stiles didn't stop him but bad enough that he stops encouraging Billy's fear to grow. By this time Billy's sobbing so hard, he can barely breathe. Stiles sits there for half a minute more, watching the fear tide to make sure it starts slowly receding (could Stiles make it go away faster? Take it away completely? He should try it. Not on Billy, though. Billy should spend some time afraid after he's made so many other kids feel the same way). Then he gets up and walks away.

In two weeks, Billy's mom is convicted for conning a dozen people out of their lives' savings, and Billy's dad takes his son and moves away, for, as Dad said, "a fresh start". Privately, Stiles thinks that Billy really needs one. Since that day he hasn't been able to even

look at Stiles again without panicking even though Stiles wasn't doing anything, and enough people had seen Billy peeing his pants that the whole school knew the next morning.

Stiles doesn't like it that people saw, though. It definitely looked weird from the outside, Billy about to beat the snot out of Stiles and then suddenly stopping, falling down, and peeing his pants. Everyone listened when Lydia flipped her pretty strawberry blond braid over her shoulder and said that Billy must have some mental problems that caused it and it's stupid to laugh at people with mental problems (not that anyone really listened to that second part), but Stiles should be more careful anyway. People have all sorts of ideas about what things cause what emotions. They might not immediately think it's Stiles causing them to feel something they don't expect to feel but they will think it's suspicious anyway.

Stiles doesn't want to be suspicious. He will likely meet a lot more bullies later on, so he should be both more careful and more creative.

He thinks he can do that.

* * *

At twelve, Stiles is tall, taller than Scott, and also thin as a beanpole. He has sticks for arms, sticks for legs, a hedgehog for hair, and an awesome magical power. Jedi knights can go suck their lightsabers, that's how awesome Stiles' magic is.

Just like Stiles himself, his magic has grown. It now covers about two thirds of Beacon Hills. He has a notebook where he writes down his observations, experiments, and conclusions, following the scientific method. Stiles likes the scientific method. It's like the opposite of his ADHD, calm and ordered, and it's so logical that it's easy for Stiles to come back to his notes and pick up where he left off.

He only writes things down in code, of course. He hasn't told anyone what he can do. He's wanted to tell Scott many times but when he imagines that conversation, he always gets afraid Scott will think Stiles has been using these powers on him, to make him like Stiles and want to be his friend. Stiles hasn't but he can't really prove it, can he? And he is definitely never telling Dad. He did use it on Dad, after all, and even though it was only about the drinking and nothing else, Dad would probably be angry. Maybe he would even stop loving Stiles like it seemed he did when Mom died and Dad wasn't interested in Stiles at all anymore.

Maybe Dad would start drinking again, just to spite Stiles. It doesn't seem like something Dad would do but the fact that Stiles has this thought in his head is already terrifying enough that he doesn't want to put it to the test.

By now, Stiles has learned to inflict and encourage pretty much any emotion. He's not so good at taking them away because people keep feeling the same again and again if they keep being exposed to the same thing that causes the emotion so it needs to be a continuous drain, not a one-time thing, and Stiles has a hard time consistently concentrating on one thing for long even with Adderall. And it's also hard to track people he doesn't know well. He can walk through the town homing in on Dad, or Scott, or Melissa, the whole spectrum of their emotions familiar to him as the back of his hand, each of them with an unmistakable feel of

Dad-ness, or Scott-ness, or Melissa-ness, but if he gets an interesting emotional spike from someone he doesn't know, he can't really trace it.

Well, he practiced a whole lot which cut into his video game time a bunch, and he can sort of hook his attention on an unfamiliar person and follow this connection between them until he finds them, but it depends again on how well Stiles can concentrate and how slowly or quickly the person cycles between different emotions. Which makes it really unfair that he still can't follow the most interesting ones, the ones he's been feeling for years now but was never able to track.

It's not regular enough to be a pattern, per se, but it happens pretty often, at least every couple of months. There's a spike of dizzying, blinding mortal terror, and then it's gone, always in the same general direction from Stiles' house. Sometimes they are grouped, several a day, and after that the intervals are usually longer. Stiles has been trying to get his hook into the terrified people for a long time so he could find them and help them but he just can't.

He realizes he was being an idiot one night while having dinner with Dad and trying to needle the (confidential) details of ongoing cases out of him. There's a murder which Dad really doesn't want to talk to Stiles about, and in the middle of a lecture on how police work is not meant for twelve-year-olds, no matter how smart and curious they are (Dad's lectures have so much begrudging pride and fondness shining behind them, Stiles never takes them seriously), Stiles zones out because it dawns on him: they die.

Duh.

Those terrified people, they were probably feeling that because they saw they were about to be killed. And yeah, of course Stiles couldn't trace them. A dead person has no emotions. He cannot trace the victims any more than he can call up their ghosts and ask them what happened to them.

But what he can do is trace the killer.

The mortal terror is very powerful, and Stiles has to actively ignore it to pick up on a different emotion right next to it. It's also difficult because Stiles expected the killer to be feeling something strong and yucky but it turns out there is only the satisfaction of a job well-done.

Somehow, this scares Stiles more than the thought of people dying.

Still, he's not easily deterred, so he waits for a day when the terror spike coincides with Dad working the night shift and therefore leaving Stiles at home by himself. The moment he feels it, he latches onto the satisfaction, picks up an old backpack stuffed with all sorts of things that he prepared for this very expedition, and slips out of the house.

It's dark, and he's already been on the phone with Dad, reporting that he was done with homework and getting ready for bed. Dad won't call again, he worries about Stiles not sleeping enough as it is, so Stiles can do what he wants.

The evening is warm, and the soft wind feels like it's the darkness giving him a velvety embrace. Stiles has never been outside alone so late, not any further from the house than it took to bring garbage over to the cans on the curb. He's exhilarated and alert but not nervous. If he meets someone who wishes him harm, he can sense them coming and give them a wide berth long before they see him, and in case he can't for some reason, he has a can of pepper spray tucked into the side pocket of his backpack, where a bottle of water is supposed to go. And, of course, he has his magic.

He's been learning to be more subtle about the things he does with it. A first reaction is always to pump someone full of fear or something else strong, knock them down, take over the situation in an overwhelming way, but sometimes—almost always—it's better to stop and think. A little but constant trickle of unease does the trick of making someone go away very well, and also helps ensure that the person will think twice about not minding their own business in the future. Even since Stiles thought that one up, the constant flow of jerkasses who think it's fun to steal Scott's inhaler has basically dried up. Or a negative emotion can be stolen—some people tend to react to that by shrugging, deciding they didn't really want to be here in the first place and wandering off. The most entertaining thing, though, is to impart positive emotions. Stiles has a rather precious memory of how Jackson and two cronies of his once thought being mean to Scott and him was the best pastime ever, and Stiles got into Jackson's face, arms windmilling, voice soaring with passion and inspiration, and gave a speech about how the human race is built on mutual appreciation, empathy, and welcoming diversity, all the while feeding Jackson a steadily rising amount of respect, admiration, and calm. Honestly, the hardest part was not to laugh in Jackson's face as his expression changed and he started nodding at the pithiest parts of the speech. In the end Jackson was saturated enough with it all to turn around to just leave them alone, and his cronies, whom Stiles had been purposely ignoring, started arguing, robbed of their bully fun and confused as heck. During the ensuing squabble Stiles and Scott just left, and no one even noticed.

Honestly, Jackson, the jerkface that he is, should consider himself lucky that Stiles has gotten smarter with his magic since the Billy incident.

In any case, Stiles has a lot of different techniques under his metaphorical belt. He might be young and physically weak, but as he walks the empty streets at night, he feels no fear. Well, none of his own.

Keeping his hook in the killer is very easy. The killer's emotions only change slightly, shifting from satisfaction to quiet contentment and a calculated determination that is similar to how people feel when they set out to study or tackle a pile of laundry. The killer also hasn't moved more than a few meters here and there. Stiles can also feel others in the vicinity of the killer, buzzing with mundane emotions as well. Do they not know what is happening? Are they in on it? What is *it*, anyway? Serial killing? Black market organ trafficking?

Stiles is not planning to take the killer on, of course. He is reckless and cocky, he'll be the first to agree with that evaluation (as he often does when Dad tells him off for getting into trouble), but he just wants to snoop around, figure out what's going on and maybe get enough information to leave a solid anonymous tip at the station. Stiles doesn't even want any credit for his part in the catching of the bad guy. He's content to act in the shadows, unknown and free to do as he likes, the way he's been doing for the past year and a half. He'll know what

he did, and it's enough. He'll be like Batman, except without a bat costume, a Batmobile or a butler. And with magic. But other than that, totally like Batman.

Stiles' feet take him further and further away from home. It's enough walking that he drinks the whole little bottle of water which was inside the backpack, and he's kinda tired by the time he finally arrives.

It's a sleepy suburban area. It seems weird that anyone here would kill anything bigger than a mosquito but they have. Stiles hides behind the completely normal-looking house and looks closer at the emotions inside.

Just as he felt on the way over, there are four people inside. One is downstairs or maybe in the basement, that's the killer, and the others all upstairs. They are all fine, with low-level happy emotions, but the longer Stiles listens to them, the more they feel... wrong. Or maybe not wrong but different.

They don't feel human. Stiles is a hundred per cent sure Dad and Scott are totally and completely human, and if their emotions are a splashing ocean, these are wind swishing in the sky. Both constantly moving and changing, which, as Stiles has come to learn, is an inherent property of emotions, but different at their core.

That can't be right. Stiles knocks his forehead with his fist a few times in the hopes of shaking loose whatever part got weirdly stuck in there. Maybe these are... some different sort of humans. Stiles hasn't felt every single kind of human there is, after all, and if the inhabitants of this house feel like something completely different, that's gotta be a mistake... right?

For the first time in a long, long while he wonders again if maybe he's just crazy. Maybe Dad stopped drinking by himself, and school bullies were scared off by his crazy face, and Billy did have mental issues...

No, that's not it. Jackson would never, ever in a million years agree with a speech about the principles Stiles pulled off haphazardly from the UN website. Not that slimy douchenozzle.

Stiles stifles hysterical giggles by pushing a fist into his mouth. Who'd've thought Jackson of all people would pull him out of an insanity spiral?

When he can breathe evenly again, he pops an extra Adderall, ignoring a twinge of guilt—Dad doesn't like it when he takes too many—and settles cross-legged by the wall, closing his eyes.

He doesn't normally do this. His awareness blankets an awful lot of territory, and he never really tried to turn it off. He only learned to mostly tune it out so that all the emotions would be a background noise, the TV that is on in another room; this way he can sleep but he's still aware that this metaphorical TV is muttering on. To be honest, the idea of turning it off completely scares him a bit. It'd be like going deaf or losing all sensation in his whole body, he imagines. But now he does it. He pulls his awareness away from street after street, block after block, countless little suns of emotions winking out, until he feels both hot and cold and unpleasantly tingly all over like all of him fell asleep.

Then he directs all of it towards this one house.

There's a clarity he has never had before. Every single emotion the four inhabitants of the house feel is crisp and complete and laid bare before him. The power hums under Stiles' skin, and he remembers that day, bombarding Billy with fear. He never really uses his magic enough to feel that tangible power but it's there now. It's making Stiles feel weightless, invincible, otherworldly.

He's not sure about his own otherworldliness but he knows for certain now that the inhabitants of this house are not human. They smell like blood, dark corners, and hunger. That's what drives their every emotion: the hunger. It's there, behind everything else that seems so mundane and normal. It's never far, only barely kept at bay. Stiles shivers with his whole body.

The creepy, endless hunger would be bad enough, but he feels more than that. It's like a cloud of fear in the basement of the house—the remnants of the mortal terror so many people felt here, compressed into one small room. It's not an actual living emotion but rather an echo, like a distant scream. For some reason, the feel of it makes Stiles think of Lydia which is weird. He got over his crush on her very quickly, faced with the irrefutable evidence of her utter and complete indifference (okay, that's a lie, he was obsessed with her enough to take the indifference but he absolutely crashed at the cliffs of disgust and pity directed towards the weird spastic kid who thought he had any sort of chance with her). Why would he randomly think of her now of all times?

The thought of Lydia slips out of his mind quickly, and he focuses on the echo again. He can't imagine how many people were murdered here for a residue to stay like this. He felt them, those brief spikes of emotion, of understanding what awaited these people, not more than a second each. It's like thread layered so many times that its resulting height rivals a skyscraper.

Suddenly, his little expedition doesn't seem quite as fun. Comparing himself to Batman feels just stupid. Stiles is scared and he kind of really wants to hug Dad.

But he is also angry and so, so sad about all the people who were killed here that it makes him even angrier. He has to get in there. He has to see. Find information. Make sure the murderer gets arrested...

Stiles pauses, half-unfolded in the process of getting up. Whoever or whatever lives here, that's not humans. That's, that's some kind of monster. Can the police take a monster and put them in jail? What if a jail can't hold someone like that? What if arresting officers will get killed too?

What if this murderer kills Dad?

The mere thought of it knocks Stiles back on his ass. His hands shake. His concentration slips and his awareness springs all over town like before, no longer held in check, and Stiles lets it, fervently searching out the familiar node of Dad's emotions in the station.

Dad is there, in his office, frustrated over something minor, probably paperwork, and fighting a craving for something, probably donuts or a burger. Stiles listens to Dad's emotions shift and change and slide, and he knows almost exactly what Dad is thinking about every time a change happens. When the familiar golden, shining, sweet, huge emotion comes on, Stiles knows Dad is thinking of him. This is Dad's love for him.

It's not quite the same as a hug but it works just as well. Stiles basks in Dad's love, warm and safe, until Dad gets distracted by his actual job, and comes to a decision: he can't let Dad within a hundred feet of this inhuman murderer. No, siree. Not Stiles' Dad.

He gets to his feet and goes over to the back door. It's locked but Stiles practiced earlier today on the back door at home, and the bobby pins aren't too clumsy in his hands. It takes a little while but he has all the time in the world: the inhabitants of the house are all upstairs now, their emotions muted by sleep. Finally, the lock clicks, and Stiles pushes the door. It doesn't creak. Murderers keep their house in good order, apparently.

It's dark inside, so Stiles fishes his electric torch out of his backpack and turns it on, keeping it low and pointing the beam towards the floor. Even though he can feel any passer-by from far away, it's still best not to let this extra light be visible through the windows. Besides, he's enough of a clutz that it's just as well that he's lighting where his feet go, otherwise he's more likely than not to trip over a chair.

He needs to go down. He cannot feel the residue of terror anymore now that his senses are spread out again but he knows the exact direction they are, it's just a matter of finding the door that leads down. In this the murder house proves to be completely normal again, and he finds the door to the basement where he'd expect it. It's really an ordinary suburban house, a cookie-cutter thing. They even have a white fence outside, for God's sake.

Stiles picks the basement door lock as well, which takes longer but there's no lock on Earth that is more stubborn than Stiles. He's coming down the stairs cautiously, not knowing what to expect—pools of blood? Bodies lying around? Shelves of jars filled with gross body parts as trophies? Yet, this is a basement like any other. Slightly dusty, with some old household appliances in one corner and a pile of unwanted books in another one. Stiles frowns.

There's gotta be something here. Some clue. So many people died here, they couldn't have all disappeared into thin air without a trace.

He searches through the basement, frantic enough that he forgets several times which parts he's already looked at and has to go over the same bits of walls or floor. He runs his hands along the cement, puts his ear to it, gently knocks on every single inch of the basement. His fingers start aching soon but he finds nothing.

This failure doesn't stop him. Stiles climbs back up and starts poking and prodding the wood paneling along the first floor walls. There has to be something hidden somewhere, some secret place, it can't be that people were murdered in that boring-looking basement without a single trace... Eventually, he's rewarded with the faintest sensation of extra chill under his fingertips, something so faint that he'd miss it if he weren't looking for something, anything. Impatience, anticipation and nervousness roil through him like stormy waves as he pushes the panel and hears a quiet click after pressing a specific spot in the wall. There's nothing that

looks like a handle so he pushes his fingers under the edge and pulls it away from that part of the wall with his whole weight, half-expecting nothing to happen because such things as secret murder rooms in basements only ever happen in movies.

The panel gives, swinging open, and Stiles stumbles in, barely keeping himself from faceplanting into the floor.

It's cold in here. Fridge cold, cold enough that Stiles can see his fast breaths rising like fog in front of him. And dark, too. He points his torch forward and walks along the hidden corridor, his heart in his throat even though he knows there's no one down here with him.

It's a short walk. At the end of it, Stiles pushes open some heavy-duty plastic curtains and locates a light switch on the wall. The cold light floods the room, weaving through the cold fog, bright enough to make his eyes water after so long in semi-darkness. And through the fog and sheen of involuntary tears he sees them.

Bodies in partially see-through plastic bags, hung on hooks very neatly, at identical intervals. He tugs one open with shaking hands, hoping he's mistaken, hoping it's illegally hunted deer or something and his eyes are playing a trick on him, and sees a face distorted by fear, mouth frozen in a silent scream. He can't see the back end of the room, and it's full of bodies, so many of them.

There's a shiny metal table to the side, and there are instruments on it: a cleaver, a saw, knives of different sizes and even a deli meat cutting machine.

Stiles bends over and vomits everything he's eaten today right out. His backpack slides along his back and hits him in the back of the head; Stiles stumbles and loses his balance, falling to the floor. His torch clutters along the floor, and his knee is in the middle of the puddle of vomit but Stiles is in no state to pay any attention to anything. He keeps throwing up so violently that he can barely breathe, can barely see through the involuntary tears that have sprung to his eyes.

They are eating them. God, fuck, they are *eating* people—

“Has no one taught you it's impolite to break into people's houses?” Someone asks from behind him.

Stiles startles violently and gets tangled in his own limbs in his rush to turn around. There's a middle-aged man standing on the threshold of the secret room, wearing pajamas, barefoot, his dirty blond hair sleep-mussed. He looks non-threatening, like a neighbor who says hello during an accidental meeting at the grocery store. His emotions are not human, and one that rises above all of them, drowning them out, is hunger.

Generally, Stiles can't tell directly what people feel in physical terms. He can only sense the surrounding emotions, like the desperation and shame of someone who really needs to go to the bathroom, or a yearning for something that can be a daydream about a burger an hour before lunch and also can, with an equal chance, be a wish for tickets to a concert. Hunger is a physical thing for humans but not so much for the creature in front of Stiles. It's an emotion

and even more than that, it's the underlying driving force of everything the man was, is and will be. It's almost like a living being in its own right.

The man smiles at Stiles, and almost immediately his teeth change, lengthening, starting to crowd each other in his mouth, darkening into a black metallic sheen. His eyes whiten and dull until they look like bits of mica.

Stiles feels it now. The mortal terror, the same as what they all felt, those people who ended up as meat on hooks. It floods him like a tsunami. The man starts moving, mouth opening, and Stiles knows now how they died.

The man is fast, but he is not faster than a thought. He's still midway between the door and Stiles when Stiles flings all of his terror forward with abandon and then keeps it growing, growing, not letting up even when the man curls into a fetal position on the floor, whimpering and covering his head with his hands. Stiles keeps going, rising the terror like a tsunami until it swallows the man whole and then it is no more.

The man—the creature—is no more.

The only sounds are the ringing in Stiles' ears and his harsh breathing. He can't take his eyes off the dead body, as if in a trance. He's never killed anyone before, has never even thought about that; and he wouldn't have said his magic can kill at all. It's all just emotions. For all that people say things like "I'm gonna die of embarrassment", no one actually dies from these things.

Not unless there's someone magical blowing a stinging spark of an emotion into a deadly forest fire.

Two twin hurricanes of anger and grief rose up almost right next to him, and Stiles is startled badly again. No one has been able to sneak up on him in years; he has to snap out of it, pay attention again. Being scatterbrained can and will get him killed.

He looks up, and there are two more people at the threshold, a woman and a guy about college age. They are staring at the scene in front of them, disbelief and loss warring through them. They must have loved the man. They must all be in on it, killed people together, ate them together, pretended to be a boring common family together.

When they both start growing black teeth, Stiles doesn't hesitate. He throws fear at them and makes it flare up, up, up. He is no longer out of his mind with his own terror; in fact, he can think with stark clarity and he knows with absolute certainty that unless he kills them, they will kill him here and now and hang him on a hook.

So he sits there on the floor and fans the flames of their fear until death snuffs them out.

After it's done, Stiles takes a long, shuddering breath. There's one more person here, a little further into the secret corridor, paralyzed with fear and shock. The plastic sheets won't let Stiles see anything except a vague silhouette but that person seems vaguely familiar, like maybe Stiles felt their emotions in passing before, most likely at school. Stiles shifts, wanting to get up, and the person takes off like a rabbit faced with a fox.

“Fuck,” Stiles says and takes all of their emotions.

With no fear, grief, rage or even the everlasting hunger egging them on, the person stops. They stand there in the corridor and wait calmly for Stiles to get close. Stiles’ *everything* shakes with the comedown from adrenaline high, and he’s a little dizzy and consciously not thinking about the contents of the secret room, and he has to keep draining this person’s emotions because it’s not like the situation that prompted them in the first place has changed at all over the last five seconds.

When he gets close enough, he recognizes this last person with his eyes, not just his emotion-sense. It’s Sean Walcott who was never really on Stiles’ radar despite being in a bunch of the same classes. He was just another face in the crowd, and today Stiles killed his whole family.

Stiles’ control slips. Sean jerks down the corridor, and Stiles grabs his emotions again.

“What are you?” He demands.

“A wendigo,” Sean says, apathetic.

“Why... why do you...” Stiles has to stop and swallow around the knot in his throat. “Why do you eat people?”

“Human flesh is what wendigos eat,” Sean explains. It sounds even more terrifying in his current dull voice. “We cannot subsist on anything else.”

“But—but why kill them?” Stiles demands. “You could, I dunno, steal bodies from a morgue, or, or from wherever people get cremated, or something. Take those who are already dead! Why kill?”

“Too many bodies missing from a morgue will attract attention, more so than disappearing homeless people. We take from all sources when we can.”

“Homeless?” Stiles is fairly sure that Beacon Hills, while not a shining (heh) beacon of social paradise, doesn’t actually have as many homeless people as had to have been killed here over the years. “Where do you even find them?”

“Dad finds them,” Sean says. “He drives out of town to bring them here. We need to keep a low profile.”

“And he brings them here alive why?” Stiles rubs his face with his hands, a gesture he picked up from Dad. “Why not kill them there and not risk that they manage to escape on the way?”

“Fresh meat flavored with fear tastes better,” Sean says.

Stiles has never wanted to kill anyone more in his life. He can feel it, the ugly, powerful emotion, hot and thick like lava, his anger and disgust at Sean.

He holds himself back. He hasn’t even made a dent in his questions yet.

“Are there any more wendigos in Beacon Hills?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Are there any other...” Stiles wriggles his hands in the air, helpless to find the words he wants. “Other non-humans? What else... exists?”

Sean starts listing various non-humans. And listing. And listing. At some point Stiles fishes a notebook and a pencil out of his backpack and writes it all down, head spinning. There’s a whole hidden supernatural world out there, and he had no idea. It’s especially mind-blowing considering that Stiles is a part of it himself. He doesn’t know what he is but, well, definitely not a run-of-the-mill human. He thought he saw and felt everything and everyone but he has been ignorant and blind.

He intends to fix this with as much research as he can manage, as soon as he can.

When Sean runs out of creatures and beings to list, Stiles asks:

“Do all of them only eat humans like you?”

“No.”

“But can they?”

“They can.”

Stiles thinks it over, and it’s actually a less disturbing answer than it seemed at first. Even humans can eat other humans. Cannibalism is a thing that exists. There’s even a whole movie about a creepy cannibal doctor that Dad forbade Stiles to watch, and Stiles watched it anyway while Dad was at work and then had nightmares for a week. But just because someone can do something, that doesn’t mean they do it.

Sean does, though.

“If I let you go, will you keep killing and eating people?” Stiles asks.

“Yes.”

Stiles sucks in air with an audible sound. He killed Sean’s family as they were about to kill him, it was really self-defense. This is different because he has Sean pretty much immobilized. He could, theoretically, call the police and hand it over to the law. But the police doesn’t deal with the supernatural; can a prison even hold someone like Sean? What would he eat? Prisons aren’t likely to serve human stew, so he would hurt other inmates, guards, anyone in order not to starve. And Sean is twelve, like Stiles. No one would give him a life sentence or anything. He’d be right out on the streets in no time.

Stiles would like for this to be a more difficult decision than it is. But truthfully, he has never been quite as good a person as Dad or Scott; and maybe that’s okay because someone needs to be a little bad to protect the good ones.

He floods Sean with fear until Sean dies. He doesn’t know how fear kills, precisely, but it’s probably a heart attack or something along those lines. It’s quick and, Stiles thinks, relatively

painless as far as killing methods go.

Now he needs to do something with this horror show of a house.

As he stands by the entrance to the secret murder room, his mind slips into the problem solving mode. He can't just call 911 and skedaddle even though no one in their right mind would connect heart attacks, however weird, to him. He vomited all over the place, and there must be other traces he left, fingerprints, fibers, the whole forensic shebang. They might be hard or impossible to trace to him since it's not like his DNA or prints are in the system but it's still an unacceptable risk. Besides, Dad is a really good detective. He might find something that will make him ask questions, and Stiles doesn't want to have to come up with lies. He'd much rather there wasn't even a shadow of suspicion on him. Dad makes his peace with a lot of Stiles' nosiness but being mixed in the murder of a family of people-eaters would push that boundary way too far.

So he breaks into the Walcotts' garage and takes a can of gas.

He splashes the accelerant on the floor of the murder room, making sure all of his vomit is covered, and detours to the basement so the fire would burn across everything he touched. He leads the trail of gasoline through the house and out the back door, paying special attention to the handle.

Then he throws the emptied can inside the house, gets a pack of matches with the emblem of his and Dad's favorite diner out of his backpack, lights one match and drops it into the tail end of the gasoline puddle. As he turns around and trudges off, back towards home, the fire roars into life. By the time the Walcotts' neighbors notice something and start panicking, Stiles is already far away, half-dead with exhaustion but still walking and alert.

He won't make the mistake of letting someone creep up to him ever again.

A week later, Dad is fixing the kitchen pipe, lying on his back and peering up towards where the pipe goes into the sink.

"Stiles!" He calls. "Gimme your torch, would you? I can't see a dang thing down here."

The request makes Stiles remember where exactly he left his torch, which would be the Walcotts' murder room. Anxious, Stiles hollers back something non-committal, makes a show of going through his drawers and shelves even though no one's watching, and comes to the kitchen empty-handed.

"Sorry, Daddy-o, I must've lost it somewhere."

Dad grumbles but eventually manages to fix the pipe without the extra light, and that's the end of it, really.

Although in some ways, Stiles thinks as he looks at a whole notebook filled with coded notes on supernatural creatures, it's also a beginning.

* * *

Stiles parks Roscoe at the edge of the Preserve and pats the steering wheel fondly. God, he loves this hunk of junk. He's been its sole owner for a while now but they are still very much in the honeymoon phase. Can one have a honeymoon with one's car? Is it too weird? Well, it probably is but Stiles doesn't give any fucks about that.

He slips out and hops up on the hood to sit with his legs crossed meditation-style. The metal is warm under him, and the breeze ruffles his short hair. He can't actually do any meditation, he's too fidgety for that, but he doesn't need to. He just wants to sit comfortably as he bathes the Preserve in his senses. The fingers of one hand absently drumming out some radio hit on a denim-clad knee, Stiles closes his eyes and sinks into his magic.

The Preserve is enormous but not more so than Stiles' range, not when he's right here. It's mostly filled with animals whose emotions are much purer, more distilled than those of humans, and feel a bit dimmer. There are some exceptions, like that coyote Stiles once came upon, who seemed almost a fusion of an animal and a human; she took one look at him, snarled and ran off, and Stiles didn't stop her. If there's a werecoyote who mastered a full shift and wants to spend most of her time running around the woods, who is he to tell her no? Live and let live, and all that.

He can feel a couple of humans moving at a rapid pace along the trail, most likely joggers, to the north-west. Close to those two there's another human, bored and complacent, and Stiles would bet money on a ranger who just wants his shift to be over so he can go home and have a beer by the TV. To the east, someone stands still, waiting, with an intriguing cocktail of emotions: the kind of specific blind desperation that comes from being in a lot of pain, powerful, snarling rage, and patience lacing all of the above. Patience is a curious thing because it's not exactly an emotion, it's more of a feeling of a bridle on emotions, keeping them in check. Stiles doesn't actually get the chance to study it close by very often because every single sentient being out there is significantly less composed and rational than they think themselves to be. There's also someone else, walking in a straight line in the direction of the patient person in pain, and they are a little angry, very exasperated, slightly ashamed, and arrogantly dismissive. Neither of these two are human, and their patterns suggest they are some sort of shifters. Werewolves, most likely.

Stiles is mildly interested in that drama, he has to admit, but it's not what he is here for. He comes to the Preserve regularly to study the two consciousnesses at its very center, directly north from him. One is vicious, and angry, and darkly amused, and it's definitely supernatural but its patterns are like nothing he's ever felt. Even looking at it from all the way over here leaves Stiles with a sensation of falling into a void. The other one is even stranger: it's vast and old (and fuck Stiles if he knows how he knows its age because it's not something he can normally determine) and none of its emotions are like anything at all. No human, supernatural being or animal is even remotely similar to it. Stiles is not even sure it has emotions in the same meaning of the word that he's used to. It's completely and utterly alien. The only thing he has ever been able to discern from it is that sometimes it somehow watches him back.

He hasn't been where they are to see them with his ordinary human eyes yet. They never move from their spot in the center, and he could have just gone over there but he's cautious. He doesn't exercise caution very often but these two beings make him wary. He doesn't want

to tangle with them until he understands what they are a little better; and he's not in any hurry. They don't seem to be going anywhere.

All of a sudden, the angry-exasperated-ashamed-dismissive person lights up with anger and determination; over the next several seconds those emotions bleed into fear and then wink out. That person is dead.

The rage breaks the chains of patience and rises like a phoenix. The desperation of pain ebbs steadily, and when it's fully gone, the rage flares ever brighter, snapping and hissing like live wires, all-encompassing, overwhelming.

Stiles opens his eyes and turns his head towards the east.

“Interesting,” he says.

Chapter 2: Awesome, World-Class Help

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter is drunk on the power. It's all he can do to hold the healing back to make sure he still has the scars. The alpha spark is really misnamed: it should be alpha flame, rather. For six long years he's been stuck in his head, helpless and silently screaming, and now he is strong again. Healthy.

Laura's body is lying at his feet, still warm. Peter is entranced by how those feet look. It's not a beta shift and it's not a full wolf shift—Peter is something else with his coarse fur and hunched stance that is more reminiscent of a gorilla. He's never heard of an alpha like that, but then again, there's never been an alpha like him.

He prowls the clearing, enjoying the way the soft loam gives under him. Without the pain every sensation is a shot of dizzying sweetness running through his veins. He has forgotten what it's like to feel things without pain.

He steps into a pool of Laura's blood, and his mood changes abruptly. She's dead by his claws, and yet it's still not enough to absolve her of the crime she committed. She left him to rot. She abandoned him and ran. Not a visit. Not a call. Nothing but a snapped pack bond reverberating in his delirious mind as she took the first plane out, hoping the past would never catch up to her. She'd probably leave Derek behind too if she didn't need at least one beta. An alpha with no betas is a sorry sight.

Well, with a beta or without, Laura was a sorry excuse for an alpha anyway.

In a fit of blinding anger he kicks her body. He's not used to his new strength so he is momentarily taken aback, gaping at the corpse like a pup astonished by the existence of his own tail as it sails over the trees to plop down somewhere quite far away. Well.

Peter huffs and walks away in the other direction. He needs to get used to this form and plan his revenge. And he also needs to make some betas.

As soon as he thinks it, there's the sound of a heartbeat approaching, quick but steady. Peter is not one to believe in fate but he considers it right now because the timing is truly auspicious. A lone human, traipsing through empty woods directly towards him just as he became the alpha? Why, it's like the universe is tipping its hat to Peter and inviting him to act.

He trots forward a bit faster to meet his soon-to-be-beta (or a dead man walking, but, well, there's only a very small chance of that). He's not in any hurry, though. If the human—and the scent coming at Peter from upwind confirms it—starts to run now, he is not outrunning Peter anyway.

They meet in another clearing, one unstained by blood. The human is a young (sixteen? Seventeen?) boy, all lanky limbs, mole-dotted smooth pale skin, huge amber-brown eyes and fluffy short hair, the whole package wrapped into several layers of clothing with a hideous oversized red and black plaid shirt on top. Peter expects a scream or at least a squeak as the human sees him but there's only a friendly-looking smile and a casual wave.

"Hi there, Mr. Werewolf," the boy says, entirely unconcerned. "Would you terribly mind shifti—"

Peter loses patience before the boy can finish speaking. The bite first, the talking later. A yearning for a pack strikes through him like lightning, the desire to own, to claim, to bond, and he coils before a leap—

And then it's gone. There's no yearning anymore, no desire. No rage even, and Peter has not felt its absence for six long years.

Peter blinks. The boy tsk-tsks.

"Now, is that any way to have a civilized conversation?" He reproaches. "Come on, Mr. Werewolf, I've been nothing but polite. I mean, sure, I understand the urge, who wouldn't want a piece of this?" The boy snickers, gesturing to himself. "But please refrain. I know you can do that so stop roleplaying the big bad wolf, please and thank you."

Peter... does not often find himself fascinated but this is what he feels now. He starts circling the boy slowly, not seriously intending to threaten him but wanting to keep him on his toes. The boy turns with him, keeping them face to face, smelling wary but not afraid.

It would have offended Peter because he happens to think his alpha form is plenty scary; however, he is pretty sure that any other human would be duly terrified. Just not this boy.

Peter takes in a lungful of air, parsing the boy's scent as best he can, and his best has always been very good. The smell is still human, with an undertone of wildness, like ozone and petrichor rolled into one. It's faint enough, though, that Peter is not sure he's not imagining it.

"Now, as I was saying, would you terribly mind shifting into your human form so we could talk?" The boy keeps chattering while Peter's busy analyzing his scent. No hunter's gunpowder or wolfsbane. Hmm. "I could, of course, hold a conversation all by myself, just like I've been doing so far, but this wouldn't be too productive, would it? I wouldn't gain any new information and you'd have to listen to me talk, and talk, and talk, and believe you me, Mr. Werewolf, many people have tried to shut me up as they were driven up the wall, round the bend, and other places by my incessant chatter, but no one has succeeded so far. I know you understand me, you know that I know, and you refusing to talk when I ask just makes you the unreasonable one. I'm gonna go out on a limb and say you're an adult. Isn't it embarrassing to be the unreasonable one compared to a high schooler? They could take your adult card away for that. That would be a terrible shame, Mr. Werewolf. Do yourself a favor, do me a favor, hell, do the world a favor and make it a better place by choosing to communicate via words. Kumbaya and all that jazz. You could undoubtedly say that you are not feeling like doing anyone any favors, and hey, man, I understand that, I feel ya, you know? But sometimes a favor paid forward is a favor to collect down the road. You scratch

my back, I scratch yours sort of thing. Not literally, of course. I am very respectful of your personal bubble and I hope you'll be respectful of mine in return, so there'll be no scratching unless mutually agreed upon because enthusiastic consent is hot. You know, there's this problem with consent in our modern pop-culture, it makes me despair sometimes. One looks at humanity and thinks, dudes, really, are you collectively pranking me? It can't be that you actually truly subscribe to the notion of *Twilight* being romantic, right?"

Yes, Peter can believe the boy's claims about driving people round the bend with his chatter. It doesn't look like the boy will ever run out of things to say, and even though it's not all that annoying to listen to his voice, Peter doesn't have all day.

Besides, there's a curious undercurrent to the whole speech. Not only is the boy confident enough to chat with a rogue alpha werewolf like they are friendly acquaintances, he is also suggesting that Peter talking to him would be doing Peter a favor, as if he is in full control of the situation and benevolent enough that he wants to talk before resorting to more drastic means. Being the apex supernatural predator that he is, Peter wants to know more about what it is that inspires this sort of confidence.

He has a niggling suspicion it has something to do with why he suddenly calmed down just as he was about to bite the boy even though he hasn't been calm since 2005.

So Peter shifts, interrupting the boy mid-sentence.

Peter is naked; his flimsy hospital clothing couldn't withstand the violence of his shift. The boy blushes a bit which looks rather fetching on him and shrugs off his plaid shirt.

"Here, you can cover yourself up, Mr. Werewolf."

Peter takes said article of clothing with a disdainful curl of his lip. The boy rolls his eyes.

"You can be all snooty runway judge when you've managed to stow away clothes for after shift, alright? If you don't like how I do fashion, do it yourself."

It's a fair point, and Peter concedes to it by tying the shirt around his waist like a makeshift kilt with an extreme slit along one side.

The boy claps his hands like a kindergarten teacher before her pupils, grinning.

"So, Mr. Werewolf, let's start with the introductions. I'm Stiles, and you are?"

There's no way in hell "Stiles" is a real name.

"Jack Napier," Peter says.

Stiles scoffs.

"And here I was thinking we were going to communicate but you were just planning to joke all over the place, weren't you?"

Peter snorts.

“And you weren’t?” He asks. “Stiles is not your real name.”

“Ah, but you see, my true name is unspeakable.” Stiles smiles like he knows a secret Peter’s not privy to—and he probably does—and his heartbeat doesn’t trip so in at least some way this must be the truth. Provided Stiles is not a liar accomplished enough to fool a werewolf. “For all intents and purposes, I am Stiles.”

“I confess, I haven’t prepared a convenient pseudonym to tell strange people I meet in the woods,” Peter says, and Stiles laughs. “My name is Peter.”

Stiles tilts his head slightly, and Peter stiffens as he sees the recognition in those brown eyes.

“Peter Hale,” Stiles says, paying actual attention to Peter’s burns for the first time. Somehow, impossibly, their conversation so far made Peter forget he had them. “Last I heard, you were a beta. Hmm... Who was the alpha you just killed?”

Peter arches an eyebrow. He’d arch both but one side of his face is encrusted with burn scars and not exactly flexible.

“I’m afraid you were misinformed,” he says. The rage simmers under his skin again, hot as fire, and Peter of all people is fully qualified to make that comparison. Nothing will quench these flames except the culprit’s blood. “I was a packless omega. And the alpha I killed was my lovely niece, Laura.”

He wants to add that she was the one who left him to die or suffer without looking back, that she abandoned him without a second thought to how without a pack he would heal that much slower, would go that extra bit insane for being all alone in the world for the first time since he was born, but he holds himself back. Stiles is not his therapist. He is a mysterious teenager Peter met in the woods, and it’s yet to be determined if Peter will be better off ripping Stiles’ throat out.

Although the speed with which Stiles makes connections with the crumbs of information available to him makes Peter want to bite Stiles even more. A clever beta like this to bond with, to run by his side, to hunt the hunters together; he couldn’t have picked better if he’d spent days trying. Peter’s wolf whines with impatient desire.

“Ah,” Stiles says. He smells a little flustered, and Peter doesn’t know why but he wants to know. “I’d say my condolences but, I suppose, congratulations are more in order?”

Peter can’t help the laugh that tumbles off his lips.

“Are you quite sure you don’t want the bite, Stiles?” He asks. “I’ve known you all of five minutes, and you’ve already been barrels of fun. I’d love to get to know you better.”

“Nah,” Stiles says, and his heartbeat is steady, if fast. “I’m good as I am, thanks.”

That’s a pity but Peter can, in fact, take no for an answer. At least for now.

“As what, exactly?” He asks, not really expecting Stiles to give him a straight answer. “You smell human but I get the feeling there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

Stiles shrugs.

“I am something,” he says, another damnable truth. “But that’s not the part of me that should be important to you, Peter.”

Peter has never been able to refuse an opening like this before, and, to be honest, he has no reason to restrain himself now.

“Why, Stiles,” he purrs in a voice so low, it borders on a content growl, “which parts of you would you like me to be acquainted with? Pray tell.”

Stiles *flails*.

“Peter!” He squawks indignantly. “What the ever-loving fuck, man, give a guy a little warning before you hit on him like a truck!”

He smells outraged, and pleased, and amused, and confused in equal measure, a complex cocktail that makes Peter laugh again.

Somehow, he never imagined that the first thing he’d do after becoming an alpha would be stand around in the Preserve, chat with a random kid, flirt and laugh. It’s bizarre to realize that this is what he’s doing, and for the life of him, he doesn’t understand how he ended up here even though he remembers the past ten minutes very clearly.

It’s almost like his pack didn’t burn to death in front of him. Almost like he’s alive and whole and free to tease boys with pretty eyes as much as he pleases. Almost like he hasn’t been silently howling for revenge for six years.

Almost.

As if sensing the shift in Peter’s mood, Stiles grows serious.

“I’ve been looking after the town for the past few years,” he says without further attempts to be coy. “My educated guess is that you’re looking for revenge. I’m someone who can help you or hinder you, and I would love it if we were able to come to an understanding that results in helping you.”

“Hinder me,” Peter repeats, not hiding the interest in his voice. “If you’re as smart as you seem, then you should know that you can’t stop me.”

“I can,” Stiles parries, and Peter would really like him to start lying at some point. So much truth all at once is exhausting. “Granted, the only way to do that is to put you six feet under, but I don’t really want to do that. Besides, you’d probably crawl right back out, tell me you didn’t like the service in this hotel and try to rip my guts out through my nose, and I’d have to kill you all over again. This whole thing sounds like a huge hassle already, so honestly, I don’t want to even start.”

“You sound very sure that you would be the one putting me six feet under and not the other way around, Stiles,” Peter remarks, smarting from such thorough dismissal. He just killed an

alpha while he himself was an omega. Shouldn't he be taken at least a little seriously? "Who died and made you king of Beacon Hills, I wonder?"

He doesn't expect Stiles to take the childish snide remark and run with it but Stiles yet again manages to surprise him.

"A bunch of wendigos. Some feuding gnomes who thought it would be a great idea to duke it out with runic explosives out in the streets in broad daylight. A hunter who stopped here for a night on his way to San Fran with a selkie he enslaved by stealing her skin. A tengu who decided the Preserve was his now and took to tying joggers up in the trees and messing with them until they went insane. A pair of vetalas who almost blew the whole supernatural secrecy thing apart by making it look like a zombie apocalypse was starting. A few more hunters who thought the local tiny fae colony was just the thing to teach the youngest of them how to best carve up a fae with iron knives," Stiles lists. He sounds matter-of-fact about it, as if every high schooler is just as drenched in blood. Peter isn't sure he believes him, and yet, Stiles' heart doesn't betray any lies. And his heart has reacted accordingly throughout their conversation, so it wasn't that the boy was simply keeping it steady at all times. Either that is all true, or Stiles is a liar the likes of which Peter has never even heard of—and that would also be an indication of a serious threat.

"I could go on," Stiles waves his hand dismissively, like the lengthy and, frankly, impressive list of his kills is old news and not really worth paying attention to. God, Peter wants Stiles in his pack. Or, barring that, just wants him. Pretty and lethal, that has always been Peter's weakness.

Stiles' ears turn pink and he smells embarrassed, and wary, and mirthful. Was Peter's desire so evident in his expression? Peter schools his face into polite interest.

"The point is," Stiles says very pointedly, "not to have a dick measuring contest over who could kill whom better but to establish an understanding that is not going to result in the supernatural splashed across the news or in innocent bystanders getting killed or turned against their will."

"So you'd be fine with the non-innocents getting killed?"

Stiles shrugs.

"Condemning a killing spree would be very hypocritical of me considering what I've had to do to get shit done around here," he says. "Besides, it's only fair that people willing to murder a peaceful pack don't get any protection from me. But I'm strongly against an indiscriminate, indiscreet killing spree. And I'm also, as I've already mentioned, very big on consent. Consider it a personal quirk, if you wish."

"So many limitations," Peter remarks. "Your nebulous but apparently formidable killing abilities aside, what is the incentive for me to follow whatever law a plaid-loving teenager lays down? Or is it only that I get to keep my life if I do as you say?"

"I said I could help, and I meant it," Stiles reminds him, ignoring the plaid barb. "The Hale fire generated a whole lot of paper trails all over the place, and I have sources and contacts

that you don't right now. Hell, I have technology that you probably haven't seen yet, what with six years in a coma. If you agree to my conditions, I will help you sincerely and wholeheartedly."

"I already have help," Peter says, mostly just to be contrary. His only help, Jennifer, is rather unsettling, and coming from him that's saying something. The way she touches his burns makes his skin crawl sometimes. She's not all that bright either. He hasn't even thought about biting her after becoming an alpha, even though that was what she asked for in return for her help and he agreed.

Not being a werewolf, Jennifer could hardly discern lies, now could she?

Stiles makes an exaggerated show of looking around, searching for the aforementioned help. He even puts a hand above his eyes and peers into the distance like a sailor hoping to locate land on the horizon as Peter watches him with growing irritation. Thankfully, Stiles is done with these antics before Peter loses whatever shreds of patience he still possesses and decides to just kill the boy.

"They don't seem to be here, and, to be honest, whoever they are, they don't seem to be very good at helping," Stiles says. "If they were, you would've said you already have all the information you need, and at the very least, they would have provided you with some extra pants, knowing that you were going to be werewolfing around the Preserve, even if you probably couldn't know for sure you'd kill Laura today and then basically Hulk out."

"And you're better," Peter says. He doesn't make it into a question, but he does make it into a challenge. Not that it would be all that challenging to be better help than Jennifer.

Stiles' lips curve into a sly smile.

"I am," he says simply.

Once again, it's not a lie.

This sounds very good. Too good to be true, in fact. Peter expected to have to cut a bloody swath through this town looking for his quarry; fight for every crumb of information; have all the doors closed to him because of his madness, because the world has moved on without him, because he murdered his own niece. And here's Stiles, a veritable gift from the gods, smart, practical, powerful, resourceful, eager to offer his assistance. Where's the mousetrap under all this tantalizing cheese?

"And, I suppose, you're going to do all that out of the goodness of your heart? Because you care so much about this town that you're willing to ally yourself with someone else's vendetta?"

Stiles hums thoughtfully.

"Well, I did have a payment in mind to ask of you. For all of my awesome, world-class help and all that."

“Oh?” Unless Laura bothered to clean the vault of all funds before going on her merry way with Derek in tow, the bearer bonds should still be there, as well as many books and various magical trinkets and baubles. There are bound to be things that will interest Stiles; although the boy likely heard rumors of the Hale wealth and is angling for a piece of that pie.

For genuine, useful help, Peter is willing to pay a lot.

“You see, when I listened to people reminisce about the supernatural history of Beacon Hills, everyone who mentioned you always went, like, oh, that Peter Hale, he was always too crafty by half and knew too much about everything. Lots of people, I find, don’t know all that much about anything and don’t even want to know because they think ignorance somehow prolongs their life expectancy or something. But I’d love to pick your legendary crafty brain on three specific obscure subjects that interest me very much.”

“Which would be?” Peter prompts.

“Oh, nothing to worry about now,” Stiles says, and that is definitely worrying. “Those subjects don’t connect to your current agenda, and they are not urgent. I’ve been looking into them on and off for a while now, and nothing is going anywhere. We’ll do your thing first. So, do we have a deal?”

Peter mulls it over for a few seconds. Well, he does need help, he knows that. And if Stiles is playing some sort of long con with the intention of stabbing Peter in the back, he’ll regret it, an impressive kill list or not.

“We do,” he says.

Werewolves don’t shake hands when agreeing on a deal or an alliance. Scent-mingling is an intimate thing, and to be so presumptuous as to insist on it with someone who is not pack is very rude. But Stiles is human, and fascinating, and a newly acquired ally, and he doesn’t smell of any werewolves who would take offense. So Peter follows his most impish impulse and sticks his hand out for Stiles to shake.

It’s also a test of their fresh alliance. Whatever Stiles is besides what he appears to be, letting Peter lay a hand on him would be a sign of trust. Peter is not planning to betray him but Stiles doesn’t know that.

Stiles takes Peter’s hand without hesitation, long cool fingers wrapping around Peter’s palm in a firm handshake. There’s no smell of fear or even nervousness, and Peter feels somewhat thwarted as he lets Stiles’ hand go.

“You’re keeping the scars, so I assume you’re going back to the hospital to pretend to be catatonic,” Stiles says. “Would you like a ride? My car’s down on the road.”

“No, thank you. I’ll get there on my own.”

“Alright. Expect a new visitor tomorrow, then.” He grins. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Stiles doesn't ask for the shirt back, and Peter doesn't remind him. He watches Stiles go instead, back turned to Peter without qualms, and wonders.

* * *

Stiles told him to expect a visitor tomorrow. Peter is expecting one, sure; it's not like he's going to have anything better to do tomorrow than wait around. Jennifer isn't working then, and even if she was, it's too risky to sneak out too often during the day; Peter might have refrained even without a deal with the self-proclaimed town guardian, and said deal stressed discretion a lot.

Peter understands discretion. He wasn't Talia's left hand for nothing, after all. What he doesn't understand is Stiles.

Peter has been out of the loop for six years, and with the way the supernatural world works, even six days can prove to be a fatally important amount of time. Is there someone backing Stiles? Someone like him could possibly be a pack emissary but there wasn't a single hint of werewolf scent about him. Unless magical means were used to remove the scents, that's not it, and Peter can't imagine what kind of information they would be looking to gain from him that they would go to this much trouble. Most of the secrets he knew concerned the pack, and now that all the Hales are dead (fire, pain, *firefirefire*), those secrets don't mean anything.

Stiles is mostly likely magic. A druid, perhaps, although the scent of herbs around him is not nearly as pervasive as it used to be around Deaton. Perhaps some sort of witch, which would help his kill list make sense if he has a coven behind him. Not that it clears up the question of why Stiles is the one doing all the killing and not the older, more experienced members of his coven. Are they, perhaps, all teenagers who banded together to rule the town?

And for that matter, what's up with the onslaught of creatures moving in and hunters getting utterly shameless? Is it just the power vacuum left behind after the fire? Or was the hypothetical teenage coven stupid enough to start worshipping the Nemeton?

Peter has so many questions and not nearly enough answers, and he needs the latter very much. Whatever Stiles' group is planning, it better not interfere with Peter's plans. From what Stiles said and how he said it, Peter didn't get the impression there's any love lost between Stiles and hunters, but that doesn't mean his goals truly align with Peter's.

So Peter waits for the long-term care ward to quiet down for the night and jumps out the window on soundless paws.

The risk is minimal; no one usually checks on him during the night, all nurses and orderlies long since used to him never making any fuss. And Peter really wants those answers.

He saunters through the sleepy streets under sheeting rain, his black fur letting him melt into the shadows. Stiles gave him enough hints to figure out that the boy is part of the established supernatural community of Beacon Hills, and the people of that community are just as tied down as everyone else, holding jobs, managing businesses, strengthening their homes. Peter starts with the small esoteric shop that caters both to humans with too much time on their hands and an unwavering belief in the healing power of random crystals and to those with

more serious needs. The old Wiccan that runs it, Soleil, knew him well enough to be one of those who mentioned him to Stiles.

He scents the air around the shop, undeterred by the rain, and sure enough, Stiles has been here before, quite a few times, judging by how the scent layers. It disappears by the sidewalk half a block later which means Stiles drives here as opposed to walking, but that's okay. Peter has a lot more places to try.

It's the fourth place, the gym run by a one-sixth incubus, that Peter strikes gold. Stiles' scent is almost lost under the overwhelming wave of dozens of sweaty humans but he was here only a day or two ago at the latest—and then he walked.

Gleeful and smug, Peter follows the scent through the streets, sneezing periodically when he's forced to dunk his nose into a cold puddle. It's a short chase, and it brings him to an address which Peter actually recognizes. This house belongs to the county Sheriff, and once upon a time Peter made it his business to know all pertinent details about key people in the local government. There's a lot of Stiles' scent floating outside. This is where he lives.

Peter remembers vaguely that Sheriff Stilinski had a son. That wasn't a really pertinent detail so Peter never found out the child's name or anything else about him, for that matter.

Apparently, the child has grown up.

Peter stalks around the house, silent and unseen. There's only one heartbeat inside that he can discern, and it matches Stiles' fast and steady rhythm. It's up on the second floor, where Peter would assume the bedrooms are. Peter grins, showing all of his teeth, and leaps over the low fence.

Or, more accurately, he tries. An unseen barrier meets him and flings him to the ground with enough force that Peter feels dazed.

Of course. It was stupid of Peter to forget that a probable witch would have wards around his house.

He growls under his breath as he picks himself up. This is an unfortunate setback but ultimately not a catastrophe. He'd like to snoop around and for Stiles to treat him a little less flippantly but both of these objectives can be reached without breaking and entering the local Sheriff's home. The wards cannot be an impregnable fortress; at the very minimum, they should let inanimate objects in, as well as whoever's invited by the residents. He'll just make sure to garner himself an invitation one of these days. As long as the attempt at the wards didn't alert anyone, Peter is still not much worse off than he was before, and judging by the lack of a witch or witches swooping in to check up on the disturbance, Peter is tentatively in the clear.

He waits in a pool of shadows around the corner of the house because he figures the risk of being here when someone shows up is worth finding out if someone does eventually show up and, should they do so, who they are. Minutes tick by, and nothing happens; Peter listens to the noises from the house, from Stiles' room. It's Stiles' heartbeat, a documentary muttering on about something called "Radithor" (is that a new teenage thing? Peter feels lost

momentarily at the thought, like an unwilling time-traveler), the sound of Stiles tapping on a keyboard, clicking a computer mouse, writing something down and turning over paper pages. Other than those peaceful sounds, there's nothing.

Peter waits some more, just to be sure. Well, a part of him wants to be sure and another part of him is in no hurry to return to the hospital. He hates how it smells; always has.

Turns out, Radithor is a radioactive drug that used to be popular before people realized that radioactivity wasn't as fun as it seemed. Stiles' taste in entertainment is certainly eclectic.

When the documentary ends, Stiles sighs and stops doing what he was doing (Peter guesses homework).

“Seriously, Peter?” Stiles asks. “Are you planning to lurk out there all night?”

Peter tenses up.

“I don't know if anyone told you but it's called stalking and it's creepy,” Stiles lectures him, sounding annoyed. “And it's fucking pointless since I'm coming over to the hospital tomorrow anyway. I understand you have trust issues the size of Mount Kilimanjaro, but couldn't you put enough faith in me to just wait and see if I show up? Here, let me extend you some trust for the sake of our deal: my dad doesn't know about the supernatural and I don't want to induct him any time soon. But if a huge-ass werewolf keeps skulking around his home, he's bound to notice something, or the neighbors are, and then I'd have to convince him it was a weirdo mountain lion.”

Peter huffs, lolling his tongue out for a moment. A weirdo mountain lion. Cute.

Stiles drums his fingers on something hard, probably his desk.

“Will you please go back to the hospital and get some sleep?” He asks.

Peter isn't sure how Stiles expects to hear a response—unless Stiles possesses supernatural senses, and who knows what can be at all possible with magic?—so he stays silent and doesn't move. Now what will you do, Mr. Magic Prodigy?

Stiles blows a raspberry.

A raspberry.

Peter stares up at Stiles' lit window, torn between amusement and chagrin. How old is that boy again?

Stiles laughs.

“Seriously, go get some sleep,” he says. “I'll bring some interesting stuff for us to look at, and we have a lot to discuss. Some rest beforehand won't go amiss.”

There's a pause, and when Stiles speaks again, his voice is softer and lower.

“I won’t let you down.”

Peter doesn’t believe him, per se. But he has been extended some trust, and he can extend a small measure in return. He might be a little (a lot) insane but he is still, at his core, a reasonable man.

He turns around and leaps away, in the direction of the hospital.

Tomorrow, he’ll see if he is right to do so.

* * *

Three minutes after the visiting hours begin, Stiles bounces into the room, the strap of an overstuffed laptop bag making a visible indent in his shoulder, a big paper cup of coffee in each hand. He’s wearing a blue and green plaid shirt today. How many of these things does he even have?

“Morning, creeperwolf!” Stiles beams at Peter. His expression has a tinge of manic energy to it.

Peter is not impressed with his new nickname which he conveys with a disdainful look. The subtlety of a look is wasted on Stiles who ignores it altogether in favor of kicking the door shut.

“Morning, Stiles,” he says mildly.

Stiles settles the bag and one cup on the floor, plops into the chair opposite Peter and takes a long drag from the second cup. It’s long enough that he has to tilt his head back, baring his pale, slender throat in the process for several moments. Peter wonders if Stiles is that unaware of the werewolf etiquette (which he could be, given that, according to his scent, werewolves are not in his immediate social circle) or if this is a deliberate tease.

He decides it’s the first one when Stiles finally lowers the cup and slumps in the chair with a satisfied sigh, completely unselfconscious. Stiles’ phone vibrates in his pocket but Stiles pays it no mind.

“Both cups are for me,” he tells Peter. “Caffeine calms me down and helps me focus, and I don’t think it’d do anything for you at all. Your wolfy metabolism just burns through stuff like this, right?”

Not to mention that Peter wouldn’t take food or drink from Stiles’ hands anyway. A witch would have access to many strains of wolfsbane, and who knows exactly how Stiles managed to kill all those beings he mentioned yesterday? It might very well be by making himself look harmless and trustworthy and feeding them a tailor-made poison.

“Alright, let’s get to business,” Stiles says and starts unloading the contents of the laptop bag onto Peter’s small table.

A thick police file comes out first. Then comes a stack of newspaper article printouts, all about the Hale fire, and then what looks like pages of an internet forum, and thin dossiers

marked with names that don't tell Peter anything yet, and more papers, and still more. Stiles' laptop makes an appearance as well but there's no space for it on the table, so it stays balanced on Stiles' knees.

"You've found all that since we met?" Peter questions. His gaze is still on that first folder, the one that definitely came straight from the police station. Peter is fairly sure that even a Sheriff's son is not allowed to take these outside; shouldn't be allowed to look at them, in fact.

"Research is my jam, man," Stiles tells him and takes another swig of coffee. "Alright, before we get into all this, what do you know about the culprit? You were there that night, did you get any sort of scent, or look, or sound that might be helpful?"

"No," Peter says. "All I know is that when I woke up in the middle of the night, the house was burning and surrounded by mountain ash, and the basement tunnel was collapsed with explosives."

"Right, mountain ash. Definitely someone in the know with the supernatural, but most creatures can't actually handle it, same as werewolves, so I'd take a stab in the dark and guess a hunter," Stiles says, blithe and factual as if he's not discussing the biggest tragedy of Peter's life. Peter is grateful. This analytical approach is what he needs; what the ghosts of his loved ones need. "Which lines up with the way the investigation was shut down. Dad did his due diligence but he's gotta trust the word of the insurance investigator, and that guy just up and wrote that it was an electrical fire. To summarize, every hole what could be poked into the theory got plugged by a person who was undoubtedly paid off. Hunters are humans with good knowledge of how to cover up murders and also a fuckton of money, especially if we're talking about the old clans. Here, take a look at the file, I better return it soon."

Peter reads the file while Stiles tap-tap-taps away at his laptop, muttering under his breath about someone named Danny and their general refusal to cooperate. The contents of the file are about what Peter expects, complete with many glossy colored photos of every dead body and the charred carcass of the house. Looking at it makes him lose an undetermined amount of time to a haze of fury and pain, and when he breaks the surface of lucidity once again, he is almost surprised to see that he hasn't mauled Stiles and whoever else is in the long-term care ward today. Unsuspecting of the danger he's just barely skirted, Stiles keeps typing, one earbud in and playing *Rock You Like a Hurricane*; he's tapping one foot in tact with the melody and mouths the words absently even as he's fully concentrated on whatever he's doing. His phone keeps buzzing from time to time, but Stiles doesn't take it out of his pocket.

Peter watches Stiles for a few minutes, and when the fury is locked away tight once again, he goes back to the file.

He avoids the pictures this time.

The insurance investigator has definitely been paid off to lie, and even if Stiles' father has been honest, someone else in his department might not have. There's a couple of known thugs who each had done time for arson before, and they appear to have airtight alibis. Peter will start with the investigator, though. Someone like that might be easier to find.

When he's done with the file (which now has three holes in one corner from Peter's claws), he starts on the dossiers. Apparently, Stiles is way ahead of him and has compiled information on every suspicious son of a bitch who made an appearance in the file. The fire investigator retired from his stressful job and is currently working as a Beacon Hills High School bus driver—which doesn't seem like a low-stress job at all, if one were to ask Peter. One of the thugs got put behind bars a year later for armed robbery and then died in prison, but the other one is alive and well and working in the local video store.

Around this point in time Stiles crows in triumph.

“Ha! Gotcha, bitch!” He pumps a fist in the air.

“Care to share your success?” Peter asks.

“Well, duh!” Stiles gives him an extra manic grin. For all that Stiles is not a shifter, his amber eyes gleam with the excitement of a successful hunt. With the way the light from the window hits them, they glow gold, not quite the same as a beta's eyes, but certainly like something supernatural. “See, we don't have any settled hunters here in the good ol' BH, so I figured whoever went after your pack was a visitor. And they were likely from an old clan because the old hunter families are the richest and the amount of money needed to cover this up wasn't exactly loose change. It was a long shot but I got a guy to hack every local hotel and estate agency—not like we have that many of those, didn't take long—so I was just going through their records and seeing if anything jumped at me. I mean, they wouldn't be so brazen as to use their actual names but they basically jerk off every night to their family trees and all that, so I thought I might look for any wordplay. Most names mean something, you know.”

“And?” Peter prompts when Stiles stops for air.

“And here!” Stiles turns the laptop around, almost dropping it, and thrusts it towards Peter. “Look!”

There's a long list of names on the screen, and Stiles has highlighted one of them: “Katerina Srebrova”.

“Hah!” Stiles preens. “She thought she'd hide under a Slavic name, but I'm Polish on my mom's side, so bite me, you pyromaniac psycho! I mean, I can't be 100% sure right now, there's still a bunch of legwork to be done, but I'd bet a whole freaking lot that this is Kate Argent.”

Knowing the reputation of the Argent matriarch, Peter doesn't want to take that bet.

“We can hasten that legwork by questioning her accomplices,” Peter says. His gums itch from how much his fangs want to appear but he holds the wolf back. This is not the time and place.

“Oh, we will,” Stiles says. “It'd probably be best if we go together but you do the heavy lifting and I stay in the shadows. She doesn't actually live here, and if we want to draw her back, we need someone to let her know there's a scary werewolf guy asking questions.”

“I have already been doing what I can to draw attention,” Peter admits.

“You have?” Stiles squints at him suspiciously, and then the gears click inside that remarkable brain. “That deer with the symbol for revenge! That was you? Wow, okay. Then someone is probably already on their way. We’ll still question those guys, though.”

“And kill them,” Peter says. “You can stay in the shadows for that too.”

“If they are dead, they can’t call anyone,” Stiles points out.

“A dead accomplice is a very powerful message, don’t you agree? It will be so much more spurring than any words.”

“A dead body is worth a thousand words with you, huh?” Stiles mutters. “Look, from what I dug up, they aren’t in the know. Killing them is easy and can be done at any time.”

“Yes, and the time is now,” Peter says.

Stiles stares at him, frustrated. Then there’s something like a shadow of blood-chilling lethal intent dancing briefly across his expressive face, and he sighs. The fight goes out of him.

“Yeah, okay, if they took part in killing your family, then that’s fair. But talking first.”

“It’s always talking with you, isn’t it?” Peter smirks.

Stiles snorts.

“I don’t see how you can go complaining about it when this is what it brings you.” He gestures towards the mess of papers.

“Oh, I’m not complaining, sweetheart,” Peter murmurs. His rage is singing in his veins in anticipation of revenge. “Quite the opposite.”

Stiles smells flustered at the nickname but not entirely displeased.

“Sweetheart?” He asks, his voice conveying the unsaid “seriously?”.

“Creepewolf?” Peter counters.

Stiles sniggers.

“It is a creepy nickname to give someone half your age who is not related to you,” he says. “That tracks.”

Peter pounces at the verbal opportunity.

“A, so you don’t mind, sweetheart? Since it makes sense and all?”

Stiles blushes with his whole face, but before Peter can revel in the reaction properly, the smell of embarrassment dissipates, and Stiles’ face cools down. What sort of trick is that? Some meditation technique reinforced with magic? From what Peter has read about magic,

usually something this immediate and strong would rely on an amulet or a tattoo. Perhaps this is why Stiles wears so many baggy layers—to hide his various magical aids.

“s not the worst name I’ve ever been called,” Stiles says. “Go ahead if you want.”

Must Stiles take all the fun out of it? Peter resolves to only call Stiles various endearments from now on and see how that pans out. He’ll probably have to suffer “creeperwolf” in return but, well, creepy or not, Stiles hasn’t been scared away yet, so Peter is willing to make his peace with it.

“You should go through the rest of it, and I’ll comb through the rest of the records,” Stiles offers. “See if there was anyone else, poke at the database some more in case they keep any CCTV records. My guy left me a backdoor so I wouldn’t bother him again if I needed to go back there, so that’s not a problem. It’s been years, so odds are stuff has long been deleted, but it never hurts to be thorough.”

Stiles’ phone buzzes again. This time Stiles doesn’t ignore it.

“Jesus Christ on a pogo stick, what is it?” He fishes the phone out of his pocket while Peter picks up the news articles to leaf through.

Stiles makes a face at his phone but unlocks it and starts flicking through the messages he’s been receiving this whole time.

“Is it your illustrious father, wondering why you aren’t at school?” Peter inquires.

“What? No, the school will call Jess at the station dispatch, and Jess is totally my buddy. Long as I bring her some of my mom’s rogaliki from time to time, she’s not ratting me out to anyone. This is my best friend...” Stiles trails off. His eyes go huge and round, and he smells of exasperation, wariness and brewing violence.

“Is something wrong?” Peter sets the articles aside.

“This is my best friend Scott,” Stiles says slowly. “He’s been texting me about how this is the literal worst day for me to skip because he has a personal emergency. A new and, apparently, amazingly pretty girl just joined our class, and her name is Allison Argent.”

Chapter End Notes

A note for those not in the know: Jack Napier is Joker's real name in a big chunk of the Batman franchise. It first appeared in the 1989 movie *Batman* where Joker was a gangster who went insane after getting badly injured and disfigured.

Chapter 3: dont do anything stupid

Stiles slides into the garden belonging to the Argents' neighbors, the Bells. They are nice people, both retired, with children who are grown up and living in big cities, so they go on vacations during school year, when all interesting places are less flooded by families with screaming kids. Like right now, for example. Very nice of them to leave their place conveniently empty for Stiles to watch their newest neighbors, unwitting as the favor was.

He slinks along the fence, mostly focused on the house but still casting the net of his senses over the town. Peter's rage and impatience stand out like a siren in the middle of the night, more annoying than Scott's incessant texting was.

Sheesh. Can no one let Stiles do his thing without interruptions?

Well, at least Peter's not doing it intentionally. From what Stiles could tell, Peter has no clue who his new helpful friend is besides a plucky human, perhaps with some rudimentary magic at his disposal. Good. Stiles prefers it this way.

There are no emotions in the Argent house. Would they all be out and about now? Granted, they have just moved in so they must have a million and one things to do, not to mention their actual goal for coming here (i.e. hunting down the last loose end of the Hale fire), but by the same virtue they must need to unpack, dust around, swap out the batteries in smoke alarms, put fresh sheets on beds and whatnot. Besides, there's a car parked out front.

Stiles crouches among the Bells' chaparral mallow shrubs and watches the Argents' entrance. Something is wrong with this place, he can tell as much. It's a little niggling something but it's enough that he doesn't feel comfortable trying to get inside based on lack of people there or leaving because there's no one to watch. He'd rather observe a little longer.

He's never had much patience to begin with. Impulsive, reckless, easygoing, mortally curious, that's him to a t. He can do research but only because with the Adderall to marshal his cat herd of thoughts he can sink into something with single-minded focus and only register the world around him again once he's done or someone (usually Dad or Scott) shakes his shoulder and asks him when the last time was that he ate, drank or showered. Any actual patience that he employs when needed is something he cultivated purposefully and with great difficulty, like a gardener trying to breed a new kind of flower. He's wrestling with it now and reluctantly boosting it via his magic as he stares at the driveway where literally nothing is happening. He doesn't like influencing his own emotions too much; it's so easy that it can get addictive.

His phone buzzes again. Stiles checks it, and for once today it's not Scott waxing lyrical about how sakura petals are swirling around Allison Argent wherever she goes. It's Peter—who, turns out, has a phone, a tidbit of information that, apparently, he hadn't planned on sharing with Stiles until they got the news of the Argents rolling into town and Stiles had to basically sit on Peter to stop him from wolfing out and going after them right away.

Not literally, of course. The idea of sitting on Peter is, well, not conducive to Stiles' dignity, what with Peter's desire always hanging around him, banked low and flaring whenever Stiles says something smart or gets embarrassed by all the creepy.

Stiles' magic affords him a unique insight into self-awareness that most teenagers don't have. He knows what desire feels like—the fine citizens of Beacon Hills have healthy sex lives—and he knows that no one in his entire life has ever felt it towards him. Which is fair, considering that in middle school he's been rather heavy-handed with spreading unease around and now the majority of his schoolmates avoid him and fear making him angry, as if he's one careless comment away from a school shooting. One possible exception might be Erica Reyes, but hers was an uncomfortable hero-worship due to him making people cut out being little shits about her epilepsy fit, and that later on morphed into some nasty malice the longer Stiles ignored her feelings (that he ostensibly had no way of knowing about), so he probably dodged a bullet there.

Peter's desire is aimed directly at Stiles, a scorching, slick, sinuous thing that makes Stiles hot under the collar. Peter wants Stiles in his pack, which he has made no secret of, and in his bed, which has only been alluded to via some jokes and teasing; but Stiles doesn't need to guess, extrapolate or read between the lines. He knows for sure, even though, for the life of him, he can't fathom why. The pack thing he can understand but the other thing? Stiles is a spastic, scrawny teenager, and Peter is a smart, capable (if currently a bit insane) adult who is unfairly attractive even with the burn scars. That werewolf physique? Oof. Not to mention the bright blue eyes and... other things.

So far, the best theory Stiles has come up with is that Peter has spent six years without getting any and is reacting that way because Stiles is the closest and friendliest warm body he's got, excluding that mysterious original helper of his. But maybe the helper is an even worse option than Stiles, so here they are.

Peter's message reads:

Anything yet, darling?

Stiles rolls his eyes.

its like being on a road trip w/ a toddler, he types back. no creeperwolf we r not there yet.

Would you care to elaborate on that, sweetheart?

Resigned to it, Stiles lets himself blush his fill at the stupid endearment. He had to resort to draining his own embarrassment away at the hospital but here no one can see (or smell) him.

omg srsly creeper, he sends. It's not the same as telling Peter to stop, and Stiles thinks they both know it. Peter would probably stop if Stiles actually asked him to. if u hide a walkietalkie in my room 2 listen 2 me sleep ill change my mind about killing u.

Don't worry, sugarplum, Peter texts back. I can hear everything you do in your room without bothering with a walkie-talkie.

Okay, wow. Stiles' face is on fire. It's not like he didn't know that little fact; he used it to talk to Peter last night, knowing every word would be heard clearly. But the way Peter presents it now, well...

Stiles needs to have a good, long talk with his confusedly screaming sexuality. Later. Much later. Right now he has work to do.

theres smth fishy about the argents, he types. He doesn't care if changing the subject loses him a point in this banter game. Peter's desire for revenge is a raging sea compared to the roadside puddle of his desire for Stiles anyway. *im watching the house rn so b patient ok.*

Fishy how?

Stiles is thinking about how to phrase it when a woman comes out of the house. She's talking on the phone, and she looks like a teacher from a horror movie, the one who turns out to have been the monster all along and takes a bite out of the blonde girl survivor. Her sharp features bear a haughty, disapproving expression that looks so natural, it must be her default; she's wearing a long dress and strict heels, and her short red hair is immaculate.

She also has no emotions.

Stiles forgets about the phone in his hands and pours his senses onto her, pulling them away from the town. His awareness slips off her like he's trying to grab her with oiled hands, but eventually, after the effort has made him sweat, he can make out a human woman-shaped void where she should be.

He's seen a lot of scary shit, and he has even faced some adversaries that weren't susceptible to his magic. Fun fact: while a vetala possesses a corpse, they also have a corpse's lack of emotions to Stiles' senses. He had to go home and dig out a baseball bat—why did he even have one? No one in his family has ever played any baseball—in order to go all classic zombie basher on them. But the woman, presumably an Argent, looks perfectly alive and well, and now that Stiles has brought most of his focus to press down on her, she doesn't feel exactly like a corpse. She shimmers ever so slightly to him, and he can only theorize that she has some sort of protection against magic. Maybe his own, specifically, which would be incredibly worrying on several levels, or maybe just magic in general. It has to be something strong because it doesn't let anything at all leak through. When he looks at her, he can only perceive her with the ordinary human senses. It makes him feel unbalanced, weak. Hobbled.

He lets his awareness splash all over the city again, sighing quietly in relief, crouches even lower because he really, really doesn't want the horror movie teacher to catch a glimpse of him, and texts Peter back.

theyve got some sort of protection against magic

its personal not wards

i dunno what that is or what else they mite b hiding up their sleeves

It takes a while for Peter to text back, long enough for the woman to get into the car and drive away, none the wiser that she is being spied on. Stiles can feel Peter's cautious deliberation but doesn't understand why it's there.

First of all, I won't do you the disservice of doubting whether or not you allowed them to spot you. What a dick, Stiles thinks. If he didn't want to do Stiles the disservice, he wouldn't have even fucking brought it up. Second of all, perhaps it might be prudent to bring the rest of your coven in. Rest assured, I have the means to compensate all of your help.

The rest of Stiles' what now?

Stiles gawks at the message for a couple of seconds before he understands what is going on and has to stifle his somewhat hysterical chortle on his sleeve. Peter thinks Stiles is a witch and has a whole coven behind him! Oh, what a funny joke. Stiles wishes he had a coven or at least a black cat familiar so he'd have someone to share the joke with. He's never even told Scott about any of it, the supernatural, the magic, the way Stiles took up protecting the town because it needed protecting and there was no one else stupid enough to do it. Did Peter only agree to the deal because he thought he could get more than just Stiles out of it? Looks like the legendary crafty Peter Hale has outcrafted himself.

ok lets go over some essentials here, he types, arranging his legs into a more comfortable crossed position. He's going to be here a while since the Argents need looking at with human eyes. 1st im not a witch

altho mb i should look into a cat familiar cuz that sounds awesome now that i think about it

2nd theres no coven

theres no anyl

just me myself and i

3rd if u r disappointed make ur peace w/ that

i made a deal w/ u in good faith n u agreed

the protections a problem so wat

problems r there 2 b solved

Peter is disappointed. Stiles is annoyed at that and wonders if some wolfsbane-laced laxative in the dinner squash puree would make it past Peter's sense of smell. Stiles has produced everything from the police file to the knowledge of the Argents arriving in town; without him, Peter would be stumbling around in the dark and being a big obvious moron.

If Peter proves himself a lot less smart than Stiles has taken him to be and annuls the deal because he won't be getting a whole witch coven that no one ever promised him, Stiles will have to watch him extremely closely. And if Peter goes outside of Stiles' conditions, well, he'd have to be dealt with.

Stiles doesn't want to kill Peter. He doesn't particularly like killing, for all that he's earned more than his fair share of experience in it. And he still agrees with the idea of raining hell down on someone who murdered one's family but it's a double-edged sword: if Peter goes loose, ripping throats out whenever and wherever, he will become a problem for the local law enforcement which means a danger to Dad.

There was once a hamadryad whose bonded tree got cut down. Understandably, she lashed out and killed a couple of humans, starting with the one who had been holding the saw. Then she tried lashing out at the police officers who came to the Preserve to investigate the crime scene, and Stiles felt Dad's shock and disorientation at being struck with a brunch the size of a Roman pillar from across town.

Very, very soon there was no more hamadryad. And she hadn't gotten the luxury of peaceful talks beforehand.

Stiles watches the Argent house and monitors Peter whose disappointment shifts into a rueful self-deprecation, then into doubt, then into certainty, then into admiration mixed with annoyance and fondness and awkwardness.

He doesn't hurry to any conclusions, though. He waits for a text.

Indeed they are, Peter sends, and it's just as stilted over text as it would have been in person. *What are you planning to do now?*

Stiles supposes it might actually physically hurt Peter to apologize or admit that he's been wrong in any way. Peter seems like the type.

To be honest, Stiles wouldn't have minded an apology or a reassurance that he is more than enough without a whole coven of more experienced people supporting him. Some verbally expressed appreciation or acknowledgment surely wouldn't go amiss, but Stiles doesn't think he's getting that now or any time soon.

Suddenly, he feels tired. He'd been up half the night with research, and then he had to get up early to make Dad's lunch, shove himself into the shower and eat his own personal breakfast special: Cheerios in a mixture of half-milk, half-coffee, topped off with some Adderall. He threw himself into this, and for what? To be a disappointment to some revenge-bent guy he met in the woods?

Looking down at the message thread, Stiles can't believe he was just obsessing over Peter casually wanting to fuck him. Maybe edging towards the borders of a crush on the man, even. What kind of a fluff-brained, stars-are-God's-daisy-chain idiot is he?

He'll help Peter find out what happened with the fire, make sure no civilians (including the police who are very much the civilians in the supernatural world) get hurt by the confrontation between Peter and, allegedly, Kate Argent, get the information Peter promised, and that would be it. A deal is a transaction. Ironic as it might sound coming from Stiles, there's no need to bring emotions into this.

ill watch the house see who else is here

remember everything u can about the argents compile n send 2 me

Of course, dear heart, comes a swift reply, smooth as butter.

Stiles doesn't feel an urge to roll his eyes or blush at the endearment anymore. Who the fuck cares.

He tucks his phone back into his pocket and closes his eyes to focus more fully on the house. If there are more protected people in there, he needs to learn to recognize that without huffing and puffing for several minutes while they stand a scant few yards away from him. If it's an item that provides protection, then he might be able to feel more of such items in the house. He will learn their names and faces, he will hack their phones (well, he will have Danny teach him how to hack phones first), he will map out their routine, he will break into their house and rifle through their secrets. They are too dangerous for Stiles to be able to afford to keep away from them.

No one will sneak up on him, a magical protection or not.

* * *

According to the short dossiers that Peter sends via many text messages instead of asking for Stiles' email like a normal person, the woman Stiles saw earlier is Victoria Argent, the fairytale princess Allison's mother.

As hours tick by, Stiles sees a gruff-faced man, Christopher Argent, and then, when school lets out, the fabled Allison herself (Scott is *still* texting Stiles about her. Did Stiles really need a third blow-by-blow account of how Allison sat behind Scott, leaned forward and asked to borrow a pen and Scott gave her his spare? No, no, he did not). She is very pretty, Stiles has to give her that. She has a soft, sweet face that is reminiscent of a Disney princess, and if she weren't part of a family of unrepentant, unpunished killers, Stiles would have even said that she seems like a perfect match for Scott.

Well, he supposes the Argents aren't a real threat to Scott, seeing as the guy's as human as they come. Not unless the Argents are aware of Stiles and what he can do, somehow, and aim to use Scott to get to Stiles.

Christopher has the same protection as Victoria. Allison does not, and Stiles latches onto her emotions like a burr, dissecting them down to the vaguest, most minute sensations. She doesn't seem to be brimming with malice or even have a care in the world besides some small annoyances but that doesn't mean anything. Stiles' magic can't read thoughts. Perhaps hunting supernatural creatures is a tiny annoyance to her, same as a stray pebble in a shoe would be for him.

Stiles kind of hates his human eyes. They can't seem to find anything in common between what Christopher and Victoria are wearing, even though Stiles does his best to try and see, aiming specifically for their fingers, wrists and neck because jewelry is an obvious choice of a talisman.

Then, sore from sitting, really needing to use the bathroom, hungry and thirsty, Stiles finally gets a break. Christopher and Victoria leave the house and wheel off, their little shimmery voids getting further and further away, and a little later Allison leaves as well. He doesn't care where they are all going; only that the house is empty. No more people, no more voids.

For the past few years Stiles has been learning everything he could about magic, hungry for any source. None of the magic described in any books has ever been like his, and what was described there was hard for Stiles to do beyond the very basics like commanding mountain ash. He still learned, latching mostly on the slow-and-steady method of runic inscription. A rune could be made and then fed with power every day. It didn't matter that Stiles could only give it a trickle as long as he gave one regularly, and it stored over time, getting more and more powerful. It was a bit like accumulating XP in a video game: you are weak over the first few levels but the longer you manage to stay alive, the harder it is for anything to kick your ass, provided you can stick to the necessary grind.

Stiles has had a lot of time to feed a lot of runes a lot of power. Boy, was he glad for the foresight last night when Peter smacked into those wards like a bug against the windshield.

He fishes a wide metal bracelet out of one of his pockets and snaps it in place on his wrist. It's covered with dense runework that took Stiles ages to perfect, but now he can enjoy the fruits of his backbreaking labor.

He taps a rune, sending a wisp of power into it and bonding that wisp with the power already stored inside; then another.

Invisible to all living or mechanical eyes and leaving no physical traces, Stiles climbs over the fence between the Bells' garden and the Argents' and makes his way towards the back door. He's extra careful on his way there because while back doors usually have weaker locks, chances are the Argents know it too and have left some surprises in their garden for an intruder.

It looks like they have not. Maybe they haven't had the time yet? Sloppy, overconfident hunters.

He moves slowly despite knowing that he has a time limit on the power of runes. He's angry enough to think of them derisively but a family doesn't survive for centuries in the hunting business without being good at what they do. If they laced anything with wolfsbane, it will poison him too, never mind that he's human. Aconite is still a bad thing to have in his body.

He takes two bobby pins out of his hair—he thought of getting a buzz cut once but opted to keep his hair a little longer, fluffy and messy enough to hide the pins in—picks the back door lock with the swiftness of long practice and walks right in.

Like every murderer's house Stiles has ever been to, it looks normal. No one ever does a snooping kid detective the courtesy of lining the hallway with serial killer plastic and leaving their murder instruments right there on display, covered in crusted blood. Stiles ignores the first floor with its kitchen and living room and goes straight upstairs towards the bedrooms.

There are no wards here, nothing to deter him. Stiles supposes there might be cameras but since those wouldn't be registering anything, he doesn't care. He goes into the master bedroom and starts searching through the nightstands and drawers, then moves to what looks like a home office.

He doesn't even try to hide that someone has been here. If they left things like hairs glued to drawers in order to know there's been a discreet search in their absence, they needn't have bothered. Stiles has no time to put everything back the way it was, and besides, he wants them spooked and paranoid and calling for reinforcements in the shape of one Kate Argent.

He flips through papers and takes pictures of everything that seems interesting, then leaves it strewn across the floor, along with Christopher's shirts and Victoria's small army of skin care products. When he moves into the home office, a locked desk greets him, and he doesn't bother with picking those locks. He taps a third rune instead and gives the desk a vicious kick with superhuman strength flowing through his veins, his own power returned to him in a rune shape that lets him lift half a desk and break it further without effort like a piece of bread. It's both therapeutic and useful because the documents that flutter out of the splintered remains of desk drawers and hidden compartments are the sort of thing that has never been meant for a stranger's eyes. It's finances, lists of trusted flunkies, fake IDs; a veritable feast of information. He takes pictures of it and keeps tearing the office to shreds. There's a laptop, and Stiles rips it open to take the hard drive for later perusal and crushes the rest into a shapeless lump of metal and plastic.

The wanton destruction is so good for Stiles' weary soul that he loses track of time. Only the sensation of the power starting to ebb reminds him that he's on a deadline, and he covers the distance from the second floor landing to the back door in one leap, using up the most of his remaining strength in one go.

He climbs over the fence into the Bells' garden and makes it under the cover of his new best friend chaparral only several seconds before the first two runes wear off. He lies there on the grass, face in the dirt, panting, heart going a mile a minute, a headache throbbing in a circle of pain around his head, his undershirt drenched in sweat. He really fucking needs to go to the bathroom, and his tongue is dry and fuzzy in a way that probably means he's dehydrated.

He smiles because he feels good. He feels alive.

A few minutes later he twists onto his back and feeds a trickle each to the three emptied runes. Cannot shirk the grind, or it'll get him killed.

Then he gets up and takes a roundabout route back to Roscoe, making sure to avoid any passers-by.

* * *

Coming home is a sensation like none other. The moment Stiles feels the wards close behind him, so much tension leaves his shoulders. This is his fortress, a safe place; he starts whistling a random tune as he makes his way into the bathroom, taking his clothes off and haphazardly folding them as he goes, content in a way he can never be outside of the protections he built into the fence, and the house walls, and the porch, and every window.

The more Stiles knew about the things that went bump in the night, the more layers of runes he added, and now just about the only thing that could take the Stilinski house wards down is probably a nuke.

Just how Stiles likes it.

Much unburdened and freshly rinsed in the shower, Stiles puts on clean clothes, transfers everything he normally carries with him into the new pockets, starts a load of laundry and heads to the kitchen.

It's a simple kind of bliss to sit down with a pitcher of cold water and make several sandwiches with basically everything. Stiles hasn't eaten anything since those early morning Cheerios, and he moans in pleasure as he bites into his behemoth of a sandwich.

For a minute, life is perfect.

Then there's a werewolf walking down the street towards Stiles' house, and it's not Peter.

Stiles contemplates using one of his least noticeable techniques, something he developed in the past two years and, admittedly, hasn't quite fully honed yet but only because it's so goddamned difficult. He's been learning to lean into people's existing urges, and it's a given that at any moment any person is wanting a whole bunch of things. To eat, to drink, to text their crush, to go to the bathroom, to scratch somewhere socially unacceptable, to listen to their favorite song, to take off painful new shoes, for the boring class or workday to end, for the nearby bakery to make a gluten-free version of a tasty-looking bun, whatever. Wants are always there, and Stiles has been learning fine control by wading through all of the surrounding emotions and increasing only specific ones for specific effects.

Sometimes it works quite well. A lot of joy has been sparked inside Stiles by the many times he made Harris rush out of the classroom and towards the porcelain throne just as he was about to give Stiles another undeserved detention. Sometimes it doesn't work the way Stiles expects it at all. But how could he have known that encouraging the sultry yearning in their Math teacher would result not in her calling her husband but in her walking up to Jackson, grabbing his face and kissing him with tongue in front of everybody?

Actually, maybe that one did work out well, despite the fact that it wasn't Stiles' original intention. Who knows what kind of harm she could have done if she'd had time to work out a more subtle plan to get into a student's pants? Not even Jackson deserves that sort of shit.

In any case, Stiles could try it on the werewolf. The latter is chock-full of anger that almost rivals Peter's, mired in a mountain's worth of slimy, thick guilt and bleeding with grief. Someone like this probably has a lot of axes to grind and a lot of wants to fulfill before he can call it a day.

As Stiles contemplates it, the werewolf stops in front of his home and just stands there. Is this something all werewolves do? Just fucking creep outside Stiles' house? Is that a werewolf sport he's never heard about?

Still chewing on his second sandwich, Stiles drags himself to the window. There he is. A tall, muscular guy. Dark hair, dark stubble, an expression sour enough to curdle all milk in a five-mile radius. The werewolf notices Stiles noticing him and stares. There's a sense of violent threat growing in him.

Stiles takes out his phone and snaps a picture of the guy. Weirdly, his eyes in it are shining bursts of white, so Stiles takes another picture from a different angle, just to make sure it's not a trick of lighting. Nope, it's not. Some inherent property of werewolf eyes? Hmm, how do werewolves get IDs, driver's licenses and passports with that sort of problem? Hell, even feature in yearbook photos? They can't all live like the Amish, so there must be a way to get around the issue.

Stiles tables the question for later and sends a pic of the tall, dark and surly to Peter.

friend of urs?

This is my nephew, Derek. He visited me earlier today. Where is he? What is he doing?

being a low-budget mafia movie level of menacing outside my house. did u tell him about me?

As far as he knows, I'm still a catatonic omega. He must have smelled you in my room and asked the nurses who else visited me.

i take he wouldnt be thrilled 2 know who did away w/ laura

No, sweetheart, I don't think he would. But from what he said, I think he's here to find out exactly that.

Hale family drama. Stiles should demand some extra payment for getting involved with that.

He swallows the last of the sandwich, washes it down with more water and goes outside.

Derek Hale is watching Stiles come closer and stop by the low fence, only a few feet away. The way Derek's not even blinking reminds Stiles more of an alligator than a wolf, and Stiles doesn't bother holding back the laughter that the thought evokes.

Derek's eyes narrow.

"Whatever you're selling, we ain't interested," Stiles tells him. "Please go away before I get my shotgun."

"Shotgun," Derek says flatly.

"Uh-huh. You know, we people in backwater towns are very trigger-happy. And Beacon Hills does get a lot of mountain lion attacks, so it doesn't hurt to keep a little something nearby for safety. So, like, shoo?" Stiles makes the correspondent shooing motion with his hands.

"Why did you visit my uncle?" Looks like Derek's the blunt sort.

“Who?” Stiles blinks with as much innocence as he can master.

“Peter Hale,” Derek growls, and there’s enough of an actual growl there for Stiles to want to facepalm. He supposes he should be grateful that Derek isn’t flashing eyes and fangs in public. “What do you want with him?”

“Oh, it’s a school thing,” Stiles lies, knowing full well that Derek can tell it’s a lie but not finding it in himself to care much. “Help the unfortunate kind of event. It’s interesting that he’s your uncle, ‘cause, y’know, no one visited him ever, so I got assigned to come over and read to him some. Good works for the community and all that.”

Stiles could go on blathering for a while but Derek seems to have very little patience for that. Violence spiking, he strikes lightning-fast, hand shooting forward to—as Stiles surmises—grab Stiles’ shirt and slam him chest-first into the fence.

Derek’s hand hits the wards full speed. He chokes on a gasp as his bones crack and snap against the invisible wall.

“As I said,” Stiles says, “always good to keep a little something nearby for safety.”

Weirdly, this incident goes a long way towards raising Derek’s regard for Stiles. As Derek cradles his broken hand close to his chest, there’s a grudging, hostile respect blooming in him, and wariness that manages to allay some of the anger.

“Who are you?” Derek asks, his tone only about half as sour as before.

“My name is Stiles,” Stiles says. “And who are you, besides an exceptionally bad-mannered werewolf?”

Derek flinches, a momentary threat splashing all over his emotions and then receding. Likely figuring out that if Stiles has wards on his house, then of course he’s in the know.

“I’m Derek Hale. You... How much do you know?”

“Enough,” Stiles says.

Derek glares at him suspiciously.

“My sister’s body was found in the Preserve, cut in two. Do you know who did that?”

Stiles doesn’t hide his surprise.

“Cut in two?” He repeats. He doesn’t think it was Peter who did that, although, admittedly, Stiles hasn’t seen the body with his own eyes. Still, if it was Peter, Derek would have said “torn”, not “cut”. One would need a big-ass blade to cut an adult body in half, and even Peter’s alpha form doesn’t have claws nearly long enough. “Sounds... savage.”

“Do you know who did that to her or not?” Derek demands, taking a step forward until he’s a hair’s breadth away from the wards.

“That’s what I would like to know myself,” Stiles says, quite truthfully. He does want to know who found Laura’s body and decided it was a great prop with which to train their sashimi chef skills. “I visited your uncle hoping for a talk. Unfortunately, talking to him in his current state is... frustrating.”

Not a word of a lie, yet Derek is still glowering like he knows Stiles isn’t telling him everything. Well, tough. Stiles has never told anybody everything. Just because Derek might feel like he’s entitled to Stiles’ secrets doesn’t mean he is.

Stiles adopts a slightly bashful face and drops a spark of indifference deep inside Derek.

“To be level with you, Derek: I’m a Sheriff’s kid. Sticking my nose into things is in my blood, and I found out about Laura’s death and got interested. Didn’t know she was cut in two, Jesus.” He rubs the back of his head, encouraging the indifference in Derek to grow little by little. “Thought I’d try to find out what happened to her and why. I don’t even know what she came here to do, to be honest. Didn’t she leave town, like, years ago? Did she tell you why she was heading here?”

He twines the indifference with disdain. Derek is an easy target, full of so much emotion already that taking his cue from his feelings and instincts is second nature to him. Whenever Stiles meets someone like Derek, he feels a bit awkward, like Interpol’s most wanted jewel thief tasked with taking a little kid’s friendship bracelet.

Derek snorts. Stiles makes himself bristle at the dismissal, knowing Derek’s nose will pick up on that.

“Never mind,” Derek says. “This was a waste of time.”

“Hey!” Stiles plays up his indignation but not too much.

Derek leaves, played perfectly like a big muscly fiddle.

Stiles goes back inside and makes himself a third sandwich.

got him 2 back off for now

hopefully by the time he thinks 2 come back itll all b done n hell b ur personal problem

Did you threaten him with murder as well, darling? Peter is mirthful as he sends it. Stiles doesn’t know what exactly Peter finds so funny, just the situation in general or the idea of Stiles in particular threatening murder, and he’s so, so out of fucks to give which one that is.

Okay, maybe he’s not as indifferent to Peter’s opinions as he’d like to be. But they’ve only known each other a day, and Stiles’ initial fascination with Peter’s quick tongue, sizzling fury and killer blue eyes is already fading. He’ll get there.

nah

he doesnt think i matter

He never has been the sharpest crayon in the box, our Derek.

This one makes Stiles smirk, even though it's not entirely fair to Derek. If not for Stiles' magic, he'd probably keep sniffing around.

He gives Peter a short update on the results of his stakeout, leaving his runes out of it. If Peter notices any holes to poke at in the narrative, he doesn't try to.

I'm going to stake out the house during the night, Peter tells him. All the delightful mayhem you caused will undoubtedly whip them into a frenzy.

Stiles mentally runs through several responses, ranging from "When are you gonna sleep then" to "Be careful".

k, he settles on, then remembers.

btw derek said laura was found cut in 2. did u bring a medieval sword 2 ur forest rendezvous or wat?

Last I saw her, she was in one piece, Peter says, and it's such a hideously morbid, unfunny joke that it makes something in Stiles—the part of him that killed that tengu with fear, listened to its last screech and, when Stiles stood over its corpse with his ears bleeding, said "Don't quit your day job to become a singer, dude"—kick its heels and giggle. It's a small (or at least Stiles likes to think so) part of Stiles, and it recognizes its like in a big part of Peter.

Is that what people mean when they say that someone is a bad influence?

so who wouldve bothered cutting her in 2??

The Argents, I suppose, Peter says. They have no idea what's going on. It seems like an attempt to make the werewolves they're here to hunt come out of the woods by desecrating our dead. Much the same thing as what you did today, my darling, only with more intestines.

Stiles laughs out loud. Peter, all the way over at the hospital, is smug as if he knows exactly what reaction his words have produced.

Maybe Stiles is not the only one recognizing some sort of similarity between them.

Peter's rage is also boiling higher and hotter than its relative normal. Has the Argents' taunting worked, then? Even though Peter was the one to kill Laura? Stiles supposes that no matter what Peter did to his niece, he never wanted the Argents near her, much less have them cut her into pieces to bait him.

Because Peter made Stiles laugh, Stiles sends another message.

dont do anything stupid

You wound me, sweetheart, Peter says. When have I ever?

Stiles doesn't bother listing the occurrences chronologically or alphabetically. He slips his phone into a pocket instead, cleans the kitchen and goes upstairs.

He means to look at the hard drive and the documents before bed, but he's exhausted. It's dark outside, and today has been a long, long day. Using several runes at the same time is especially tiring for him, and with that on top of everything else he plops onto his bed, just to rest for a few minutes, and falls into deep, dreamless sleep.

He's jerked out of it with a smothered, incoherent exclamation when Peter's rage, desire and vindictiveness shoot up like a superhero movie sky beam, searing, thundering, inescapable, like nothing he's ever sensed before, and before he's fully awake, he can already feel his newest acquaintance, Allison Argent, right next to Peter, terrified, and desperate, and angry-determined. Then her desperation spikes, twined with shock and disbelief, and her emotions grow muted with unconsciousness.

Peter's rage recedes like a wave rolling back into the ocean as both he and Allison cross the town at a breakneck speed, and a completely different emotion joins in, one that could be best described as "Well, shit".

Stiles fumbles for his phone, cursing a blue streak. His eyes are heavy with sleep and his hands are clumsy, and it takes him three tries to find "creepewolf" in his contacts and start a call.

Peter stops behind a supermarket to pick up.

"Why, hello," he says, all nonchalant. "To what do I owe—"

"What did you do?" Stiles demands.

Peter falls silent. Stiles senses Peter's concentration, the way he is utterly, hastily focused. Probably calculating the best lie. But in the end Peter seems to decide that Stiles already knows something and there's no point in spinning a lie blind.

"Something stupid, sweetheart," Peter admits with a rueful sigh.

Stiles is ready to strangle the guy with his bare hands, so help him God, they had a deal—

"I... may have bitten Allison Argent."

* * *

Stiles drives straight to Peter and Allison. He told Peter to go to a secluded spot and didn't bother asking for landmarks and directions—let Peter wonder how Stiles is tracking him. The rain is sluicing down Roscoe's windows, and were Stiles relying on his human eyes to find the road, he would have gotten lost at least four times. He parks Roscoe behind some trees, well-hidden from the view of anyone driving past, and hikes the rest of the way through the trees and underbrush of the Preserve. The night is wet and chilly, and the branches do little to protect him from the rain. By the time he gets where he's going, he's half-soaked in icy water which does nothing to improve his mood.

Allison is lying on the grass, still alive and unconscious. The huge bite on her side is bleeding sluggishly, staining the tatters of her shirt—which, wait, hold on, that’s not her shirt. That’s one of Scott’s. Wow. Good on you, Scott, Stiles thinks almost hysterically. That was fucking fast, buddy.

Peter is waiting for Stiles standing a few feet away from Allison, hands in his pockets (so he did stash some clothes around the Preserve for after shift). He looks calm and in control, but his emotions are a churning sea of snapping fury, loss, disgust, wary alertness and profound grief. At the sight of Stiles, there’s suddenly a side serving of genuine pleasure tinged throughout with sexual desire and amusement.

“Hello, Little Red Riding Hood,” Peter says, smirking. “Do you come to these woods in search of big bad wolves often?”

Stiles doesn’t get it for a second, and then he looks down at himself and sees his red hoodie that he randomly pulled from his closet in the dark. It would have been funny if Stiles weren’t so incandescently, uncompromisingly angry.

“What the hell,” Stiles says, quiet and level, and makes a step towards Peter, “were you thinking?”

He knows what Peter was thinking—knows that Peter wasn’t—but he really fucking wants to hear what Peter has to say for himself.

“I’m an alpha,” Peter says, flashing his red eyes. “It’s in my nature to make betas, sweetheart.”

“I know that!” Stiles roars. A peal of thunder in the sky punctuates his words. Allison moans and mutters something unintelligible but doesn’t wake up.

He doesn’t remember last being so angry. Maybe when that hamadryad hurt Dad. There was a thunderstorm that day too, and Stiles came home covered head to toe in sticky mud after burying her in another unmarked grave among the trees she loved so fucking much.

“It’s not a breach of our deal,” Peter reminds him. “The supernatural has not been revealed. No one died.”

“Leaving aside for the moment the little fact that she could still reject the bite and die,” oh yeah, Stiles read about it, werewolves say “the Bite is a gift” like the poncy gifts that they are but it’s a gift that comes with a shake of dice, and rejection is always fatal, “I also shared with you then that I was a big fan of consent. There’s no part of this that she consented to. That’s right up the alley of the things that get you dead in my town.”

He gives Peter a bland smile.

“That hunter who enslaved a selkie girl. She asked me to kill him slowly, and I did.”

There’s a vicious, hungry approval humming through Peter, and that isn’t the fucking reaction Stiles has been looking for.

Maybe he will kill Peter tonight and wash his hands off the whole mess. Clearly, he's not getting through.

"I don't have any prurient interest in the Argent girl," Peter says mildly. It's true, Stiles doesn't sense the sneaky, petty glee of a lie, and still, again, Peter is missing the point.

"Oh, no, you didn't fuck her," Stiles says. "You just rewrote her DNA and bound her to you forever. Again, that is if she survives."

"So... are you going to kill me for it?" Peter wonders. Something rises in him, the desperate, fanged, spiked, huge yearning. His will to live. Above all, Stiles thinks, or, rather, underneath everything else, Peter is a survivor. He was the only one to come out of that burnt out house not in a body bag. Nothing, not even the rage, guides his actions like his will to live.

Stiles contemplates it for a few seconds. If he kills Peter, and Allison survives, she will become an omega and go feral which would necessitate putting her down; she might have half a chance of holding onto sanity if the alpha spark goes to her, but, on the other hand, there's also Derek, and besides, she can probably go feral due to being without a pack anyway. And with the reception that is likely waiting for her at home, should she go back there, she might well be better off with Stiles putting her in the ground at once. If Allison rejects the bite, there's no reason not to kill Peter, besides the fact that Stiles... doesn't really want to.

Peter is partially insane. Stiles knew that from the start. That's why Peter's emotions are the way they are, untempered by reason, hanging half-out of the protective net of sanity that would cushion and soothe them, raw and rubbing against the world like an open wound against sandpaper. How much is Peter to blame for what he does? Should Stiles haul him away into a mental hospital instead?

On the other hand, the only asylum that could possibly hold an alpha werewolf for any length of time is Eichen House, and, frankly, Stiles would rather kill Peter quickly than sentence him to torture. Eichen House is a whole different kettle of rotten fish, a pus-filled pimple on the face of Beacon Hills that Stiles will deal with sooner or later.

Peter is still sane enough to know that he fucked up. Sane enough to look and behave perfectly functional. He is, Stiles feels, sane enough to take responsibility for the clusterfuck he caused.

"If she dies, I will," Stiles says. "Don't worry, if it comes to that, I will make sure to finish the investigation into the fire and kill the culprit."

Peter snarls at him, fangs out, eyes shining with bloody red.

"How magnanimous of you," he says. His will to live surges, braids into his rage and turns into a swiftly growing lethal intent.

Stiles' lips twitch into a sincere smile. This is almost cute.

“It is,” he says, and he banks Peter’s lethal intent, making it wither, and he drops a handful each of fear, confusion and helplessness into Peter’s mind. Not too much, just enough so Peter wouldn’t suspect his emotions are being tempered with directly.

He pulls back some of his awareness of the town and lets the extra power pulse through his veins, roil under his skin like ocean waves before a storm. He knows it has some effect on many supernatural creatures, and turns out, it works on werewolves too because Peter’s eyes widen and he inhales deeply, almost entranced by whatever it is he can discern in Stiles’ scent.

Stiles heaps on more fear, confusion and helplessness, binds them close together so that they feed off each other and eclipse even the ever-present rage. His magic courses through his body, restless, looking to spring back the way it’s used to being. Lightning and thunder crack and shatter the sky several times in quick succession, so close together that it almost feels like music.

Deep inside the Preserve, the alien mind is watching Stiles but making no move.

“If I decide to kill you tonight, I will,” he says. A sound that is half a growl and half a whimper leaves Peter’s lips. His eyes are blue again, and his teeth look human. “Make no mistake, Peter. There’s nothing you or anyone else in the world can do to stop me.”

Finally, *finally*, Peter looks like he believes him.

It would sure have been nice to have a coven or something. A bunch of experienced people ready to have Stiles’ back, someone to talk to about all the crazy supernatural bullshit freely. Stiles can honestly say he wants something of the sort.

But he doesn’t need it. He never has.

Stiles eases up the fear, confusion and helplessness and lets the excess power seep out, back to enveloping the streets with his awareness. Peter blinks and takes in another deep breath; straightens up as Stiles drains away the induced emotions bit by bit.

Peter’s eyes focus on Stiles, boring into him with intensity, and Peter’s desire rushes in like a flood, sharp and deliciously tingly with the sexual edge like extra-bubbly soda.

Stiles only barely holds back from facepalming. Is this whole thing a kink of Peter’s? Really? Really?

“We can’t stay here,” Stiles says, brisk and business-like. The thunder above abates but the rain is still pouring down, and Stiles’ hair and clothes are heavy with it. “The Argents are bound to be frothing at the mouth right now. They’ll go looking for her and you as soon as they get together a big enough party, and they will comb the Preserve very carefully.”

He can feel it, many people flush with anger, contempt and gleeful anticipation moving in the direction of the Argents’ house where two little voids are pacing around the living room. None seem to have the sort of protection that the Argents are sporting. This must be something special, something unique and kept in the family.

“The Hale house?” Peter suggests, dubious at his own idea.

“Derek is sleeping there tonight,” Stiles says.

“Of course he is,” Peter mutters, rolling his eyes. Inside him, reluctant concern and sharp, deep betrayal vie for dominance.

Stiles sighs. Seems like there’s only one obvious choice.

“I know a place,” he says. “Pick her up, we’ll drive there. Did you ditch her phone? They can track that.”

“Of course,” Peter huffs, as if assuming he’s done the smart thing is something Stiles is supposed to do automatically.

Stiles pins Peter with an unimpressed look, and Peter gives him a sudden sheepish smile that looks entirely too sane and sweet to belong on his face. Stiles looks away and starts trekking back to Roscoe.

Peter plucks Allison off the grass and follows. They walk through the rain, the mud, and the branches that seem to be almost reaching out to Stiles to snag him by the hoodie. Stiles’ disposition isn’t benefiting from any of this, especially when Peter seems to glide through the woods unimpeded like a ghost. The way he moves makes Stiles feel ten times clumsier than he actually is.

The familiar shape of Roscoe is a comfort and a balm for the soul. Peter drops Allison in the back seat and gets in the front with Stiles, buckling himself in without prompting when Stiles does.

They are close enough that Stiles can feel Peter’s body heat. Apparently, werewolves are walking furnaces who are definitely never in danger of getting sick after a walk in the rain. Well, Stiles has a rune for quick-drying on his bracelet that he added after the hamadryad but he’s not about to use that in front of Peter. It’s the level of trust that Peter’s going to have to work hard to earn, and Stiles isn’t sure if Peter even wants to—if Peter will live long enough to earn it—and it’s better to come down with the sniffles than to give away secrets. Soleil can hook Stiles up with some herbal remedies that work wonders on the symptoms anyway.

Before they leave, Stiles reaches back and pokes Derek awake with a shrill spike of alarm. There. Now he can hear the hunters coming and take care of his own safety as needed.

They drive into the city, and Stiles makes sure to give a wide berth to any hunter cars. Peter feels relaxed and affectionate next to him, entirely unconcerned despite Stiles’ display earlier. There’s some wariness but no murderous intentions, and even though a myriad of emotions flicker on and off, following Peter’s thought process, none of them stay long enough to become anything substantial.

It’s both annoying and weirdly relaxing for Stiles as well. The only one who felt Stiles’ magic knowing that it was, in fact, magic and lived to tell the tale, was the selkie girl, and even though she looked to Stiles for protection and revenge on that hunter, she was also

scared shitless the entire time and felt knee-wobblingly relieved when he let her go. Is it Peter's insanity that Stiles proving genuinely dangerous is somehow causing nice fuzzy feelings? Or is it just Peter?

Stiles is still so fucking angry. Peter inadvertently leeching some of that anger off makes him angry about that. It's a convoluted and vicious circle, and Stiles is glad when they finally arrive at their destination.

Even after all these years, no one has bought the Walcott house. The first responders on the scene found what was later termed in the news "people larder", and that sort of infamy kept any potential buyers away. A couple of years ago Stiles warded it with some notice-me-not runes to use as a safe spot when needed; he also keeps a bunch of magical shit in there to avoid Dad asking any questions about herbs, powders, metalwork equipment or any of the other things Stiles has accumulated over the years.

Peter is curious about where they are going but doesn't ask any questions yet, following Stiles with Allison once again in a princess carry.

He takes Peter by the shoulder, guiltily enjoying for one brief second the warmth and solidity of the muscle under the thin shirt, and pulls Peter with him inside the wards. Peter inhales sharply once, the only outward sign of how startled he is at having a building appear out of thin air.

"Who burned this one?" Peter asks, eyeing the charred husk of the house.

"I did," Stiles says. "Come on."

"I can't help but wonder," Peter says, "was there anyone inside at the time?"

Stiles weighs the pros and cons of disclosure and decides he doesn't care. It's not like Peter can't find out the general history of the house from any number of public sources if he wants.

"A family of wendigos used to live here," he says. "I killed them but left too many traces behind, so I burned the place down afterwards."

"I have to say, sweetheart, that doesn't sound like the meticulousness I have come to expect of you," Peter teases.

Stiles snorts.

"Cut me some slack," he says, pushing the panel leading to the secret corridor. "I was twelve."

Peter is taken aback enough that he doesn't ask any follow-up questions.

Stiles didn't bother doing anything to the topside but he did clean up the corridor and the murder room. He used runes for that because there were no cleaning products in the world that could remove all of the traces, and now it's spotless and even smelling fresh.

He pushes apart the plastic sheets and flips the light switch. Then he obligingly holds the plastic sheets apart to let Peter duck and pass. Peter's curiosity runs rampant at the sight of the room with its earthy green walls and ceiling, a thick plush brown carpet, mismatched furniture, an abundance of magical bits and bobs, books, print-outs, notebooks, some second-hand and third-hand laptops and phones lying around and other general paraphernalia.

Stiles wills a handful of mountain ash to rise from an open bag and lay in a winding path around his stuff. The only things not protected from an overly nosy werewolf's paws are the couch, the mini-fridge in the corner and an unobtrusive-looking bucket. God, he loves mountain ash. After years of practice that stuff's practically eager to do Stiles' bidding; if it had a tail, it'd wag said tail so hard any time Stiles came into any contact with it. It's the best freaking thing about the supernatural world, bar none.

"Set her down there," Stiles says, nodding at the couch. "There are snacks and water in the fridge, feel free to help yourself and give some to her if she comes to. Don't let her leave. And it'd probably be better if you didn't show your face in the streets for a while. I bet the Argent's will come to the hospital to look for you too, so going back there is no longer a good idea."

Peter watches him with fascination.

"You're not afraid that I will run to save my skin if she dies?"

"There's nowhere you can run where I won't find you," Stiles says.

Damn it, Peter finds that very hot, apparently. It was just a fucking fact, nothing more.

Fucking unfairly attractive pervert.

"Nothing in the house itself works," he warns. "If you need the bathroom, there's that bucket over there. It's spelled to disintegrate anything that reaches inside deeper than an inch so don't drop anything you'd like to keep into it. No running water, so ration the stuff in the fridge. I'll bring more supplies tomorrow after school. Questions?"

Peter has none, and Stiles turns around to trudge outside for yet another drive through the city.

Man. What a bullshit fucking night.

Chapter 4: Things That Go Bump In The Night 101 Course With Professor Hale

Peter is drifting. He is weightless, soaring aimlessly like a catkin on a hot lazy afternoon. No thoughts trouble him, only the marrow-deep, howling loss that is always with him.

He was once lying in the grass on a hot lazy afternoon. He remembers, and he lets himself drift into it, not quite a dream, not quite a memory.

The Preserve is full of sounds for those who have the ears to listen. Peter is on his back, stretched in the grass, eyes closed, and the sounds envelop him with their richness: the songs of birds, the rustle of leaves, the skittering of animals, the buzzing of insects. And, of course, the laughter and happy shrieks of children.

Peter volunteers to look after the pups sometimes. While they are small, they tend to adore him, their indulging, funny uncle who's always up for harmless mischief, and he's been taking these babysitting shifts more often lately to slap some band-aid on the gaping wound where Derek's trust, love and respect used to be until they got torn right out. The twins, Anthea and Luke, are both born wolves but they are very careful with little Emma who is not only human but also a little sickly and fragile. They are playing hide-and-seek in the woods around the clearing, purely for Emma's benefit since the twins can hear heartbeats and track scents, but all three seem to be having genuine fun.

Peter tracks the pitter-patter of their feet and their heartbeats with ease. He's content like this. He couldn't do it always, there's a reason he's never seriously thought of having his own children, but this is simple and nice, and their joy is healing.

A heartbeat is getting closer and closer, and Peter is fully prepared when Emma runs over to him, giggling so hard that she fumbles a few steps, and plops onto him with all of her rather insubstantial weight.

"Uncle Peter, uncle Peter, hide me!" She demands, still laughing. "They said they were gonna tickle me!"

Peter grins at her and briefly rubs his cheek over her soft hair, scenting her.

"Ah, but what made you think I won't, little Em?"

Emma's eyes go huge and round in her outrage as she realizes that she's still in the danger of tickling.

"No fair!" She protests, pouting.

Peter laughs. Emma pushes off, scrambling to sit up, and looks over her shoulder at the woods.

“Not fair, uncle Peter,” she says, sounding very serious and like she’s not talking about tickling anymore. “You know they are coming.”

“Anthea and Luke?”

She looks back at him, and her blue eyes melt into light brown, amber and honey glowing in the sunlight.

“No. They are coming, and we don’t have time.”

“Who?” Peter sits up as well.

Dark lines spread through the sky, and its cloudless blue shine warps and crinkles like burning paper. When Peter looks away from the sky, Emma is no longer in sight, and the Preserve is up in flames around him.

The fire closes in on him within moments, and in its roar there’s a bizarre, incongruous chime.

Peter jerks awake, still half-dazed. The sound that pulled him from the nightmare-memory repeats, and now that he’s conscious, he recognizes that it’s his new phone.

He shakes off the last vestiges of the things he’s just seen and takes the phone out. It’s Stiles texting him.

the hunters got derek

also congrats

u get 2 live 2 wolf another day

the bite took uve got a brand new beta

The atrocious text-speak that Stiles uses both aggravates and amuses Peter. At least it’s on purpose. Stiles is too smart not to know what an apostrophe is.

Good morning, darling. Do you know if he’s still alive?

yeah he is

Peter is worried about Derek, and he doesn’t want to be. Derek left him to rot here without a second thought. Yes, he was following his alpha, but their relationship had been soured before the fire, and he was likely glad to cut Peter out of his life.

That doesn’t mean Peter is glad to cut Derek out. He bears his nephew no serious ill will, and being in the hands of enraged hunters is something that Peter would only wish for his worst enemies. There are, Peter knows full well, a lot of things worse than death that could happen to someone.

Conflicted and annoyed at himself for it, Peter sends:

Do you know where they are holding him?

yes but fat lot of good knowing is

cant do much for him from a distance

hes immobilized smhow

Peter has no earthly idea how Stiles gets the information that he does or why Derek being immobilized is specifically relevant. It's a secret to learn, and it's exhilarating. Almost as exhilarating as thinking about tearing Kate Argent's throat out.

If I had to hazard a guess, that would probably be mountain ash-infused manacles. It's a tried and true method of holding a werewolf. Unfortunately, picking locks from a distance is indeed impossible.

Stiles is silent for almost a minute which, with his normal texting speed, is a sign of some intense thinking happening on his end.

thanks for the idea, Stiles sends eventually. ill see what i can do b4 school

What idea, Peter wonders. Picking locks from a distance? Even if Stiles can somehow manage to do that, the hunters in the room would just get Derek into a fresh pair of manacles right away. He wants to ask for details, but he doesn't think Stiles will answer; most likely, wouldn't have answered even before yesterday's... mishap.

Be careful, sweetheart, he sends. Derek might have told them about you under torture, simply due to the fact that he has little else to tell. Or they may find out about your existence via the nurses, like he presumably did.

Peter feels very invested in Stiles, for a variety of reasons. Him getting killed by rabid hunters would be... unfortunate.

noted, Stiles sends. The curtness of the reply and the glaring continued lack of the silly "creeperwolf" nickname are surefire indicators of Stiles still being pissed at Peter. Well, that makes two of them. Peter is pissed at himself too.

The conversation with Stiles over for the time being, Peter moves his attention to his first and only beta. She is still sleeping on the couch, and from the smells and sounds Peter can tell it's healthy, restorative, normal sleep as opposed to the heavy unconsciousness of last night. The bite took beautifully, and Peter can already feel a fresh packbond.

It's revolting. His beta, an Argent. The burned, scarred remnants of the Hale pack joined by a hunter from the family that razed them to the ground. He feels sullied in the worst way; the packbond is like a cockroach that managed to crawl into his very soul. If Stiles weren't a combination of a wrathful god and Jiminy Cricket on his shoulder, Peter might have killed her before she ever woke up, absorbed her beta spark, and tried to erase the incident from his memory altogether. But if she dies, Peter dies, at least for now, so for the moment he has a beta.

Great beginning, alpha Hale. Truly, stuff of legends.

He uses the bucket and takes a bottle of water from the mini-fridge. The snack options make him stare into the fridge for some time because this is not what is expected from an American teenager on the loose, no matter how mysterious and magical. The only indication that Stiles is even on the same planet as what's expected is a big package of Reese's peanut butter cups, and the rest of it clearly homemade and healthy. There's a Tupperware container of slightly unevenly cut granola bars, a half of a loaf of banana bread in saran wrap, a jar of chia pudding, dates stuffed with nuts, a variety of onigiri, and little balls that smell like a symphony of peanut butter, oats, protein powder, nuts, dried berries, coconut milk and honey. It doesn't bear the smell or touch of any other human. Huh.

Peter takes several onigiri and the container with peanut butter balls. Both taste divine, and Peter stuffs his face without caring if it's only because of the bland hospital food he's been eating for so long or if Stiles really is a gifted cook on top of his other talents.

Of course, when he's on the third peanut butter ball of pure deliciousness is exactly the moment the Argent girl decides to rejoin the waking world.

She sits up on the couch jerkily, like a marionette. Her dark brown eyes take in her surroundings, and her breathing and heartbeat quicken in confusion and fear. When she sees Peter, sitting cross-legged on the carpet by the opposite wall, she yelps and flinches backwards into the couch.

"W-who are you? Where am I?" Despite being clearly terrified, she's not descending into panic. Her eyes are roving the room with focused urgency now, looking for an exit, an edge, an explanation.

Level-headed in a crisis. Peter approves of her and abhors her.

"Who, little old me?" He says and eats another peanut butter ball. He has to remember to compliment the food later. "I'm the big bad alpha your parents warned you about, Allison."

She smells even more confused than before.

"Alpha? Is... is that your criminal pseudonym?"

Peter stares, the fifth peanut butter ball forgotten and melting slightly in his fingers. What on Earth is she playing at?

"No," he says in his best "you moron" tone. "I'm an alpha werewolf. Around these parts, *the* alpha werewolf."

It's after these words that a sour note of panic creeps into her scent.

"A werewolf?" She repeats in a slightly wobbly voice. "How, uhm, unusual! So you, uhm, you believe that you're a werewolf?"

No. It can't be.

“I know I am,” Peter says. “Don’t you believe in werewolves, Allison?”

“I, well, I’ve only ever read about them in fantasy books and saw them in movies—but I believe you!” She hastens to reassure him. “You say you’re a werewolf, and I believe you!”

She is lying. Her heart betrays it clearly, completely untrained in any sort of concealment. She doesn’t believe him; she thinks he’s a crazy person and is trying to pander to his supernatural-leaning delusion in the hope of getting him to lower his guard and escaping.

Despite all the evidence, this is hard to wrap his head around. The Argents never told their daughter, the future matriarch of the American line, that werewolves exist. She’s seventeen, for Moon’s sake. How long were they planning to dither? What, to borrow Stiles’ charming turn of phrase, the ever-loving fuck were they waiting for?

He has to do one last test, though. This hypothesis is just wild enough to require an extra bit of proof.

“I understand,” Peter says soothingly. “This is hard to believe, isn’t it? Such a claim sounds quite outlandish.”

She nods, mutely, minutely, when he pauses, waiting for her reaction.

“It’s alright. Tell you what, Allison—how about now?”

He doesn’t have a change of clothes here and doesn’t want to get up, so he doesn’t bother with the full alpha shift. He lets his face drop abruptly into the partial shift with all the trimmings: sideburns, eyebrow ridges, fangs. And, of course, the glowing red eyes.

He leaves off the claws, though. He doesn’t want to puncture extra holes in Stiles’ Tupperware.

The Argent girl shrieks. The scent of pure, unadulterated terror fills the room. She presses herself into the couch with enough of her new strength that it starts tipping dangerously, and she stares at him with her pupils blown wide and her breath fast and uneven. Her packbond trembles with her fear and shock, instinctively seeking for comfort and protection from her alpha. Peter gives her none.

“As you see,” he says, “we’re quite real.”

She doesn’t even seem to hear him, mesmerized in her fear. Peter sighs and returns to looking human. Christopher and Victoria Argent aren’t even here, and they are still somehow managing to make his life extra difficult; although, he supposes there’s a hollow victory to be had in the fact that even if they knew that they are and why, they still wouldn’t be thrilled with the situation.

“Will you calm down?” He asks. His people skills are rather rusty, and even if they weren’t, he doesn’t want to bother with an Argent. “I’m not about to kill you.”

The sight of his human face does calm her down some, enough that she starts blabbering.

“You, you turned into a monster! You had...” She presses the trembling fingers of one hand to her mouth. “And... how? You...”

“I’m a werewolf,” he repeats, annoyed. Can’t she keep up at all?

His phone chimes.

“Hold that thought,” he says absently, fishing it out.

dereks in the wind

hope he got brains enough not 2 get caught again

things okay on ur end?

Peter frowns at the messages. How did Stiles manage to free Derek? And was that last question genuine, or did something prompt Stiles to ask? Perhaps a ward got tripped?

Well, since Stiles asked now, Peter might as well tell him right away.

I have no clue how you managed to free him, dear heart, but I am firmly certain that you were magnificent. Peter doesn’t know if anyone but him is aware of what Stiles can do (insofar as Peter counts as “aware”; all he’s got are mismatched crumbs of information and one hell of an impression), but he has a feeling Stiles is not praised for it often. Perhaps Peter is laying it on a bit thick, but on the other hand, after yesterday... he might very well be understating things.

As for my end, they are, for a given definition of “okay”. Curiously, the Argents kept their daughter in the dark concerning the existence of the supernatural. Her Things That Go Bump In The Night 101 course with Professor Hale is quite impromptu.

wat??? 4 real????

peter r u shitting me rn

they didn’t tell her anything even when moving in2 town w/ an unknown alpha who left a body in the woods specifically 2 hunt him down?

holy shit they r dumber than a box of rocks

Peter grins at his phone, amused and gratified by Stiles’ reaction that echoes his own very much. Also, unless Stiles is a very dedicated actor, it seems that this little lair is not outfitted with any sort of listening equipment or hidden cameras, and Stiles’ own mysterious abilities do not go so far as remote surveillance of conversations. It’s another little factoid that Peter files away.

Ever so slowly, the Argent girl is shifting her weight on the couch. One of her feet comes down to the floor, softly enough that the heel of her boot makes no sound.

“Don’t even think about it,” Peter warns, not looking up from his phone.

Instead of being discouraged, the discovery seems to electrify her fight or flight instinct into action. She springs to her feet and tries to flee past Peter, towards the heavy plastic sheets at the entrance.

“Stop,” Peter says.

His voice reverberates with an alpha growl. It’s effortless; she is, after all, one of his own. His displeasure and his will flood their bond, and she crumples to the floor in the middle of the room, cowering, unable to disobey or understand what just happened to her.

Indeed, sweetheart, Peter types.

well then

have fun

imma have 2 go do some learning of my own

Have a great day, darling. He debates with himself for a second whether or not to send the addition that has popped into his head and decides that why the hell not. Try not to outshine your peers and teachers too much. Their helpless jealousy might inspire their petty little minds to hurt you, and while I’m absolutely game to help you hide a body or a dozen, right now it would behoove us to stay under the radar.

All Stiles sends back is an emoji sticking its tongue out. Peter laughs quietly at it, satisfied with that outcome.

All that talk about school has given him an idea, though. He turns to look at the Argent girl who is still on the floor, in a fetal position, shivering and smelling like helpless, lost horror. She is a tabula rasa right now, as far as the supernatural world’s history and politics go. No doubt, the adults in her family planned to disclose (if they actually planned to ever do that at all) the secret from the hunters’ point of view. Peter is familiar with that rhetoric, one that paints hunters as knights in shining armor, protectors of humanity from dangerous, dumb beasts who only pretend to be sapient and are therefore fair game to be harassed, tortured and killed with or without reason. Their so-called Code even includes killing themselves, should they survive a werewolf bite, rather than becoming one of the slaving monsters they so despise.

Peter’s got his own point of view, and he has a unique opportunity to impart it. Instead of killing her, wouldn’t it be much more satisfying to genuinely turn her to his side? The look on her family’s faces will be so much sweeter when they see her not only turned but also hating their entire prejudiced, hypocritical way of life.

This will require a lot of effort on his part, mainly in hiding his disgust with everything she is, but Peter’s not afraid of hard work. Nothing worth having comes easy.

He crouches on the floor next to her and sends reassurance through their bond. She blinks up at him, eyes childishly big and guileless, hair a wild tangled mess.

“I’m sorry for scaring you, Allison,” Peter tells her. Butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. “I’m just... well, I’m very angry and hurt. Yes, I am a werewolf, and yes, your parents should have told you about me. Let me explain everything to you from the start.”

“Will you please let me go?” She whispers.

“I can’t. In all truthfulness, even if I did, you no longer have anywhere to go.”

She sits up abruptly, fear and anger coming off of her in a pungent wave.

“Nowhere to go? What do you mean? What did you do to my mom and dad?”

“Nothing,” Peter raises his hands in a gesture of surrender. “As far as I’m aware, they are alive and well. The reason you have nowhere to go is, well, you’re a werewolf now too, and your parents are werewolf hunters. They will kill you in a heartbeat.”

She scowls at him.

“I’m human! And they would never, ever hurt me! And they are not werewolf hunters! I would have known if they were!”

“Are you?” Peter questions that first one and points at her side.

She looks down to the bite. The shirt there is in a truly sorry state, torn apart by Peter’s teeth, dark and rigid with the dried blood. She lifts the shirt in that spot, puzzled, and sees the bite that has already scabbed over. It must not be bothering her at all since she hasn’t even noticed it since waking up. It’s still obvious that she has been treated like a chew toy by something with really, really big teeth.

“What...?” Her brow furrows as she traces it with her fingertips.

“This is the bite I gave you last night,” Peter tells her. “It has almost healed already because you have been turned into a werewolf and your healing factor is now much higher than that of a human.”

She scoffs at him.

“I don’t feel like a werewolf, Mr... Alpha, was it?”

“My name is Peter Hale.” She doesn’t seem to recognize his last name at all. “And I am an alpha, yes.”

“What does that mean? You keep repeating the word “alpha” like it’s really important.”

As soon as she asks, she shakes her head, impatient with herself.

“Never mind. I don’t care. Whatever scar you drew on my skin while I was unconscious, I don’t care. I want to go home to my parents.”

“You can’t, Allison.”

Peter takes her hand; she tries to shy away, to pull it out of his grip, but, of course, to no avail.

“Observe carefully,” Peter says, lets a claw out and scratches the back of her hand just deep enough to draw blood.

She whimpers.

“Now, I didn’t draw this on, did I?” He asks. “You can feel the pain. See the blood and smell it. It’s a very real cut. Now watch.”

They both watch as, after two seconds of reluctant bleeding, the cut is gone. Her skin knits back together without leaving a trace of the hurt behind except the few drops of blood.

“How did you do that?” She asks, her voice dull with shock.

“I didn’t do that,” Peter says, stretching the truth a little. Wounds given by an alpha are slow to heal because the inner magic of pack hierarchy considers them punishments, so he had to send some goodwill to her through the packbond to encourage the healing; a permission, so to speak. “You did. Your werewolf body did that.”

He lets go of her hand, and she looks at it, turning it this way and that.

“Come on, Allison,” Peter says soothingly. “Have a seat on that couch, it’s a bit worn out but it looks comfy. I’ll get you some water, and then I’ll tell you everything you should have already known.”

“If werewolves can do... that, why do you still have those burns?” She suddenly asks.

She is sharp, Peter has to give her that. She will be a good student.

“I kept them on purpose,” he tells her. “I will tell you why and how in a minute, but that purpose has become obsolete now. Look.”

He lets go, allowing his healing to do its work. The burns disappear like chalk wiped off a board, and Peter’s new skin is uncomfortably tender against the cool air of the room. The clothes touching the fresh skin on his arm and side feel rough and intensely sensual.

The Argent girl barks out a nervous laugh.

“What’s one more impossible thing,” she mutters.

Then she peers at him with shrewd eyes, apparently over the general disbelief. Good.

“You said you would tell me about werewolves and... and whatever.”

“I will. Come on, Allison.”

She doesn’t fight being led to the couch and handed a bottle of water from the mini-fridge. Peter is certain she is planning to believe only 50% of what comes out of his mouth at best,

seeing as he is holding her in a basement and has admitted to having been the one to turn her. That's okay. They'll work their way up to 100%.

While she opens the bottle and takes a few sips, he resumes his position on the carpet, the container with peanut butter balls in his lap.

"My family, the Hale pack, held these lands for eight generations," he starts.

* * *

By the time the school has let out and Peter hears Stiles' quick heartbeat upstairs, the Argent girl is sullen, shaken and torn with doubts. She hasn't taken the news about coming from a family of ruthless serial killers with Nazi-like beliefs gracefully at all. In fact, she stubbornly refused to believe a word of it, and when he didn't take back any of what he said, she settled into a protracted huff, arms folded and face set into an angry grimace. Peter let her stew in it for now, even if it has been quite boring to sit there and do nothing for the last couple of hours. He wishes Stiles had left a paperback or something unprotected but literally everything interesting is behind the mountain ash line, and while, given time, Peter could get around that in a number of ways (which, Peter is certain, Stiles is quite aware of), the fact that Stiles pointedly put it around his private stuff is a clear signal that he would prefer the line to be respected.

The Argent girl perks up when she hears someone coming, her eyes flickering to him to see if he has caught on. Peter lets a small smile curve his lips as he turns his head towards the secret corridor.

Stiles comes in, adorned with yet another plaid shirt, this one deep purple with dark red and white lines, arms full of supermarket paper bags as he shoulders the plastic sheet aside. Peter gets to his feet, walks over and takes a couple bags to lighten his burden.

"Hello, gorgeous," he purrs. Up close Stiles' eyes are even prettier than from the socially acceptable distance they have been keeping so far. His hair is ruffled, looking like he's just rolled out of bed, and the sharp line of his jaw is a siren call.

"Hello, creeperwolf," Stiles returns, and Peter's smile widens.

They settle the bags next to the fridge in a bizarre accord of domesticity. Stiles fishes a granola bar out of the fridge, turns around and lands his eyes on Peter properly for the first time. The sharp intake of breath and the faint yet unmistakable spicy and musky scent of arousal are very nice strokes to Peter's ego.

"You got rid of the burns, huh," Stiles says.

"Yes. There was no point in keeping them any longer, and they served as a useful demonstration of my abilities."

"Makes sense." Stiles raises his hand, slowly enough to give Peter all the time in the world to move away. Peter doesn't, and Stiles' lightly calloused fingers glide over his new skin. The

touch feels exquisite and torturous at the same time, and Peter would like to feel more of it, and not only on his face.

Stiles takes his hand away, suddenly smelling flustered and shy. Peter doesn't understand how someone like Stiles can be *shy*, someone powerful, brilliant, witty and so adorably attractive that Peter wants to eat him whole (metaphorically speaking). Everything Peter has seen of Stiles has only made him want more and more to have Stiles at his side—on his side—in whatever capacity Stiles will consent to. Admittedly, turning the Argent girl has been a little bump in the road, but it also opened Peter's eyes that much wider to just how much blazing, awe-inspiring power Stiles keeps hidden and contained under those plaid shirts. However, if people around Stiles are so blind that they don't see his worth, well. Their loss, Peter's gain.

The fact that Stiles likely sees right through Peter, shyness or not, and yet still allows Peter to play his games is just a cherry on top. Wooing an ally open to this road is a much smoother endeavor than an unwilling one, and Peter has always been partial to a bit of a mutually enjoyable chase.

“Who are you?” The Argent girl cuts in, sounding impatient and somewhat betrayed. “Are you his... accomplice?”

Stiles turns towards her, raising his eyebrows. Their little byplay seems to be already forgotten, and Peter represses an urge to snarl at his impertinent beta for interrupting them.

“Hi, Allison,” Stiles says. “My name is Stiles, and yeah, you could say Peter and I are accomplices. The human law would totally agree with you.”

“Are you a werewolf too?” She asks.

Stiles snorts and goes over to a table to hop onto a corner free of books and notes.

“Hasn't Peter told you? Werewolves aren't the only ones out there that the general public knows nothing about.”

“So what are you?” She insists.

“I am something.” Stiles grins at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and takes a bite of his granola bar.

She doesn't look happy at his reticence but is smart enough to understand that trying to push him on this will get her nowhere.

“I suppose you're also here to tell me how my family are all racist psychopaths,” she says, her voice biting and bitter. “And since you and he are...” She waves a hand between them. “You're probably perfectly okay that I, I was bitten, turned into a werewolf,” she still sounds incredulous saying that, “and abducted?”

“I was not and am not happy with Peter for pulling that sort of shit without all involved parties being on board,” Stiles admits easily. “I told him that in very clear, murder-threatening

terms. But he's been toeing the line since then, and your family has already sort of retaliated by taking his nephew for interrogation under torture. Did you know there's a literal torture basement under your house? I bet your folks made sure you didn't see anything interesting there. Maybe even kept you from going down there altogether."

"A torture basement?" She repeats.

"Uh-huh. I haven't seen it with my own eyes but it's probably way less welcoming than this one."

She shakes her head.

"This is insane," she says. "Why can't you just let me go? I promise I won't tell anyone where you are or anything. Please."

She sounds and smells earnest, and Stiles' face softens for a moment.

"I'll be level with you, Allison. There are several reasons we can't just cut you free and wish you luck. First, your family hates werewolves and other supernatural creatures. They hold to the idea that turning into one makes you less than a human and adhere to the tradition of ritual suicide in case something like what happened to you happens to one of them. No matter how much you plead with them that you're still their beloved baby princess, they will put you down like a rabid dog. In their minds, you died the moment Peter's alpha teeth broke your skin."

He lets her digest that for a moment and chews on the granola bar, swinging his legs. The nuts and grains baked with honey crunch loudly between his teeth in the silence.

"Second, there's no way you are going to be able to keep that promise, even if you mean it right now. Besides the enormous possibility of you changing your mind once we're not looming over you, your family is going to be very insistent about asking. And there's also that little fact that, as Peter's beta, you have a connection to him. Now, not being a werewolf, I'm not an expert, but in my experience a connection between two things usually means that one of those things can lead to the other, and Peter and I made a deal. No one but me is killing him on my watch until we both uphold our ends of it, no matter how much they might want to. And, in a semi-smooth segue, the connection between you two leads me into my third point: you're a werewolf now. I don't know how much Peter already explained to you about it except for the rapid healing thing, but it's not all roses and hunting fluffy bunnies down in the woods. You need to be in a pack, with your alpha, or you have a real big chance of becoming an omega and going feral which will result, again, in you getting put down by a hunter or by me. Oh, and by the way, you should be really invested in Peter's survival now because your pack is you and him, and if he dies, no other pack will take you once they know who you are. Few names are so universally hated across the supernatural underbelly of the world as "Argent". And then there are full moons. They will make you wolf out and try to kill anything in sight, so you need another, experienced werewolf to hold you back and teach you control. And fourth: your presence here has not been planned in the least, but now that you're with us, we'd be morons not to use you to rile your family up. Did Peter tell you we're after your psychotic aunt who, as all evidence so far says, was the one to murder his whole pack? Ah, I see that he did. How much are you willing to bet she's putting the pedal to the

metal right now to get here ASAP and murder the shit out of whoever dared kidnap her niece and heir? I, personally, would bet a lot. Maybe we'll take a video of you looking unhappy or something and send it to your parents. Make the whole American branch be stupid with rage. I haven't thought that through yet, and I'm also gonna need Peter's input before I do anything of the sort." He favors Peter with a conspiratorial smile. "Can't be plotting without the craftiest son of a bitch on the West Coast."

Peter laughs.

"Let me guess, that was you quoting Soleil?"

"Got it in one, creeperwolf." Stiles finishes his granola bar. "I think that just about covers the most salient points. Phew, haven't talked so much all at once since that history presentation where I successfully proved that Roosevelt was a reptiloid. Made the teach doubt the credibility of his whole career. Can't deny, that was a good day. Peter, be an angel, pass me some water?"

"I do so rarely get an opportunity to be an angel," Peter says, getting a fresh bottle out of the fridge's rapidly dwindling supplies. "Here you go, sweetheart."

Peter makes to lob the bottle gently towards Stiles, but the mountain ash between them parts as if out of its own volition, and Peter is allowed to step close to press the cold bottle, wet with condensation, into Stiles' open hand.

He stays there, vaguely in Stiles' space but not hovering, and looks at all the things up close. The books are about magic, different traditions and styles, various creatures and beings, supernatural history. They are heavy with brightly colored post-it notes, and the notebooks next to them smell heavily of ink; one notebook lies open but seems to be written in a code. This is an indication of an inquisitive mind disposed to learning, and Peter wonders how many brownie points he would be able to get with Stiles in exchange for a few books from the Hale vault. There's some very interesting stuff over there.

The Argent girl stares at them both, face scrunched up in frustration.

"You talk like you're the one in charge, making decisions, protecting him," she says finally. It's a nice change from the stubborn insistence that her family is not like that and anyone who says otherwise is a filthy liar. "But you also mentioned school, and you look my age. How come?"

"I am your age," Stiles shrugs. "I skipped yesterday, or we would've met in class. As far as being in charge goes, well... I like to think Peter and I are more equal parties to the deal we made as opposed to a boss and a subordinate. Even if, apparently, our relationship requires an occasional dominance contest in order for us to reach an understanding."

In the privacy of his own mind, Peter can admit that being able to do literally nothing against Stiles smarted quite a bit. Were Stiles his enemy, Peter would likely have been bouncing off the walls in impotent rage. But then again, were Stiles his enemy, Peter would be dead. And while having an ally powerful enough that Peter literally can't lay a single claw on them does make him uneasy, Stiles has proven surprisingly ethical and consistent in his own way so far.

Even with his pride a bit bruised and his need to make back-up plans thwarted, Peter is not actually worried about Stiles backstabbing him.

“Dominance contest,” the Argent girl repeats dubiously. “Is that something supernatural creatures do?”

“Pfft, you say that like you think humans don’t. I’ve been to the boys’ locker room in a high school, you know. Let me tell you, it’s a jungle out there.”

She has nothing to say to that.

“If it’s any consolation in your situation, I’m not looking to unalive you,” Stiles adds. “If not for your own sake, then for Scotty’s.”

“Scotty’s?” She frowns. “You mean Scott McCall?”

“Yep. He’s my best friend. Been joined at the hip for about ten years or so. And let me tell you, I’d never known him to be a poet until I received the gazillion texts he sent me about you.”

She blushes briefly, smelling pleased, then grows tense.

“Does he know about all of this, then? Werewolves? Hunters? Whatever you are?”

“Ha, no. We’re not actually physically joined at the hip, you know. He’s your base model human, and way too trusting and kind for his own good, so it’s easy to keep him in the dark. He still thinks people stopped trying to steal his inhaler around middle school because they understood it’s not a nice thing to do.”

“What, did you unalive everyone who tried to steal his inhaler until the rest of them took the hint?” She quips.

“Nah. Digging that many graves would have been a bit beyond the noodle-armed middle school Stiles. I mean, I have dug some over the years which is how I acquired all of my manly wiry muscle,” he exaggeratedly demonstrates a biceps curl, “but at the time I just did something like this.”

He hops off the table and strolls over to the Argent girl, his strides long and unhurried. A predator walking towards his trapped prey in absolute surety of how the next few minutes will turn out.

The Argent girl smells uneasy. The closer Stiles gets, the more uneasy she becomes, even though he’s not doing anything particularly threatening and doesn’t even smell of power like last night. It’s so strange to watch Stiles utilize his abilities from the distance of a few feet and still have no idea what those abilities are. The only thing Peter can get from this is that whatever it is can be precisely targeted because Peter himself is definitely not affected.

When Stiles is a few steps away, she scrambles off the couch and into the furthest corner. The unease mixes with rising fear. She raises her hands to cover her face, claws popping out without her even noticing.

“Stop this!” She gasps. “Please!”

Stiles stops, both physically and ability-wise. Peter knows when that last one happens because there’s a very tiny pop in pressure, like they had been going up in a fast elevator and finally reached their destination floor.

“As you can imagine, not many people found an attempt at stealing Scott’s stuff worth it again,” Stiles says, calm as you please.

“Shit, yeah, I believe that,” she says.

Then she frowns.

“What’s that weird scent?”

“What scent?”

“Something... spicy and musky? Is that something in your bags?”

Motherfucker. One thing Peter has not thought of yet is that having another werewolf around means having someone with a superior sense of smell around.

Stiles starts snickering.

“Down, creeperwolf,” he gets out between the giggles. “Don’t be improper around your baby beta, would ya?”

He turns to the Argent girl, still sparkling with mirth, and explains:

“Werewolf sense of smell is sharp enough to sense emotions. It’s all about pheromones or some shit, I dunno. What you just smelled was your alpha having the hots for me being menacing.”

“Ew,” she says, her face scrunching up. “I thought there was something weird, but, like, you’re my age! And he’s...” She points at Peter.

Peter feels offended. He is not that old. Certainly not old enough to warrant that unhesitating, decisive “ew”.

“Eh,” Stiles shrugs. “He’s hot, smart and likes my bad boy side. Granted, it would be illegal for us to make a beast with two backs and my dad would probably have a coronary, but it’s not like Peter’s gonna be able to do anything I don’t like. So I’m okay with him being a bit of a creeper. Builds up the old self-esteem, too.”

“I bet hundreds of other molested teenagers also thought the adult wouldn’t do anything they won’t like,” she points out. “It’s against the law for a reason.”

“Oh my God, Allie,” Stiles rolls his eyes. “I’m seriously touched that you’re worried about me getting manipulated into sex, but not only has no one actually molested me yet, there’s also a difference between thinking the adult wouldn’t want to do anything unpleasant and

knowing that the adult would not be able to do anything unpleasant. Like you were unable to do much of anything just now when I gave you a little taste of what I can do.”

“I mean, emotional manipulation is still a thing,” she insists stubbornly. God help Peter, she is a *good person*. She’s honestly worried and indignant about one of her kidnappers possibly getting inappropriately hurt by the other while still standing in the basement they’re not letting her leave. “Pressure, negging, all sorts of horrible things. And if he’s as crafty as you said, you might not see it until it’s too late.”

“Well, if that happens, then the moment I see it is the moment I kill Peter and get some exercise digging a fresh grave in the Preserve.” Stiles sounds and smells unconcerned and perfectly truthful. Peter smothers a new sweet spark of desire. “We both know that. As far as foundations for a relationship go, this one is honestly not the worst one I’ve seen.”

“You sound like a serial killer when you keep talking about graves and stuff,” she says, suddenly wary.

“I’m not,” Stiles denies. “Serial killers get a sick kick from murdering. I just... keep Beacon Hills a safe place.”

She smells like it’s starting to sink in that Stiles is not joking when talking about killing and digging graves. And also like she’s remembering that he’s not a cute classmate who got tangled in the sinister webs of a lecherous adult but someone who’s keeping her prisoner and planning to kill her aunt.

Stiles nods, as if sensing all the same things as Peter.

“You’re telling me so much,” she says in a tremulous voice. “You’re not actually going to let me live, are you?”

“Oh, Allison,” Stiles says. “Of course we are. You’re on our side of the supernatural divide now, and like it or not, anything you blab to anyone about us will also hurt you, and I’m not even talking about Peter or me hurting you ourselves. You have been reborn to a whole new world of fairy tales and bloodshed, and we’re your only allies here, shitty as we look from your perspective right now. You just don’t want to believe it yet.”

He leaves her to chew on that and nods to Peter.

“Creeperwolf, a word away from impressionable baby wolf ears?”

Peter is only too happy to oblige, and they walk out of the room, mountain ash rustling behind them.

They walk out the back door, far enough that the Argent girl wouldn’t be able to pick up on their voices even with werewolf hearing but still inside Stiles’ wards. Stiles leans against the charred wall, and Peter mirrors his position a foot away. They are about the same height, and Peter lets himself enjoy the bleak January sunshine playing in Stiles’ eyes.

“What did you want to talk about, darling?”

Stiles studies him as if looking for something. Peter doesn't know if Stiles finds it or not.

“The Argents are all up in arms, as you can imagine. They are a pain in the ass to track, at least Victoria and Christopher, but their people are easier. They've been to the hospital. If your mysterious original helper was someone who worked there, now is the time to tell me if not who they are, then what exactly they can tell the hunters.”

Ah. Stiles is looking to see if Peter's all-in, especially after their confrontation last night. Odds are fifty-fifty on whether or not Stiles has managed to figure out the identity of his helper already, but that's not the point of this conversation.

“Jennifer Hall,” Peter says without hesitation. “My nurse at the long-term care ward. She would be able to tell them that she got me a phone and give them the number. She would also tell them that she took a picture of the deer with the revenge symbol cut into its side and sent it their way and Laura's way for me. I promised to give her the bite once I was alpha.”

Something in Stiles relaxes, and his gaze becomes less intense.

“Would she have been working today around noon?”

“Between twelve and one is when she normally took her lunch. She liked going out to a nearby café.”

“Perfect time to grab her.” Stiles makes a face. “Gimme your phone.”

“It might be too late already,” Peter warns, handing it over. “It's been hours since then.”

“No one's tortured her yet,” Stiles says, the little shit. He deletes their message history, deftly dismantles Peter's phone, breaks the SIM card in half and stomps on the rest of it until it's a pile of scraps. “They'd be at it as soon as they could, of course, but there was a tip texted to Christopher about Allison getting spotted at the train station. And a very well-timed ping about one Peter Hale signing up for a tour with the biggest local estate agency.”

He grins at Peter. Peter catches one of Stiles' hands and brings it up to kiss his knuckles.

With his nose right there, Stiles' scent is intoxicating. Peter inhales a luxurious lungful, lips still pressed to Stiles' fingers, and catches the notes of ozone and petrichor lurking underneath the mundane.

Stiles makes a noise of amusement, belied by the scent of his flustered arousal.

“Going classy for a change, creeperwolf?” He asks.

“Do you like it when I do, sweetheart?”

Stiles turns his hand over and cups Peter's newly healed cheek. His thumb strokes the sensitive skin with deliberate pressure. Peter lets himself lean into the touch, eyes fluttering shut with intense pleasure.

“You’re coming on pretty strong,” Stiles notes. “What if you get stuck with me in the end and only then find out that you hate how I adore Star Wars or squeeze the toothpaste out of the middle of the tube?”

“You’re looking pretty far ahead,” Peter remarks. “Almost like we’re living together and I find your Star Wars shirts strewn all over the place every day.”

The picture these off-hand words create unexpectedly takes Peter’s breath away. A spacious apartment full of light and fresh air. Stiles striding out of the bathroom in a graphic Star Wars tee and underwear, smelling of minty toothpaste, going for the coffee maker but not before ducking down to where Peter’s drinking his tea and dropping a kiss on this same cheek. After his revenge is done.

After. A life after.

Somehow, for all of his dogged fascination with Stiles, Peter hasn’t given much thought to what will happen after all the heads have rolled and all the dust has settled. His rage has given him tunnel vision, and that vision has been filled with death; he half-expects to get killed himself in the process or soon afterwards.

He doesn’t know if he’s even ready for the idea of having a life after, let alone for living it. A life without his pack, without his duty, without his purpose. A ghost of a left hand, a burnt-out shell full of sound and fury—“life after” is not for the likes of him.

But Stiles has somehow cracked his charred husk of a soul open with a few words and a simple touch, and oh, the daylight brushing against the tenderest, rawest of his innards hurts.

Peter opens his eyes and realizes with distant surprise that they are wet. He has not cried since kindergarten, and he’s not exactly sobbing now but it’s the closest he’s probably able to come to that.

Stiles is looking at him with searing, profound understanding. Peter wants to say something, to laugh this off, to snap his soul closed so Stiles’ eyes won’t sneak a peek. But he has nothing. He just stands there, and the cool hand on his cheek feels like his sole tether to reality.

They stay like that for a while, long enough for Peter to feel like he is, more or less, back in his own skin, uncomfortably and mercilessly *seen* but ready to brave another day.

Smart as he is, Stiles is an idiot if he thinks Peter’s going to let him go after this, cheesy sci-fi franchises or not.

“I’ll give you one of my burners,” Stiles says. “And I have a hard drive from Christopher’s laptop that needs to be checked out on an isolated machine. I’m afraid that’s gonna have to be your job tonight, creeperwolf.”

“A digital task? How come?” Peter asks, his voice steady and normal. “Are you busy with something?”

“One of the Argent parental units has just rolled into the Sheriff’s station. Since they already reported Allison missing after a disturbance last night, I can only guess that they’ve found out about me, had someone try my home and get bounced off my wards and are now planning to harass my dad.”

“Looks like our Allison will soon be one parent short,” Peter says with a snort.

Stiles smiles a mirthless smile.

“Depends on how far they are going to go. I can tolerate a few disrespectful questions that leave dad confused. Anything further than that, well...”

Peter turns his head and presses a feather-light kiss into Stiles’ palm; then he takes Stiles’ hand off his face and regretfully lets it go.

“Come on. The sooner we sort out the mountain ash and electronics, the sooner you can look after your father in person.”

As they head back to the secret room, Stiles smells grateful, and worried, and angry, and a dozen other things.

Peter, though, feels content.

Chapter 5: A Very Twitchy Individual With A Gun

Much as Stiles would like to teach the Argent at the station a lesson about messing with the Sheriff via a judicious application of baseball bat to the head, he has to restrain himself. More likely than not, this is a trap for him, a bait to lure him out and get to Peter through him, and he has to adhere to his own advice and not do anything stupid.

Dad doesn't seem to be in any sort of distress as Stiles is driving over; there's a bit of exasperation and a lot of sympathy towards, Stiles hazards a guess, a distraught parent, and Dad's not moving anywhere. There are people milling around the station, most of them feeling familiar. Argent flunkies waiting for Stiles to come their way so they can, presumably, grab him. Stiles has to park two blocks over and redirect them with small, well-placed urges so he can slip past them while they are distracted by getting a snack, taking a leak or smoking. Weirdly, Derek Hale is also lurking near the station instead of doing the smart thing and legging it all the way back to where he came from. He lets Stiles be, though, so Stiles lets him be in return.

The Argent and Dad have been talking long enough by now, with Dad sometimes feeling confused, that Stiles thinks the Argent tried to see if Dad knows about the supernatural with some pointed hints. It's a bit of a reach, what with Stiles only having access to the emotions and only for one party of the conversation, but Stiles is not half-bad at this. He also really wants for his guess to be correct because they might back off Dad and focus on Stiles who's bound to be the one knowing something.

He fully admits to himself that going into the station instead of staging another distraction might well count as something stupid since he doesn't want to tip any of his hand to the Argents, but the protective anger over Dad is only one part of it. He needs to know what that fucking magic protection is so he can neutralize it or get past it. Without his magic he's playing on the baseline human level, and hunters with their numbers and guns leave him in the dust. Meeting one adult Argent face to face is still about as safe as pulling a viper's tail, but it's better than meeting two or more.

That protection chafes at him. In his imagination, the shimmery void pulses with laughter at his attempts to probe it, brute-force it or go around it. It's a flawless and hateful cocoon of nothingness. He's only been familiar with it for a day or so, but it feels like he's been wanting it gone for years.

He slips into the station uninhibited and beams at Jess who's manning the desk.

“Jess, love of my life, hi, hello! How's it hanging? Is Dad treating you right?”

Jess laughs readily, happy to see him. She's old enough to be his mother or maybe even grandmother, if she started young, and she treats him like nothing less than a grandchild to be spoiled. Most officers at the station are fond of Stiles, and he didn't even have to do anything magical to make them feel that way. He'd kill ten Argents for each of these deputies.

“Hi, Stiles,” she says, smiling. “Fancy seeing you here. Here to bug your dad into eating another salad you made him?”

“Don’t tell me,” Stiles sighs. “He foisted his lunch off on a deputy and got himself a greasy burger again, didn’t he? I should start taking his wallet away every day so he can’t buy that shit while I’m not looking.”

Actually, Stiles already knows what Dad did because Dad’s guilty happiness at eating a burger instead of “rabbit food” is very familiar to him by now. Doesn’t mean he isn’t still frustrated by it.

Stiles is not any kind of saint, and he has been tempted time and time again to give Dad an aversion to greasy, cholesterol-bomb foods and an appreciation for greens and yogurts. It would be easy, too. Stiles would just need a bit of time and consistency, like with the alcohol. A month of daily work, and Dad hasn’t even touched a single beer for years.

Stiles doesn’t do it because it’s a slippery slope, and the last thing he wants is to wake up one day and find that he has turned his loved ones into Play-Doh and shaped them to his liking until they stopped being themselves. It’s a literal recurring nightmare that he would have loved to talk through with a therapist if he could ever find one in the know, trustworthy and discreet (which is probably not gonna happen in this life).

Today is one of those tempting times.

“Sorry, kiddo,” Jess says with genuine sympathy. “Would you like me to slip a whoopee cushion into his chair before an important meeting?”

Stiles snorts, his mood lifting a little.

“Thanks for the offer, but not just yet. I think I’ll go into his office and guilt him with the Bambi eyes until he promises to eat his vegetables at least for a week.”

“Ooh, the Bambi eyes,” Jess says approvingly, and Stiles bats his eyelashes at her with a winning grin. “Give ‘im hell, kiddo. Only maybe wait a bit, he’s in with someone right now.”

“Oh? With whom?”

Jess looks right and left to make sure there’s no one to overhear her nudging away that confidentiality line a little.

“It’s Victoria Argent. You probably heard that someone took her daughter right in front of their house, right? That high school rumor mill must be buzzing by now.”

“Yeah,” Stiles confirms. Scott has been a maudlin mess all day. Stiles just about had to force-feed him lunch because all Scott wanted to do was mope, mash his mac and cheese into a disgusting-looking pulp and tell Stiles over and over again about how Allison had come into the animal clinic last night and agreed to go out together on Friday. Stiles had to drain lots of his own guilt away because Scott’s Bambi eyes are nothing to sneeze at either. “Why is she here, though? Have there been any developments?”

Jess narrows her eyes at him.

“Fishing for details, huh? You know I can’t tell you much about ongoing cases.”

Stiles masters his best sheepish face.

“I know, Jess, sorry. It’s just that Scott is gaga over Allison Argent, you know? It’s some Disney love at first sight romantic shit, I kid you not. Dude has known her for one day, and today he’s inconsolable. I just thought, well, if there’s some good news, I could tell him the Sheriff’s department is on it. I wouldn’t share any details, pinky swear! Just, you know, give him some reassurance that maybe she’ll even make their first date this Friday. Or even if not, then just that she’s gonna be safe.”

Yeah, if hell is a thing, then Stiles is going straight there.

“Oh, that poor kid,” Jess says, clearly touched to the depths of her soul. She’s an unapologetic romantic, and if there’s a way to get her to spill the beans, then this is it. Her hesitation morphs into determination, and Stiles has to hold himself back from pumping his fist in the air. “Listen, you haven’t heard it from me, but the Argents are insisting it was Peter Hale.”

“Who’s that?”

“His family all died in a fire when you were about yay high.” She holds her palm well below the level of her desk. “He spent all the time since catatonic, but today he’s missing from the hospital, a nurse is missing too, and the Argents say he’s got some sort of crazy vendetta against their family, God only knows why. It all came through me which is how I know but your dad is skeptical. I mean, even if the guy woke up wanting nothing more than to hurt them and somehow found out that they’d moved here and their address, he still spent years sitting in a chair and staring at the wall, all covered in horrific burns. How’s he gonna snatch an athletic sixteen-year-old and spirit her away? His muscles are all bound to have atrophied, not to mention he has no property to his name to hole up at. I’ll bet you a dozen of your mama’s rogaliki that Mrs. Argent is in there right now arguing it was Hale. They really want us to put out an APB on him, slap his face everywhere. And this vengeful catatonic story is our current best lead, so…” She spreads her hands. “Maybe don’t tell Scott anything yet. Try to distract him with something if he asks you.”

“My lips are sealed.” Stiles mimes pulling a zipper along his mouth, then turning a key and throwing it away. “Man, what a mess. I hope Allison’s okay, wherever she is.”

“Me too, kiddo,” Jess sighs. “Missing kids hit different, you know? Those kinds of cases aren’t like gang shootings or whatever.”

“Don’t I know it,” Stiles nods sagely. “Wait, gang shootings? When were there ever gang shootings here?”

Jess rolls her eyes.

“I was with the NYPD for five years back when I was young. Seen everything there is to see, you know.”

She pauses.

“Here’s quieter, not gonna lie. Even though it’s one strange little town.”

“Well, it’s our strange little town.” Stiles winks at her. “That makes all the difference, right?”

“Look at you, all grown-up and wise,” Jess laughs. “Now shoo, I’ve got work to do. Go wait for your dad outside his office. And remember, you don’t know anything about anything.”

“Who, me?” Stiles points finger guns at her. “Never known a thing in my life. Where am I and what’s my name again?”

He leaves her grinning and shaking her head at his antics and heads over to Dad’s office. Dad and the void that is Victoria Argent are inside, and Stiles can hear muffled voices. He parks himself on the bench, slouching, and starts messing with his phone, a textbook picture of a bored teenager.

“Hey, Stiles,” Tara says, smiling. “I see someone here finally wised up to your tricks and decided to haul you in?”

“You wound me, deputy Graeme,” Stiles returns, his grin entirely genuine. “I’ll have you know this fella is innocent as a dove, he is!”

She laughs.

“Whatcha doing here, kid? Did you need help with something?” She grows serious, ready to help him with whatever problem he could possibly be bringing to the Sheriff’s department.

“No, no, I’m peachy. I’m just here,” Stiles raises his voice enough that it will have to be heard inside Dad’s office, “to ask Dad if he liked his beetroot and halloumi salad with pomegranate seeds! His loving son needs his feedback to keep making him good food that won’t lead him to an early grave!”

A wave of snickering travels through the station. Stiles senses Dad’s embarrassment and exasperation and feels nothing but schadenfreude.

“It was very tasty, actually,” deputy Parrish offers from his seat in the corner with a rueful smile. “Sorry, Stiles.”

“Not your fault, Jordan,” Stiles says generously. If Jordan didn’t eat it, Dad would have probably sneaked out the service entrance that nobody uses and put it right in the dumpster, and that would’ve been just wasteful. He raises his voice again. “Glad to know *someone*, at least, appreciates my cooking talents!”

“You’re vicious today,” Tara whispers, eyes sparkling with laughter.

“I spent a lot of time in the dairy aisle looking for that halloumi under all the cheddar,” Stiles tells her in a low voice. He knew that the mere words “beetroot” and “halloumi” would make Dad rebel like a toddler disgusted with his mashed carrots, but he hoped that maybe the salad would at least be eaten alongside a stupid grease-soaked burger. No such luck. “And the kitchen looked like a crime scene after I was done with the beetroot. I daresay he deserves it.”

Dad swings his office door open, looking and feeling thoroughly vexed.

“Stiles!” He barks. “Will you please quit making a ruckus when I’m in a meeting?”

“Hi, daddy-o!” Stiles chirps, jumping to his feet. Victoria Argent is behind Dad, watching Stiles with cold eyes. Her shimmery void is like a gauntlet thrown in challenge. “Oh, did I disturb you? So sorry, didn’t mean to, scout’s honor!”

He presses a hand not occupied with his phone to his heart and directs his best Bambi eyes at Dad. Those still work every time, and Stiles senses Dad’s love, vast and golden, part the outer layer of annoyance, like a peek at a leviathan that always patrols the deep.

“You were never a scout,” Dad grumbles, then pulls Stiles into a quick hug. “Everything alright, kiddo?”

“All good, Dad,” Stiles promises, leaning into the embrace. With how much Dad works, these are far and few between, and Stiles cherishes every single one. “Just thought I’d come by.”

“And police my eating habits again,” Dad says dryly.

“Well, this is the one crime our Sheriff’s department doesn’t seem to be able to get under control,” Stiles shoots back. “So here I am, a concerned citizen.”

“A vigilante, more like.” Dad gives a long-suffering sigh. “Look, kiddo, you can hang around, of course, you’re always welcome, but we’re all a bit busy.”

“Yeah, I heard.” Stiles shrugs under Dad’s suspicious look. “What? The school’s been talking about nothing else all day.”

Dad rolls his eyes.

“I sure hope you’ve been ignoring all that exciting and inappropriate talk and absorbing knowledge like a model student.”

“Of course, daddy-o,” Stiles deadpans. “You know me, I’m all about that knowledge. Sucking it up like a great big sponge. Whatever crumbs of knowledge are there to be sucked up, here I am, vacuuming them right up.”

“Alright, that’s enough out of you,” Dad says fondly. “Go home, do your homework.”

“Kidney bean curry for dinner?” Stiles asks.

“Any meat?” Dad bargains.

“Turkey bacon on top,” Stiles allows. “But with brown rice.”

Dad makes a face. Stiles raises his eyebrows, and Dad deflates, knowing that he doesn't have any points to play off of today.

“It'll taste good, daddy-o,” Stiles promises, clapping Dad on the shoulder. “Alright then, I'm off.”

Behind Dad, Victoria Argent makes a great sobbing noise that causes everyone to jump.

“Oh, I—I'm sorry, I was just reminded of my daughter.” She presses her hands to her face, hiding her non-existent tears. “You having this conversation with your son... God, I miss my baby daughter so much... I hope she's safe...”

Tara, God bless her kind soul, hurries to console the upset mother.

“We're doing everything we can, Mrs. Argent. We will not rest until we find Allison, you have our word.”

Tara is too smart and experienced to say “until we bring her home safe and sound”. Victoria Argent is definitely savvy enough to catch on to the wording but she pretends to have been placated anyway.

“I understand, deputy,” she says, dripping sadness with every word. “Thank you. Truly, thank you for looking for my Allison.”

“That's our job, ma'am,” Tara says. Dad sends her a pointed look, and Tara gets it without needing anything to be spelled out. “Let me escort you out? If you're not feeling up to driving, I can take you home.”

“No, I think I'll be fine.” She gives Tara a tremulous smile. “I have to be strong for my baby girl, don't I? Although...” She takes a masterful pause, not too short, not too long. “I have to admit, I wouldn't mind some company on the way to the car since I parked a block away, but I'm loathe to distract any of you fine officers from work. Perhaps...” Her eyes land on Stiles as if she's struck by sudden inspiration. “Perhaps young Mr. Stilinski would be so kind as to accompany me? He's on his way out anyway, isn't he?”

“Sure,” Stiles says easily. “Come on, Mrs. A, let's get you bundled into your car. Fair warning, I might talk your ear off before we get there, but you did ask for me, y'know!”

She makes a grateful noise and turns to leave. “You owe me,” Stiles mouths at Dad behind her back. Dad grimaces but nods. Excellent. That's at least two dinners with long stem broccoli eaten without resistance right there.

They walk out of the station, Stiles chattering on and on about school, periodically tapping at his phone quickly as if he's having a conversation via text. He does, in fact, send one message, to Peter's new burner:

when I call mute ur side n put me on speaker

He waits for Peter to light up with anticipatory interest, then taps the call button and slips the phone into the breast pocket of his shirt, screen to his chest. Peter can be a snob about plaid all he wants but these shirts are not only comfortable and casual. They are also occasionally quite useful.

From the interplay of emotions happening in the people larder basement, Peter doesn't know how to mute the phone on his end and has resolved the potential problem of Allison making a loud fuss by threatening her life. Stiles rolls his eyes inwardly. Fine, whatever works, as long as it works.

Victoria keeps up her grieving mother face until they are out of view of the surveillance cameras or station windows. Then she stops. Stiles halts too.

"Is something wrong, Mrs. A?" Stiles asks innocently. "Why are we stopping, is your car parked here?"

"You can stop pretending, Mr. Stilinski," Victoria says. Her face bears about as much friendliness and kindness as that of a grizzly woken up mid-hibernation. "Where's my daughter?"

Stiles ignores the potent turmoil of Allison's emotions at hearing her mother's voice and Peter's venomous rage. He rocks back on his heels, rounding his eyes in surprise.

"Allison? What, why? How would I know where she is?"

"Don't play games with me, boy," she hisses. "I know you consort with Peter Hale. Where does that beast have Allison?"

"Consort?" Stiles squeaks. "I—I don't know what you're talking about..."

Lightning-quick, Victoria grabs his shoulder and squeezes.

"Ow!" Stiles says, completely sincerely. She's got fingers of steel. He's definitely going to bruise. "Ow, you're hurting me, stop! Okay, alright, I'll tell you everything!"

Peter's emotions don't change to betrayal. Stiles wonders if Peter trusts Stiles unquestionably to be running a con or if the phone, being so close to his heart, catches enough of the sound of his heartbeat to tell Peter that that last one was a lie. Either way, there's not even a shadow of a doubt.

"Talk," Victoria says.

Stiles swallows audibly, making sure to bob his head as he does. A scared teenager caught up in something well beyond his ability to handle, that's whom Victoria should see.

"He... He promised to make me a werewolf too, alright? Strong, fast, like him. I mean, who wouldn't say yes to that?" He laughs nervously and tries to tug his shoulder away from her hand. She doesn't let go. "Will you please let me go? It really hurts."

It really fucking does. Stiles' magic doesn't avail him of any extra resistance or healing. He's just as squishy as any normal human, and currently he feels like his shoulder is being squished into bloody pulp.

"When you tell me where Allison is, I will," she says. "Where's she?"

Stiles has to give credit where credit's due: she knows what she wants.

"I don't know!" He cries out, trying to free his shoulder more insistently. Not too insistently, though. It wouldn't do to be clutzy about it and have his phone fly out of the pocket and attract attention with its ongoing call. "He's not my friend, now is he? I don't know where he's hiding!"

"You must be able to contact him somehow," Victoria says. "How?"

"He passes me notes during English," Stiles snarks back and winces when she tightens her fingers again. Jeez, is she bending metal bars with those in her free time? "What do you think? He finds me when he wants me! He knows where I live and where I go to school! He doesn't trust me enough to give me his address or number. I mean, I can't blame him, I did kinda spring it on him that I know some stuff when I came to the hospital..."

She peers into his face, her expression sharp and threatening. Stiles lets her. He might not be able to touch her emotions (yet) but his own are at his full disposal. If he wanted to, he could become the most accomplished freaking actor on the planet.

"You know more than you're saying, Mr. Stilinski," she concludes at last. "You will be coming with me and answering questions in a more comfortable environment. Or a less comfortable one. It will depend entirely on your willingness to cooperate."

"Shit," Stiles says in a wobbly voice. "Shit, Mrs. A, are you saying you're gonna torture me? But, but you're, like, a werewolf hunter, and I'm human..."

She laughs.

"A little collateral damage is always unavoidable, Mr. Stilinski. Remember, it's in your power to avoid that fate."

"Fuck," Stiles exhales and licks his lips as if they are dry. "Listen, it's probably gonna sound stupid, but... I, well... Mr. Hale told me you guys, I mean, hunters, always kill yourselves if you get bitten by a werewolf. I don't really understand it but it's, like, your code? Is it true? Is... fuck, is being a werewolf so bad? 'Cause it didn't sound too bad the way Mr. Hale described it."

Victoria stares at him without blinking. Come on, Stiles urges her mentally, draining away his impatience and seeding himself with trepidation and wariness. Come on, speak your mind. Here's a vulnerable kid for you to try and convert. Reach out and take him.

"Life as a dumb, rabid beast is not worth living, Mr. Stilinski," she finally says. "For your sake, I hope you haven't been lying to me and have not yet been sullied by a bite. Believe

me, that fate is to be avoided at all costs.”

Home run.

Stiles drains away his triumph but allows himself to bask in Peter’s dark amusement, admiration, respect and glee. Allison, on the other hand, is wholly, utterly devastated.

This whole morning, sitting at school and only half-listening to the teachers, Stiles wondered at the emotions playing out in the basement. Peter’s deliberation, patience and sneaky malice were clear enough; now that he had an Argent beta, of course he tried to turn her over to his side. But Allison puzzled him because all of her stubborn outrage and disbelieving contempt were suffused by thick, sickly doubt. It only took a few words from someone keeping her prisoner to make her doubt her family that way, and Stiles was curious as to why until he saw Victoria Argent again and put two and two together. Five seconds of being in her presence, even covered by that protection and lurking behind Dad’s broad-shouldered bulk as she was, were enough to tell Stiles that growing up with a mother like that must have been like spending one’s formative years with one’s hands and feet chained together. That unbendable authority has made Allison into what she is today: *biddable*.

Stiles did his part as a competent helper when he arrived with the groceries, but ultimately, he knew, words only weren’t enough, not on their tight deadlines. Allison needed to hear the unvarnished, ugly truth straight from the horse’s mouth, and now that she has, Peter can probably shape that girl’s psyche like putty.

Stiles might condone this, but, well, he’s no stranger to emotional manipulation himself, and whatever else he is, he doesn’t want to be a hypocrite. Besides, all Peter and he did was really simply tell her the truth. No gaslighting, no fudging facts, no lies. It’s beautiful, in its terrible simplicity.

Here, Stiles feels, his helping part is done for the moment. Peter can take over for now, and it’s high time Stiles did a little something for himself.

“Oh,” he says in a small voice. His shoulders slump a bit.

Victoria lets him have a few seconds. A dark SUV is rolling towards them down the street, and Stiles knows the two presences already inside: Argent goons.

“Come on, Mr. Stilinski,” Victoria says. “We’re going to talk, you and I.”

She lets him go—fucking finally—and he takes a little step back, using his newfound freedom.

“Just, just let me text my dad,” he says, fumbling his phone out of his breast pocket and ending the active call. “He’ll be home for dinner—”

“Depending on how our talk goes, you might also be there.” She gives him the most fake smile in the history of fake smiles as she plucks the phone from his hand and puts it in her jacket pocket.

The SUV stops, and the driver goon hops out to open the backseat door for Stiles. Derek, who has so far been hiding on a nearby roof rather stealthily, tenses and coils with readiness for violence. Stiles has no idea whether Derek genuinely wants to help a stupid and cocky human kid about to get tortured or just doesn't want the only known source of information about Peter to slip through his claws, or maybe even a bit of both; in the end it doesn't matter. Stiles can't have anyone intervening, so he drains Derek of the tension and violent intent and floods him with the nearest urge he can find, which Stiles thinks is hunger.

Derek might question his own integrity later when he stops and thinks about how he let Stiles get taken because he was getting a sandwich, but that's not Stiles' problem. That's Derek's therapist's problem, if anyone's.

The driver goon pushes Stiles into the middle of the backseat and climbs in himself while Victoria takes the driver's seat, which is honestly so perfect, it's like Lady Luck leaned down and kissed Stiles with tongue. Sandwiched as he is between two muscled adults with guns and knives worn quite obviously on their persons, Stiles makes sure to fake some fear but he doesn't put too much effort into it. His whole being is vibrating with anticipation.

He waits until they turn into an empty enough street, and then he pours waves and waves of pure, sweet contentment into both goons while draining away everything else. They sag in their seats, eyes glazed over and features slack, completely helpless and happy to be so. Stiles takes the nearest gun out of its holster, clicks the safety off and presses the barrel between Victoria's ribs.

She is good. Despite tensing up, she doesn't crash the car or even swerve.

"Drive to the Preserve, Mrs. A," Stiles says. "Don't make any sudden moves. And just so you won't be tempted to claim you've gotten lost in an unfamiliar town, I will tell you when to turn and where."

"Is that where Hale is waiting for you?" She asks, still unflappably cold. "In the Preserve?"

"Drive, and you'll see what's there." Stiles smiles at her in the rearview mirror and pushes the barrel deeper into her skin.

The drive passes in relative quiet, punctuated only by Stiles giving directions and one of the goons snoring. The other one is not asleep but drooling as he stares vacantly at the car ceiling. Victoria doesn't try anything, perhaps saving all her tricks for when, as she assumes, she meets the rogue alpha who has her daughter, and Stiles has her drive into the Preserve until the trees become too thick to let the SUV through.

"Stop," he orders.

Once the car rolls to a halt, Stiles twists to unlock the passenger door on the driver's side, his shoulder throbbing, and uses his foot to kick it fully open and push out the drooling guy. Except for an involuntary "oof" sound, the goon offers no protest to his hard landing.

"Unlock your door and get out slowly," Stiles says, moving the gun back a bit. "Please keep in mind that I am a very twitchy individual with a gun who is not at all opposed to seeing

how *you* respond to pain as a teaching tool.”

Victoria follows the instructions, her contempt clear in the rigid lines of her shoulders, and Stiles shimmies out as well, making sure to keep the gun on her at all times.

“Now what?” She asks coldly, looking at him like he’s an insect crawling by her shoe.

“Turn your back to me and walk forward,” Stiles says. Just a little longer, and he will find out what that damned protection is.

Soon they reach a clearing big enough to be convenient. There’s no one else for at least ten miles around, and Stiles judges the place good.

“Stop,” he orders when she has walked forward enough to put a few feet between them.

“Turn around.”

He waits for her to do that, impatience gnawing at him so strongly that he has to drain most of it away. She obeys while scanning the surrounding trees with sharp eyes, probably assuming Peter is lurking somewhere in there.

“Take off your jacket and throw it on the ground in front of you.” She frowns ever so slightly at the strange order but does it. “Now take off all of your jewelry, one by one, and throw them on the jacket.”

“Is this... a simple robbery?” She asks, incredulous.

“Dear Mrs. A,” Stiles says. “This is a guy with a gun ready to shoot you full of holes unless you do as he says. Is that enough of an explanation for you, or should I demonstrate by putting a bullet through a joint? Which one do you like the least?”

She scowls but does as he says. Stiles is one hundred per cent ready to have her strip if the jewelry is not the cause and inspect her for any implanted objects or magical tattoos, but thankfully, it doesn’t come to that. After she drops her earrings on the jacket one by one, she takes off her bracelet, several simple strings of pearls, and the shimmery void blinks out of existence. Everything that Victoria Argent is floods Stiles’ senses, her murderous intent, coiled and sharp, her furious worry, her enormous pride, her unflinching arrogance, her love for her family threaded tightly with the sense of duty, her hatred and disdain for him, everything, *everything*. He drinks it in, almost swaying with the relief the awareness of her brings, and hastily drains his triumph before it can show on his face. Sloppy, he scolds himself, but it’s okay in the end because there’s no suspicion in her: she doesn’t notice anything, consumed with bitter hatred as she tugs her wedding ring off her finger.

He waits for her to be done since it would hardly do to let her know he’s only interested in the bracelet. She gives him a look that could freeze a lake’s worth of water.

“Now what, Mr. Stilinski?”

Stiles studies her with interest, head cocked slightly to one side. He could kill her right now but she hasn’t actually done anything bad enough to warrant that for the moment. There are

some bruises on his shoulder, sure, and then there's Peter's ex-nurse getting tortured as they speak which Victoria is definitely complicit in, not to mention Derek's ordeal. But as far as they know, she's not the one who burned the Hale pack unless she was devious enough to use a name that redirected attention towards her sister-in-law, and no one died by her hand in Beacon Hills, at least not yet. Besides, she will be useful in spreading the story of the Sheriff's son being a little psycho with the aspirations of becoming a werewolf. The hunters already know about him, they might as well get fed this delightful tidbit of misinformation.

And, of course, now that she has lost the protection, he holds her life and sanity in his hands. He is in control, and whatever he can do to her now, he can do at any other time as long as she's in his range.

The Argents, Stiles decides, will not leave Beacon Hills with that protection. He will destroy all of it.

"Now you're going to go over to that tree, press your back to it and give it a little backward hug with your arms," Stiles says. "Do you know what a hug it, Mrs. A? Have you hugged your daughter often before she disappeared?"

As he says it, he sinks bits of regret and remorse into her. Remorse is a curious one: while by far not the rarest emotion out there, it's also one that just doesn't stick. It's tied up too much in the cerebral stuff, all the mores, values, beliefs, things that depend on what people are taught and told as opposed to being a primal and unfettered thing like fear, joy or disgust. Stiles tried using it once, on the youngest of the hunters who'd come to Beacon Hills to torture the local fairies, and it faded away pretty much the moment he stopped. The hunter then made an attempt to kill Stiles, shouting incoherently about mind-fucking, and Stiles had to deal with him in the usual way. It was an unsettling experience—the first and only time someone knew that their emotions had been messed with.

It works while he's in the process though, and as long as he doesn't overdo it, Victoria won't know. He makes sure to fuel her fear that is almost definitely not for herself but for Allison and sprinkles in some doubt. To be fair, he doesn't actually need to do this part but he does it because he is petty and now he can. And also because he wants to be extra sure that no protection lingers on her and he can indeed do it.

He works with a light hand, as careful as a neurosurgeon, and it's gratifying to sense her respond the same as anyone. Her hatred for him grows, though, and he does nothing about it. Let her feel that all she likes. The important thing is that Stiles knows that she is doing it only as long as he allows it.

With a thought, he commands the handful of mountain ash that he carries in his pockets to slither out discreetly, move towards Victoria through the underbrush and bind her hands. It happily hardens around her wrists, as good as any handcuffs, and she stiffens at its touch.

"Who else is here?" She asks.

"That's for me to know," Stiles says cheerfully.

He clicks the safety back on, shoves the gun into a pocket and gathers the jacket with the jewelry from the ground. He makes sure to fish his phone out of her pocket where she can see and return it to the rightful owner.

“Well, this has been fun, Mrs. A,” Stiles grins at her. “I’d say let’s do this again some time but, you know, let’s rather not. Cheers.”

He turns and leaves the clearing, smiling to himself at her confusion and suspicion. The remorse he planted melts away without his active influence like ice ships left out in the sun.

He is forced to drain his impatience twice as he hikes a few miles away from her. The jacket is (metaphorically) burning his hands but he only lets himself put it down on the ground when he reaches the lake.

It’s cold enough that there’s no one around in the middle of the week, and he releases Victoria and her goons absentmindedly as he unrolls the jacket and grabs at the bracelet.

Nothing happens when he touches it, and he turns it over in his hands, studying the pearls and the underlying links of metal. Most magical items need contact with skin to work, he remembers, and looks at the inner side.

There it is.

Smack in the middle of the inner side, there sits a flat piece of metal. Its shape is irregular, and it’s decorated with a stylized wolf that reminds Stiles of those weird-ass medieval paintings. It looks as innocuous as a cheap novelty trinket from Etsy but when Stiles touches it, all sensation of his magic disappears.

He drops it back on the jacket, not because he decided to do so but because his whole body spasms, including his fingers. His magic swoops back in, frothing and restless like a mountain river, and he falls over, swathed in vertigo so strong that he no longer knows where up, or down, or left, or right is. His stomach cramps all the way through, and he throws up that granola bar, and the school lunch, and the fried egg sandwich he scarfed down for breakfast, and, it feels like, everything else he’s ever eaten right down to his mother’s milk. About all he can do is hope he’s aiming it vaguely down because he will choke on it and die if he aims it up.

Eventually, the dizziness recedes and the dry heaves calm. Stiles even gets enough of his bearings back to roll half a foot away from the puddle of vomit before curling up into a fetal position.

Getting cut off from his magic is bad. Real fucking bad. Noted.

He’s vaguely surprised that not much time at all seems to have passed but the sun is still pretty high overhead. He lets himself lie there and breathe carefully for a few more minutes before the awareness of the bile coating his tongue becomes too much of a threat to his newfound fragile digestive peace, and he makes himself crawl over to the water.

Fuck, he was on point with coming to the lake. He only did it because he thought he might need to do a cleansing ritual or something, and from what he read, those always need natural water. Fuck rituals, though; he scoops the lake water up with one hand, uncaring of fish poop or whatever else might be swimming in there, and rinses his mouth until it tastes fresh.

He feels a crowd of hunters converge at the edge of the Preserve where Victoria meets them, so angry and vengeful that her emotions seem to be buzzing like a wasp nest. Shit.

He's still weak as a kitten, and it scares the bejeesus out of him. Less than a second, and that violent a reaction? This is a weapon against him so potent that if it touches him for any extended period of time, he might just die right then and there.

Stiles crawls back over to the jacket, not feeling up to trying to stand yet, and glares at the evil little thing. Forget cleansing it, he will just destroy it. Fueled by determination, he wraps his right hand with his shirt sleeve, picks up a nearby rock with a convenient-looking sharpish edge and starts hitting the thing, over, and over, and over again.

It's not made of anything especially durable. The way it's tarnished a little in the creases says it has silver in it, maybe some sort of alloy, and it gives under the rock after several tries. Stiles hits it until it and the bracelet are cleaved in two; then he takes a deep breath and quickly, carefully touches a finger to one half.

Nothing happens.

Stiles slumps with relief, so bowled over by it that he might cry. Destroying it does the trick, then. Whatever awful, malevolent magic this thing was imbued with is not there anymore.

He keeps beating it with a rock until the metal is so warped that no one will ever recognize it for what it used to be. Only then can he breathe a little easier and, pouring in determination with a generous hand to keep himself moving, deal with the evidence.

Acutely aware of the line of hunters combing the Preserve and coming closer and closer, he wipes the gun and the bracelet halves, puts everything into the jacket, weighs it down with a few rocks, rolls the jacket up and ties the sleeves to make sure the contents won't try to scatter around. Then he crawls over to the willow that grows right by the water and lets it take his weight as he climbs back to his feet. His knees are wobbly, and even this much activity makes him sweat through his undershirt, but he makes it, and, holding onto the branches, he throws the jacket as far into the lake as he can. It's, admittedly, not as far as it could be, but it's still far enough that Stiles is reasonably sure it will not be found.

Alright. He lets himself half-sit, half-fall to the ground, supported by the willow's crooked trunk. Time to figure out how to run when he can't run.

He needs like a gallon of fish-poop-free water, some food that is easy to digest and an hour or two to rest. He's not likely to get any of that in the middle of the woods with hunters closing in. There is, of course, always an option of dropping a few of them with something or distracting them so he can crawl past unnoticed, but they are organized too well: from how they are never too far from each other, alert and paying attention, they must keep calling out and any absence will be immediately noticed.

Well, he can drop them all. But that is so unsubtle that it borders on waving around a neon sign that says “Look what I can do!”, and with how outnumbered Stiles and Peter are, advertising Stiles’ abilities like that is really the very last thing they can afford, especially since the Argent’s might have more of those protection thingamabobs lying around, just waiting to be distributed to flunkies in case of need.

He has to drain away the anxiety and fear that cloud his thinking but it doesn’t help him come up with any solutions.

Then he feels the watchful alien mind in the center of the Preserve stir.

It still doesn’t have any emotions he can understand, but, turns out, it has a *will*. It doesn’t feel like human determination. If anything, it feels like Stiles’ own awareness blanketing Beacon Hills, that intangible, undefinable sixth sense. Pure, powerful magic.

Its will calls to him. Without words, without gestures, without discernible emotions, it’s crystal clear to Stiles that it’s offering him shelter. Those who would hunt him will not find him if he comes to it, not unless it wills them to.

Stiles believes it. He is also scared shitless of both it and its offer.

He hasn’t known such genuine fear in a long time, and today he’s beating all his records. Just his luck.

He has no reason to trust a fucking alien mind of all things. For all he knows, it wants him to come to it because it wants to eat him or something. Or maybe it’s lying and it will give him over to the hunters the moment he relaxes. He has no way of knowing if it’s telling the truth or not.

He thinks “Thanks, but no thanks” vaguely in its direction and starts crawling along the lake shore, moving diagonally away from the line of hunters. He can’t hope to outpace them but perhaps he can hold on until help arrives.

And, well, these days he has a kind of help. At the very least, he hopes he does because God knows, Stiles has been upholding his end of the bargain above and beyond any reasonable expectations and has a right to ask for something in return.

hey creeperwolf

im in a bit of a rough shape rn

can u come pick me up

He crawls and waits for Peter to check his messages, swearing to himself that if Peter hangs him out to dry or tries to take this chance to harm Stiles thinking him too weak to fight back, he will fucking burn Peter alive again and make sure to do it properly, and then he will raze every single dickwad hunter to the ground, subtlety be damned. He can, theoretically (he’s never actually tried), drop the whole town drooling in contentment or stop them in their tracks by stripping them of all emotion. He can deal with any witnesses as needed.

The alien mind is watching him. It stopped calling but if it's disgruntled by his refusal at all, Stiles can't fucking tell.

Peter perks up so much that Stiles would have noticed even if he wasn't watching for any changes there. A cloud of concern thickens in Peter, but there's also a victorious sort of joy, and eagerness, and business-like determination.

Okay. So far, so good. Stiles isn't sure what the joy is about but there's no malice, or murderous intent, or anything icky like that. He'll take that over an inscrutable alien... cautiously.

Of course, sweetheart. Where are you? Do you need medical supplies?

bring some water if u can

but just hurry

ill text you where to go n what way so u dont bump into hunters

Understood. Give me the directions.

Stiles texts the directions, and keeps texting them as Peter runs through the city. For each text he has to stop, and every time resuming his crawl through the underbrush becomes harder. His arms shake from having to hold him up, and his legs are practically dead weight. His hands are bleeding from a million scratches, and if there's a low-hanging branch that hasn't tried slapping Stiles in the face like an angry ex, he doesn't remember it.

His only saving grace is that there are too many hunters for them to cover ground too quickly. They are, of course, faster than him—a newborn turtle is faster than him right now—but he's still a mile and a half ahead of them when Peter comes practically flying from between the trees.

Even though Stiles has known exactly how far away Peter was at any given moment, it's still a relief to see him with Stiles' human eyes. Stiles lets his arms buckle and falls face first into the coarse mass of dry leaves and grass, relieved that, one way or another, he can, at the very least, stop now. Peter's concern spikes.

“Stiles!” Peter's knees hit the ground next to Stiles, and warm hands turn him over and slide along his shoulder and collarbone towards his neck, looking for his pulse. “What's wrong? Where are you hurt?”

Stiles thinks of batting Peter's hands away, just to be contrary, but he's too exhausted for that.

“M fine,” he mutters. “Not shot or anything. Jus' tired.”

He's not lying, and Peter relaxes a bit.

“You asked for water. Here.”

He takes a bottle out of his pocket and holds it out to Stiles. Stiles gives it a side-eye, suddenly all that much more aware of how dehydrated he is.

“You’re gonna have to help me sit up,” he points out after a couple of seconds.

“Of course,” Peter says smoothly. Inwardly, though, he’s flustered and annoyed at himself.

He sets the bottle aside and scoops Stiles up with the same ease that Stiles would feel picking up a pencil. One of Peter’s arms curls around Stiles’ shoulders securely, and Stiles finds himself leaning in sideways, head nestled on Peter’s chest. Ha, Stiles can hear Peter’s heartbeat too now. Take that, fancy werewolf senses.

Peter unscrews the bottle and holds it to Stiles’ lips, at the exact correct angle to make drinking comfortable. Paranoid and frantic as he is, Stiles only makes himself accept it without pause because he figures Peter has had no opportunity to find anything odorless and colorless to slip into this water. It tastes like plain water, which is to say heavenly, sliding in a cool cascade down his parched, raw throat. Stiles can practically feel his strength returning as he drinks... although not that much because he still doesn’t think he can outrun or even out-powerwalk the hunters on his own.

He guzzles down half the bottle before he makes himself stop, afraid of making his stomach rebel again. He doesn’t think that’ll definitely happen because his bout of weakness and illness hasn’t been caused by anything so normal as a stomach bug, but better safe than sorry.

“You smell like pain, dear heart,” Peter says, putting the bottle away. There’s a low, rumbling growl in his chest which Stiles might not have even heard if he weren’t pressed right up against all that. “Did Victoria Argent do this to you?”

Well, technically? Maybe? Not like she knew touching the inside of her bracelet would hurt Stiles so much.

Slightly less wary now that Peter’s brought him, by the looks of it, legit water and hasn’t even tried whipping out claws or fangs, Stiles snuggles a little closer. It would sure be nice to be able to truly trust Peter. Peter’s warm, warmer than a human, and his muscles are solid as a rock, and he doesn’t seem like he’s in any hurry to let go. Stiles gets hugs often enough but they are all pretty brief. Peter also smells nice despite not having showered since... yesterday morning, probably? How often do they wash patients in the long-term care ward?

“Some of it,” he says. “I dealt with the protection she had against my magic, and it took a lot out of me. I need food and rest, mostly.” He hopes that’s what he needs. It’s not like he’s had to deal with this specific malady before. “She did leave a few bruises on my arm, though. She’s got the grip strength of a harpy eagle, that bitch.”

Possessive protectiveness and vengeful anger swirl inside Peter as he once again touches Stiles’ neck. The throbbing ring of pain around Stiles’ shoulder and all of his assorted aches and stings disappear, leaving behind a rush of blissful, visceral relief.

“Oh, fuck me sideways,” Stiles moans, going limp and turning his face into Peter’s chest. “What the hell have you just done? Also, keep doing that. Also, maybe marry me so you can

always keep doing that.”

“I took your pain, darling,” Peter says, his amusement and pleased smugness openly coloring his words. “Werewolves can do that.”

“I didn’t know that.” That hasn’t been in any of the books Stiles has managed to get his hands on that mentioned werewolves. “Most texts just like going on about how strong and all,” he flops his hand vaguely, “*rrrah* you guys are. But wait, if you took my pain, does that mean you’re feeling it now?”

“I feel it as I take it but since it’s not actually mine, it dissipates quickly,” Peter says. He bends his head, probably thinking he’s being all sneaky, and nuzzles Stiles’ hair a bit.

“Huh,” Stiles says. He didn’t expect Peter—who has had several lifetimes’ worth of pain compressed into the last six years—to take on unnecessary hurts purely for Stiles’ sake. That wins Peter a hefty amount of brownie points, Stiles can say as much. “Well, much as I like cuddling with creepy wolves in the woods, we need to get a move on. Dear ol’ Mrs. A’s leading a whole bunch of hunters combing the Preserve, and they are only a little over a mile away by now. We can deal with them if they catch up, but then you’ll be the one to dig several dozen graves all on your lonesome because at the moment I’m only fit to supervise you from under a nearby tree.”

Peter snorts into Stiles’ hair, a warm, slightly ticklish puff of air.

“Not my idea of a fun afternoon, dear heart,” he says, all smarmy and strangely sweetly glad. That seems to be because Stiles was telling the truth about liking the cuddles. Oh well. At this point, Stiles doesn’t feel like this is information Peter shouldn’t be privy to. “Judging by your state, I assume when you said “come pick me up”, you meant that in the most literal sense?”

“I knew you weren’t just a pretty face, creeperwolf.” Stiles pokes a finger into Peter’s washboard stomach.

Peter laughs as he gets to his feet, picking Stiles up in a princess carry. Stiles curls his arms around Peter’s neck and tucks his head into the crook of Peter’s shoulder. The last time anyone carried him anywhere was that evening his magic manifested and Dad took him upstairs, and Stiles certainly didn’t expect that to change now that he’s almost seventeen and generally able to get places under his own power. Then again, he’s only 147 pounds of pale skin and fragile bones. An alpha werewolf like Peter can probably bench-press him with one finger without any effort.

He lets himself relax into Peter’s hold. In for a penny, in for a pound, right?

“I expect you know the safe way to go again?” Peter inquires.

“Yep. We should go get my car first, then back to my super awesome secret hideout. Just go where I guide you, and we’ll be fine.”

“I don’t doubt it for a second, darling.”

With that, Peter takes off the way he came, trees blurring around them. Stiles closes his eyes and rattles off directions as needed.

Peter never once veers away from the course Stiles lays out, and Stiles, who knows his own emotions inside and out, feels the first seeds of trust give tentative sprouts.

Maybe one day...

Well. Who knows.

Chapter 6: His Pack (Such As It Is)

Peter's packbond with the Argent girl thrums with her confused worry and guilt as Peter is laying Stiles down on the couch. She's smart enough to put the two and two together, as in Stiles meeting her mother and Stiles being in a bad enough shape to need carting around in Peter's arms.

Not that Peter minds. There's a simple, foundational pleasure in the fact that their scents are now mingled, Peter all over Stiles and Stiles all over Peter, Peter-and-Stiles. Even though they are not pack ("not yet", the possessive desire whispers into Peter's mind), it still brings him the kind of peace and clarity of mind he hasn't known for a very, very long time.

"Are you..." The Argent girl stumbles over her words. "Are you alright?"

Stiles grins at her from the couch, looking refreshed after resting in Peter's embrace for a while and doing nothing more strenuous than mumbling "left" or "right" or "back off into that alley over there for a sec". He's still paler than normal for him but his eyes are clear and bright.

And oh, so pretty. Peter squashes the urge to lean over and kiss that slightly impish grin.

"I'll be fine," he says kindly. "That is, unless you hungry wolves have finished off all of the food already."

Eager to make herself useful, she promptly opens the mini fridge before Peter can so much as make a step in that direction.

"Something light?" She guesses, glancing at Stiles. Her sense of smell is easily her best, that likely won't change even after she learns to wield them all, and she can definitely pick up the sour notes of vomit clinging to Stiles. "There are the yogurts you brought today, and that chia pudding? And the granola bars, maybe? Or is that too rich?"

Stiles makes a face.

"Yeah, maybe not the granola. At least not until I forget the taste of it coming back up. Gimme that pudding."

She brings it over. Stiles looks at the jar critically, and then mountain ash weaves around one leg of a table, loops to tug at the drawer handle, dives inside and comes back with a spoon. It's courteous enough to close the drawer again before slithering back down and across the floor to deposit the spoon into Stiles' waiting hand. Peter watches with undisguised fascination. There isn't even a whiff of that terrible, amazing power Stiles showed him last night in the Preserve, and yet Stiles is making this happen without a blink.

"Wow," the Argent girl says, staring at the mountain ash as Stiles fondly pets it before commanding it back to the floor. "Is that... sentient?"

Stiles giggles around a spoonful of chia pudding.

“Hasn’t Peter told you what mountain ash is?”

“He said it’s specially treated ash of the rowan tree,” she recites. “And it’s used to stop or trap most supernatural creatures, and humans can will it into a circle even if they aren’t all that magical. He didn’t say it can fetch spoons on mental command.”

“Fair enough.” Stiles eats some more pudding. “It’s not sentient on its own, I guess. I’ve had this batch for a long time though, and I like playing with it. I, well, I do have magic, and wielding the ash is good training. And the more I use it, the more it gets used to me, I guess? In the beginning I used to have to take it out of the bag with my actual hands and concentrate on wanting it to make a circle or whatever, but now we’re sort of on the same wavelength, and it might have actually absorbed some sentience via osmosis because I don’t need to focus on things much when I ask it to do something. It knew what a spoon was without me trying to visualize one or whatever. And it likes me. It’s like the world’s most hassle-free pet.”

“Wow,” she says again, watching the inconspicuous line of black powder on the floor. The mountain ash is doing its best impression of a dumb handful of dust, and, Peter has to give credit where credit’s due, it’s very good at it.

Stiles finishes off the pudding, catches Peter’s eye and makes grabby hands towards the fridge. Peter steps over there and crouches in front of the open door.

“What would you like, sweetheart?”

“Bread and cheese, if we still have any? And some veggies. And the sweetest yogurt there is. And more water,” Stiles lists.

Peter piles white bread, a block of cheddar, a pack of red bell peppers, two bottles of water and a cup of mixed berry flavor yogurt so big, it might as well be called a tub, into his arms and brings it over. He watches Stiles eat and drink, first carefully, then ravenously, and sit straighter and hold himself easier in the process. Something in Peter that stiffened in alarm when he saw Stiles face-planting into the loam relaxes at the sight. If Stiles minds Peter staring, he doesn’t show it.

The Argent girl watches too, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“What did my mother do to you?” She asks quietly.

“She squeezed my shoulder like she was desperate for something to come out of there,” Stiles says.

“And that caused you to…” She gestures towards Stiles huddled on the couch.

“No. But, frankly, Allison, I don’t trust you enough yet to tell you any more.”

She nods as if she didn’t expect anything else but Peter smells her wilting shame as if she’s the one who did this to Stiles. He doesn’t much care about her moral struggles at the moment,

though; the reminder of the bruises that Victoria Argent left on Stiles' skin causes him to bristle.

"Show me," he demands. "There's no quick cure for bruises, but at least a cold compress can help with the swelling."

Stiles rolls his eyes but sets aside the half-empty cup of yogurt and wriggles out of his plaid shirt, wincing as it jostles the injury. He rolls up the baggy sleeve of the shirt he wears underneath, and the long, finger-shaped bruises, obscenely dark with the blood pooled under the skin, are exposed to the light.

"I—I guess that whatever you are, you don't have healing like werewolves—like we do," the Argent girl says.

"No," Stiles sighs, prodding at a bruise. "I really don't. These are gonna take a week, maybe longer. Ugh."

Peter slides his fingers along Stiles' arm, taking the pain again. Its fleeting sting is more than worth it to see Stiles beam at him.

"She didn't have to do that," the Argent girl says. "When you talked to her, she had no idea you were anything but human, right?"

"Right," Stiles agrees. "But, to be fair, I let her do that."

"You did?" She asks dubiously.

"What, you didn't think I could do anything while she womanhandled me? Even if I couldn't be obvious about it, I'm not a one-trick pony."

The Argent girl doesn't fully believe Stiles. Peter does, but ultimately, it doesn't change anything. Victoria Argent still hurt Stiles, and Peter is still furious about it. Restless violence stalks across his thoughts. He hasn't set out to kill Victoria but her reputation has more than earned her a torn throat...

"Stop scheming without me," Stiles chides, tugging his sleeve back down. "Get me a bottle of cold water to put on these and come scheme with me. We've gotta talk business."

Peter narrows his eyes. He let the bossiness slide just now but Stiles shouldn't think Peter's just going to fetch whatever on demand. He's not a dog. Instead of asking more nicely, though, Stiles looks at him, shrugs, wincing again, and sends his mountain ash slithering to the fridge to get the water instead. He changes his position, his back to the couch arm, his legs crossed and the unfinished yogurt leaned against the V of his ankles, the cold bottle gently pressed against the bruises through the shirt. Incidentally, this position would make it awkward for Peter to sidle up close and scent Stiles again, and Peter doesn't know if this is something Stiles intended for or not.

Somewhat frustrated, Peter sits down on the couch, a socially acceptable distance between them. For all that Stiles doesn't regulate his heartbeat or mask his scent, he's harder to read

than Peter would like.

“Did you find anything interesting on the hard drive?”

“I haven’t had time to look through all of it,” Peter says. Business it is. “I started with the older files, though, and it doesn’t look like Christopher Argent had anything to do with the fire.”

“Makes sense,” Stiles agrees. “His reputation doesn’t paint him as quite as much of a psycho as Kate or Gerard.”

“My grandfather?” The Argent girl asks incredulously.

“Yep,” Stiles says, unfazed by the interruption. “That guy has been murdering for decades. The blood he spilled can fill Lake Superior and then some. Why, there’s a delightful story going around about how an alpha wanted to do some peace negotiations with Gerard but the latter decided that would be too boring and killed most of the werewolves who came to the meeting and blinded the alpha. Curiously, he left that alpha alive. Probably figured that being a blind werewolf was gonna feel worse than a dead one.”

The Argent girl presses her hands to her mouth, eyes brimming brightly.

“But that, that’s just one side of the story,” she says feebly. “Surely the supernatural people exaggerate in gossip as much as anyone...”

“It happened in the old distillery near here,” Peter cuts her off, not in the mood to listen to her try to talk Gerard Argent of all people out of looking like a monster. “The blinded alpha, Deucalion, asked for advice about negotiations from my sister Talia and some other alphas. He was a soft fool who wanted to believe in the best in people and had this high-handed, naive vision of peace between humans and shifters, so he didn’t actually listen to the advice. I was already Talia’s left hand back then. If anything, the stories don’t do the brutality justice.”

She bows her head, her long tangled hair hiding her face. Stiles gives Peter, then her long curious looks.

“You guys need a hairbrush or two,” he says, seemingly heedless of the tension in the room. “And I need to think about where to relocate you. I bet you’re missing showers. And windows. And lots of other things.”

“A shower would be nice,” the Argent girl says in a small voice.

“I do have money,” Peter says. A part of him is still smarting over Stiles effortlessly and efficiently preventing any touching. No one but nurses and orderlies touched Peter for years, professional and disinterested. He feels a bit like he did his first day at the human school, almost suffocating without the constant touch and scent-mingling he’d been used to, lost in a world where no one living came close enough to brush against him. He doesn’t like feeling that way, but this is what he’s been reduced to by six years of betrayal and two days of charming smiles. “As soon as I get to it, I can provide for myself and my beta.”

Stiles sets his yogurt cup on the floor by the couch and looks at Peter.

“Look, we made a deal that I will help. I’m helping. I’m not saying I won’t be glad when you have your own money ‘cause being a high schooler is not a lucrative job or anything but it’s alright for now. We have more pressing things to do, and it makes more sense to rely on the resources we already have at hand, namely mine, while there are hunters swarming the town.”

They stare at each other without blinking, frustrated tension vibrating in the air. The Argent girl proves her survival instincts healthy by not making a peep. Then Stiles sighs and rakes his hands through his hair.

“I think I overestimated how much energy the food gave me,” he says. “I better lie down.”

He looks along the couch Peter is sitting smack in the middle of, then back at Peter’s face. Peter raises his eyebrows and doesn’t move. Stiles pffts, pursing his lips in a very indecent way, turns himself around, getting tangled in his long limbs momentarily like a newborn fawn, and lies down on his back with his head in Peter’s lap and his knees bent.

Peter is simultaneously affronted by the presumption—he’s still unhappy with Stiles, dammit—and delighted by this development.

“You look ravishing from this angle, sweetheart,” he purrs, burying one hand in Stiles’ hair. It’s as fluffy and soft as its appearance suggests.

Strangely, there are two bobby pins hidden in the fluffiness. Peter ignore them apart from making sure not to dislodge them. He can ask about it later.

“You’re such a creeper,” Stiles says fondly, only slightly embarrassed. “There must be something wrong with me because it doesn’t make me want to punch you in the dick.”

The Argent girl chokes on a laugh. Peter ignores her.

“That would probably be because you know there are way more satisfying things to do with it, my delicious wonder,” Peter says.

Stiles blushes bright red, no doubt, having thought of several suitable things already. Peter is enjoying himself immensely.

“Cut it out, dude,” Stiles says, pushing into Peter’s hand petting his hair with such force, it’s almost as if he’s headbutting it. “All dicks stay in their respective pants with baby betas around.”

Peter is one hundred per cent certain Stiles has said that on purpose.

“Ah, so without those being present all bets are off? Allison, would you...”

“Oh my god, shut up before you really do get punched somewhere you won’t like,” Stiles puts a hand over Peter’s mouth. Peter takes it with his free hand, plants a kiss in the middle of Stiles’ palm—the fact that it’s scratched up and smells like Stiles’ dried blood and the

Preserve plants only serves to make his scent more enticing—and settles it on Stiles' chest, their fingers entangled.

Peter will behave. For a little while. As long as it suits him.

“Before you started the conversation about dicks, we were talking business,” he says, still carding one hand through Stiles' hair and getting it thoroughly soaked in his scent. Stiles makes an outraged face at him but doesn't start another dick-adjacent argument. Such a smart boy. “Something about hunters swarming the town, I believe?”

“Right,” Stiles says, the slant of his eyes promising some sort of retribution later. “They've got like forty flunkies already, and I bet Kate will bring more when she arrives. It will happen some time soon, so we need to go on the offensive before then.”

“The offensive?” Peter questions.

“In our investigation, yeah. We still need to make sure it was Kate,” Stiles says, every inch an amateur sleuth. “The ex-fire inspector and the guy who works in the video store, they should know who paid them.”

“That is true,” Peter muses. “Hmm, Allison, how well do you know your aunt?”

She flinches at being suddenly addressed. Her packbond exudes wariness.

“She's more like my big sister than an aunt,” she says. “Why?”

“How knowledgeable is she about chemistry?”

“Chemistry?”

“Yes. The fire started too quickly and spread too fast without the help of an accelerant, and I don't remember it smelling like anything so pedestrian as gasoline.” The memory of the fire is a roaring, looming beast. Peter deliberately focuses on Stiles' scent and the sensation of Stiles' soft hair and smooth skin; he can feel the precipice of insanity and has no wish to tip over into it right now. “She must have used something more complicated than that.”

“I don't think she'd know about something like that.” The Argent girl bites her lip. Her fangs start poking out, reacting to her anguish. “But then again, I didn't know all that much about my family, did I?”

“Teeth,” Peter reminds her. She startles, then concentrates on controlling her shift.

“You think she consulted someone?” Stiles muses. “Some chemist? Yeah, I could see it, there are some evil types in that profession. No need to go far for examples even. Our chemistry teacher, Harris, is a real fucking twatwaffle. I could totally see him consulting a random aspiring mass-murderer on the best ways to make a house go up in flames and not asking any extra questions.”

“Perhaps it was him,” Peter agrees. “Do you think he'll be amenable to a little talk with a great, big, hulking, red-eyed beast?”

Stiles snickers.

“Oh, creeperwolf, I’d pay money to see his face at that moment. I’m almost tempted to ask you to wait until I’ve slept a night and eaten more so I could go with you and that view could compensate me for years of getting college-level assignments from him instead of normal ones in an attempt to fail me. But, unfortunately, you’re gonna have to head out by yourself.”

“That’s disappointing, my Little Red Riding Hood, but I understand,” Peter says. His thumb strokes Stiles’ cheekbone. “Your well-being comes first. I’m sure you will be with me in spirit, though.”

Stiles’ smile is full of mischief and secrets.

“You can bet on it, big bad.”

“I don’t wanna kill or even scare people,” the Argent girl says abruptly. “I... I don’t want to go with you.”

“I wasn’t planning on taking you with me.” Peter shrugs. “It’s not your vendetta anyway.”

“Oh.” She relaxes. “Well. I, uhm, I’ll stay here then.” The “I can’t go home anyway because my parents will shoot me dead” stays unsaid but they all hear it clearly. “Can I have something to do? I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep. A book, at least?”

“I’ll share the homework with you,” Stiles promises. “And there are some books about the supernatural that can be a good primer for a beginner. It’s not all gore and sadness, you know. This world can be full of wonders.”

“Can it?” She asks, skeptical.

“Course it can.” Stiles makes the mountain ash rear up and shape itself into a pentagram, then a rose, then the silhouette of a howling wolf, all without lifting a finger. This casual display of power and skill makes Peter’s desire burn hot and sweet. Stiles glances up at him briefly, the cheekbone under Peter’s thumb heating up, and turns his attention back to the Argent girl who has cheered up somewhat at the beautiful show. “And I’ve got my fair share of nice stories, too, not only about how I killed someone, or got almost killed by someone, or had to Google how to hold a shovel correctly for the purposes of burying more bodies because the old way I was holding it was killing my wrist. I bet Peter does as well. In fact, I know he does: other supernatural people in town mentioned him a bunch, and he got up to some heartwarmingly hilarious shenanigans sometimes.”

“Lies and slander,” Peter says airily.

“Sure, sure, as you say,” Stiles says, indulgent, grinning up at him.

“What’s a nice story of yours?” The Argent girl asks.

“Ah, let me think. There’s a good one but I can’t tell it in full since that would disclose more about what I am than I’m prepared to share. I can summarize, though. I know you’ve only been to Beacon Hills High once, but did you meet Isaac Sweeney?”

“Yeah,” she nods. “Lydia Martin got me to have lunch with her, her boyfriend and his friends. I don’t remember everyone’s names yet, but Isaac’s on the lacrosse team, isn’t he? The one with curly hair who constantly competes with Jackson?”

“Well, he wasn’t always that way. Popular, cocky and happy, I mean. When I was about eleven, I found out that he was being abused by his shithead of a dad. I won’t disclose the details because privacy and stuff, but man, it was gruesome and sad, and at school he was a weirdo loner. So I staked his house out until the next incident, and then I called my dad, the county Sheriff, and got him to arrest the shithead. I even made sure Jackson, who actually lived across the street from Isaac and knew what was going on, would come forward with his own witness account, even though he’d been silent before then, the little douchenozzle. Dad personally made sure Isaac got a nice, stable, kind foster situation with the Sweeneys, and a year later they adopted him. It took him a while to come out of his shell, but, you know, if I wasn’t there to sound the alarm, he’d probably still be living with his biodad. And were I only human, I never would have even known to help him.”

“That story wasn’t as nice as I expected,” the Argent girl says. She’s tearing up and smiling at the same time. “I thought there’d be hilarious shenanigans.”

“Alright, not a nice one but one that has a happy ending,” Stiles concedes. “An undeniably good thing that came out of the supernatural.”

“Helping people does sound nice,” she admits. “Alright, I’m willing to believe it might not be all doom and gloom. Provisionally.”

“That’s the spirit,” Stiles says.

He looks at Peter again.

“I’ll text you the details of where to find all these guys and even make sure the doors are unlocked for you if I can. Can we agree that you will go late at night, around midnight, so you definitely won’t be seen?”

“Alright.” Peter can wait a few extra hours. Taking care with these things was part of their deal, after all. “I’ll keep looking through the files until then.”

“Sounds good.” Stiles tightens his fingers around Peter’s. “We’re vastly outnumbered and about to be even more so, so be careful, okay?”

“Of course, sweetheart,” Peter says smoothly.

* * *

Once again, Peter is prowling the streets of Beacon Hills in his alpha shift form—something that almost caused the Argent girl to have a panic attack since she’d only seen it for a brief moment before getting bitten and fainting. This time he is a tiny bit more sane, a little more careful. It helps that Stiles’ information is good, and the doors are indeed all unlocked before he arrives at them; his suspicion about how exactly Stiles manages remote lock-picking is confirmed when he catches a slight whiff of mountain ash lingering by the first lock.

So clever, Peter marvels as he pushes the door open and slips into the suspiciously nice house of the fire inspector turned school bus driver.

So resourceful, Peter admires when he receives a text from Stiles with a tip about hunters staking out the front door of the video store guy from sniper positions and a helpful piece of advice to go in from the back.

So sweet, Peter coos upon leaving the chemistry teacher's apartment and getting another message, one that says: *congrats w/ a good hunt creeperwolf gnight im beat.*

Peter has left three bodies behind tonight, and they all belong to people who aided and abetted Kate Argent in burning the Hale pack. He knows now it was her, without a doubt. He also got a couple more names for his kill list, Unger and Reddick, low-level thugs.

He is energized, buoyant with his success and also more smitten with Stiles than he was a day or even an hour ago. He meant it as a joke that Stiles would be with him in spirit, but, apparently, Stiles is able and willing to do exactly that in very tangible ways without leaving his home. The range, fine control, precision and reliability of Stiles' power are amazing.

As Peter runs through the town, steering clear of any heartbeats, he tries to guess exactly what Stiles is.

His powers are uninhibited by mountain ash; more than that, they are compatible with human magic such as manipulating the ash. Possibly runes as well, judging by all the wards and some of the books Peter has seen lying around the basement hideout. They cover an enormous territory, miles and miles, indicating not only great strength but also a clearly inhuman ability to process vast inputs of information. They allow for precise locating of people and tailored influence. Said influence is as of yet unclear in its actual nature but it causes fear, unease, helplessness and confusion. It can be blocked by some sort of protection possessed by an ancient and rich hunter clan. Also, Stiles didn't say anything about how he'd found out about the Sweeney boy's plight but Peter would cautiously bet on Stiles simply sensing the suffering.

Moreover, in this light, the circumstances of their first meeting have become ever more intriguing. It was not mountain ash that stopped Peter from biting Stiles, and not even a runic ward, now was it?

He has a couple of vague ideas but for all that he has always been interested in new knowledge, he's no scholar, so he decides to take a small detour to the vault, being out and about as he is already. There are a lot of books kept in there, some of them old and exotic bestiaries.

And, perhaps, he might lend Stiles one or two, just as a sign of gratitude for the truly awesome, world-class help Peter is getting. When he first woke up, with Jennifer as his only confidante, he couldn't have imagined someone like Stiles in his wildest dreams.

Sometimes Peter wonders if he's still in that thrice-damned long-term care ward, his body finally healed up enough that in the absence of constant pain his mind has become free to think up something besides the fire and homicidal ravings. Although, if Stiles is a fever

dream, a phantom of wish-fulfillment, Peter isn't sure why his subconscious has made Stiles underage. One would think that a figment of one's imagination would be conveniently over the age of consent so that the figment's armed father wouldn't have a legal reason to shoot one in the unmentionables, should he find out about one's desires.

He huffs to himself, amused. No, this is real. He is not staring at the wall right now, lost in his broken mind. The taste of blood clinging to his mouth is too sharp, and the night air flowing through his fur is too fresh.

He's almost at the high school when he notices someone tailing him.

It's a combination of things, mostly sounds. A single distinctive heartbeat that neither gets closer, nor is ever left behind; distant thuds of hands and feet landing in the rhythm of a loping run. There's also the feeling of someone watching him, and that one never failed Peter once in his whole life.

He changes his route slightly, heading to the lacrosse field instead. He doesn't want to lead his little extra tail to the Hale vault, and he's curious to see who it is. It seems to be just one person, and a werewolf to boot, and unless there's a new player in town, Peter has a pretty good guess about their identity.

He stops in the middle of the field, looks towards the bleachers his pursuer has hidden behind, and holds out one paw, beckoning Derek to come out.

Derek does, pretty much cannonballing himself from between seats, snarling as he goes, having shed any pretense of subtlety. He lands on one knee, eyes blazing with beta blue, claws scoring deep gashes in the grass.

"You," he growls.

Talking in his full shift is impossible, so Peter does Derek a favor, even though his wayward nephew hardly deserves any consideration at all, and morphs into a partial shift. He's naked again, excepting the makeshift phone holster slung across his chest, but, unlike Stiles, Derek doesn't care or even notice.

"Yes, dear nephew, it is indeed me," Peter says mildly. His eyes glow red in a conscious taunt.

"You killed Laura!"

"Sorry," Peter offers rather insincerely. "I lost control."

Derek roars. It would be threatening... to a kitten, perhaps.

"I'll kill you," he promises. "You had no right!"

Okay, Peter has had quite enough of this. Faster than Derek can even blink, Peter leaps forward and pins him to the ground by the throat, the tips of his claws biting into the skin. Derek scratches Peter's arm, trying to get him to let go, but those wounds heal almost faster than they appear. Peter wasn't weak before the fire, and Laura was a young, healthy alpha

with a powerful spark. Peter knows how to put the sheer strength coursing through his veins to good use.

“I had no right?” He hisses in Derek’s face, the farce of civility forgotten. “I had every right! She was my alpha, and she LEFT ME TO ROT!”

He screams those last words, his voice echoing across the field, layered with the roar of an alpha. Derek stops struggling, cowed instinctively; they no longer share a packbond but they still share blood, and that means something, no matter how much Derek might not want it to.

“Tell me, nephew,” Peter asks in a silky voice, “did you ask her about me when she took you to the airport and said that you two were leaving forever? Did you ask if your uncle, the only other survivor, would be somehow coming with you? Or were you still holding enough of a grudge that you were hoping I would die from my fourth-degree burns and the loss of all of my packbonds? Or were you counting on me not dying but spending years in agony instead? Well, if that last one is the case, then your hopes and dreams have come true because I came out on the other end of six years of hell, and I took the Hale alpha spark that Laura forfeited the moment she decided to turn her back on a member of her pack.”

He lifts Derek by the throat and tosses him across the field, suddenly too disgusted to keep touching him.

“Go back to where you came from,” Peter tells him. “You were a stupid child beta, so I won’t kill you for abandoning me. Find yourself a pack willing to take you in, preferably on the other side of the country. There’s nothing for you here anymore.”

“And what will you be doing here in the meantime?” Derek challenges. “Throwing children in the hunters’ path by promising them a bite?”

Oh, for Moon’s sake.

“And you what, fancy yourself the protector of Beacon Hills? Looking to defend Stiles from the big bad wolf?”

“Who?”

“Stiles,” Peter says slowly. Derek could hardly be referring to anyone else, seeing as Stiles is the only one who ever claimed out loud that Peter had promised him a bite. “Sheriff Stilinski’s son.”

“Ah. Yes, him, and anyone else. You’re insane, Peter. You’re on a rampage. It’s only a matter of time before you’re gunned down.”

“And you want to be the first to put me down so you can have the alpha spark to yourself?” Peter rolls his eyes. “You’re a hypocrite of the highest order, nephew.”

“And you would waste that spark chasing revenge!” Derek snarls.

“Revenge is never a waste,” Peter says. “Not that you would know anything about that, having slunk out of town with your tail between your legs the moment the going got tough.”

“Do you even hear yourself? You’re in an all-out war with the Argents! You took their matriarch-to-be! They will flatten the whole town to make an example out of you!”

“Perhaps it’s high time someone made an example out of the Argents.” Peter hums. “They’ve been killing indiscriminately for far too long. I think I’ll start with the esteemed Katherine as soon as she gets here.”

At the sound of Kate’s name, Derek flinches, and Peter can smell the guilt coming off of him even across the field. Without meaning to, Peter growls and takes a step forward.

“You reacted strangely just now, nephew. What is it about Kate Argent, hmm?”

Derek steps back, his beta blue eyes fixed on Peter. The guilt is now mixed with fear.

“Something to share with the class, dear Derek?” Peter inquires in his softest tone. “Are you, by chance, familiar with the Argent matriarch?”

Derek looks down, unable to meet Peter’s gaze. This is enough of a confirmation for Peter to leap across the field, rage boiling over into a growl, and backhand Derek into the bleachers.

“Tell me, Derek,” he orders, stalking up close, and his voice is threaded with his alpha power, heavy and almost tangible. Derek shudders. “How do you know her?”

“She...” Derek takes a deep breath. “I... We... dated. We dated. She and I. Before the fire. I thought... I had feelings for her. She swore she wasn’t like the other hunters, she was so understanding. She liked me. I told her about the secret tunnel in the basement. That... That was why no one could get out that way.”

All the fight is leached out of Derek now, as if keeping his shame secret was all that was keeping him upright. Peter can’t stop growling; vicious anger pulses inside him in sync with his heartbeat.

He wants to kill Derek for being so stupid, for letting a hunter turn his head, for spilling secrets that cost so many lives, for hiding it from his family until it was too late. Yes, Derek was young, but does it excuse him?

Peter can’t help but find an unfortunate parallel with his own situation. Can he treat Stiles with the respect and equity he would award an adult but consider Derek who was about the same age at the time a helpless child who was taken advantage of?

Should he give into the impulse and finish Derek’s wretched, guilt-ridden existence right here and now?

Derek closes his eyes and tips his head back, wordlessly ready for his throat to be torn open. He smells like peace and resignation.

Stiles and Derek, Peter thinks, are two very different people. And dealing with people always works best on case-by-case basis.

“Unbelievable,” he says coldly. “After that revelation you expect me to accommodate you and serve as your suicide tool? You’ve got some nerve, nephew.”

Derek opens his eyes, human-looking now, and stares at Peter in confusion.

“As you might have noticed by now,” Peter says, “laying down and dying is not how I deal with things. And since you seem to be leaving this up to me, I’m choosing to make you deal in a way that is more productive than a pointless, cowardly self-sacrifice.”

He smiles at Derek ever so sweetly.

“Dear nephew, you’re going to help me take revenge on Kate.”

He bends his head and slides his fangs into Derek’s shoulder through the jacket and shirt. Derek screams, a long incoherent shout full of pain, but doesn’t try to get away.

A packbond springs between them anew, tenuous and trembling but there.

Peter releases Derek and takes a step backwards.

“If you still think that dying is the best way to atone, I can’t stop you from taking the matter in your own hands. But if you’re interested in aiding the remaining tatters of your family, you will give me your phone number and follow my instructions when they come.”

Derek thinks about it for a second. Then he opens his mouth and recites his phone number.

“Go into hiding for the moment,” Peter says after adding the number to his phone contacts. “We’ve made enough noise to attract all of the hunters and law enforcement in town to this field. Don’t get caught and don’t try anything stupid. I will know.”

He turns around to leave, then halts and tacks on, in order to appease Derek’s apparent heroic side that might prod him into unfortunate decisions:

“I expect you’ll meet Stiles properly soon. I shall disclose no secrets that do not belong to me, but rest assured, he has no need of your protection.”

Derek stares, disbelieving and wary, as Peter shifts and takes off.

* * *

every time u go out u get a new puppy 4 ur pack

is that gonna be a thing

it feels like a thing

I wasn’t planning on it, sweetheart. He just happened to be there.

same as allison did yeah i heard that song be4 creeperwolf

its ur pack so u do wat u want w/ it so long as theres consent

im not letting him live in my hideout tho

its already kinda cramped

Peter frowns at his phone. While Stiles is correct in pointing out that it's Peter's pack, the long-term plan is to make Stiles part of it—not as a wolf but perhaps the emissary? Truthfully, Peter's not that picky about what role Stiles chooses for himself so long as he is pack. Stiles distancing himself from pack-related decisions is decidedly not going in the right direction.

I agree completely, my darling. The hideout is your space, and I intend to be respectful of both it and your generosity. In fact, I took the liberty of acquiring some prospective funds last night after the confrontation with my nephew. With one visit to the bank I will be able to rent an apartment.

u might get to the bank w/o getting shot but i bet the argentsll get wind of ur new address sooner rather than l8r

Not if I take care to use cash and a fake identity. My photo in the ID looks a bit youthful compared to my current appearance but it's still clearly me.

It takes Stiles a few minutes to reply to this.

looks like uve thought of everything

anyway i wanted to tell u be4 u launched the derek story

2 more argents under protection rolled in2 town during the nite

i bet one of thems kate

A wide, wild smile splits Peter's face. He's one step closer to his goal.

they r all at the argents place probs holding a war council type of thing

k i got shit to do around the house be4 school

think on how best to deal with her

ill think too

brainstorm together l8r

Can't wait, dear heart.

Despite the precious, immensely satisfying information he just received and the promise of a later meeting of like minds, Peter can't shake off an uneasy feeling that he missed something.

* * *

Going to the bank gives Peter anxiety. He could have asked Stiles for safe directions but right now is school time and Peter doesn't want to disrupt Stiles' education simply for the sake of metaphorically holding Peter's hand, so being constantly on his guard it is.

Perhaps he should have broken into the bank last night, taken some cash and left the appropriate bearer bonds behind. It would certainly have been less dangerous. Damn Laura for cleaning out all the cash from the vault before she skipped town.

Despite the early hour, there is already a queue. Peter takes a number and finds a seat behind a tall, wide column where he is marginally hidden from view and protected from bullets to the back. He tracks the numbers called out by the system with only the edges of his attention, mostly focused on parsing the heartbeats and scents around him.

There are plenty of agitated people, which is understandable considering that they are dealing with their finances, but none of them smell like wolfsbane or gunpowder. There is one who smells like herbs and antiseptic, though, and Peter recognizes him long before the man takes a seat next to him.

"Hello, Peter," says Deaton.

"Alan," Peter acknowledges.

He wonders what the point is in initiating this conversation. Deaton was, and still is, the most useless emissary out of everyone Peter has ever heard of. He wasn't able to protect the pack he supposedly served from an attack. He did nothing for Laura, Derek or Peter himself afterwards. He has never actually done anything that Peter remembers besides doling out cryptic advice once in a blue moon. He wasn't even a positive presence in the pack's day-to-day life, preferring to live at his animal clinic in the city and only appearing if summoned by Talia for some reason or another. Peter rather doubts the man decided to involve himself now.

"I hear you've been busy," Deaton opens.

"Life has a way of keeping everyone busy," Peter says.

As usual, Deaton smells and looks unperturbed. Considering the current situation in the town, Peter suspects that those herbs Deaton seems to be so fond of might be helping him keep extra calm.

The next number gets called. There are only two people before Peter now.

"Let us cut to the chase, Alan," Peter offers. "What is it that you're hoping to achieve by ambushing me here?"

"This is hardly an ambush," Deaton says. "You have always been... impulsive, Peter, with your words as well as your deeds. As for what I want, that would be what I have always wanted: balance."

"I have to confess, I don't care one whit about that," Peter says. "There, I saved you some time. You can go."

“You should, Peter.” Deaton smells sad and concerned. It’s patronizing enough that Peter wants to rip his throat out here and now. “You’re tangling with forces you do not understand.”

Peter snorts.

“I like to think I understand them well enough. Blind prejudice and a taste for murder—they are not really all that complicated.”

“Oh, you misunderstand.” Deaton smiles blandly. “I do not mean the Argents. I’m not planning to stand in the way of your vendetta. These things have a way of working themselves out.”

Peter waits. Then waits some more.

And some more again.

“I take it you’re not going to ask what forces I do mean.”

“I figured you’re here to tell me, so I might as well relax and wait.” Peter shrugs.

“I’m afraid relaxing is the last thing you can afford right now.” Deaton’s earnestness is a stifling and stale smell. “The entity with whom you’re dealing is far too dangerous for that. Forget hunters, Peter. He will spark a war that will empty this planet for his own amusement.”

“He? The entity?” Peter raises his eyebrows. “You are making it sound like I sold my soul to Cthulhu.”

“He is not at the same level of ability for destruction... yet.” Deaton studies Peter’s face with a frown. “You really didn’t sense it? Didn’t feel wary in his presence? He must have made sure not to make you suspicious. You must be important for his plans.”

Another number gets called.

“Whose plans?” Peter is tired of this bizarre game. “Alan, are you quite certain you brewed the right herbal tea this morning?”

“I’m talking about the entity who is calling himself Stiles Stilinski,” Deaton says, and Peter would be amazed at hearing a straight sentence come out of the man’s mouth if he weren’t so taken aback by the actual words.

“Stiles is a destructive entity whom you’re so afraid of that you made an effort to get out of your precious clinic, track me down and talk to me about it,” Peter summarizes dryly.

“He may seem harmless,” Deaton says. “Charming, even. But for those sensitive to such things, his presence is a beacon.”

Peter wouldn’t go so far as to call Stiles harmless but a comparison with Cthulhu seems excessive. Although...

Peter thinks back to the ideas he has regarding what Stiles is. A couple of them are genuinely terrifying. Then again, he already knows Stiles can be genuinely terrifying, with or without a label to define him.

“I felt it the day he awoke.” Deaton leans forward, propping his elbows on his knees. His head is bowed, as if some grief is too heavy to bear with his chin up. “Most supernatural people here did. A wave of otherworldly power and a pop of pressure, and the darkness of the night seemed crisper than ever afterwards. I didn’t know exactly what or who it was until a chance meeting in person. In his arrogance, he isn’t hiding himself at all. Even so, I had trouble believing it at first. His kind were supposed to have been exterminated long ago.”

“And who would his kind be?” Peter inquires. He isn’t buying Deaton’s fearmongering but perhaps he can still get some useful information out of this street corner doomsday prophet lecture.

Peter’s number gets called. Deaton sighs.

“Go,” he says, nodding at the row of teller windows. “Sort out your finances. Stay on your guard around Stiles Stilinski.”

Peter rolls his eyes. Typical for Deaton to clam up the moment he might have had to divulge something specific.

“Goodbye, Alan,” he says, getting up. To be honest, he is only too happy to get away from the herb smells. They are so intense, it’s like they are numbing his nose from the inside.

* * *

Contrary to his reputation, Peter is a believer in hard work. People take one look at him—conniving, slick, self-serving, cunning—and somehow come to the conclusion that he gets everything handed to him on a silver platter. They don’t seem to understand that Peter has honed every aspect of himself through effort and diligence. Being a smarmy lawyer might look like an easy life on the outside but it comes on the coattails of many, many days and nights spent memorizing laws, going through old case files, practicing both sides of a court debate and so on. Peter has made his share of mistakes in life, too. A little adversity never hurt anybody’s growth, in his opinion (well, unless it killed them but such is the path of natural selection). It is with that principle in mind that he tells the Argent girl all about her beloved aunt fucking family secrets out of a naive high schooler and then proceeds to tell her to practice her shift.

She stares at him, aghast.

“I,” she says, her soft face trembling, “I can’t believe she would... would do that... This is... That is depraved!”

“Not so much from her point of view,” Peter shrugs. “She doesn’t view werewolves as sentient beings, so it’s not like she was, to her, seducing a sheltered young boy. Maybe she saw it as a little thrilling bestiality experience since werewolves are dumb beasts to a hunter. Most of us are easy on human eyes.”

The Argent girl's packbond pulses with horrified disgust, and for a moment Peter wonders if she's going to throw up. She holds her lunch in, though.

"Go on," he says. "Claws out, claws in, until it's second nature. You know the drill by now."

Her first full moon is in two days. The more she can learn by then, the less of a burden she will be, considering that with her family raging through the city Peter may not have such a luxury as having a whole night to babysit a newly turned beta. Although, perhaps he could ask Stiles to put her in a mountain ash circle?

There's a lot he's come to rely on Stiles for. It bothers him some, considering that they have known each other for such a short time and he doesn't even know what Stiles is, except that, according to Deaton, he's something horrifying on par with a world-destroying mythical monster.

Again, Peter doesn't believe Deaton. The man is clearly scared of Stiles, and fear tends to exaggerate both the size of the threat and the likelihood of it being a threat; Stiles started quite early, already killing a whole family of wendigos at twelve, and if he was at all interested in starting a war of any kind, he would have been at it by now. Instead, Stiles goes around protecting abused selkies and human children and being anal-retentive about maintaining the secrecy.

Still, Peter feels like, risky as it was, getting an apartment of his own was the right decision. He's an alpha werewolf, and it chafes at his nature to hide behind another and not be able to provide for his pack (such as it is) on his own. Not to mention being a leech will hardly endear him to Stiles or earn him any respect.

He did ask Stiles to help with relocating to the apartment later tonight, though. The Argent girl's picture is plastered everywhere, on walls, trees, doors, milk cartons, in papers and on TV. It might be impossible to steer clear of everyone who could recognize her and sound the alarm, and there's definitely no way to avoid all of the CCTV cameras on the way. At the very least, they need a hoodie to hide her hair and face somewhat.

"Claws?" She interrupts his thoughts. "You tell me Kate did... *that*... and you expect me to sit here and focus on my nails?!"

"You are going to need to be able to focus on them no matter what is going on," Peter tells her, sending a strict warning through the packbond. She twitches, but her mulish expression doesn't change. "You're my beta, and while you are that, I am holding you to high standards of control. You might have noticed by now that life as a supernatural being sometimes entails a bit of stress..."

This surprises a half-hysterical laugh out of her.

"...And you have not yet felt the kind of stress the full moon will put on you," Peter finishes, magnanimously ignoring her outburst. "Your every sense will heighten. All of your wolf instincts will clamor for the driver's seat. Retaining any sort of control over what you do, where you go, and who you hurt will be the hardest thing you'll have ever done in your life. I

don't expect perfection out of you right out of the gate, but I do expect you to strive for it. Have you given any thought to your anchor yet?"

She wilts a bit.

"I have, but..." She picks at the seam of her jeans with human nails. "I can't use my family as an anchor now, can I? And I don't have any friends that close. You did say it doesn't have to be a person, but I, well, I just don't know. What else can I even use?" She gives him a brief, wary glance. "You never said... What's your anchor?"

Peter debates whether or not to tell her and decides that he might as well, even though it may not prove useful in her own search.

"My sense of duty."

"Duty? Were you in the military?"

"No, I was a lawyer." Peter looks at the wall. It's easier, somehow, than looking at the girl. "My duty to my pack. I was Talia's left hand, her enforcer and spymaster. It was my job to deal with interlopers on our land, to make sure other packs understood that we were strong, to strike a threat down before it could strike at us. The head of security, if you will."

Leave the boy alone, Talia said. He'll introduce his secret girlfriend when he's ready, she said. He needs his privacy and he will definitely not appreciate you of all people sticking your nose into his love life, she said, all benevolent and wise even as her words scored at Peter like a swipe of claws.

He never should have listened.

"Oh," the Argent girl says.

The scent of her indecision fills the room. Even her packbond feels like it's waffling, shifting from foot to foot.

"Ask what you want to ask," Peter snaps, annoyed. "Just remember you may not be entitled to every answer."

She nods. Peter expects something along the lines of "if you were ensuring your family's security, how come they are all dead", perhaps because this is what he thinks of every single day, but she goes in a very different direction.

"What will your anchor be after, though?"

"After?"

"You have your revenge right now," she says quietly. "Your last duty to the pack you lost. But when... that's done... your actual pack is me. And Derek too, now, I guess. I, well, I don't think you feel the same duty towards us. What will you use as your anchor after that?"

“I don’t know,” Peter says honestly because a clever question like that deserves honesty. “I’ll think of something, I’m good at improvising. Are you worried about what will become of you? Don’t. Unintended as your turning was, I’m your alpha now. So long as that’s the case, you will have a roof over your head, food, all the other necessities. Education. Guidance.”

It galls him to admit but he owes her that much. In the depths of his insanity, the bond with her—much as he despises it, much as it makes his skin crawl when he thinks of it too long—stabilized him like little else could. She could have made it worse by fighting him tooth and claw, defied and denied him, but she accepted the bond, took food and water from him and followed his directions. She has a hundred and one reason to hate him, and yet here she is, her packbond humming with nothing worse than some low-level worry and frustration, healthy and strong.

Maybe it simply hasn’t occurred to her that she can do that. But Peter doubts it. Even though she’s very new to the supernatural world, she is smart enough to figure out that connections go both ways.

“That’s not what I meant, but, uhm, it’s good to know.” She teases a tangle out of her hair with her fingers. Stiles was right, she does urgently need a hairbrush. “Not that any of that helped me with finding my anchor,” she adds.

Peter sighs. Teenagers. Always complaining about something.

“Has there ever been something that helped you calm and focus?” He asks. “Any person? Activity? Book?”

“Archery,” she says without hesitation. “I’m very good at it. I would always go to a range if I wanted to unwind.”

Her eyes grow distant in memory.

“There was always the goal I needed to hit, and then there was my arrow. I would stop thinking about anything else and find the perfect way to connect the two. The right route over that distance between me standing there with my bow drawn and the arrow hitting the bullseye.”

“Well, there you go,” Peter says. “Your goal is control. And here you are, a newly turned beta. Look for that feeling and try to hit the bullseye.”

“Huh,” she says. “It’s... more metaphorical than what I thought it should be.”

“It should be whatever it is,” Peter says. “Your anchor is your own, abstract or concrete. If it works for you, then it’s right, even if it’s different from what others are using.”

A burble of amusement plays out briefly in her scent and bond. Peter glances at her, curious as to what caused it, but she’s already looking at her hands, rapidly slipping into what smells almost like meditation.

After two minutes of it, she pops her claws out. Then pulls them back in. Then pops them out again, one by one, exhilarated and grinning.

“It’s much easier this way! Did you see? I even managed them one by one! And they went away right when I wanted them to!”

“Well done,” Peter says. She smiles almost shyly, pleased, and her packbond preens. “Now claws and fangs at the same time.”

She makes a face at him but gets to it.

Strangely, the ensuing silence in the basement is almost peaceful.

Chapter 7: The Antithesis Of Stiles

Chapter Notes

Please fasten your seat belts, ladies and gentlemen and variations thereupon, and keep your hands and feet inside the ride at all times. We are entering a zone of some turbulence.

Stiles rolls into the people larder basement after dark in a mood so foul that he isn't even tempted to drain it away. It has taken over to such a degree that now he's relishing it somewhat.

He gives curt nods in response to Allison's "Hi, Stiles!" and Peter's "Good evening, sweetheart", drops his overstuffed backpack on the floor and goes straight to the mini fridge. His family-sized stash of Reese's has been raided by the werewolves, but there's still plenty for Stiles to grab with both hands.

Peter is sitting in the middle of the couch, and it takes Stiles a split second to reach the decision that fine, Peter might be making like a grown kid and moving out, but fuck it, Stiles can still get at least one last warm werewolf cuddle in before Peter's all independent and far away in that apartment of his.

He kicks off his shoes because even in a foul mood he cares about the state of his couch and flings himself into Peter's side. Without missing a beat, Peter lifts his arm just in time for Stiles to fit under it and curls it around Stiles' shoulders, fingers skimming gently over where the ring of bruises is and settling below it. Stiles wriggles around a bit, movements jerky and too fast, finding a comfy position, and starts aggressively stuffing his mouth with chocolate and peanut butter.

"Rough day at work, darling?" Peter asks, amusement curling through him delicately like the vines of morning glory.

"Sumfink li' zhat," Stiles says through the Reese's.

"Your manners are appalling," Peter complains, but he's still amused, and he also bends his head to nose at Stiles' hair and forehead, and when their skin touches, all pain rushes out of Stiles.

Some of the foul mood leaves Stiles at that, and he relaxes, smushing his cheek against Peter's chest and breathing in and out deeply.

"That felt good," he mutters, almost resentfully. He was ready for a good long stretch of feeling like garbage, and Peter is ruining his plans.

“I know,” the plan ruiner says, unrepentant and smug.

Stiles is probably going to regret reinforcing this kind of attitude, but he unwraps a peanut butter cup and offers it to Peter anyway. Peter takes it, somehow even more smug but also pleased.

“It’s been a sucky day,” he admits. Peter hums in response, showing that he’s listening; it rumbles through his chest in a slight vibrating sensation that’s actually pleasant to be next to. Allison is looking at him attentively, her borrowed algebra textbook forgotten in her lap.

Stiles regrets having to break apart this surreal moment of domestic affability.

“Kate Argent came to school today,” he says, and both Peter and Allison explode with emotion, loud, bright and chaotic; even though everyone’s still sitting down, Stiles feels a bit of a whiplash from the change in the atmosphere.

“Did she try to hurt you?” Peter’s arm around him tightens a bit.

“No.” Stiles frowns. “That’s the weirdest bit. I mean, you’d think Victoria would have told everyone else every detail of our encounter and they’d be on me like angry bees, but Kate just hijacked a bit of history class to tell everyone about how she’s looking for her missing niece and anyone who knows anything should come forward. She didn’t even glance at me an extra time. But she did drag Scott away to interrogate him about having seen you at the animal clinic, Allie, even though he already gave Dad an official statement.”

He bites into another peanut butter cup savagely. The werewolves wait for him to chew and swallow, and the tension in the room would have been palpable even if Stiles couldn’t feel it with his magic.

“She actually dragged him out of school and into the car where another Argent was waiting,” he continues. “I was about to go stage a rescue, but the car didn’t actually go anywhere. I don’t know what they thought they were going to get from him besides what he’s already told the police, but he spent the rest of the day all jumpy and nervous. I mean, I clapped him on the shoulder and he literally leaped a foot upwards like a spooked cat.”

Scott’s emotions during that interrogation were wild. Shock, and fear, and nervousness, and determination, and confusion, all intense, all tangled together. Stiles fucking hates that. He’s spent the last ten years protecting Scott from bullies, and now he had to sit on his hands while some of the biggest ones out there were telling Scott who knows what.

“Could they have told him about you?” Peter asks.

“Tell him what about me? That I’m an impressionable youth hoping to overcome the hardships of puberty via the magic of a werewolf bite?”

Peter snorts.

“No, sweetheart. I meant that you are *something*.”

“They don’t know for sure I’m anything.” Stiles devours another peanut butter cup. He can feel all the rapidly swallowed sugar take hold, muting the edges of what remains of his bad mood. Ah. Nothing quite like processed, artificially flavored, tooth-rotting happiness.

“They might,” Peter says, and there’s a curious note to him that makes Stiles twist and look up into Peter’s face. “I ran into Deaton, the Hale pack’s former emissary, this morning at the bank.”

“He used to be an emissary?” Stiles had no idea. “I mean, I know he’s a small-time druid and addicted to some very pungent herbal teas, but, like, no one ever even mentioned that.”

“That would probably be because he was never a proper part of the pack and was also generally useless,” Peter says. “In any case, he was there to try and warn me away from sticking by your side.”

“Huh?” Granted, Deaton has never liked Stiles. The dislike was obvious the few times they met, in passing, when Stiles dropped Scott at the clinic sometimes or picked him up. It was a bit offensive because Stiles had never done anything to Deaton but it was also not bad enough for Stiles to expend any effort on digging deeper into this.

Stiles has never told Deaton—or anyone else—what he is, what he can do. If he ever did, that would be a valid reason to warn others away, of course, but as it stands... why?

“Apparently, you’re on par with nightmarish cosmic entities,” Peter says. His mirth is easy and swift. “He said he felt it when you awoke, and when he met you face to face, he knew that was you.”

Stiles stills.

“Did he tell you what I am? What I do?”

Peter is a little wary, having felt how Stiles stiffened, but there’s no fear or apprehension. Stiles roots deeper, flips through every emotion Peter has, from the fleeting surface whims to the ones that constitute the bedrock of who Peter is and what Peter does, and finds nothing hidden, no subterfuge carefully tucked away.

Unaware of the massive invasion of his privacy, Peter says:

“I did ask him, but, as per usual, he proved to be of no use and didn’t say. I’m not sure he actually knows, to be honest. He just waxed poetic about how powerful and dangerous you are. That man is scared of you to death, sweetheart.” That last tidbit is something Peter seems to like, if his satisfaction and admiration are anything to go by.

Fuck. Triple fuckity-fuck with a fuck on top. Who else felt Stiles’ magic awakening all those years ago? He has met literally everyone supernatural in town by now. If they could sense what he was, this whole time, and the secrecy he’s been so careful to keep was for nothing...

No. No, that can’t be right. Whatever he is, it’s not general knowledge. Stiles has been researching the shit out of it for years, and he has never seen anything similar described

anywhere. If they sense anything, that would probably just be that he's powerful, and there's a million and one ways for power to manifest, so many different creatures under the sun. And no one has been afraid of him. Not the way they would be if they knew he could take all their feelings and put new ones in instead, make them love something they hate and hate something they love, answer any question, wither away from dehydration while drowning in contentment, expire from sheer terror, and many, many other things.

Still, he feels very stupid. He kind of thought everyone bought his story about being a normal human kid dabbling in some magic. Maybe it was all polite fiction. Looks like some of it definitely was.

He relaxes a bit again and leans his cheek against Peter's shoulder. There's no immediate danger, it seems, even though he's going to have to be more attentive once the town is clear of hunters. Check if there's any damage control to be done. Sound people out.

"I am powerful and dangerous," he says because there's hardly any point in denying that. "He was telling the truth."

"I already knew that," Peter says dismissively. He's entirely sincere. "The point, my darling, is that if Argent seniors asked around about you, anyone sensitive to such things could have told them you are something. That could have made them cautious."

"Shit," Stiles says.

He feeds Peter another peanut butter cup and tosses a couple Allison's way. She looks like she needs the sugar.

"I'm not pushing," Peter says, "but if you ever decide to tell what exactly you are, I am here to listen."

"No," Stiles says flatly.

How can he ever tell anybody? What he can do, what he does do on regular basis, is something that makes it impossible for him to be trusted. People around him can never rely on their decisions to be their own; he has no way to prove he hasn't done anything to them, and any trust there is can have easily been planted by him.

Hell, Stiles wouldn't trust himself if he were in such a position.

"In any case," he says, changing the subject with all the subtlety of a pop-up ad promising to enlarge one's penis for only \$9.99, "they couldn't have told Scott that. He wasn't afraid of me. Just... nervous. He was clingy, even. He rarely asks that I come to his lacrosse practices, but he asked today."

There was determination in Scott, and some fear but not of Stiles, and scrambling confusion, all discordant like screams of a crowd. And the clinginess. They hang out all the time, they are best friends, but Scott seemed unwilling to let Stiles ever leave his side today and only backed off when Stiles cited the need to do laundry which would involve sorting through

Stiles' own and Dad's unmentionables. It was probably the latter one that did it. It takes a rare bravery to impose on the Sheriff's underwear time.

"I don't like that she was anywhere near you," Peter says, dark with rage and lethal intent. He pulls Stiles closer, close enough that Stiles is half in his lap. "And that she was sniffing around your best friend. Derek was his age back then."

Allison chokes on an alarmed protest.

"She wasn't trying to do that, I don't think," Stiles says slowly. "Surely she wouldn't have someone else in the car for that. I mean, Scott would definitely not like an audience, and, y'know, he already picked the Argent he likes."

Which reminds him, he's got something for her. He commands the mountain ash to bring him his backpack—the way it glides towards him as if on its own will never not be fun, and Dad almost caught him like five times when he played with it like that at home—and unzips it to fish out a hairbrush. It was Mom's. Both Stilinski men tend to keep their hair short and not bother with products much, so they make do with combs or just their fingers as they roll out of bed in the morning.

It's a keepsake, an intricately carved dark wood brush that Mom used to treasure because it had been Stiles' *babcia's* before; the slender wooden bristles gleam, still clean from the last time Mom was well enough to take care of it. He doesn't want to just hand it to Allison and have her mistake it for a gift instead of a loaner, so he makes to straighten up.

Peter's arm tightens around him, making Stiles' movement an ineffectual flail. Possessive, protective rage simmers in Peter as he, no doubt, broods over Kate.

Stiles' eyes narrow.

"Peter," he says in a light conversational tone. "As you already know, I value healthy communication in relationships. So in the interests of our beautiful friendship, let me use my words and establish a personal boundary: either you let me go whenever I want to be let go, or you lose the offending limb. Please pick one within the next twenty seconds, or I will pick one for you."

Yeah, his foul mood is not completely gone yet. Still, it is a good boundary to have.

Peter's eyes flare red, but he knows Stiles is not lying and lets go before the first ten seconds are up.

"Thank you," Stiles says. "I would hate to spend time cleaning blood off the couch. We have things to do tonight, after all."

He sits up and brandishes the hairbrush at Allison.

"Come here, Allie. We've got to do something with that hair of yours, or it will never fit under a hoodie of mine. Maybe a hijab would work, but I don't have one of those at hand."

She is regarding him with some wariness—likely, she also knows he was not joking when talking about loping limbs off—but gets up, unfolding her long legs from their lotus position.

“How do you want...?” She gestures at the couch the center of which is taken over by Peter whose broodiness has not been helped by Stiles’ threats.

Stiles studies Peter’s mood and sees strands of jealousy in it. And there was some moodiness yesterday when Stiles sat in a way that wouldn’t easily let Peter touch him, wasn’t there? And it went away the moment Stiles decided to be cheeky and use Peter’s lap as his pillow.

Somehow, Stiles has been so busy with his own insecurities about a handsome older man possibly not wanting to cuddle with him that he forgot about said man having spent years in a coma with only perfunctory, professional touch of nurses and orderlies. And Peter is also a werewolf, one of the most tactile beings in the world. Is it any wonder that now that Peter has found someone he likes to share touch with, he dislikes having to let go a whole lot?

Sure, it’s healthy to have a boundary. But as long as that is adhered to, there’s really no harm in touch that both sides want, is there?

“Okay, wait a sec, we’re going to rearrange a little.”

Peter gives Stiles an unimpressed look conveying that he, for one, is not going to be rearranged, no matter what threats might be employed to that effect. Stiles plows right past the message.

“Peter, if you sit sideways and lean against the couch arm, I can lean against you. And you, Allie, can sit in front of me so I can reach your hair.”

He aims his Bambi eyes at Peter. Those might be the most dangerous weapons in Stiles’ arsenal because, while reluctant, suspicious and annoyed, Peter does move as requested. Stiles slides in, back to Peter’s chest, pressing close. Peter’s arms come around his waist after a short moment of hesitation, and a chin hooks over his shoulder, scenting him cheek to cheek in what Peter probably thinks is a surreptitious move.

Stiles doesn’t mind, though. There’s a joy in Peter—a terrible, aching, vulnerable joy—that rises and ebbs like a tide with each deep inhale and exhale full of Stiles’ scent. Stiles can create the same thing in anyone, and it would be real, because all emotions are real, whether they come from Stiles or from within, but it wouldn’t be true.

Unsurprised, Stiles finds that he wants this true thing, so unlike anything anyone has ever felt about him. He’s selfish, and he’s greedy, and he’s been lonely as fuck in some ways since long before his magic awoke, and he actually likes Peter, the good parts and the bad ones and the ones in between, the striking blue eyes, the bloodthirsty pursuit of revenge, the quick asshole wit, the creepy stalkerish tendencies, the handsome face, the infuriating smirks, the unflinching loyalty, the weirdo power kinks, the brilliant crafty mind, the comfy cuddles, the alpha strength, all of it.

Maybe if Peter hasn’t been so... *Peter* around Stiles from the very start, this kind of thoughts wouldn’t come to Stiles, at all or for some time. But Peter has, and now Stiles, observing his

own emotions with a practiced eye, is certain that he wants Peter, as much of him as he will be allowed to have.

Allison gives them both a weird look, and Stiles has no idea what all she can smell from them and determine by their heartbeats. As she turns around and climbs on the couch with her back to Stiles, there's a guarded, decisive dismissal in her that can be best encapsulated in Mom's favorite Polish saying: not my circus, not my monkeys. Stiles mentally applauds her healthy attitude.

He gathers her thick mane of hair in his hands and starts carefully brushing it from the ends, the way Mom always used to. As he does that, he rubs his cheek against Peter's, briefly, so as not to make a big deal out of it, but deliberately enough that it can't possibly be mistaken for a random head movement.

Peter's surprised, smug, possessive delight makes Stiles mellow out enough that he decides, should Peter ever trample over the established boundary, not to cut off any limbs but use less permanent ways of expressing displeasure that are at his disposal.

He doesn't say that out loud, though. Can't have Peter thinking Stiles is going soft, now can he?

* * *

The night goes to shit approximately ten seconds after they roll out in Roscoe, Allison's hair braided and hidden inside the folds of a baggy hoodie of Stiles', the dark gray hood pulled low over her face. As Stiles listens around, he can't miss the attention pointed right at him from many blocks away, coupled with anticipation and violent intent. As he drives through the empty streets, more and more people around the city turn their attention toward him, somehow, and three shimmery voids next to a very bloodthirsty Victoria Argent leave the Argent house.

"We're being followed," Stiles says. "Likely a bug stuck on the car, or they hacked into the city's CCTV cameras. Maybe both. Argent seniors are moving to intercept."

Allison is confused but holds back the reasonable "how on Earth do you know all that" question. Peter doesn't bother with the pointless confusion and just nods.

"Change of plans, then," he says calmly, but his eyes shine with red so intense, it would be almost blinding to look directly in them in the dark. The rage inside him sings and grows and swirls like a hurricane. "We fight."

"Not at the new apartment," Stiles says. "Too much risk of exposure and collateral damage. The Preserve?"

"The Preserve," Peter agrees.

Stiles takes a turn towards to woods that may be too far away to be visible to his human eyes right now but might as well be a neon sign for his magic. In fact, can it be said that wherever

Stiles' magic is, he himself is also present already? A question to mull over on a boring rainy day.

"You should call Derek," Stiles suggests. "Since you're pack again now, he might help."

"I texted him," Peter says, sliding his burner back into his pocket. "He may prove a useful distraction for Kate."

"Just a distraction? Not a fighter?" Stiles wonders.

Peter chuckles.

"He hates me enough that I fully expect him to try stabbing me in the back when he can. Even now I can feel his resentment through the bond. What I was and am counting on is that he hates Kate more. She killed more of our family than I did, after all, and violated him in the process to boot. So he will likely help with that before he makes his move."

Stiles digests that. He can confirm that Derek is indeed very resentful. Perhaps resentful enough to murder his own uncle and not consider how it makes him a big fat hypocrite, condemning Peter for killing family and then turning around and trying to do the exact same thing.

"I take it your new apartment doesn't have a bedroom for him, then," he says finally, going for a bit of levity.

"No," Peter agrees. "There's a bedroom for me, a bedroom for Allison and a bedroom for you. That's it."

"Me?" Stiles echoes, dumbfounded. "But... I'm not pack?"

Peter glances at him, the deafening rage quieting for a moment, and smirks.

"Yes, you, sweetheart. And if that's your only objection, then that can be easily rectified."

"I don't want the bite," Stiles says, a bit annoyed. Is Peter still hoping for that?

"And I don't want to give you one," Peter parries. "You're not human, you won't turn anyway. But a pack can include more kinds of beings than just werewolves."

Huh.

"Huh," Stiles says. "Ask me after tonight. If you ask nicely enough, I might consider thinking about it."

Peter's smirk widens. Behind it, behind the wall of rage and bloodlust, there's that disarming, fraught, fragile joy again. Stiles wants to cradle it with protective hands.

Stiles clears his throat.

“Back to business,” he says, because, apparently, flirt-discussing the possibility of being part of Peter’s pack is filed under “pleasure”. “We’ve got sixty-three flunkies rolling after us from all over town, and the Argents got their own car. I’ll drop the flunkies one by one when they’re in quiet corners so there’ll be less risk of patrols noticing them.”

“You’re going to kill sixty-three people?!” Allison squeaks from the back seat.

Stiles rolls his eyes. She has a lot to learn about living on the wrong side of the law.

“Of course not,” he says and ignores Peter’s exaggeratedly disappointed face. “So many bodies in one night? We won’t have the time to deal with them all, the media will have a field day, and everyone and their mother will descend on Beacon Hills. Every alphabet soup agency. Extra police. Hell, even conspiracy theory youtubers. The supernatural world doesn’t need that sort of scrutiny. No, I’ll just make sure they stop and can’t follow.”

“How?” Allison wants to know.

“Trade secret,” Stiles sing-songs. Allison in the rearview mirror looks like she wants to smack him on the back of his head.

As they move through the city, Stiles smoothly drops the flunkies into disinterest and apathy to get them to slow down and stop their cars, then floods them with contentment. That one will ensure they don’t move or call anybody or do anything at all.

“Okay, the flunkies are done,” he says distractedly as they start on the road that runs directly to the official Preserve entrance. It’s no strain to hold them but there’s something suspicious: Scott, nervous and worried, at Stiles’ house. And, despite the late hour on a weekday that has most people snoozing away already, Deaton is still up in his clinic. Waiting. For what?

“You haven’t even done anything,” Allison says, full of skepticism.

“Just because you didn’t see anything, doesn’t mean I didn’t do anything,” he retorts and wonders if Peter’s of the same opinion and asking himself right now if Stiles has made the flunkies up entirely.

“You’re a werewolf, Allison,” Peter says, his voice mildly reproachful. “Use your senses. What does Stiles smell like?”

“What do I smell like?” Stiles is curious. Does his magic smell like something?

Allison diligently inhales deeply, eyes closed for better concentration.

“Thunderstorm,” she says. “And that smell like after a rain... I think it has its own name...”

“Petrichor,” Peter says. “Good job.”

“Hold on,” Stiles protests. “How can I smell like petrichor? That’s a compound made up of flower oils and a bacterial by-product called geosmin, disturbed and diluted by water during a rain. It’s not even any one thing!”

“Well, you contain multitudes, don’t you, my bewitching blossom?” Peter inquires.

“Smartass,” Stiles mutters, grinning despite himself. Peter’s mirth is bright and sly.

“That’s what you smell like,” Allison says defensively. “You didn’t smell that way earlier today, you just smelled human. So... you really did do something. While driving and talking. With no one else even noticing you were doing it.”

“That’s what happens when Stiles unleashes his abilities,” Peter says.

Stiles considers the sixty-three people he’s got control over without breaking a sweat or even losing any concentration. He doesn’t think he’s unleashed them yet, to be honest. Not even close.

As if reading his mind, Peter asks:

“Are you alright to do anything else? That many people can’t be easy to deal with.”

Stiles smiles.

“Don’t worry about that,” he says, which serves to make Peter both intrigued and aroused. Honestly, man, time and place.

Stiles drums his fingers on the wheel as he watches Scott’s progress from the Stilinski house to the animal clinic. What the fuck is going on there? He wishes he had the time to call Scott and get the truth out of him.

“Why did Deaton come to warn you?” He asks.

Peter is a little nonplussed by the non-sequitur.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, were you two friends before the fire? Did his fuzzy feelings demand that he warn you off of little old me?”

“No,” Peter says slowly. “In fact, I despised him back then and always thought he loathed me.”

“So why did he do it? Did he hope to divide the two of us and conquer?”

“That’s plausible,” Peter allows. “You think he hates you enough to try and deprive you of any support?”

“I don’t know, man,” Stiles says honestly. “I’ve never done anything to him or his. We’ve barely even met.”

“He is afraid of you,” Peter points out. “Perhaps he hoped that you’d fed me the same story as you did Victoria, about being a regular nosy kid who wants to be a werewolf. Either I won’t stand for having the wool pulled over my eyes and working with someone more

powerful than me and quietly drop our partnership, or I confront you outright and you kill me. Either way would work in his favor.”

“Fucking scheming old stoner.” Stiles’ lips pull apart in a snarl.

“Are you going to kill him now?” Peter asks, genuinely interested.

“Scott is with him at the moment,” Stiles says, frustrated. “I don’t want to freak the dude out by having his boss drop dead in front of him. Might trigger an asthma attack. But later... I might get clear answers out of him first and see where that goes. Gotta say, right now it’s not looking good for him at all. It’s one strike to plot against me, another strike to plot against you, and a third one to get Scott involved in something he has no business being a part of. And Scott is definitely involved.”

“It might be a tall order to get any clear answers out of Deaton,” Peter remarks. “He thrives on being condescendingly vague.”

“Everyone talks to me very clearly,” Stiles promises.

He doesn’t even say it in any particularly threatening way, he doesn’t think, but Allison’s fear spikes anyway, and Peter’s hungry rage purrs.

So dramatic. Is that a werewolf thing?

They roll to a stop in the clearing in front of the blackened carcass of the Hale house. Peter gave Stiles the directions, and Stiles followed the old, unused dirt roads here, where it had all started.

“I—I don’t want to fight anyone,” Allison says, voice trembling slightly. “Especially not my family.”

“No one’s making you,” Stiles tells her. “If they weren’t on us tonight, you would even be far away from any fighting whatsoever. Just stay in the car. It’s reinforced, so no stray bullets will make it in, if there are any.”

She doesn’t feel very reassured but nods. Stiles and Peter get out of the car.

“Derek is almost here,” Stiles says. “The Argents are close behind him. And Deaton is taking Scott this way.”

“Everybody, enter stage right,” Peter says.

“I’ll drop Victoria when they stop their car,” Stiles warns. “Hopefully it’ll unsettle them. Be careful with the other three. They are protected, so I can’t work on them directly.”

“What does that protection look like?” Peter asks.

“Are you asking because you might like to keep something like that in your own back pocket?”

“I want you to be pack, Stiles.” Peter turns his gleaming red eyes to Stiles, and the moment feels important somehow, heavy with unsaid meaning, because for once Peter didn’t use an endearment. “Do you think I’m not loyal to pack?”

“That’s not a no,” Stiles notes. “Besides, I’m not pack yet. Just a random guy with some bizarre powers.”

“Sweetheart,” Peter says, and his appreciation has an obsessive note to it, sharp as glass and dazzlingly spicy. “You could never be just a random guy if you tried.”

Stiles raises his hand to Peter’s cheek, stroking the tender skin that used to be covered in scars. Peter turns into the movement, nostrils flaring, and his desire spikes. Stiles’ own rises in return, heightened by the fact that they are a minute away from a lethal confrontation.

Maybe they are both fucking perverts. A well-matched pair.

“I’ve done right by you so far,” Stiles says. “And you came when I called.”

“All true points, dear heart.”

No one ever came to help Stiles. He never even had anyone to call before. Peter seems eager to be that for him, despite knowing Stiles for less than a week.

“It’s a small metal thing, about the size of a watch face,” Stiles says, voice pitched extremely low to ensure that Allison can’t hear him from Roscoe. This is for Peter’s ears only. “Irregular shape. Decorated with a wolf silhouette relief. At least that’s what Victoria’s looked like. The metal is nothing special, and it loses power when broken.”

Peter nods, and inside him there’s that same victorious joy Stiles sensed when he called Peter for help, trilling and preening like a peacock. Is that Peter happy to be trusted by Stiles?

“Then I’ll keep an eye out for some bits of metal to tear apart,” Peter says.

Stiles thinks of kissing him here and now—and wouldn’t it be one hell of a first kiss, truly epic due to the circumstances alone—but he doubts it’ll be easy to stop and he doesn’t want either of them to sport a hard-on when the Argents show up.

He settles for pulling Peter close for a quick cheek rub, which is all they have time for before Derek jogs over.

He comes into the clearing grumpier than ever and ruffled after roughing it at an abandoned subway station the night before. He stares at them with anger, resentment and frustration.

“Good timing, Derek,” Peter says cheerfully. “The woman who burned most of your family will soon be here.”

The words do nothing but add some fuel to the flame of Derek’s anger.

“Hi,” Stiles waggles his fingers in greeting. “I do believe we’ve met.”

Derek is wary of him.

“How did you get away when she took you?” He asks. No “Hi, Stiles”. Rude.

“What is it with werewolves being so keen on finding out all my secrets?” Stiles wonders. “Is that because you guys are naturally nosy?”

Derek scowls. He’s got the eyebrows for that, Stiles has to hand him that.

He’s not feeling very charitable towards Derek, to be honest. Sure, he was a traumatized teenager; most of his family had just died a horrific death and he’d been taken advantage of by a piece of slime pretending to be a human being. Still, it has been six long years, and one would think Derek would have managed at least a phone call or two to ask after the health of his abandoned uncle if he were so inclined.

Stiles has opinions on disloyalty and being spineless. Maybe he got lucky in the sense that he has the power to back up doing what he wants and standing up for what he thinks is right, but honestly, Stiles would have probably been the same regardless, or at least he likes to think so. Besides, it’s not like treating Peter better than last week’s trash would have required anything from Derek besides basic decency.

It is because of this uncharitable feeling that Stiles doesn’t warn Derek not to even think about backstabbing Peter or else, if Stiles has anything to say about it at all, regret this fresh betrayal a whole lot. The petty part of Stiles wants Derek to dig his own grave.

Three shimmery voids and Victoria Argent step out of their own car a few minutes’ walk away.

“Move a little,” Stiles says. “You’re standing with your back to where the hunters will come in. How much wolfsbane do you think they’ve put in their bullets for tonight’s party?”

Derek heeds the advice, not feeling grateful for it. Stiles drains everything from Victoria and gives her confusion instead. The other three mull around her a little, doubtlessly alarmed by how she doesn’t seem to be able to put two words together or do anything besides shuffle in place awkwardly and look lost. Eventually they move her a bit, likely stuffing her back into the car for safekeeping, and then they head straight over to the Hale house. Definitely a bug on Roscoe. Stiles will have to look into runes against that, if there are any.

Peter’s head jerks up when he hears them coming, and Derek’s too, half a second later. They don’t try to circle the clearing and ambush them, recognizing that it’s a lost cause against werewolf senses on a ground they didn’t choose and prepare. They march in exactly where Stiles predicted they would, Kate at the head of their little procession, grinning brightly like she’s meeting up with old friends. Christopher is behind her on the left, face thunderous and a gun in each hand, and there’s an old man behind her on the right. Stiles has never seen him before but that must be the infamous Gerard.

Stiles wills mountain ash to crawl out of his pocket out of sight. He doesn’t have much with him, not having counted on a fight, but he tells it to slither over to the hunters and find and recruit its brethren, then stay nearby and be ready for action. If a free supply has come his

way, why not? His rune-engraved bracelet is on his wrist, slipped on during the drive over; the runes he used to break into the Argent house are still woefully undercharged, but he has a couple of others that may or may not prove useful.

He's a bit frustrated by this situation, to be honest. He's stifled by the fact that he and his allies are not planning to kill everybody present and also by the allies themselves. Peter is one thing, but Stiles absolutely wants Derek and Allison to be privy to as few of his secrets as possible, so he's going to have to hold back.

The presence of those protections makes him profoundly uncomfortable. Were he a shifter, he'd be stuck in his shift right now, growling and showing fangs. As it is, he contemplates using mountain ash to choke all three of them and search their unconscious bodies for those nasty talisman things, and he probably would have done that already if there weren't any witnesses.

Well, he could drop Peter, Derek and Allison into any number of feelings that would make them oblivious to the world and do as he liked, but that's a shitty thing to do to people who are not actually his enemies, so Stiles won't do it.

(It's a slippery, slippery slope. Stiles does his best to teeter on the edge.)

He looks at the hunters; his human eyes are painfully inadequate for a real good look, but he thinks he notices where they conceal some of the extra guns and knives they have.

“What a party, boys!” Kate chirps. There's an unholy glee in her voice. “We aren't late, are we? Peter, looking good, wow, I almost can't tell you were a Sunday roast a while back! And Derek, sweetie, my, how you've grown!”

She winks at Derek. Derek's anger and violent intent hit the roof, and he lunges at her.

Guns go up, and Stiles is slow, slow, slow, he cannot feel their intent before it makes its way into their hands, and Kate almost gets a shot in, shredding Derek's jacket on his side as she dodges. It doesn't stop him, though: he hits the place where she just was, rolls to his feet and leaps again.

Okay. Okay. Time to get to work, limitations or not.

Stiles sends a wailing, panicked fear towards a herd of drowsy deer, several prowling coyotes, three foxes, a mountain lion and a whole lot of birds huddled in nearby trees. Not all of the spooked animals come this way, but the sheer ear-splitting noise distracts Christopher and Gerard, and a few stampeding deer kick Kate off her feet and make her drop her weapon while Peter and Derek have enough speed and agility to dodge.

A loop of mountain ash catches Christopher by the ankle, making him stumble; his shot goes wide, pinging off Roscoe and ricocheting into the woods. Another handful rises behind Gerard, carrying some dirt, and slaps it in his eyes. Gerard barks out a swear, one hand automatically going up to rub it away.

Peter waits for a few moments, his anticipation looming, savoring, letting Derek attack Kate with mindless, abandoned violence, and then tips over into the fiery inferno of his rage and throws himself at Kate's back.

Allison screams from the car, high and reedy, terrified by the reality of a fight to the death, by the bullet her own father shot unknowingly in her direction. Stiles can feel her torn between the loyalty to her family and the knowledge that they are unrepentant killers of what is now her kind, two different fears, tinged heavily with grief.

Stiles still stands where he was, heart beating like crazy, spurred on by the adrenaline and the sheer frustration of the shimmery voids. He hates fighting like this. Up until now, his least favorite opponent ever have been the vetalas and their immunity to his magic while they possessed a corpse, but now the Argents are firmly in the top spot.

Christopher is the one to notice the scream. He peers at Roscoe across the clearing, fight forgotten momentarily in favor of the hope written on his face. And, of course, Allison has her face pressed to the car window. The moon is bright, it's almost full, and it's enough for Christopher to recognize her.

"Allison!" He rushes towards her across the clearing, eyes only for his daughter.

Stiles steps to the side at just the right moment and trips him. He also makes sure to throw more dirt into Gerard's face and have some mountain ash go up his nose and vibrate until Gerard is out of commission, sneezing without stopping, tears streaming down his face.

Christopher goes down with an "oomph" and reacts immediately, throwing himself to the side and up to his feet again. His guns are trained on Stiles at once, and Stiles knew they would be, so just as Christopher finishes the movement, a thin loop of mountain ash wraps across his throat and tightens.

Christopher wheezes, trying to inhale; he drops one gun and claws at the garrote on his neck, and if Stiles weren't actively controlling it, he'd probably succeed in breaking it. Allison in the car has gone numb with fear.

"Shh, Mr. Argent," Stiles says, loosening the loop a little. "I don't want to kill you. If you do me one teensy, itty-bitty favor, I won't even stop you from reuniting with your daughter."

"And what... is the favor?" Christopher's bloodshot eyes would be scary if Stiles hasn't seen worse by now.

Interestingly, Christopher Argent doesn't have a reputation nearly as bad as his father, or his sister, or his wife. He is a hunter, and he's no saint by any definition of the word, but nothing Stiles has ever heard about the man through the supernatural gossip grapevine has led him to believe he was as psychotic. Either the man hides it very well, or... well, Allison had to learn how to be a decent person from someone in her family, and the list of candidates is really very short.

Stiles contemplates Christopher's person. He is not wearing any jewelry, not unless it's some sort of piercing hidden under his clothes or a more exotic thing like an ankle bracelet, but,

honestly, Christopher doesn't seem the type based on the way he looks otherwise.

He does wear a watch, wide and thick. And Stiles did mention to Peter the thing was watch-face-sized.

"Take off your watch," Stiles says.

Christopher looks at him sharply. It should be a simple request, if a strange one.

He knows, Stiles realizes. He knows what the thing is and why Stiles wants it.

"If you don't, I will choke you until you are unconscious and take it off you anyway," Stiles says. "With the exclusion of Allison, you seem to be the sanest one among the psycho killers that comprise your family, so believe it or not, I'm not chomping at the bit to hurt you. If your sister didn't burn Peter's family alive, you would likely never even have known I exist, much less be in a situation where I'm about to do you harm."

At the mention of the Hale fire Christopher looks like Stiles backhanded him across the face. Didn't he know? Perhaps that particular notch on Kate's belt was not something she shared with her big bro over a Christmas dinner.

"Take off your watch, Christopher," Stiles says. "Show me the other side. Move it a tad so you won't graze me, then shoot the thing through. And then I will let you go to Allison."

Christopher hesitates.

"How do I know you won't kill me the moment you can?" He rasps.

Stiles rolls his eyes. Behind him, the battle rages on. Peter and Derek are still alive and kicking and aren't even in that much pain. Good.

"I can kill you right now, and you're still alive, aren't you?" The impatience is like acid eating away at him. Stiles drains some of it away. "And your wife has not kicked the bucket yet."

Christopher narrows his eyes at Stiles.

"You could've tried to make me take it off by threatening Vicky's life," he says. "But you offered access to Allison instead."

"Dude, I don't know what flavor Kool-Aid they had you drink in hunter school, but sometimes things that go bump in the night are just going about their business and don't give a flying fuck about hunting humans or some other idiot shit like that," Stiles snaps. He drains more impatience away which works much better than taking deep breaths or whatever bullshit self-help books advise to do. "Now, are you taking off the watch, or am I taking it off of you?"

Stiles regrets that his first damnable impulse is always to try talking. It's how he handled things before, but right now is different from helping a lost yeti find her way into the mountains or getting a depressed gargoyle to agree to move to a big city and risk looking for

love again. This is a fucking battle. He should have just choked Christopher into unconsciousness and gotten shit done.

Christopher takes off his watch, and oh, *oh*, the awareness of him rushing in full-tilt where the void has been.

Turns it around so Stiles can see the funny-shaped bit of metal, the wolf relief on it barely discernible in the moonlight.

Moves his arm to the side, carefully and slowly.

Puts the muzzle of his gun right up to it.

The gunshot is uncommonly loud, and only when Stiles' right leg gives under him, he realizes there were two guns fired at the same time.

White-hot pain spreads through his thigh, and he drains the associated shock and desperation as swiftly as he can, twisting and rolling away. Gerard is staring at him hatefully, eyes squinting and dirty, and it's likely only because Gerard can't see very well right now that Stiles has been shot in a leg instead of in the head.

"Let me go now!" Christopher barks, feeling entirely unconcerned with Stiles' wound. "I did what you asked for!"

"Fucking go!" Stiles yells back, calling back the mountain ash with a thought.

Christopher loses no time in sprinting across the clearing, calling out to Allison, and she jumps out of the car to meet him, buoyed by seeing her dad and having, from the looks of it, completely forgotten about how it might not be conducive to her health to be around him anymore.

Whatever. Stiles should take care of his own health first.

Mountain ash rises through the grass, flowing into Gerard's mouth and nose and eyes like a string of very tiny angry bees. There's no clawing it out, but Gerard does his best to try anyway. Stiles gets up, gritting his teeth against the shock of pain, and hobbles over to Gerard.

He should try the watch first, too, wrists seem to be a theme. He tries to catch Gerard's hand, yet again too impatient to wait until the lack of air will knock the man out, but Gerard is strong, despite being a geriatric, and he fends Stiles' attempts off.

Fucking fine.

He taps his most fanciful rune. He calls it Medusa, even though that's inaccurate like ten times over. After he activates it, anyone and anything he touches stops for ten minutes. He could probably stop a speeding car with it... although that would throw the driver right through the windshield, so he won't try that without a real need. He came up with it after it turned out that the shambling zombie stereotype was just that, an unfair stereotype, and that a vetala possessing a corpse can in fact run as fast as Roscoe if the idea strikes its fancy.

It was surprisingly difficult to get this one done. All of his runes are, strictly speaking, not single runes but interconnected clusters; Medusa is the biggest one, sprawling over half the bracelet, and it took Stiles five months to get it right. Runework is very rigid and blunt, he has learned. It's much easier to do an instant kill rune than one that stops a living being for a little while without harm.

The shaped power rushes into him, and he slaps Gerard in the face. Strictly speaking, any touch would do, but Gerard fucking shot him.

Gerard freezes mid-movement. The Medusa effect is absolute; it leaves alone the autonomous functions like heartbeat and breathing, but it doesn't allow for any thrashing or flailing, and so Gerard can't even try to cough up the mountain ash anymore. It must be terrifying.

Couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow, Stiles thinks, sparing a glance towards his leg. Doesn't look like anything vital got hit, just the meat, in and out.

He diverts his attention to Gerard's watch, and now nothing stops him from clawing it off Gerard's wrist.

It's there. The revolting, disgusting thing that is the antithesis of Stiles, it's hidden behind the watch face, and the awareness of Gerard is a heady relief, even though Gerard's emotions are... weird. Stiles picks through them, confused—has a long exposure to the protection warped something permanently, granted him an imprint of itself?—but there's no resistance, as usual. It's just that some things are heightened to an unnatural degree, like arrogance and thirst for violence, and others are muted or even absent, like love. Stiles would expect to find Gerard's love for his family down at the bedrock of him, but there's nothing. Nothing golden or warm at all.

Oh, Stiles realizes. Gerard's a legit psychopath.

That makes a whole lot of sense.

The conundrum solved, Stiles plucks the gun from Gerard's rigid fingers and, making sure to hold the watch by the strap, puts two bullets through the thing.

Three down, one to go.

He looks over to the side where Peter and Derek are still engaged with the last shimmery void. She looks to be in a rough shape, deep claw marks gauged into her chest, left arm and right side, blood flowing freely. Peter and Derek are shifted, circling her and growling as she keep a small gun trained on each of them. There are no watches or bracelets on her, not that he can see, but there is a thin necklace chain on her neck, sparkling in the moonlight, that hides its pendant under her clothes.

Christopher and Allison are watching in horror, and there's a growing violent intent in Christopher. Nope, dude, your sister's gonna have to lie in the bed she made, and you don't get to rescue her.

Stiles drains the violence from Christopher and, after a second's hesitation, gives him some shame and remorse instead. To his surprise, they take like they belonged there all along, and Christopher turns away, hugging Allison to himself and pressing her face into his chest so she wouldn't see.

"But Dad," she protests, sounding much younger than she is, "they are gonna... she's gonna..."

"I always suspected," Christopher says, and it feels like the sack his sadness was stuffed into has ripped and now it's all tumbling out at once. "I never knew, but I thought it was a strange coincidence. Kate would go on an assignment, and a pack would be wiped out. Usually in their sleep. Then she would show up back home immediately after, all happy with herself and secretive about where she'd been and what she'd done, and bring you a little souvenir from the exact city where the pack used to live. Do you remember that fridge magnet with the picture of a lake in the woods, from six years ago? The one that said "Beacon Hills, CA" at the bottom?"

Allison reels back, as if hit.

"She... She's been killing people for so long? And she's been bringing me... *trophies*? Like... like a serial killer?"

"I'm so sorry, baby girl," Christopher says and hugs her again.

Argent family drama. Stiles feels like there's not enough money in the world to pay him to get involved in that.

He draws the line at having been dunked into the middle of the *Hale* family drama, and that is only because Peter gives amazing cuddles.

Even lost in his rage as he is, Peter is still the more cautious Hale, and Derek is the one to break the standoff, snarling as he flies at her. The moment both her guns shift towards Derek, Peter is also in motion, his black-furred bulk blurring against the grass. She twists to avoid both of them and shoots, but the blood loss must have made her slow because Peter's enormous jaws close over her knee and crush it with a crunch.

Allison must find the sound sickening because a horrified revulsion shudders through her. Stiles doesn't even remember when he last felt that queasy about someone getting injured in his vicinity.

He gets up again, grimacing at the pain. It's hard to think when it hurts so much, but he's a stubborn little shit, always has been, so he walks around the edge of the clearing, leaning on trees to take his weight off the hurt leg for a second here and there. That thin chain. It must lead to the protection thing. It has to. Stiles needs to get close and make sure it's destroyed. It's the last one.

He's so tunnel-visioned that Scott's voice catches him... well, not unawares, exactly, but it certainly startles him a little bit. He tuned out Deaton and Scott during his conversation with Christopher and never got around to paying attention to them again.

“Stiles!”

Stiles turns around. He kind of hoped everything would be over by the time Deaton managed to drag Scott here, but, apparently, a mild-mannered vet is not above speeding at night, with a kid whose mom was definitely not consulted about this road trip in his car.

“Scott, what the hell are you doing here?” He asks.

Deaton is behind Scott, taking in the carnage, and he feels still as unflappable and calm as ever. That can't be right, Stiles knows, he knows emotions, and he plunges through the layers of Deaton's calm. They part, and underneath, stifled and hidden, there's fear, and anger, and satisfied self-importance, all musty and stale, because they have not been allowed to see the light of day for so long, not where Stiles could sense them right off, get intrigued by them.

The scent of Deaton's herbs is so strong, Stiles smells them with his human nose all the way from where he's standing.

Scott is overwhelmed and scared by the chaos in front of him, but then he zeroes in on Stiles, and there's that determination again.

“Stiles! You're hurt! We've got to get you outta here!”

Yeah, not happening. Stiles is not walking away from the last protection thing until it's destroyed as well.

“Scott, go home,” Stiles says, gently slapping away Scott's hands trying to press against the wound. It's not bleeding nearly enough to need field staunching. “Your boss is a shady fuck, and whatever he told you, forget all of that. You can take Roscoe, just go.”

“Man, are you nuts?” Scott is looking at him like Stiles is speaking gibberish. “I'm not leaving you here! Come on, let's go.”

He tugs Stiles' sleeve. Stiles doesn't budge.

“Scott,” Stiles says, patiently, because this is his best friend and the sweetest guy on the planet, and he deserves consideration even when they are in the middle of a shitshow. “I need to stay. I'll be fine, I promise.”

“Dr. Deaton told me,” Scott blurts out, eyes nervously scanning the trees behind Stiles. “That guy, Peter Hale, he's dangerous, and I know he's got you helping him under duress...”

“Duress?” Stiles corrects, trying not to laugh.

“Yeah, dude, that one, but listen, it doesn't matter, I promise. You don't have to help him, no matter what he said or, or threatened. It's gonna be okay. Come with me, alright? It's... it's scary here, something crazy is happening here, shit, look, there's an animal mauling that woman—”

“Scott,” Deaton says, mildly chiding.

Scott glances back at Deaton guiltily and returns his attention to Stiles.

“Come on, man,” Scott pleads. He’s wheezing a little, a surefire sign of an impending asthma attack. “Let’s go. Please.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Stiles says. “You’re about to have an asthma attack, man. Use your inhaler and go home. I’ll text you as soon as I can, I promise.”

He’s about to reinforce the suggestion with a judicious application of magic when Scott fills with sorrowful determination, nods and puts his hand in his pocket. Going for his inhaler, then, just as Stiles advised.

Stiles feels a bit of tension flow out of his shoulders, and then—

A shimmering void blinks into existence.

Right where Scott used to be, with the worry, and the warmth, and the kindness, and the goofy optimism, and the friendly affection.

Stiles gasps out loud—Scott feels taken from him, torn away like a limb, even though he’s standing *right here*—eyes widening in shock, he can’t do anything but gape as Scott flings his hand out of his pocket, something metallic glinting between his fingers, and slaps the side of Stiles’ neck.

There’s a burst of pain, as if something sharp punctures his skin, and a cool touch of metal, and Stiles’ magic is...

Gone.

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Chapter 8: Can You Give Me A Name?

The wrongness is impossible to ignore. Peter feels it shudder the world in invisible and omnipresent ways, as if the constant of the gravity of Earth suddenly changed.

Stiles.

Peter knows it's about Stiles before knowing anything else, because he is now bereft of a presence he hadn't known was there, a cloak upon his shoulders that slipped and exposed him to harsh winds, and that presence, he belatedly recognizes, was Stiles. Even Derek stills where he's been mindlessly tearing the throat out of the dead Kate, slowing claws scratching across her exposed vertebrae.

He whirls around, a howl on his lips. Stiles is lying on the ground, limbs bent at awkward angles, twitching like he's being electrocuted, eyes closed. Deaton and a boy Peter doesn't know stand over him, and there's a metallic glint at Stiles' neck that wasn't there before.

He leaps forward without thinking. Deaton throws a hand in his direction, and Peter slams into a rounded invisible barrier. Mountain ash.

"Calm yourself, Peter," Deaton says, and Peter has never wanted to kill him more. "This is for the best. The balance will be restored now."

"Peter?" The boy next to Deaton gapes. "That's... Peter Hale?! Dr. Deaton, that's, uhm, a bear or something!"

Peter throws himself at the barrier; his bones snap in the process and start knitting together immediately. It pulses and flashes with magical light but doesn't give. He needs to get to Stiles. He has to.

"It's alright, Scott," Deaton tells the boy. "I will explain everything later."

Scott. The best friend. Turned traitor, from what Peter can see.

Scott chews his lower lip nervously.

"Are, are you sure this is okay? You said this would help... but Stiles isn't looking so hot. Dr. Deaton, I think he needs to go to the hospital."

Peter shifts into his human form. Scott squeaks and flinches away so hard that he falls on his ass.

"Stiles is dying!" Peter snarls. Mountain ash doesn't stop scents, and Stiles smells like he's drowning in a sea of pain. "Get that thing out of his neck! Fast!"

"What?!" Scott turns his earnest, worried eyes at Deaton. "Dr. Deaton, what is he saying?"

“Peter is an accomplished liar, I’m afraid,” Deaton says. “He’s trying to scare you so he can regain control over Stiles.”

Scott turns back to Peter, getting up and dusting himself off. He has audacity enough to look betrayed at the perceived lie.

“No one can control Stiles, you moron!” Peter snaps.

“Therein lies the problem, doesn’t it?” Deaton agrees.

Scott’s forehead wrinkles.

“Dr. Deaton, what do you mean?”

Peter loses interest in the idiot. Clearly, no help is coming from that corner.

Some foaming saliva bubbles up from Stiles’ mouth and starts dripping down his cheek.

Peter yanks on his two packbonds.

“Help Stiles,” he says, and his voice echoes across the clearing with alpha authority. It booms for long seconds, quieting and renewing in strength, as if the forest itself picked it up and decided to spread the message. Help Stiles. Help Stiles.

The Argent girl makes to move forward, and her father tightens his arms around her. Derek, still more wolf than anything, obeys without hesitation and gets himself stuck in his own mountain ash circle. The trees around the clearing rustle in a sudden gust of wind.

“What is happening?” The girl asks. Peter can feel the longing to follow his lead in her packbond, but it’s also ingrained in her to do what her father says, and she has been ever so good at controlling her wolf side so far. “Scott, what did you do to Stiles?”

“Allison!” Scott brightens, his dying best friend clearly forgotten. “You’re alright! I’m so glad!”

He makes to run towards her but Christopher’s dark glower stops him in his tracks.

“Allison,” Peter says, and he’s pleading this time. He has nothing left except to rely on the goodwill of a girl he kidnapped and bit against her will. “The thing in Stiles’ neck is cutting off his access to his magic. His magic is such an intrinsic part of him that it’s killing him. Quickly. If you don’t help him, he will die in minutes. The boy who brought you homework, braided your hair, shared his Reese’s with you. The boy who told you the truth. Who stood up to me for you. He will die. Right now.”

She stares at him with wide eyes for a moment. Then she looks at Stiles. The wind picks up a few dry leaves and lands one on Stiles’ face.

There’s a long, long pause until Stiles’ breath blows it away. Much longer than there should be.

Allison shakes off her father's arms and sprints towards Stiles.

Deaton surges to intercept and catches her by the arm, not knowing that she's a werewolf too. She turns a snarl at him and pushes him away with enough strength that he flies into a tree with a thud. As he tries to get up, grunting in pain, a tree branch bends fluidly and whips him across the face, drawing blood.

That is not normal tree behavior but Peter has no mind to spare for that. He's pressing against the barrier and watching Allison push away Scott, slightly more gently, and throw herself across the remaining distance to land on her knees beside Stiles.

Suddenly, the barrier disappears, and he falls forward with nothing to support him. He scrambles to turn around, and Christopher Argent is standing over him. An irregularly shaped pendant decorated with a wolf relief is dangling from the blood-stained metal chain wrapped around Christopher's fingers.

"This is the last one," Christopher tells him. "Five amulets for five points of a star. A star to outshine the Spark."

These words hold significance, but Peter will process them another time. For now, he grabs the thing and tears it in half. It goes easy, like softened butter.

Half a heartbeat later, just as Peter twists back around to look, Allison tears the actual last one out of Stiles' neck and rips it in half, too.

Peter feels the pressure pop, almost painful in his ears. Stiles arches off the ground, sucking in a tortured breath. His presence, previously unnoticeable until Peter lost it, crushes in like a tidal wave.

It's magic, pure and unstoppable and roaring in betrayed fury. The steady wind in the clearing picks up until it's almost up to tornado speeds; it's scouring Peter's skin, throwing around loose branches and guns, making clothes flap loud like thunder. Peter's emotions flicker and glitch like an old TV, a dizzying kaleidoscope of fury-sadness-joy-desire-disgust-annoyance-pity-contentment-curiosity-confusion-fear-wariness-happiness-malice-mirth, until he no longer knows what he's feeling and is ready to curl up in a fetal position and beg for someone to kill him to make it stop.

He doesn't do that. He walks through the wind instead, digging his feet deep into the loamy soil to make sure he won't be thrown aside, and gets to Stiles who still hasn't even tried to sit up. His eyes are open now and staring into the dark sky, unseeing.

"Stiles," Peter says. His voice is immediately lost to the howling wind. He crouches over Stiles, lips close to his ear. "Stiles, sweetheart. You're okay. You're alright. You can stop."

He buries a hand in Stiles' hair and strokes the sweat-soaked tufts; the hurricane of emotions slows and stops. A wave of sly amusement hits him, then a wave of sexual desire so strong that it leaves Peter dizzy and rock hard, then a wave of fond exasperation that has him rolling his eyes at he doesn't know what, and the last one—of dark, wary trust.

He drains Stiles' pain. It flows into him like a river, blindingly sharp before it dissipates.

Stiles' eyes turn to him. They are still glazed over, but Peter counts the tiny movement as the first win.

“Darling?” He calls.

Stiles doesn't answer. He feels feverishly hot under Peter's hands.

“Stiles?” Scott's voice can barely be heard in the hurricane. The unbearable moron crawls up to Stiles. “Is that you doing this somehow? Can you stop?”

He touches Stiles' hand, and before Peter can rip the traitor's limb out of its socket, Stiles jolts and sits up. His unseeing eyes find Scott, and Scott whimpers in fear.

There's nothing to be so suddenly afraid of, and yet Scott's terror is ramping up and up. His heartbeat is insane. In a very short while his heart will give out.

Peter is sorely tempted to let Stiles finish the job, but he suspects Stiles will regret killing the contemptible disloyal idiot when he returns to his right mind. With a sigh, Peter cups Stiles' cheeks in his hands and turns that pale, drawn, beautiful face towards himself.

“Dear heart, please, stop,” he says. “He deserves to die for betraying you, I agree, but you should kill him when you're fully aware of what you're doing.”

As far as convincing arguments go, this one is pretty lukewarm, but something—Peter suspects that would be the emotion behind the words—gets through. Stiles whines, a helpless, lost sound, and Scott's heartbeat slows until it's no longer loud enough to be heard through the wind.

Peter feels like he's holding a nexus of earth-shaking power between his palms. Perhaps that's because he is.

“It's calling,” Stiles whispers.

“What is, sweetheart?” Peter jumps at this sign of returning awareness. “What's calling you?”

Stiles doesn't answer, and Peter tries not to consider it a setback. Perhaps Stiles doesn't know what it is. Moon knows there are too many creatures and beings out there for any bestiary to list.

He tries a different tack.

“Why is it calling you, darling? What's it saying?”

Stiles tilts his head back, opens his mouth and screams.

It's not a scream that Peter would have thought human vocal chords can produce. It's not even an animal screech or howl. It's a wave of power so thick that Peter can see it coming out from between Stiles' lips like a faint haze, splashing across the forest and sky, and it's also a

scream about decay, about corruption, about slow inevitable withering, about being killed in the slowest, cruelest way possible.

Every hair on Peter's body stands on end, and he's honestly not sure if this primal, unfathomable scream will kill him simply by virtue of being in its proximity. However, when Stiles stops screaming, Peter is not hurt in any way.

Stiles lowers his head again, and his eyes are no longer absent of any mind behind them; but they are not clear either. They are shining with frantic fervor, and his pupils are blown so much that the warm brown of his irises is just a thin ring. There's something in the depths of those pupils. Something moving in the darkness, something thin and long and rigid.

Like tree branches.

"The void won't let it heal," Stiles whispers, and Peter has to strain his hearing to make the words out. "Peter, ah, Peter, I hate voids. They need to *go*. I need—I—it's calling—begging—I—"

All of a sudden, his scent is flooded with determination and adrenaline, so thick that the wind becomes drenched in it instead of carrying it away. Stiles shakes off Peter's unresisting hands (Peter has no interest in losing a limb right now, thank you) and gets up.

Peter is at a loss for words. He remembers how physically weak Stiles was after getting rid of Victoria Argent's protection amulet, after what Peter assumes was a much briefer contact. Even with the pain drain, Stiles should not be able to stand on his own two feet so soon, without any rest, or food, or water.

Leave it to Stiles to subvert Peter's every expectation.

Stiles turns around without another word and starts running deeper into the woods. With every step he takes the wind around the Hale house slows down a bit.

Peter's "what the actual, ever-loving fuck" moment is just that, a moment. He scrambles to his feet to follow and stops mid-step, remembering suddenly that he has pack to take care of.

He will not be the kind of alpha who ignores the members of his pack he doesn't like. He will not be neglectful, ungrateful, callous. He will not abandon a beta in need.

He will not be Talia. He will not be *Laura*.

He turns to Allison who is sitting on the ground, looking shell-shocked by the recent events; her bond is chock-full of confusion, fear and worry. He comes over to her, crouching by her side, and puts a hand on the back of her neck.

The reaction is instinctive: she tilts her head, baring her throat, and her eyes flash gold. Peter sends her reassurance, comfort, affection, protectiveness through the bond—*well done, you helped Stiles, you did such a good job*—and receives back the elation of a loyal beta, guileless and pure like a puppy—*alpha happy, alpha proud, alpha here*.

The interaction with Allison's wolf side helps her calm down. Peter leans in close to make sure she can hear him, and no one else.

"Number 6, Cypress Boulevard, apartment 503," he says. This is not the address of the apartment he rented from a shifty-eyed young man in Beacon Hills biggest estate agency under his least favorite fake name. This is the apartment he rented online under a different name, the one the hunters would have found out about, had they been able to follow Stiles' Jeep there tonight. As it stands, it's still secure. "I have to make sure Stiles is okay, and it might be too dangerous for you to come with me. Take Stiles' Jeep and ditch it halfway, it's still bugged. I don't have the keys to give you right now, the wind threw them somewhere, but just break the lock carefully or take the fire escape and break the window. It's safe. Don't go with your parents tonight, they may... overreact."

Sorrow comes through the bond as Allison nods. Peter sends more reassurance back.

"I don't know the town," she says. "I don't know where the street is."

Right. She moved here a few days ago and spent a big chunk of that time in a basement.

Peter turns his head and calls out:

"Derek!"

Derek has been standing in one place, lost and drifting beta shift put away. His mountain ash circle was destroyed as the wind tore apart the grass and the soil, but Derek hasn't moved. Peter's voice returns him to conscious thought.

Peter flicks Derek's flimsy packbond. It's pulsing with unmoored apathy.

"Come here," Peter says. Derek comes over, mostly, Peter suspects, because he doesn't know what else to do with himself.

Peter tugs him down, to crouch next to himself and Allison.

"Listen carefully, Derek," Peter says. His alpha voice vibrates low in his throat. "Allison is a werewolf with hunter parents. She needs to get to my new apartment where it is safe. Show her the way. Help her ditch the car in a convenient spot and remember where it is." Stiles would be royally pissed if they managed to lose his Jeep. "Protect her. She is pack. Do you understand?"

Derek looks at Allison. She smiles at him, cheeks dimpling, nervous but hopeful.

"I understand," Derek says. He feels through the bond like he's glad to be given a task so he doesn't have to be alone with himself. "I won't let anyone hurt you," he promises Allison, and his heart doesn't trip.

"Good. Now go, both of you. The car keys are in the ignition. Be careful."

Derek takes Allison's hand, helping her to her feet, and they tear across the clearing to the Jeep. Peter watches their backs, ready to intervene if Christopher Argent takes offense to the

plan, but the latter stands frozen, pale, wide-eyed, staring at his daughter who just flashed golden werewolf eyes.

The car revs to life, and they are off. Peter shifts into his alpha form and takes off after Stiles.

* * *

It should be easy for Peter to catch up to someone running at human speed, not matter the few minutes of head start. The scent is thick and distinctive, that unnatural determination and fresh blood coming from the wounds on Stiles' leg and neck, and even without the scent Peter can still see the blue and white plaid shirt between the trees, easy to discern in the moonlight.

And yet, the moment Peter gets going, the forest itself starts doing its absolute best to delay him. Ferocious wind is blowing directly at Peter, throwing all manner of debris in his face; branches catch at his limbs and try to loop around his neck; whole trees lean into his path, creaking and groaning, and Peter has to break and claw them apart to continue.

He doubts Stiles is doing that.

He fights his way through the recalcitrant greenery, clenches his muscles against the wind, and follows Stiles. He's too busy trying to keep moving to note their path, so when Stiles slows down and Peter—one fang chipped, dozens of fresh scratches dripping blood, an eye swollen, one leg broken, the werewolf healing overclocking—finally, finally gets close to him, it comes as a surprise that they are in a clearing with an enormous tree stump and not much else.

The Nemeton.

Peter stares at it. He has been here a couple of times, out of academic curiosity. The tree was cut down long before his time, and it was a commonly known truth that the Nemeton was dead. After all, it's not like it grew back.

Not quite fully dead yet, it looks like.

Here there's no hurricane wind. The clearing is quiet, and the tree stump isn't doing anything that would distinguish it from any other stump. Peter can't feel any of its fabled power of old, just like he never felt it before, but Stiles is looking at it like they are having a conversation. Can magical trees speak... telepathically?

Peter wishes he'd had more time to study obscure myths while he had the chance.

"I'm here," Stiles says. "It's gonna be alright, I'm here."

He still doesn't sound and look entirely like himself. Peter shifts into his human form so he'll be able to talk.

"Stiles," he calls. "Darling, what are we doing here, exactly?"

Stiles looks over, unsurprised to see Peter.

“I’m going to help it,” he says. “It’s weak. It’s dying.”

“That’s an admirable cause,” Peter says, looking askance at the stump. It’s definitely not a lucky coincidence that the damnable magic tree picked right now to approach Stiles, when he has been, judging from the pain Peter drained, nearly flayed open by that amulet. “But perhaps it can wait until you’re a bit more rested? You’ve just had a very exciting evening, after all.”

“But it’s dying,” Stiles says like Peter is supposed to give a damn about manipulative dying trees. “It needs—it needs—“

He vaguely shakes his hands in the air.

“A jumpstart?” He finally says, unsure. “It’s not very clear. It doesn’t speak like people speak.”

“If you’re not sure, then it might be a good idea to do this another day, on a clear head?” Peter suggests. “Don’t some food and a soft, warm bed sound good? I can carry you all the way to your home or to the new apartment. You don’t need to do a thing, sweetheart.”

Stiles stares at him, uncomprehending. There are no jokes about Peter being his creepy self and just wanting a chance to get Stiles into bed, no rambling, no confident establishment of independence, nothing. It’s like Stiles is still not fully... on.

Peter doesn’t like this. He’d give a whole lot to hear “creeperwolf” right now.

“I gotta help,” Stiles says again.

He turns away, apparently done with the conversation, and starts walking to the Nemeton. His whole body is trembling with the effort of staying upright and moving, and Peter hovers half a step behind, unsure what to do. Stiles seems to have his heart set on helping the accursed tree, and trying to remove him from the forest forcibly might not end up with simply most of Peter’s teeth punched out by irascible trees, it might end up with Peter getting swiftly smitten by Stiles like a sinner by an angry god. Maybe not permanently because it does seem like Stiles has a soft spot for him even in this state, but it will definitely incapacitate him. More than that, Peter may not be able to even try. Stiles can likely sense this sort of intention.

Peter still isn’t sure what Stiles is and how he works, but he has some insight, and that insight tells him it would be a bad idea to try and prevent Stiles from doing something he wants to do. Maybe Stiles will faint from the horrid exertion he’s putting his body through, and then Peter can scoop him up and race away.

It’s a passive sort of plan, and it irks Peter to resort to it, but he doesn’t have any other ideas. So he follows Stiles to the Nemeton and does nothing as Stiles lets his knees buckle and presses his palms to the top of the stump.

For a while, from Peter’s point of view, nothing happens. Stiles is kneeling by the stump, leaning heavily on it, head bowed, and the only signs that something is going on are the slight sensation of pressure and the growing smell of ozone and petrichor.

Then Peter notices that the hundreds of tiny cracks in the stump are slowly but surely pulling closed. The surface of the Nemeton is looking less dry and worn.

And then a small green sprout shoots up between the tips of Stiles' index fingers. Then another, and another and another, popping out in rapid succession until the whole enormous stump is covered in delicate fresh greenery.

Peter watches, mesmerized, how the sprouts start tangling together, tighter and tighter, and getting lighter in color and more rigid until a thick fresh layer of trunk hardens and pushes Stiles' hands upwards.

Stiles exhales and bows his head lower. Two heavy drops of blood fall from his nose on the surface of the stump, and the stump absorbs them immediately.

That is quite enough.

“Stiles!” Peter ducks down, hooks his arms under Stiles' armpits and pulls him away.

Stiles is not resisting; he is, in fact, almost unconscious, head lolling back against Peter's shoulder. Blood keeps slowly oozing out of his nose, and his pulse is thready.

The earth rumbles and shakes under Peter's feet. He stumbles, tries to keep his footing but almost loses it again when the soil in front of him explodes and a monstrous root whips out, showering both Peter and Stiles in dirt. It tries to trip Peter up but he jumps over it in time.

The earth keeps shaking, more and more, and root after root break through to the surface, longer than Peter is tall and thicker than his torso. The whole clearing is a death trap, the Nemeton's roots hiding underneath like ambush predators. Peter hauls Stiles into a bridal carry and ducks, weaves, jumps and, on one memorable occasion, somersaults above three roots closing in on him from different sides.

This much jostling can't be good for Stiles, but he doesn't complain. He is well and truly unconscious. Peter keeps one arm pressed along his spine, hand pushing Stiles' head into Peter's neck, and Peter's other arm is almost folding Stiles in half, drawing his knees close to his chest. It can't be a comfortable position to be in, but the fewer parts of Stiles stick out, the fewer parts the roots have to grab.

He shatters careless roots with well-placed kicks and keeps up with the deadly dance. He might not have been able to, before he became an alpha. That spark has given his speed an extra boost, and he has never been as glad for it as he is now. It allows him to keep up with an enraged Nemeton and plot the escape route at the same time.

Ever so slowly, Peter moves towards an edge of the clearing. It helps that the Nemeton is clearly afraid of accidentally damaging Stiles and isn't coming at Peter as hard as it could have been. If only Peter gets out of the range of the roots, the fucking tree won't dare to use the forest against him again as he runs when Stiles is in his arms. Surely, it's smart enough to understand that it's better to lose a battle and wait for the next one rather than stupidly lose the whole war through its own actions.

He's three feet away from the safety of the ordinary trees when the cacophony of roots snapping and creaking and whipping is cut through with a sound that is very strange to hear here and now: the clink of breaking glass.

Suddenly, all roots stop where they are and start slowly turning back in the direction of the stump. They are acting like they are trying to sneak up on someone which is both a ludicrous picture and an extremely alarming sign. Unmolested, Peter slowly backs up towards the trees, eyes searching for the unknown new threat.

He can't see it at first, but the roots shoot forward, as ineffectual as could be expected from something so big and obvious, and their quarry easily slips through their tangle. It's a large firefly, and while it doesn't look like anything particularly threatening, Peter finds himself growling at it under his breath before he can even pick apart why.

It has a presence that is way too big for an insect, and said presence is insane and bloodthirsty. Peter knows what it's like rather intimately, and with Stiles so vulnerable, Peter absolutely does not want anyone that is so reminiscent of himself at his absolute worst anywhere near.

Peter hastens his steps some. He would have turned around and run but showing his back to this thing doesn't seem like a good idea. The firefly buzzes, steadily flying towards him and Stiles. The roots keep lashing out at it and missing, too big and clumsy for a nimble insect.

Peter's elbow brushes along rough tree bark; they are at the edge, and soon Peter can try to run.

Out of nowhere, the firefly puts on a burst of blazing speed, and before Peter can even blink, it swoops between Stiles' parted lips.

Fuck. That motherfucking flying bastard. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Hastily, hands shaking, Peter lays Stiles down on the churned earth, settling his head in Peter's lap and supporting it with one hand, and pries his mouth open wide. There's no trace of the firefly. Wherever it's gone, it's already there.

What the fuck is he supposed to do now?

"Are you fucking happy now?" He growls at the roots that are hovering in the air in a way that almost seems like they are feeling guilty. "You couldn't have fucking let him go? You had to throw a giant tantrum like the biggest dickwad toddler on the motherfucking planet, and now... What even is that thing? What did it do? How do I get it out? Fucking answer me!"

He roars the last words, and his voice echoes through the woods. The Nemeton says nothing. Maybe it even wants to talk, to help fix what it fucked up, but Peter cannot hear it, cannot even feel its power. He's a werewolf, not a species known for their sensitivity to magic. Only Stiles can communicate with the Nemeton, magical, brilliant, enigmatic, fierce, sharp-tongued Stiles, and there's no help coming from him now. Now, Peter is alone, lost, helpless, and Stiles is slipping away from him, even though Peter is holding onto him with both hands.

It wasn't even ten minutes after they met when Stiles first made him laugh. It hasn't been even three hours since Stiles settled into Peter's embrace and rubbed his cheek against Peter's, mingling their scents.

Peter throws his head back and howls at the moon. There's no one to answer him as he screams his anguish and fury in a way that only wolves and werewolves can; his family are dead, and their ghosts have surely long since moved on. When Peter woke up in the hospital, mad with pain and grief and betrayal, he thought he had nothing more left to lose, and then he chanced upon a boy with luminous brown eyes and a quick wit, and he gained something that he cannot lose now. He refuses. No. No. He cannot.

"My, what a lovely performance you're putting on," says a voice that is both familiar and unfamiliar. "Is that for little old me?"

Peter looks down to his lap slowly, heart beating at the base of his throat. Stiles' eyes are open and clear, but his head is tilted at a slightly strange angle, like he's an amused predator watching his unaware prey prance its last prance. His smile is a crooked and twisted thing that pulls attention towards how his teeth gleam in the moonlight.

Stiles' steady presence at the back of Peter's awareness and that heady, sweet, tart scent of his are slowly filling with something foreign; with malice, and insanity, and gleeful bloodlust.

These might be Stiles' eyes but the thing behind them isn't Stiles.

Possession. How does one deal with possession? Peter tries to remember the old tomes he used to flip through on rainy days, feet tucked under him in an old armchair in the library at home. He'd never expected to seriously need any of that knowledge. Werewolves don't do magic, and he read those books partly because he liked knowing things and partly because he despised Deaton and wanted to be able to double-check any magic their useless sack of shit of an emissary did on behalf of the pack.

"Ugh, I should've known you won't buy it. You're a werewolf." The thing wrinkles Stiles' nose. "A big, uncouth thing with senses too sharp for your own good, yes, you are," it croons as if speaking to a dog.

Peter growls through fangs.

"Oh, come now, threats?" The thing grins and stretches luxuriously. "You won't touch a hair on my head. Do you know how he perceives the world? I'm sensing it through him, and it's glorious." It laughs. "I know exactly what you feel. What everyone feels. So much power! The poor child is not even using it properly. Look at what he did to this body with his fumbling."

It raises Stiles' hand, looking with displeasure at the way the fingers tremble.

"Maybe I can try to make it last," it muses. "It would be such a shame to have to vacate an awakened Spark too soon."

There's that word again, the same one Argent used. Spark. Some distant memory of a vague myth is bobbing in the far corner of Peter's memory, and he makes note of it for later.

Peter looks down at the thing, numb, shocked, fearful, angry. He's holding onto those feelings. Even Stiles, who has had years with these abilities under his belt, couldn't boast omniscience. There's a way to fool someone who's been at it less than five minutes.

"What are you?" He asks. He's never known of any entity trapped by the roots of the Nemeton, and, unless the memory was taken from him, he would have heard of something like that happening in the Hale territory. That is, unless someone somehow left this here without tipping anyone off. "Why are you here?"

"I am a nogitsune," it says primly, with a coy smile. It takes pride in being a void kitsune, it's obvious, but Peter can't help but be taken aback by the admission. To the best of his knowledge, nogitsunes stopped visiting this plane centuries ago, and they are not supposed to be malicious. They are tricksters. Not to mention that they are foxes, and whatever happened to warp this one into a *firefly* has to have been an experience of such magnitude that it is not clear that the result of it can still truly be called a kitsune.

Peter would have suspected it of lying and managing to control the beat of Stiles' heart, but Stiles did say "the void won't let it heal". So it's probably true... or used to be true.

"As for why I'm here," it says in a nonchalant tone of voice, and then it snarls with Stiles' face, going from relaxed to murderous without any transition, "that would be because a traitor put me here! Filthy, lying betrayer of kin! She will snivel in fear and pain for seventy years before I'll even think of gifting her with death!"

A conflict between kitsunes? It sounds plausible that one could have left this little surprise smack in the middle of the Hale territory with the 'wolves none the wiser, and if seventy years is a length of time that has significance, then it must have happened during World War Two. That was not a period in the Hale pack history when they were overly vigilant with territory patrols, considering everything else that was going on.

Honestly, Peter can understand. Sympathize, even. Under different circumstances he might have even offered the nogitsune an alliance; a little murder of a traitor is no skin off Peter's back, and a being that managed a possession that smooth must be powerful.

These are not those circumstances, though. And from what Peter can remember of possessions, the host body gets worn out and breaks down pretty soon, and the host dies with it.

Peter would like to keep that body intact, thank you.

Of course, there's an option of washing his hands off the whole affair, hightailing it to Canada at top alpha speed and starting afresh. It's not a viable one, though. He won't leave Stiles or his pack—not to mention that during the time it would take to race out of Stiles' ridiculous range the nogitsune can kill him a hundred times over without lifting a finger.

"Is she here?" He asks. "In Beacon Hills?"

The topic of the betrayal seems like an understandably exciting one, and the nogitsune is happy to talk. Well, “happy” is probably a strong word. “Eager” may be a better one.

“No, not here,” it says, agitated, and furious, and frustrated, “she took herself away, somewhere far away, but she’ll be back. She’ll have felt my prison breaking. She’ll come thinking she can finish me off, she won’t be able to stay away after I drown this drab little town in blood—“

It never gets to finish outlining its plans because Peter shifts his fingers underneath Stiles’ neck minutely and lets his claws out. They are sharp enough to shred metal, and they sink into Stiles’ skin and spine without the slightest resistance.

The nogitsune got into Stiles’ head. That’s where Peter needs to go in order to remind Stiles that he can and should throw any rude squatters out on their ears.

It gasps and tries to arch away, but it’s unable to slide Stiles’ weakened body off the claws. Peter gives it his toothiest smile before he can no longer see the outside world.

* * *

Peter is burning alive.

Fire spreads across him smoothly like liquid, eating into his flesh, and he screams. He has already screamed like this once, has already lived through the excruciating, immeasurable pain and come out the other side.

Hasn’t he?

He falls and rolls, beating his body against the ground in a mindless bid to smother the flames, but all it does is make bits of his cooked flesh come off. There are people around, he can hear the rumble of voices, but no one is helping him. Why is no one helping him? Are they burning too?

Is he back in the Hale house basement, burning with his pack all over again?

Has he ever stopped? Was everything else an elaborate dream made up by a brain starved of oxygen?

Peter screams, and screams, and screams.

If the fire goes out, he doesn’t know it. The pain is still all-consuming, whiting out his brain, stealing every sense, hollowing out every thought. Hands pick him up, and he screams. Bandages wrap around him, pressing against charred nerves, and he screams. There isn’t even the morphine that used to provide sporadic pinpricks of relief before his body worked through it. He screams until his vocal cords give out, and someone next to him mutters “Thank God”.

Like last time—like always—forever—he loses himself in the pain. The thing about being burned is that it keeps hurting on, and on, and on, never stopping, never letting up, the stupid

mutilated body screaming in its own way and sending the never-ending signal to the brain about there being something extremely wrong.

Who the ever-loving fuck thought this was a good way to construct a body, he thinks, and the words are not quite like himself, they are more like someone else, but every memory is overshadowed by the inescapable present.

Peter lets the pain take him over because there's nothing there except the pain and there never will be; the stench of his own burnt meat mixes with the harsh smells of the hospital, and Peter would have found it nauseating if he wasn't wholly submerged in the pain.

He floats in it, throat jerking with screams that are coming out as hissed whimpers now. Some time passes—maybe six minutes, maybe six years—and someone picks him up, and carries him, and throws him down roughly.

The pain reaches new heights at that, immolating him throughout, and Peter would beg for somebody to just kill him if he had any voice left to beg with.

There's an undulating motion that stirs up new waves of pain as it rocks him, incessant, and the sibilant whimpers keep tearing themselves out of his throat. They are moving. In a car. Why?

His thoughts scatter like spooked insects when he tries to gather them, to reason out what's happening. The pain is too much. The pain is everything.

Then they stop, and someone picks Peter up again and throws him down again, and Peter wonders if the same interminable journey will repeat again, and again, and again, if he's only imagining it, if he's actually still dying on the basement floor next to little Emma's body. She went out relatively peacefully, choked by the smoke before the fire could get to her. The only piece of mercy throughout that whole night.

Peter hopes that at least this knowledge is real.

He is lying on something lumpy and uneven, and he knows it not quite through touch but through the geography of pain, its peaks and valleys where he's pressed into something and where there's a gap underneath him. The bandages gauge deep into him, a tiny crisscrossing web of pain, like they are made of heated wire.

Then some liquid splashes on top of him and next to him, and he recognizes the sharp, biting smell of gasoline.

They are going to burn him one more time, and this time they will make sure there's nothing left of him but greasy ash.

There's a feeling growing in Peter that has carried him through more things than he has cared to count. The mindless, ferocious, *feral* part of him that refuses to take another fire as his due even if he did just wish for death a few eons of pain ago. It's his will to live.

He will always, always survive. He knew that when Talia backhanded him for his smart mouth when he was seven with enough force to make him lose his footing and skid across the floor. He knew that when his parents forgot to show up at his high school graduation. He knew that the first time he killed for the pack and felt fearful mistrust seep towards him through his packbonds. He knew that when a house crashed on top of him in a roar of flames.

No matter what happens, Peter will survive.

Strangely, this thought brings some clarity into his mind, and the pain recedes a bit. Just enough that Peter can push himself up and stand, wobbly and seared with the pain all anew, but moving under his own power. There's a gap in the bandages where his eyes are, and he can see the night, the outlines of trees further back, and, most importantly, two men in military-looking uniforms, slowly backing away from him. One of the men is holding a canister of gasoline in his hands.

They are his enemy.

Peter moves on instinct. His claws puncture the bandages on his fingers and swipe, still as deadly as ever. The men's flesh is as soft as anyone's, parting easily, and hot blood spurts onto Peter, soaking the bandages through to his charred flesh. It's over very soon, even if Peter is slow and unstable on his feet.

Breathing heavily, he stands there and looks around, trying to understand where he is. The territory seems somewhat familiar. It must be Beacon Hills, but something is off about it, not quite what he's used to. And it's not even because of the large pile of corpses behind Peter where he lay a minute ago.

He studies the corpses but none of them look familiar. They are mostly Asian in features, and their clothing is a bit old-fashioned, like he's in the middle of a period horror drama set close to the beginning of the 20th century.

He likes clothes, he remembers abruptly. He's always had an eye for fashion, a little personal fancy that helped him look sharp in any situation. He looks down on his arms covered in bloody bandages, and he laughs because even though it's a horrendous choice of an outfit, it's still better than things like plaid. The laughter comes out as a quiet, choked gurgling.

Someone likes plaid. Peter is sure that he knows someone like that. Who is it?

Peter gropes for memories, but they slip out of reach. It seems important that he remembers but there are so many holes in his memory, he doesn't even know where to begin. Where did the memories go? Did Talia put her claws into his neck and take them away? Why? Did some other alpha? Was that it, were they attacked? While they were... mingling with predominantly Asian historical reenactors?

None of this makes sense. If he burned in a house fire with his pack just now, where are the others? Not only are all of the corpses unfamiliar, they also don't look like any of them died in a fire. How come Peter is the only one?

Frustrated, he growls. The sound carries far in the quietness, and then, after a pause, there's an answering one. A raspy, tiny whimper that Peter would never have heard if he weren't a werewolf.

It has come from the pile of corpses, and Peter is dazed with the realization of what it means: there's someone else alive there.

He doesn't know why this buoys him so much, why it's important—the two soldiers were also alive until they weren't—but it does, it is, and he lurches back to pile and pushes the unwieldy bodies, slippery with blood, until he unearths the faint heartbeat and the raspy breathing, dark eyes staring at him from the face of a small child.

Peter has never seen him in his life. Judging by the stark fear on the boy's face, Peter is also not what he expected to see.

“W-who are you?” The boy whispers.

Peter tries to answer but his raw throat gives out on him, and all he can manage is unintelligible hissing.

He is expecting the boy to run from a bloodied bandaged figure who can't speak, but, weirdly, the fear eases up. The boy stares at Peter intently, every breath rattling inside that small body. He must be sick, something with his lungs.

“Who am I?” The boy asks hesitantly.

Peter shrugs and regrets it immediately. The pain is blinding, and he slumps under its onslaught, unable to stand up straight.

“You're hurt,” the boy says.

He scrambles out of the pile, ignoring the corpses piled up around him, and stumbles over to Peter. Small hands close in fists in the bandages around his torso. I might be hurt, Peter thinks, but you have zero self-preservation instincts, sweetheart.

The endearment twinges oddly throughout his head, like a bell chime. He's used words like this a lot, his whole life, and they always served a purpose. Needle someone, charm someone, sometimes both at the same time. He has no practical purpose in calling the boy that, and yet it fits, somehow.

“I think I must be dead,” the boy whispers, one cheek pressed to Peter's stomach. He's sick and tiny but definitely alive, so Peter has no idea what kind of delusion this is. Surely this here is not the afterlife. If so, then Peter would like to talk to the manager, please.

He tries to ask the boy why, and he still can't speak. Somehow, the boy understands the gargled sounds.

“I think Mom killed me,” the boy confesses. “She called me a monster. I don't remember my name but I remember that. She put a tripwire on top of the stairs when I was in my room, and then she called me from the kitchen. And she came into the bathroom when I was taking a

bath, and she tried to drop a plugged-in hair dryer into the water while I was still there. And she hoarded her pills, and ground them into powder, and put it into the PB&J she made for my school lunch.”

He stops, swallowing audibly. Peter sets one bandaged hand on his head, careful, just to let the boy know Peter’s there. The mention of pills is a big clue as to why the boy’s mother thought this tiny, sweet slip of a thing could be a monster. Hell, Peter is a monster, he even looks like one right now, and the boy’s response was to *hug* him.

“N-now... now I’m here, and, and everyone looks dead ‘cept you and me, and that must mean she succeeded and I—I was put where the dead people go, right? Maybe I am dead, I just don’t know it?”

Peter slips one finger under the boy’s chin and tips it up, gently. The boy follows the motion until he’s staring up at Peter, eyes brimming with tears. Peter shakes his head. No.

“No?” The boy echoes the gesture. “I’m not dead? Are you sure?”

Peter nods.

“Oh... Okay.” The boy gives him a hesitant smile.

At the sight of that smile, Peter’s pain recedes further until it’s just a dull ache. That’s... not how healing fourth degree burns should go, even with the werewolf healing at play.

Somehow, the boy is the key.

“We...” The boy glances towards the corpses and hugs Peter tighter, the only sign of his discomfort with being around the dead. “We should probably go somewhere living people are.”

Peter makes a questioning sound. Not all living people might be safe to be around for either of them; not that Peter knows how to communicate that in hisses and gargles.

“You don’t want to go where the living people are?” The boy guesses unerringly. “You... You are wary of them?”

Peter nods.

“Alright,” the boy says. “Where do you think we should go?”

Peter is curious. Why does the boy trust him so much? He gargles something to that effect, and the boy chews on his lips, brow furrowed as if he’s thinking very hard.

“I, well, I’m not sure I’m getting it right,” the boy says. “You want to ask me something?”

Peter nods. He hasn’t played charades in... maybe ever, unless a game or two are hiding in the lost pieces of his Swiss cheese of a memory, but he gives it an honest try, pointing first at the boy, then at himself and trying to project puzzlement with his body language.

“You’re asking... why I wanna go where you wanna go?” The boy guesses.

That’s close enough, and Peter nods. The boy blushes a bit.

“Cause you came for me,” he says. “I might’ve been not dead but I would be soon if you didn’t find me. You didn’t have to. You have bandages all over, so it must have hurt you to get me out. So I wanna go with you, unless...” the boy’s hug weakens, and those eyes start shining suspiciously wetly again. “Unless you don’t want me to come with you?”

Well, they can’t have that. Peter picks the boy up by the sides, feeling the vibration of the little lungs rattling with a startled inhale, and hugs him, head automatically leaning down to the boy’s throat, to nuzzle and scent. The boy is human through and through but he’s not frightened by it. On the contrary, he laughs delightedly and clings to Peter with his arms and legs like a monkey.

“Great!” The boy says, and his scent is happy through his illness and the stench of death they are both drenched in. “We’ll go together! What’s your name?”

“Peter,” Peter croaks, and he’s astonished that he can manage even that.

“Hi, Peter!” The boy chirps. His enthusiasm is infectious. “I’m pretty sure my name starts with an “M” but I just can’t remember it... Mi... Mich... Mees-ch?”

He frowns.

“Can you give me a name? I can’t go around without one, right?”

Peter thinks about it, still holding the boy in his arms. The boy gets bored with waiting in seconds and starts fidgeting and squirming, and Peter rumbles at him, a little annoyed.

The boy giggles and palms Peter’ cheek, the touch surprisingly sure and tender. His thumb slides across the bandages in a caress, and Peter leans into it in a way that seems almost habitual.

He has the wrong color eyes, Peter thinks out of nowhere. But he does seem like a...

“Stiles,” Peter says.

It’s a weird kind of name. It doesn’t sound real. In fact, it sounds like the ringing of a great bell, ripping through the night.

The forest and fields around them blur and distort, and then everything disappears in a rush of whiteness. The last thing Peter sees before the world melts away is the darkness of the boy’s eyes lighting up until they are the shining, warm brown of amber.

Chapter 9: Cherry-Sweet And Ever So Wicked

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Memories come back to Stiles in a rush, all at once. His whole life tumbles back into his head, reasserting itself into its proper places, and he gasps under the waterfall, hands blindly finding Peter's arm and clinging to it. Thankfully, he feels healthy skin under his fingers, not grimy bandages, and he himself is no longer small and sick.

When he's able to stand upright and think straight again, the first thing he sees is white. It's an enormous white room, spotless shining floor, ceiling and walls, empty and bizarre.

"Where are we?" He mutters, not really expecting Peter to know.

"From what I can remember, darling, we're inside your head," Peter says.

Stiles wrinkles his nose.

"I admit, if asked, I'd think that particular location would be less... empty," he says. Peter laughs, his amusement playful and sweet.

There's an exaggerated gagging sound somewhere to Stiles' right. Stiles turns to see who it is, and there, on an enormous tree stump that is somehow growing in this room, sits another Stiles. He seems identical to what Stiles sees in the mirror every day, except other-Stiles' face is drawn into a rictus of contempt so strong, Stiles really only saves that for special occasions. He also looks kind of rough, like a Stiles who hasn't slept for several days and hasn't seen the sun for several years.

"You two make my teeth ache," other-Stiles says. "So saccharine. Sweets are bad for your health, did you know that?"

"And who the fuck are you?" Stiles asks.

"That would be a nogitsune who managed to possess you while you were vulnerable," Peter says. Apparently, Peter is the one with all the knowledge today. Stiles doesn't mind.

"Where did we even find a void kitsune?" He wonders. "Last I remember, we were still in Beacon Hills."

"Looks like it was imprisoned underneath the Nemeton. which you might know as an asshat magic tree stump." Peter offers. He's better than Wikipedia, Stiles thinks and sniggers to himself. "In something made of glass which broke while the Nemeton was throwing a hissy fit about not wanting to let you go."

"It was?" Stiles doesn't remember much between Peter's hands pulling him away from the tree stump and waking up in the body of a little boy who could barely breathe.

“Yes. Another kitsune put this one there for reasons unknown.”

“I would venture a guess that the imprisonment was because it’s a complete and total douche canoe,” Stiles offers. “I mean, it got into my head and made me think I was an amnesiac child with pneumonia, and what the hell did it even do to you that you were covered in bloody bandages?”

Peter stiffens a bit under Stiles’ hands, a heavy hatred splashing to the top of his emotions.

“It made me burn alive again.”

Stiles slowly turns his head to the nogitsune who grins with Stiles’ lips and blows them a kiss.

“You were already going to die,” he tells it. “But for this you will die slowly.”

“Such bravado,” the nogitsune sing-songs. “You silly child, what are you even going to do? Huff, and puff, and blow my house down? Oh, wait, that’s probably the job for the big bad wolf, isn’t it?”

“A couple of people have given me interesting hints tonight,” Peter says, completely apropos.

“About what?” Stiles is okay playing along.

“About what you are. They mentioned the word “Spark”. It was a bit of a chore to remember, but I do now.”

“A Spark? But I don’t do pyrokinesis or anything.”

“It’s more of a metaphorical name than anything. It’s hard to find any mentions of Sparks. I only ever saw two old books that had a paragraph or two on the topic, and both books dismissed the existence of Sparks as a myth. Humans with a magical gift so powerful that they were a spark from which a fire could start strong enough to envelop the world.”

“That sounds incredibly sensationalist.”

“I agree, sweetheart. However, it’s as good a name as any because the books also agreed that the rumors of Sparks never contained any consistent descriptions of what the gift was, precisely, and therefore must be idle tales. The imaginary monsters under the beds of monsters, all the better to scare supernatural children into eating their vegetables.”

Stiles snorts.

“If that’s what I am, maybe I will write my own book,” he says.

“Make more plans, go on,” the nogitsune grins. “It’ll be all the sweeter to feel you lose hope in the end.”

“How long have you been imprisoned?” Stiles asks but doesn’t wait for an answer. “In any case, clearly long enough to addle your brain.”

The nogitsune sneers at him. Stiles rolls his eyes.

“You’ve had your one shot. You missed.”

Stiles bares his own teeth at it.

“You feed on chaos, strife and pain, and you try to possess me—the one guy who has absolute control over those for many miles around. Honestly, putting you down is doing *you* a favor at this point.”

Stiles knows his head inside and out. His own emotions are as much his playthings as those of others; every part of himself is laid bare to his magic, the sweet parts, and the nasty ones, and the so-so ones, his pettiness, and his loyalty, and his anxiety, and his love, and his hate, and his desires, all of it. Now that he is aware of who he is, he can feel the nogitsune like slime spread across his plains, nooks and crannies. It’s gorging itself on Peter’s hatred and on Stiles’ anger even as they speak, and it boils with its own insane bloodlust.

Stiles takes all of that away.

He floods all three of them with contentment, and love, and acceptance, poisoning the nogitsune until it shakes like it’s going through a heroin withdrawal. It tries to summon rage and violent intent, and Stiles is there to drain it all away.

“You...” It exhales in Stiles’ voice. “You can’t kill me... I’m a thousand years old...”

“You should’ve thought of retiring somewhere else besides my head then,” Stiles says.

Peter’s arm loops around Stiles’ shoulders, and Stiles feels a kiss on his temple. He doesn’t know how the fuck touch even works when they are not in the physical world, but he likes it anyway.

“You’re magnificent, sweetheart,” Peter whispers into Stiles’ skin. His desire is almost tangible, and a sweet, viscous wave of arousal runs through Stiles.

“Pervert,” he says, and then he turns his head and kisses Peter.

It’s his first ever kiss. Peter’s lips are firm, hot and demanding, and Stiles wrestles with him for the dominance of the kiss, clumsy but enthusiastic, his own desire heavy and delicious. Peter licks the seam of his lips, and the sensation goes through Stiles like electricity. He parts his lips, eager, and Peter’s tongue is even hotter, werewolf hot, tangling with his own, gliding across Stiles’ palate which, fuck, it makes his brain go numb and his knees wobble.

Peter’s there to reel him in, holding him tight to his own—extremely naked, wow, Stiles has no idea how this has slipped his attention until now—body, and to kiss him more, harder, harsher, until Stiles is a moaning, pliant mess, hips jerking to rut against Peter’s solid thigh.

Throughout it all, Stiles’ control never slips. When they part, the nogitsune is curled on the white floor by the tree stump, whimpering, out of its mind with bliss and happiness and goodwill towards its fellow sentient beings. Its false body is covered in cracks that are oozing

something thick and iridescent. Its void maybe be bottomless but it was never meant to take in the things Stiles is shoving into it.

That's how one saves the day with love in real life, Stiles thinks. Take notes, Disney.

"Oh, darling," Peter says. His lips are cherry-bright but visibly healing whatever tiny damage the kissing did. Stiles runs the tip of his tongue along his own lips that feel tingly and hot and swollen, and Peter's hungry gaze follows the movement.

"An epic first kiss," Stiles decides. "Twelve out of ten, would recommend."

Peter laughs, tugs him even closer until his face is pressed to Peter's neck, and then continues to laugh some more into Stiles' hair.

"Does this kiss count?" Stiles wonders, his lips brushing Peter's skin every time they move. "I mean, we're still... astral projections or something."

"If you're in doubt, dear heart, then we can always repeat it out in the real world," Peter says, smug both inwardly and outwardly. "I suspect that you need to finish killing the nogitsune first, though."

"Right." Stiles turns towards it, resting his head on Peter's shoulder. "Would you like it to suffer some more? Given what illusion it thought up for you, I have no qualms doing whatever you like to it."

"You should be more ruthless on your own account, sweetheart," Peter chides. "It took over your body and stuffed you under a pile of illusionary corpses."

Stiles shrugs.

"I'd probably be angrier for myself if it posed any danger to me while I'm conscious," he says. "As it is, I even respect it somewhat for managing to get as far as it did."

"You're always going to be the reckless boy who hugs monsters and talks to them even if they can't talk back, aren't you?"

"Probably," Stiles concedes. He regrets having to kill the nogitsune, but he hasn't had a chance to talk with it first, and it has gone and done things he can't forgive in the meantime. It's alright. He hugs and he talks, but he also kills. It's what he does. "Yetis give nice hugs," he adds. "Smell a bit like wet fur but very soft."

"I can't wait to hear that story," Peter says in a silky voice. A strand of jealousy weaves through his emotions but Stiles doesn't have time to decide what he should do about that because Peter adds:

"Finish it. Let's go back."

When the nogitsune dies, it's silent. Its false body stills and turns into stone that crumbles into dust immediately, and that dust is blown all over the place by a wind Stiles himself doesn't feel. He's not sure what he can do about that. Is there some sort of brain-vacuuming

ritual? A soul-dusting spell? Is it bad to have dead nogitsune dust sitting around in his mind? He wants to ask Peter but that will have to wait a bit because the white room melts into darkness and that's the only thing Stiles can see.

* * *

Stiles comes to and is certain at once that he's in the real world. Everything hurts, he's weaker than a newborn kitten, he's got a headache from hell, the wounds in his leg and neck are aching something fierce, and his feet are slowly turning into blocks of ice in their thin Converse shoes. None of that was a problem in the white room inside his head, and Stiles wishes for a moment to go back there.

Nope. Time to face the music.

He feels a weird pressure leave his neck; there's a wet sound, and his neck stings.

"Ouch," he complains, blinking muzziness out of his eyes, and coughs.

There's something in his throat, not letting him breathe, and he twists, panicking, and half-coughs, half-retchs until an enormous dead fly comes out of his mouth. When it lands on the grass, cracks run through it, and the breeze makes it crumble into dust.

"Ew," Stiles says, voice raspy. He falls on his back again, limp like a noodle from the exertion, strong hands cradling him carefully. "What was that? Both the fly and... whatever was in my neck?"

Peter's face is looming over him, pale in the moonlight.

"The fly was the physical form of the nogitsune. And I had to put my claws in your neck in order to go where you were. That might scar a little, sweetheart, sorry. But there shouldn't be any other consequences."

"That's okay." Stiles doesn't mind a few small scars. There are a lot of more interesting things to focus on. "So what, your claws, like, give you mental powers? That wasn't in any of my books about werewolves!"

Peter smirks.

"We have kept a few secrets from the general public, my darling. But yes, it's a technique that allows us to establish a mental connection. It's mainly used to take memories but it's more versatile than that. Not many know how to use it, though. It can be extremely dangerous for the untrained to get their claws into someone's spinal column."

"Yikes, yeah." Stiles knows enough about bodies to be aware that messing with the spine is more likely to end badly than not. "Guess I'm lucky you're one of the ones who are well-trained, huh?"

Peter preens, and a fond smile twitches on Stiles' lips.

“How are you feeling?” Peter’s hand tightens a little bit on the back of Stiles’ neck, and then all pain leaves Stiles’ body in a sweet, sweet rush.

“Like a sexy werewolf is draining all my pain while I’m lounging in his lap,” Stiles says and gets rewarded with a chuckle. “Mostly just weak now. Need food and sleep.”

“That can be arranged.”

There’s a distinct poke in the back of his awareness. Now that Stiles is not half-crazed from the forcible separation from his magic, he doesn’t think he has to drop everything and follow that call, but he suspects the call will always be there now.

He turns his head to the Nemeton. Weirdly, its roots are out of the ground now, the soil looking like it got bombed.

“What happened here?” Stiles wonders. “Peter, you said something about a tantrum?”

“I took you away from it when you started bleeding from your nose, and it tried to kill me and take you back,” Peter says readily, a self-satisfied, petty tattle-tale, and Stiles can’t help the amused fondness.

“None of that now,” he tells the Nemeton. Its roots are hovering a bit sheepishly, but one of them is creeping along the ground, coiling in a way that suggests it’s about to snatch Peter away by the ankle. Stiles raises his voice. “Knock it off!”

The offending root slithers away, sulky. Peter watches it go, attracted by the rustling of its movement.

“These roots have a disturbingly human-like body language,” he remarks.

“It doesn’t have emotions as such,” Stiles says, eyeing the Nemeton with displeasure. “Only its magic and its will which are one and the same. I think now that it’s gotten through to me, it’s taking social cues from me. Mimics the appropriate, expected emotions.”

“Gotten through to you?” Peter questions. “Do you have another unwanted guest in your head? Should I go get a chainsaw from the hardware store?”

The Nemeton’s roots rear up at the suggestion, looking ready to tear Peter limb from limb before he can implement the suggestion.

“Settle down!” Stiles barks at it, pulling a little magic under his skin to give his words extra weight. “If you ever touch Peter again, I will take a saw to you myself,” he warns it. “He’s off limits. Do you understand?”

The Nemeton doesn’t seem happy at the new rule, but it subsides and starts slowly pushing its roots back into the ground.

“So you’re still intending to... cooperate with it?” Peter asks. His distaste for the Nemeton is as obvious as the Nemeton’s distaste for him. “It hasn’t gone very well tonight, sweetheart.”

“Yeah.” Stiles sighs. “It’s not evil, it’s just... hurt. I’ll figure out how to help it get better without straining myself ‘cause I’m using my magic in ways it doesn’t want to be used.”

He looks up into Peter’s face again.

“Thanks for coming for me,” he says. Peter smiles down at him. It’s one part smug and nine parts tender.

For all that Stiles has had a few busy years, he’s never met anyone like Peter.

He wants to *keep* him.

“Always, dear heart,” Peter says easily. “By the way, now that we’re back in the real world, what’s your stance on kissing? Asking for a friend.”

Stiles huffs a laugh and chews his lower lip.

“We’ve got to talk about something first,” he says. “Before we do anything else, because you were serious when you asked me to be pack, and I, well, I don’t do casual. Don’t want to.”

“About what?”

“Uhm...” He’s never talked about it out loud. Not even to himself, in the security and solitude of his secret hideout. It’s kind of like taking a skeleton out of your closet and waltzing with it down the street in full view of appalled neighbors. Still, the skeleton has been rattling in its closet loudly enough that Stiles is certain Peter has picked up on it. “How much have you put together about what I can do?”

“Well, I know you can sense and manipulate emotions. There’s probably a little more to this, but I assume that is the gist?” Peter says, calm as you please.

“In a nutshell,” Stiles says. “I... I sense emotions, from everyone, all the time. I don’t, like, feel them as my own, which, thank God, because if I did that, I’d probably bash my head against the wall until I was dead after a week, but I see them. Hear them. Taste them. You know, kind of; not quite but close enough. I can take them away, or I can give new ones. Anything I like. I mostly kill with them, too. Fear works well, it’s incapacitating and fast, but I can use just about anything.”

Peter listens with interest and none of the mistrust Stiles is expecting. Stiles is not sure what to do with that, so he just barrels on.

“In the interests of full disclosure, I can also change habits with repetitive application of emotions. I got Dad to stop drinking with disgust. So, uhm... In light of all that knowledge... Are you sure you still want to kiss me?”

Peter raises his eyebrows.

“I put most of it together before I went into your head,” he says. “You’re not very good at hiding secrets, sweetheart. Probably because you haven’t really worked alongside someone who would have an opportunity to suss them out, have you? Although,” he adds, disgruntled

and a bit embarrassed, “I didn’t even think about Sparks. My best guess was that you descended from Eris.”

“Eri... oh, the Greek goddess of discord?” Stiles snickers. “You thought I was a *demigod*?”

Peter flashes his red alpha eyes at him. Stiles keeps snickering.

“You did only demonstrate an ability to work with negative emotions,” Peter says, defensive. “And Eris is known to have had children responsible for various negative aspects of humankind.”

“Alright, I actually see how that makes a lot more sense than the reality,” Stiles allows, still grinning. “But if there’s a goddess somewhere in my family tree, I don’t know about it. And it doesn’t have to be only the negative ones.”

“Well, I know now,” Peter says primly.

Stiles sobers up.

“Knowing that, can you trust me?” He wonders. “Every time you look at me, won’t you wonder if I manipulated you into this? Seeded your mind with affection and desire against your will?”

“Have you ever influenced my emotions directly?” Peter asks, and then something occurs to him to make wariness grow swiftly inside him. “That time we talked outside of your hideout... Did you influence them then?”

“No,” Stiles whispers. Here it is. The full understanding has hit Peter, and Stiles’ expectations for the consequences of telling the truth have panned out. He drains the beginnings of misery from the upcoming vehement rejection. “Not then. I influenced you four times.”

“How? And when?”

“I calmed you down when we first met and you were about to bite me. Then I drained some of your rage at the hospital, when you looked at the Hale fire file and were about to alpha out right there. Then in the forest, after you bit Allison, I gave you fear, confusion and helplessness. And just now, in my head, I swapped out your emotions to ones that the nogitsune couldn’t feed off of. That’s all. That’s it, I swear.”

“Technically, it was five times,” Peter says. “When Allison took the protective amulet out of your neck, you did... some sort of emotion hurricane.”

“Oh,” Stiles says stupidly. “I... I don’t really remember much from right after I woke up. Five, then.”

Stiles’ mind is already racing ahead, pragmatic as ever. When Peter tells him to go take a hike, well, Stiles won’t be able to actually take a hike in his current condition. The Nemeton will probably be happy to shelter Stiles without letting him freeze to death. Maybe even help forage something edible, if there’s even anything like that around in January. Either way, he

can wrap his leg wound with his shirt, sleep off the worst of his magic hangover here and make his way into town tomorrow morning—

Peter relaxes, and his wariness swirls away.

“Well, I don’t see the problem then,” he says.

“You don’t? Because I do,” Stiles says. “You just thought I might’ve magicked you into liking me. Exactly as I predicted you would. You might not be suspicious of me right now, but what about next time, and the one after that, and the one after that? You will think of your feelings, and wonder, and ask me again if I did anything to you.”

He swallows.

“It’s not fair to either of us to live with this kind of mistrust,” he says.

“Trust is something that grows over time, sweetheart,” Peter says. “Don’t you, of all people, know that?”

Stiles scoffs.

“And what’s gonna stop you from asking me one day if I’ve been subtly growing it in you all this time? You wouldn’t know it if I had. Emotions are sneaky.”

“The fact that I know you,” Peter says.

“You’ve known me for, like, three days.”

“But what unforgettable days those have been, hmm?” Peter smirks. “You didn’t lie just now. You didn’t make me want you. Admire you. Treasure you.”

“But,” Stiles tries.

“You could, of course, manipulate me,” Peter continues right over him. “Give me unquestioning loyalty, undying love and blind trust and take away any doubts about all those.”

Peter’s hand that is not supporting Stiles’ neck starts carding through his hair, a soothing comfort and a possessive marking rolled into one.

“But you don’t want that,” Peter says with soul-flaying certainty. “You don’t want someone who will wake up in the middle of the night, when your influence wanes, and question their devotion to you. You want someone who would go to another planet for a year and come back into your range eager and happy to see you. You want something that is real without your help.”

Stiles feels laid bare, for all that he’s still wrapped in his many layers. He feels young and helpless in a way he hasn’t since his magic awoke.

“Yes,” he says quietly. He’s too exhausted to cry but he kind of wants to. “I want that.”

“And I want to be that for you, my beguiling miracle,” Peter leans in close enough that their breaths are mingling. “All you have to do is let me.”

Stiles kisses him again.

This kiss is much more chaste, lit through with the stained-glass beauty of Peter’s fragile joy. Stiles drinks it in, head swimming, not minding that it tastes like blood, and lets himself hope that Peter’s words will prove true not just tonight but down the line too.

Peter did come for him. Burned for him and didn’t feel any regrets afterwards.

Stiles isn’t sure what he’ll do if this hope gets crushed. Probably something inadvisable. But then again, Peter is smart enough to know that too.

Peter is rather insufferably smug when the kiss eases off and they just stay as they are, foreheads touching, Peter’s warmth warding off the chill of winter night. Stiles, as per his being honest with himself policy, admits in the (relative, due to the Nemeton) privacy in his own head that he adores that smugness.

Something else solidifies in the back of his mind, too. Something that, if he squints, resembles somewhat the hooks he can leave in unfamiliar people so he can follow that connection to where they are. It’s not exactly like that, though, and it feels like Peter, like the coarse fur, and the moonlight, and the warm hands, and the sarcastic, kissable smirks.

“Is that…” Stiles flicks a little tendril of curiosity at it. Peter jolts, eyes opening wide. “Is that a packbond?”

“Looks like it is, sweetheart,” Peter says, and Stiles is enveloped in Peter’s possessive triumph thrice over, in his voice, in his emotions and in his bond.

“Aw, man,” Stiles complains. “I was going to make you woo me into your pack properly. Go the whole nine yards.”

“If you want to be wooed, gorgeous, I will make that happen,” Peter purrs, literally, his words a potent rumble in his chest and throat. “Sweep you right off your feet. Anything you’d like, I’ll make sure you have it.”

Stiles thinks it over.

“I just want you,” he says, which is both corny and all-around true. He wants Peter’s attention. Wants Peter’s emotions turned to him, even when they are away from each other. Wants gifts that show that Peter is thinking of Stiles, no matter big or small, cheap or expensive. Wants Peter’s time and effort.

He wants Peter’s true devotion.

He’s used to being overlooked and dismissed; has used it as both a weapon and a shield. But Peter knows the truth and has made some big promises, and Stiles wants more from him than from anyone else.

“Something easily provided,” Peter says, grinning, and leans further down to drag his cheek and nose along Stiles’ throat, breathing him in deeply and leaving his scent all over Stiles’ skin. Peter’s own neck is right there, and Stiles reciprocates—clumsily, perhaps, but he’s enjoying it, even if his human nose can’t do scents like that of a werewolf. Peter still smells nice to him, and Stiles sneaks in a tiny kiss or two when Peter makes an animalistic keening sound in response to Stiles’ affection.

“I have to say,” Peter says some time later when he’s scented and been scented his fill for the moment, “when you mentioned you wanted to talk about something, I thought you might want to discuss your age and inexperience.”

“Oh, that,” Stiles says. “Yeah, I’m a virgin, but I’m not worried about that.”

“You’re not?”

“Dude,” Stiles says, thoroughly enjoying Peter’s distaste towards the word, “I’ve been able to sense the feelings of thousands of people since I was a little kid. Sexual desire and pleasure are very much feelings, you know, and people are a horny bunch. At any given moment, there’s guaranteed to be a whole crowd of people getting lucky in Beacon Hills, and most of those who aren’t lucky are more likely to be jerking off than not. I know exactly what every shade of bedroom activities feels like. Kinky sex, guilty sex, angry sex, a drunk alleyway blowjob, a lazy Saturday morning fuck, you name it, I’ve sensed it. It’s not like I’m a normal virgin, stuck alone in their own head with only anxious fantasies and Internet porn for company. It might have flustered me to sense you wanting me, specifically, ‘cause that’s not a thing that happens often, but I’m not worried about feeling good or making you feel good. Unless you’re against mixing magic and sex on principle, I can make you feel the best you’ve ever felt without even touching you. And even if you ban any active influence from the bed, it’ll still be way too easy to catalog everything you like and don’t like.”

Peter feels extremely interested, and Stiles is suddenly, intriguingly aware of the fact that Peter’s naked cock is a few scant inches from his face. Peter’s thumb is stroking Stiles’ lower lip lightly, the smooth warm touch leaving electric, dizzying sensations behind but not taking it any further. It’s as if he’s simply savoring the silky feel of a mouth he intends on leaving sore, swollen and throbbing later.

Stiles shudders under the caress, lips falling open. Peter’s desire is thick, ubiquitous and laser-focused—Stiles could almost wrap it around himself like the world’s most indecent blanket.

“We shall have to explore this side of your abilities, my darling,” Peter says. “When you’re rested, and strong, and ready, of course.”

“I have been curious about the physical side of it, not gonna lie,” Stiles admits. “I think it’s gonna be fun.”

Peter laughs.

“I adore you, sweetheart,” he says and peppers Stiles’ face with kisses like he can’t help himself, brief, affectionate touches to Stiles’ nose, cheeks, forehead, corners of his lips.

“I know,” Stiles says and laughs when that earns him a playful nip on the jaw with blunt human teeth. “Now carry me away from this cold forest, please, before I freeze my ass off.”

“That would be a shame,” Peter agrees, easily getting up with Stiles in a princess carry. “It’s a very nice ass.”

Stiles blows a raspberry in Peter’s neck, just because it’s there and he can, and settles into Peter’s arms, allowing himself to relax. He sends a reassuring poke to the Nemeton, promising to return soon, and gets back a sense of acceptance and waiting.

“Can you sense Allison and Derek from here?” Peter asks as he starts running. “I have their packbonds, but it would be nice to get a confirmation from you that they are fine. And what about the Argents and Deaton?”

Stiles does a quick check.

“Allison is asleep next to Derek in the new apartment, and he’s vigilant and brooding. Gerard and Kate are either dead or managed to get up and out of my range since we last saw them. Victoria and Christopher are at home and, from the feel of it, having a giant row. Deaton’s all muddled, like he’s concussed, and moving around his clinic. From how panicked and harried he is, I’d say he might be packing to get away.”

He also checks on Scott. He’s unsure what to feel about his best friend anymore, but he’s relieved to find out nothing happened to him besides getting stranded in the forest without a ride and having to walk all the way home.

“Do you still want to interrogate him before you kill him?” Peter asks.

Stiles considers it. In hindsight, it’s perfectly clear how Deaton took this chance of a lifetime to get rid of Stiles; it must have seemed to him incredibly auspicious to have Scott under his thumb, aka the only one gullible and trusting enough to be duped into hurting Stiles without malice, and to have the Argents in town, an old hunter clan who had to have some way of countering Stiles’ magic, considering that they were running around town and amassing an army of flunkies with impunity. And Stiles was more arrogant and less smart than he thought himself to be because the plan worked like a dream. If it wasn’t for Peter, Stiles would’ve been dead by now.

It’s grating that he missed Deaton’s scheming. He’s been much too dismissive of people with less power than he has. He’ll have to do very deep dives into everyone else he knows that’s connected to the supernatural, just to make sure he doesn’t have another Deaton lurking right under his nose.

In the meantime, Deaton has very little usefulness left and has earned himself an express ticket to the afterlife several times over.

“Nah,” Stiles decides and floods Deaton with lethal fear. “There, that’s him done.”

He yawns and curls up further into Peter. All that warm, firm muscle feels so damn nice.

“Remind me to go around his clinic later and swipe all his mountain ash,” he says. “Not like he’s gonna be using it anymore.”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

“Mm-hm,” Stiles sighs in thanks.

He’s so, so tired, and he’s also safe. Soothed by the steady rhythm of Peter running, Stiles drifts off to sleep.

* * *

Two days later Stiles is firmly on his feet again. He tires more easily than he’d like but he’s more than well enough to spend his Sunday morning baking and then head over to Peter’s apartment.

He lets himself in by way of picking the lock and grins when Derek rushes into the hallway, ready to meet the intruder with violence.

“Hey there,” Stiles says cheerfully. “Don’t mind me, I’m just dropping by!”

Derek shows him fangs anyway. He’s wary around Stiles, unsure what to make of him.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Peter greets him, gliding past Derek. “What a wonderful surprise.”

Stiles pulls Peter in by the back of the neck and kisses him hello. They keep it PG, mindful of having an audience, but Stiles’ lips still tingle nicely enough when they are done that he wishes briefly he and Peter were alone.

“Mm, doubly wonderful,” Peter purrs.

“Isn’t Stiles still in high school?” Derek asks. Disapproval and horror whirl inside him, and Stiles remembers belatedly Derek’s own high school sexual experience. “Peter, what the fuck?”

“Don’t get involved in that,” Allison advises from behind him. “I’m pretty sure no one’s taking advantage of anyone.”

“Allison, he’s your age.” Derek frowns. “He’s not old enough to get into this kind of relationship.”

“Stiles can do invisible and powerful magic, so he can take care of himself,” Allison shrugs. “I’m *also* pretty sure Peter will actually lose a limb if he does something Stiles doesn’t like.”

Derek takes her words with a grain of salt. Stiles kicks off his shoes, mindful of Peter’s floors, and heads to the kitchen, patting Derek’s shoulder on the way.

“Thanks for giving a fuck, man, but I don’t need anyone to protect me from the big bad wolf.”

“Oh yeah?” Derek challenges, following him. “Wouldn’t you agree that’s what teenagers the world over think, right before they get into big trouble?”

“I agree,” Stiles doesn’t actually contest the point. “I’m not most teenagers, though.”

“Right,” Derek says, unimpressed.

“Oh, for the love of God,” Stiles mutters.

He plops in a chair, glad to get off his feet, and commands the mountain ash in his pockets to take his backpack off his shoulders, bring it to the floor, unzip it and get the Tupperware container out. Derek’s watching it with incredulity, Peter with smarmy satisfaction and Allison with childlike glee.

“Is that mountain ash?” Derek demands. “How are you controlling it like that?”

“A trade secret, dude,” Stiles says, mostly just to be contrary. “Hey, creeperwolf, I brought these.”

He tosses the Tupperware to Peter who catches it with ease. All three werewolf noses are already sniffing the air with interest.

“My Mom’s rogaliki,” Stiles explains. “With vanilla, almond and pink peppercorn cherry jam.”

“The famous rogaliki you’re using to bribe people?” Peter asks. Stiles is warmed right through by the fact that Peter remembers a throwaway thing he said. “What are you hoping to bribe us to do, sweetheart?”

Stiles rolls his eyes.

“It’s a housewarming thing, not a bribe, you dick. But hey, if you don’t want them…”

He makes the mountain ash rear up, as if telling it to go take the cookies back, and Peter presses the Tupperware to his chest protectively.

“Now, don’t be hasty, sweetheart, I didn’t say that,” he says, opening the lid. Even though Stiles already sneaked a few for himself as he packed them up, the aroma of cherry, spices and buttery dough is still mouthwatering. “I did wonder if you cooked all the food you had at your secret hideout yourself.”

“How come you’re so good at making food?” Allison closes her eyes and inhales full lungs of fresh rogaliki smell, visibly basking in it. “Is that part of your magic?”

“Mom died when I was little, and Dad is a shit cook.” Stiles snaps his fingers. “Voilà, the amazing chef Stiles was born! I mean, my first attempts kind of sucked. To this day, I can’t stand instant noodles, ugh. But I got better at it. If you like the rogaliki, wait till you try my tarragon chicken with quinoa or my lemon tart. That last one is a dessert and a show rolled into one ‘cause I don’t have a blowtorch so I have to brown the meringue on top with runes. If you look closely, you can see like a thousand tiny brown imprints of Kenaz.”

Peter takes one from the container and bites into it. His eyes widen, and Stiles' grin widens accordingly as he senses Peter's pleasure.

"If that's the kind of housewarming present you give, maybe we should move houses more often," Peter says and eats three more in quick succession.

"Well, I might be persuaded to come over from time to time and putter around the kitchen," Stiles preens under the praise. It's always nice to be appreciated. "Of course, if I'm provided with sufficient motivation to feed you guys."

Peter offers the container to Derek and Allison, who each grab a huge handful, impatient to have their share, and hogs the remaining cookies as he makes his way over to Stiles.

"I'll have to see what I can do to provide you with sufficient motivation, darling," Peter says and kisses Stiles. His mouth is cherry-sweet and ever so wicked.

"First of all, get a room," Allison complains, licking traces of jam off her fingers. "It's kind of like watching a parent kissing, ew. Second of all, Stiles, if you are bribing us, I'm game, whatever it is. Just make more of that, please."

Stiles giggles against Peter's lips.

"And thus my evil plan to subjugate the Hale pack hath succeeded!" He declares.

Derek is suddenly full of brooding sadness, despite the baked goodness in his hands and mouth. Right, he's probably remembering a different Hale pack. Nice going, Stiles.

Stiles squeezes Peter's shoulder lightly and nods towards Derek, but Peter's already noticed. He rubs his cheek against Stiles' and straightens up.

"Derek," he says. "I think you and I should talk."

He leads Derek to another room, the Tupperware still in his hands. Stiles suspects his cookies are going to be the social lube for this very heavy conversation. Smart. He sends Peter a bit of amusement through the packbond and receives back what amounts to a sly smile.

"So, Allie, how's it hanging?" Stiles grins at her.

Allison perches on another chair. She's dressed in a mishmash of her own jeans, Derek's spare tee and Stiles' red and black plaid shirt, and Stiles knows for a fact that it was Peter who did her wraparound braid this morning because Allison texted Stiles about her alpha's unexpected mad hair skills from the burner Peter had gotten her. She's very calm and content for a teenage girl who got kidnapped and had her life turned upside down, and Stiles is willing to bet a lot that the wolf in her is responsible for most of that, happy when surrounded by their scents.

"I'm kinda bored," she says, picking at her sleeve. "Wish I could go to school again."

"Soon," Stiles promises. "I didn't just come here to fatten you wolves up, I'm gonna talk business with Peter. We'll figure out a semi-plausible cover story for where you have been

this whole time, where he has been, and where his scars went, deal with the police and whatnot, and you'll be free to go outside again."

"Only semi-plausible?" She teases.

"Well, so long as we don't claim you two got abducted by aliens, I can take care of any doubts," Stiles winks.

"Right, your enigmatic mojo," Allison nods.

Her mood sours despite Stiles' promises.

"What about my parents?" She asks, staring at the surface of the table. "Do you maybe know anything?"

Stiles has been keeping tabs on the hunter situation, of course. To his surprise, it has basically dissolved by itself when he expected to have to do something about it; but he doubts Allison will see the news as positively as he does.

"They spent Friday quarreling all day, and yesterday morning your mom left town. The flunkies are also all gone. It's just your dad. He's at home right now. I don't think he's trying to hunt us down or anything, at least not at the moment."

"I see," she says.

Stiles waits her out as she thinks.

"Do you think at least dad is maybe not quite so..." She makes a vague gesture with one hand. "Militant about werewolves? He's not staying so he can..."

She doesn't say "find me and shoot me dead?" but Stiles can hear it anyway.

"I don't know, Allie," Stiles says, completely sincere. For all that his magic allows him a great deal of insight into people, he can't actually read minds. "I can't promise you anything either way regarding what your dad is thinking. But I can promise you something else: you've got me, okay? You're a cool person, a good one, and you don't deserve any of the shit that has rained on you lately, and you saved my life. You have my support. And hey, I have a packbond with Peter, so even though I don't have one with you, least not yet, you're still, like, pack by proxy, okay? My mojo's on your side. If anyone, your dad included, wants to hurt you, they are never even gonna get a chance."

"But you're not a werewolf," she points out. "I can feel these pack things, instincts and whatnot, which helps kind of a lot, but you are something else. Does your, uhm, kind have packs too?"

"I doubt it," Stiles says. "But it doesn't matter. I'm the one with the bond, so I'm the one who gets to decide what it means to me."

"Back then, in the forest, while you had that thing in your neck," she says, and Stiles grimaces at the reminder. "It felt so weird. I don't even know how to describe it, but there

was something missing. Something warm, and constant, and strong. It's gonna sound stupid, but it was like the world was less. And then you got your magic back, and the world felt right again, even if you weren't all there for a while."

"Huh. I didn't know it felt like that to others, to be honest."

"What is it, though? I mean, exactly?"

"My magic." Stiles isn't sure what to tell her. "Maybe the best way to describe it would be my attention. Or my will. I met a sentient tree whose magic is its will, and I'm starting to wonder if that's just how it works."

"A sentient tree?" She squeaks. "What, like a Tolkien's ent? Are you serious?!"

"Not exactly like that, no," Stiles laughs. "Maybe I'll introduce you one day. It's currently sick and cranky, and I'm helping it get better."

"I'm gonna hold you to that, Mr. Gandalf Stilinski," she tells him, and they both can't hold giggles in.

"So you see," Stiles says, sobering up, "I'm always with you even when I'm not. Which probably sounds terrifying, in which case I'm sorry, but it also means I'll keep you safe."

"It doesn't feel terrifying," Allison shrugs. "I think it would be if you were evil, but you're not. I just..."

She bends her head down, hiding her face in her folded forearms. Desperate hurt swells up in her like a flash flood.

"I just wish I didn't need your protection around my parents," she chokes out in a tiny voice. Her shoulders shake with silent sobs.

"Hey, hey," Stiles pulls his chair over to hers and hugs her. Well, considering how she's leaning over the table, more like awkwardly flops on her back, but Stiles doesn't sense her wanting him to go away, so it's fine. "I'm not gonna tell you not to cry because crying is a healthy thing to do, but just remember it's not all bad, okay? There are good things to look forward to. As long as you're alive, there's always something good ahead. You're gonna return to school, we'll make sure you get some clothes that actually fit you, there'll be movies, and sugary Starbucks coffee, and, I don't know, fluffy bunnies in the Preserve for you and Peter to chase together. It'll be a bonding activity. I can even cook some if you actually bring them back."

Allison laughs through her tears. Stiles releases her from the flop-hug, and she straightens up.

"Your idea of consoling somebody is talking about murdering and eating a fluffy bunny? Were you raised by wolves or something?"

Stiles snorts. Her misery is tinged with some reluctant amusement.

"Don't knock my technique. It works, see, you're laughing."

He pats her shoulder.

“It’s gonna turn out fine, Allie, you’ll see. Do you want me to bring around rogaliki with cinnamon orange jam and crushed hazelnuts next time I come by? You’d have one sure thing to look forward to.”

Allison gives him a watery smile, then, out of the blue, startles and laughs.

“Peter and Derek just stopped their serious conversation to tell me urgently to say yes,” she explains after Stiles’ questioning noise.

“Well, if they are nice to you, you can consider sharing one or two with them,” he tells her. Then he waits a few seconds and asks:

“On a scale of one to ten, how outraged are they?”

“About fifteen,” Allison tells him, and they laugh together.

* * *

Their cover story is transparent enough to pass a windowpane test. It goes something like this: after hearing that the Argent family were back in town, Peter woke up due to shock and escaped the hospital, fearing for his life, because he knew it had been Kate Argent who had set his home on fire. Wandering around the city, he ran into Allison, who, after learning his story, was also afraid of her murderous family history, and they hid together for a few days. Kate and her father Gerard eventually found them and chased them into the Preserve where a handy rabid mountain lion did away with the bad guys while Allison and Peter ran. After that, there was some hiding again, until Derek, Peter’s concerned nephew, found them due to his superior knowledge of his uncle’s habits and way of thinking and told them that Kate and Gerard were dead and it was safe to return now. All of Kate’s murdered accomplices were, of course, murdered by Kate who was afraid of her cover-up unraveling. At least the emotion hurricane that Stiles apparently inflicted on everyone in his range was explained away by the general public as a weird effect of atmospheric pressure without Stiles having to come up with anything himself.

Stiles drains the skepticism of every police officer who hears the cover story, including Dad, because Dad is a good cop and Stiles can’t afford him digging into it any further.

Peter spends a month wearing a silk mask that covers half his face whenever he goes out in public, claiming that he’s undergoing an experimental burn therapy and one of the requirements is not exposing the burned area to the sun.

Stiles drains the shock, awe and interest from the doctors when Peter comes into the hospital sans mask to finalize the dragged-out matter of his extensive care bills.

Every evening, when he sees the story on the news, he drains the entire town of gossipy curiosity, until something else takes the reporters’ attention, and after that things are pretty much as back to normal as they ever are.

People are ruled by emotions, and Stiles rules the emotions. As he sits side by side with Allison on the school steps, waiting for Peter to pick them up after classes, he wonders if it's a bit too much power for one person to have.

He examines his feelings in a habitual sweep. His anger has been a little colder since the nogitsune. His mischievousness has been a little stronger. His previously almost non-existent appreciation for delicate traditional Japanese art has grown leaps and bounds. He makes sure to check often, to trace all the places where the dead void kitsune is scattered. Right now the void-touched parts are all quiet; he is mostly calm and also a bit uneasy.

He plays with the uneasiness, poking and prodding, going back and forth along his chain of thoughts, and the uneasiness flares when he thinks back on the past month and how unprecedentedly liberal he has been with active influence. Is that why, Stiles wonders, he is so adamant about consent elsewhere? Because he never gives people a choice when he does what he does?

His thoughts drift back, way, way back, to the family of wendigos. They had to kill and eat humans; that was just what they were, how they were. Is it Stiles' fault that he is what he is? It started with him influencing Dad, before he even knew he could. Is it Stiles' fault that every day he chooses to use his magic instead of clamping down on it and living as the normal squishy human he looks like, never acknowledging what he is? His morality has always been more flexible than not, but he finds that he doesn't quite know where the line is anymore. Has he ever known it, really? He's been using his magic for years, observing when he didn't work it actively, and some people have come off the better for it, like Isaac Sweeney, some have come off the worse, like Harris who bore the brunt of Stiles' practicing to evoke bathroom urges, and some haven't been touched by it in any meaningful way like Mrs. Martin whom Stiles cheered for when he heard she was getting a divorce (she had been faking her orgasms for a long time by then). He's never really thought about these things, simply happy to explore what he could do. To watch over his town in any way he saw fit.

If these doubts are what growing up is, that this sucks and Stiles wants no part of it. He sighs and settles his chin between his drawn-up knees. Peter is late picking them up, and Stiles wishes he'd hurry up already.

The vast majority of what Stiles has done over the past month has been for Peter, to make sure Peter was safe, wasn't harassed, was able to resume his life under his own name, could walk the streets happy and unbothered.

He would do it all over again, he thinks, and the uneasiness dissipates slowly. He'd do much worse than that for Peter.

A familiar cluster of emotions is getting closer to school, and he's gonna be here faster than Peter.

"Your dad's moving in our direction," he says, and Allison flinches so violently that she almost drops her phone. "Do you want to avoid him? We can slip out of here and walk towards Peter."

She bites her lower lip.

“I... I don’t know,” she says. Her emotions are a contradictory chaotic swirl.

Christopher Argent was at the Sheriff’s station the day Allison gave her statement. He didn’t talk to her or stop her walking away with Peter and Derek even though, Stiles knows, he was watching her with sadness and longing so intense, it was a wonder the man could still breathe.

Not that the emotions meant much without Christopher acting on them. So far the only tangible thing Stiles can list in Christopher’s favor as a dad is the fact that he hasn’t left town, and, well, that’s not quite enough to qualify for the Father of the Year award.

“Do you know if he wants to hurt us?”

“I don’t think so.” Stiles doesn’t sense a violent or lethal intent—and he’s checking very, very thoroughly.

“Oh.”

Stiles waits for her to decide, unbothered by the swift approach of Christopher Argent. Even if he wanted to hurt them, Stiles wouldn’t let that get anywhere; the point of the conversation is solely Allison’s comfort.

“Let’s go,” she says, brave despite the hurt-fear-anger-misery maelstrom tearing through her. “I... We can still contact him later, right? Ourselves. On our terms. As, as a pack. I think we need to, if only to make sure he doesn’t try to make legal trouble for Peter and take me back since I’m not eighteen yet. Can your mojo get people’s phone numbers? I don’t remember his by heart.”

Stiles chuckles, getting to his feet.

“I don’t need mojo to get some dude’s phone number,” he says. “That only requires a bit of brains and a willingness to break a pesky law or two. Wanna learn?”

Allison gives him a reproachful look as they start walking in Peter’s direction.

“How are you the Sheriff’s kid?” She wonders. “Hasn’t he taught you to respect the law?”

“Oh, I respect it plenty. That’s why I make sure to never get caught.” Stiles flashes her his most shit-eating grin, and she smiles back at him, cheeks dimpling.

“Yeah, okay,” she caves, “I wanna learn.”

“Yes!” Stiles crows. “We’ll make a delinquent out of you yet, Allie, you just wait and see.”

He gets a gentle punch in the shoulder for that, careful enough that it’s basically a regular touch. Peter’s been teaching her control all the time, and Allison has taken to it like a duck to water. She makes an awesome wolf.

They spend a few minutes walking down the street and chatting, and then Peter’s BMW rolls to a stop next to them. The driver’s window goes down, and Stiles is treated to Peter’s most

obnoxious smirk.

“Going somewhere, kids?”

“This one asshole was supposed to pick us up,” Stiles says. “But he never showed up, so we decided to walk.”

Peter tsk-tsks.

“What a horrible person he is. Perhaps I can make up for his failings? Would you be willing to get into my wonderfully comfortable car with tinted windows and ride away with me?”

“You need a van for this to be properly creepy,” Allison says, climbing into the back seat. She immediately flops on her back and gets absorbed in her phone again. Her emotions are still churning but scrolling through her Instagram seems to help.

Stiles slips into the shotgun seat and belts up.

“Hello, creeperwolf.” He smiles at Peter and inhales deeply, taking in the now-familiar scents of soft leather seats, Peter’s citrusy cologne, and the fresh coffee waiting for him and Allison in a takeout bag.

“Good afternoon, sweetheart,” Peter murmurs. His emotions soften, and Stiles basks in the combination of pleasure, affection, desire and admiration, all with a dark, spicy tinge of possessiveness and a primal, deep, wild joy that is Peter’s wolf side also being happy to see him.

They don’t kiss hello or even rub cheeks. Stiles doesn’t want the headache that would come with quelling the rumors about the Sheriff’s underage kid canoodling with an older man, so any intimacy is saved for behind closed doors until he’s eighteen. They do entangle their fingers over the gear stick, a touch that is all the sweeter for being stolen under the noses of the unsuspecting passers-by.

“Sorry I was late,” Peter says, slightly sheepish. Stiles loves how Peter knows that his emotions are an open book to Stiles and yet never tries to restrain them, never feels apprehension or discomfort around him; on the contrary, Peter seems to welcome being *known* by Stiles. The intimacy of it is breathtaking. Stiles’ fingers tighten around Peter’s in a surge of his own possessiveness. “I actually wanted to discuss it with you, darling.”

“The thing that held you up? What was it?”

Peter takes his hand away briefly to turn the key in the ignition and then returns it right where it belongs. The car starts moving, its engine a soft purr.

“I’ve been thinking about rebuilding the house in the Preserve. Establishing the pack properly.”

“Okay,” Stiles says because Peter is waiting for some kind of input. “Did you want me to ward it?”

“No—well, yes, that’s part of it. But what I actually wanted was to ask you to be the pack’s emissary.”

“Emissary?” Allison pipes up from the back seat. “What does that mean? You mentioned the word but never explained.”

“An emissary is most often human, a magic user. They are responsible for any magical tasks that need doing, such as warding, for example, and are often an integral part of the pack’s diplomatic relationships.”

“Ah,” Allison says. “Well, Stiles would be good at that. He’s already basically Gandalf, only without a beard.”

“Look who’s talking, girl Legolas,” Stiles sticks his tongue out at her. She sticks hers out right back.

“What do you think, sweetheart?” Peter prompts, benevolently amused by their exchange. “You don’t have to answer before you’ve thought it over.”

Stiles shrugs.

“I’ve been doing more or less that for a while now,” he says. “And even if you picked some other magic user to be your emissary, I would go on protecting you and your pack anyway, so we might as well save ourselves the hassle of anyone’s ruffled feathers. But I do want to make sure we’re on the same page about what me being the emissary would mean.”

Peter turns a corner.

“In what sense?”

“You would be officially my alpha, yeah, but that doesn’t mean you’d get to tell me what to do. I’ve never done well with any kind of authority, and I’m sure as hell not gonna try adopting a subordinate mindset now. Especially not with you.” Stiles smiles at Peter somewhat apologetically. “Also, I take it you intend for the pack to live in the house? I’m not moving in there before I’m eighteen at the very least. I don’t want to create any scandals that would draw unwanted attention, and I’m very iffy about leaving Dad puttering around an empty house alone. He’ll probably eat nothing but grease in my absence until his arteries explode.”

Peter’s disdain for Dad bothers Stiles a little. But Peter never says anything disparaging out loud and always takes into account that Stiles cares about Dad, and, well, Peter’s entitled to his opinion. Dad probably wouldn’t like Peter very much either.

“We could hire a cook for him,” Peter remarks, voice light. “Something to think about later.”

“So you’re fine with both things?”

Peter laughs.

“My enchanting sugarmuffin, you don’t bend when it comes to movie night choices. No, I did not expect any sort of submission from you. It honestly never even crossed my mind. And we’ll figure out your father’s situation whenever you feel you’re ready to move into the pack house, be it when you’re eighteen or later. As long as you’re willing to be my emissary, I’m happy with whatever terms make you comfortable.”

“Cool,” Stiles says. “Then you’ve got yourself an emissary.”

Peter’s emotions are like the sun, happiness, pride, possessiveness, lust, smug satisfaction, sly calculation; Stiles closes his eyes, enjoying the taste, feel, look, smell and sound of all of them—including the pale, dew-fresh, small hope hiding behind the loud things.

Whatever else an emissary is supposed to normally do, Stiles will make nurturing that hope one of his main duties.

Eyes still closed, Stiles smiles as their town rolls by outside the car. Peter’s hand never leaves his.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: epilogue! It'll tie up some loose ends, answer a handful of remaining questions and give us a glimpse of the life Stiles and Peter are building for themselves. Because it's the epilogue, it's special and it won't be in Stiles or Peter's POV. I think it's gonna be interesting nonetheless ;)

Chapter 10: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chris is nervous.

Some adrenaline here and there is not a new sensation by any means, but he hasn't been filled with as much trepidation since his teenage years. The way he was contacted out of the blue took him aback and the news that Allison wanted to meet with him made his stomach tie into knots.

He has a lot to tell his precious baby girl, but he worries about what she wants to say to him. If she will even be here or if it's a trap of some sort.

Not that Hale and Stilinski would need to stage one to kill him, to be honest. Especially not now.

He fiddles with his coffee cup, watching the door. Old habits have him sitting with his back to the wall, aware of all possible exits. There are quite a lot: this café has floor to ceiling windows in three of the four walls. They let in the afternoon sun and provide a perfect view of the street.

He notices them approaching from afar, and his heart beats heavy and fast as Allison gets closer. They don't hesitate before going in even though they must know he's here already. Allison walks over to him, hands in the pockets of a red hoodie that looks like it's meant for someone with broader shoulders than hers, and takes a seat opposite him. Hale and Stilinski go so far as to give them an illusion of privacy, settling two tables over.

"Hi, babydoll," Chris says. Perhaps he shouldn't have started with a fatherly endearment but he's distracted, drinking her in.

She looks good. Healthy. Other than the hoodie, her clothes seem new and fit her. Her hair is up in an elaborate swirl of three thick braids, and visually, it's the biggest change because she used to like to wear it down. Even though her body language is defensive, shoulders hunched forward, and she's not looking him in the eye, there's no sign betraying her as a werewolf.

His beloved daughter, a werewolf. Chris tamps down on all the emotions the thought is bringing. Now is not the time for that. Allison is his priority, now and forever.

"Why were you trying to ambush us?" She looks up, scowling.

"Ambush you?" Chris is confused.

"Yes, me and Stiles. The other week, when Peter was a bit late to pick us up, you were coming to the school. Where we were."

"Oh," Chris says. Even to his own ears he sounds inane. "I didn't know you were still there."

Allison looks surprised, the wind taken out of her sails somewhat. Chris wonders if she already knows how to listen for lies in the rhythm of a heartbeat.

“Why were you going there, then?”

“I had a meeting with the principal.”

“What for?” Allison’s eyes narrow.

Chris supposes it’s as good a moment as any to break this piece of news.

“I wanted to update him personally on the fact that your mother and I are now divorced and all parental rights have been signed over to me. She is no longer allowed to take you out of school, if she ever shows up here and tries to do so.”

“Di...” She breaks off to take a deep breath and center herself. “Divorced?”

“Yes,” Chris says. “I mailed the last of her things to her in France yesterday morning.”

“Oh, I... I see.” She tugs the hoodie around her and up, burying the lower half of her face in the soft fabric and inhaling deeply. “Was that because of me?”

Chris’ heart breaks for his brave, hurt baby girl. He wishes this one was as easy to fix as a scraped knee.

“It was because of your mother’s unreasonable prejudice towards people of your persuasion,” he says, dancing around words like “werewolf” or “supernatural”. “She’s the one to blame for holding on to that, not you, pumpkin.”

“But if I wasn’t...”

“And the fact that you are is not your fault either,” Chris interrupts her. This is something that he suspects has not been stressed enough for her. “It’s Hale’s.”

There’s a long, awkward pause that ends with a waitress putting a huge mug of hot chocolate with mini marshmallows in front of Allison.

“I didn’t order this,” Allison says.

“It’s from the adorable young man at that table over there.” The waitress winks before leaving.

Allison looks over to Hale and Stilinski, and Chris follows her line of sight. Both the werewolf and the Spark wink as well, rather obnoxiously. Allison huffs a laugh, wraps her hands around the mug and inhales the sweet aroma.

“Stiles’ hot chocolate is better,” she says and takes a sip. “This is not too bad, though.”

She drains half the cup. Chris is content to sit there and watch her, alive and well, enjoying a favorite treat. He caught glimpses of her via the CCTV cameras near Hale’s apartment that he

had hacked but it wasn't nearly enough.

“So mom left altogether,” Allison says, still brittle but seemingly fortified by the ridiculous amount of sugar. “And you didn't, but you ignored my existence for over a month.”

It's not a question but Chris takes it as an opening anyway. At least it didn't sound too hostile.

“It's been a busy time,” he says. “I sold the business, buried Kate and Gerard, hashed out the division of all assets with Vicky's lawyer and made sure, as much as I could, that the hunting community of America would stay away from Beacon Hills, before cutting ties with them.”

“You... What?” Allison stares at him, uncomprehending.

“I also took the time to get into therapy,” Chris adds. “I had to tell the therapist that I was uncomfortable with my daughter's sexual orientation since I'm not aware of any specialists in the know, but it turned out to be similar enough to help me a lot with getting rid of some ingrained bigoted mindsets.”

“You what?” She repeats.

Chris sighs and glances towards Hale and Stilinski. Hale is watching them without even trying to hide it. Stilinski is slouched in his chair, tearing pieces off of a muffin and scrolling through his phone, but between the two Chris has a feeling the unassuming teenager is the bigger threat.

As if sensing Chris' attention, Stilinski turns his head and gives Chris a saccharine-sweet smile. Chris looks back at Allison.

“I love you more than anything in the world, babydoll. And I knew I couldn't stay in your life if I kept... doing what I did. Thinking how I thought. I had to overhaul my life and my convictions, so that was what I did. Am still doing. I'm sorry it has taken so long.”

She is blinking rapidly, trying to hold back tears.

“So you—you don't think wer, uhm, people like me are mindless monsters that need to be put down?”

“I think you are precious and wonderful, no matter your specific genetic makeup,” Chris says. “Some others are still a work in progress, though.”

He can't help glancing at Hale with undisguised dislike.

“Don't hurt Peter!” Allison raises her voice briefly, then catches herself and makes an obvious effort to speak in a low, furtive voice. “He knows what he did was wrong. He was not sane at the time, and he was angry because you cut his dead niece in half to taunt him.”

“It still doesn't excuse him for dragging you into this,” Chris hisses. “You had nothing to do with the fire!”

“And what was your excuse for keeping me in the dark?” Allison hisses back. Her stubborn temper is all him. “You never so much as hinted that the monsters under the bed were real, much less that we were moving here to hunt a specific one down! If I had known, I wouldn’t have gone out alone that night!”

“I didn’t want you involved with the bloodshed, and the secrecy, and the hard decisions,” Chris says, his anger deflating. Hale might have been the one to sink his teeth into Allison but Chris’ own insistence on keeping her out of the family legacy was what put her within an insane alpha’s easy reach. “I wanted you to have a happy childhood, and it made me short-sighted. I’m sorry.”

He’s sincere, and that makes Allison back down as well. She’s always been a kind girl, and that doesn’t seem to have changed.

“Still,” she says. “Don’t hurt him. He’s better now. Stable. He’s been taking care of me.”

She chews on her lower lip.

“And don’t hurt Stiles or Derek either,” she adds. “If you try to do anything to any of them or try to take me back by force...”

“I wouldn’t succeed anyway.” Chris gives her a small smile. “I don’t know for sure what Stiles can do, but I’m fairly certain he could kill me before I’d even try.”

Allison frowns at him.

“Maybe you need some more time with that therapist of yours,” she says. “Stiles is not some maniac dictator, killing people on a whim. Just because he can do something, doesn’t mean he will.”

“So, uhm, he’s around a lot, then?” Chris can’t help it. The idea of a full-fledged Spark next to his daughter gives him the heebie-jeebies. Hale is one thing: if the man is sane now and smart enough to want to hold on to that sanity, of course he wouldn’t hurt his beta, considering how short he is on those. Stilinski, though, is a much more unpredictable factor.

When Deaton contacted them after Vicky’s disastrous attempt to question the Sheriff’s suspicious son and told them what Stiles Stilinski really was and what precautions and measures were best to take, there was no doubt in Chris’ mind that the boy was too dangerous to leave alive. That was exactly what the amulets were for. Old talismans that had helped to eradicate half a dozen Sparks over the centuries, passed through generations in secret. A fragile shield against boundless power that was sure to corrupt its owner just as boundlessly.

And then Chris saw Stilinski’s young, frustrated face, and had a garrote of mountain ash around his throat, and got talked to—arrogantly, impatiently, yes, but *reasonably*. The realization that, amulet or not, Chris lived or died at the Spark’s will, and that he did live, even though it would have been much simpler to tighten that garrote and not bother negotiating, hit him hard enough for his conviction to tremble and shift.

Why did he give Kate's amulet to Hale instead of pocketing it, again? It's a nervous, annoyed thought. Chris doesn't truly regret doing that.

And now, he is fairly certain, that impulse decision is the main reason why he is warranted as much goodwill as he is.

"We're in many classes together at school, and he's at the apartment all the time." Allison looks at him judgmentally. "We do homework together and swap halves of our sandwiches, he texts me stupid memes and makes the world's best cookies which he always shares, and he's been getting me into Japanese pop-music. What a horrible, bloodthirsty, unforgivable monster he must be, huh?"

Chris is pretty sure Allison didn't use to be so sarcastic. He looks down at his coffee, dull flush filling his cheeks.

"Sorry," he says again. "I'm... I'm glad to hear they've been good to you. I worried."

He drinks some coffee, cold by now, in a futile hope that it will give him some extra courage. He failed his baby girl so badly.

"Would you consider maybe moving back in with me?" He says and loses his nerve immediately. "Or at least visiting? All your things are still at the house. And I, well, I'd be happy to see you. Any time. For any reason, or no reason at all."

She hides her face behind the hot chocolate mug. This gesture is so painfully reminiscent of toddler Allison who was shy and liked to hide behind whatever was in her hands so that only her big dark eyes were visible that it gives Chris' heart a sharp pang.

"There are no guns in the house," he adds. "No wolfsbane, or mountain ash, or anything else related to... well, that. I got rid of everything."

Allison gives a strained laugh.

"Maybe we shouldn't rush into anything if it's still necessary to specify that there are no guns to kill me with," she says. "But..."

She twists in her chair and looks at Hale and Stilinski. Hale smiles at her, looking encouraging and kind. Stilinski lifts his phone and taps out a quick message; Allison's phone chimes in her pocket a moment later.

She takes it out and reads the message. Chris has never wished so badly to have a giraffe's neck he could crane all the way around the table for a peek at that phone.

Whatever it is, she visibly relaxes after reading it and smiles at Chris. It's a small, hesitant thing but it's there.

"Maybe we could go somewhere this weekend?" She offers. "Like, to the botanical gardens or something? Just to walk 'round somewhere and talk."

“I’d be happy to,” Chris says quickly, seizing what he’s given before Allison can change her mind. If Stilinski’s message prompted her to do this, Chris will have to send the boy a truckload of fruit baskets. “Just name the time and place, I will be there.”

“Okay,” she says. Then wariness washes over her face. “But just in case, you should know that even though Stiles won’t be there, he’ll still be watching over me.”

Chris looks at Stilinski whose smirk is positively vulpine.

“That’s a bit creepy,” he says because it really is. “But I don’t really care, pumpkin. You, me, some plants. That’s all that matters.”

Allison smiles at that, still not carefree around him but hopeful. Willing to give him a chance.

That’s more than Chris expected.

He drinks his disgusting cold coffee and hopes for the future.

* * *

Deucalion is drifting in a sea of quiet bliss. Nothing matters; nothing even exists in his perfect, all-encompassing contentment. He lets it carry him through time which has also become meaningless. There’s nothing to wish for, to strive towards. Everything is already perfect.

Slowly, ever so slowly the contentment subsides. Losing it feels like taking a blowtorch to his vulnerable places, and he’s helpless against that, struggling to accept the sensations of the disappointing reality again.

“...funny thing,” a voice says. “You remember our original deal, creeperwolf?”

“How could I forget, sweetheart?” Another voice replies. “You ranted at me about *Twilight* and gave me a plaid shirt to cover my nether regions. It was certainly one of the more memorable days of my life.”

There’s an amused snort. Deucalion raises his head, lighting his red eyes discreetly behind his sunglasses, and sees the two who are talking. It’s a boy who looks young enough to still be at school and an older man. They are leaning against each other’s sides in a way that is suggestive of them keeping their hands in each other’s back pockets.

Deucalion’s pack, Marin and a woman he doesn’t know are sitting in the grass close by. None of them is bound, same as Deucalion, but they look to be drooling and smell of perfect contentment.

“Anyway,” the boy says, smiling, “in return for helping you I asked to pick your brain about some things. Two of them were actually the Nemeton and the nogitsune. See, I only sensed them as these hella weird presences in the middle of the Preserve, and there was no worthwhile information I could find by myself. I figured you’d know more about them than me, having lived steeped in the supernatural your whole life, and right next to them both besides. It’s funny how it turned out.”

The man hums thoughtfully. He is a werewolf, Deucalion can sense it—and an alpha, to boot. This must be Hale. He’s changed a lot since Deucalion last saw him, grown into himself.

As for the boy, obviously, it’s hard to be sure, but Deucalion is fairly certain that this is the fabled Spark. Deucalion’s sensitivity to magic is, alas, not much higher than average for a werewolf, but it’s enough to shudder at the crackling, wild power that rolls off this child.

“What was the third thing, darling? I remember you mentioning three things.”

“Eichen House,” the boy says. “There’s something in there, too. Some dumb, hungry, malicious thing.”

“That’s news to me,” Hale says slowly. “I knew it was a covert prison for supernatural creatures, and I did a very fascinating deep dive into its history and legal status once. But, to be honest, I always tried to keep as far away from it as possible.”

“A smart choice,” the Spark child nods. “We’ll need to research it and see if we can figure out the best way to deal with it. I’m tempted to just raze the whole building to the ground, but that might free the thing instead of killing it, who knows.”

“We will.” Hale kisses the Spark’s temple. “I still remember a lot of interesting facts from that deep dive that might help us. In the meantime, though... Why did you let this one wake up?”

He doesn’t even nod at Deucalion, doesn’t even look. He will pay for the disrespect, Deucalion seethes momentarily, but then the anger is... gone.

Deucalion stays sitting where he is, half-unsheathed claws sliding back into his fingers. What is going on?

“I thought you might find it fun to mock him for trying to make a mess in our territory,” the Spark grins. “Don’t say I never get you anything nice, creeperwolf.”

“You’re so thoughtful, sweetheart.” Hale’s voice is full of mirth.

They finally look at Deucalion.

“So, what’s the big idea, Duke?” Hale asks. “Why did you think you could just waltz in here with your merry little band of misfits and stalk my betas?”

“I heard there was once again a Hale alpha,” Deucalion smiles pleasantly. “One much less uptight than dear old Talia, and one who managed to destroy the Argents in one night. I had to come and see if you would be amenable to joining my pack. Besides...”

He peers at the Spark, in all of his adolescent, baggy-hoodie-adorned, lanky glory. It’s frustrating that Hale evidently managed to get his hands on such an impossibly rare jewel first, but that doesn’t have to stay exactly that way.

“I met a selkie girl who told interesting tales,” Deucalion gives the Spark a more genuine smile. “I could hardly be expected to withstand the temptation to come here myself and see if

the legend of Sparks has truly come to life again, now could I?"

The Spark groans and thunks his forehead against Hale's shoulder.

"This idiot wanted something with me? Seriously?" He complains. "He knew there was a Spark here and thought he could, what, come snatch me up or something? Jesus tap-dancing Christ."

Hale presses an amused smile into the Spark's hair, not looking compassionate in the least.

"Oh, I know," the Spark says mournfully. "It's a branding problem."

"Branding?" Hale questions.

"Yes! These self-important alphas, they hear the word "Spark", and they imagine something small and cute. I mean, what kind of picture does "spark" even create? A tiny thing, about to fizzle out, unable to do much harm, waiting for somebody else to blow it into something serious. It sends all kinds of wrong subliminal messages. Who even came up with that?"

Hale's shoulders shake with laughter.

"Well, to be fair, sweetheart, you are very cute," he says. "Although I wouldn't say you're all that small."

The Spark pokes Hale in the ribs.

"Save the innuendo for when our murder victim isn't watching us, pervertwolf. Anyway, someone's gotta do something about this disastrous PR campaign. We should rename the concept of Sparks into something that gives every stupid power-grabber out there a better idea of whether or not they should risk their health coming after me. How about "Supernova"? Do you think that'll stick?"

Murder victim? Deucalion wonders why this doesn't make him tense, angry or afraid. It should, shouldn't it?

"That would imply that you're only good for one big shot, and after that you die," Hale says. "We should keep workshopping it."

"Ugh, you're right."

Deucalion has had just about enough of this inane conversation and being ignored.

"Murder?" He says. "Surely, that sounds like an extreme measure for someone who has not actually done anything objectionable?"

"Oh, so coming in uninvited with a pack of douches like yourself, a druid with a grudge towards me for killing her brother, and a darach at your heels is not objectionable?" The Spark rolls his eyes. "You're a shitstorm personified, dude. And let's also take into account that you killed your whole pack."

Suddenly, the Spark is entirely serious. His eyes blaze with fury, and the scents of ozone and petrichor fill the clearing out of nowhere. His power bears down on Deucalion like a hydraulic press.

“They relied on you, trusted you, looked up to you,” he says. His voice reverberates through the night air, loud and layered as if there are ten people speaking in unison. “It was your duty to protect them, and you used them for a cheap power-up instead. Personally, I take a very dim view of betrayal.”

Before Deucalion can say anything, all emotion leaves him. He is empty; a hollow, unfeeling nothing.

“It’s not fun anymore,” the Spark says. “Let’s get it done and go shower their scents off?”

“Of course, my darling,” Hale says.

“Hey, you, silly shrub,” the Spark says, his tone softening. “Time for dinner.”

With the numb eyes of a husk, Deucalion watches a gigantic root rip its way free of the ground, wrap around Kali and bring her over to a tree stump in the middle of the clearing. It’s wider than a truck and taller than a man, and Hale cups his hands for the Spark to step onto and gives him a boost up. The Spark climbs nimbly on top of the stump, disappearing from view, and for a minute or two only sounds indicate what is happening: the Spark chanting under his breath in a language Deucalion doesn’t recognize, Kali’s quiet gasp and the particular murmur of blood spurting out of an artery. In the end, the root that brought Kali up rears above the stump and comes down with a wet, squelching noise. The power in the clearing is stifflingly thick, viscous like honey.

The stump seems to have gotten taller still.

“One down, six to go,” the Spark says. “I have a feeling I’m gonna have to yell “Geronimo” when I jump off this time. You’ll catch me, right?”

“Always, dear heart,” Hale replies, his voice tender.

One by one, the root brings up the happy, content people. One by one, they die. Deucalion is the last. His back hits the wooden surface, and he lies there, a body robbed of its impulse to move, as the Spark leans over him, breath full of chocolate and peanut butter, turns his head and slices his carotid artery, making sure the blood goes towards the stump and holding the cut open with his fingers to prevent it from healing.

Fresh green sprouts push their way out of the stump all around Deucalion. The root plunges into his chest.

He dies surrounded by the scent of newly sprung grass and Reese’s peanut butter cups.

* * *

The bell by the door tinkles, announcing visitors. Soleil looks up from her magazine.

“Hello, Soleil,” Peter Hale smirks at her.

She is not impressed. She has never been impressed with this boy, even if she has had a bit of a soft spot for him since the day he walked into her shop, touched every book and knickknack with his sticky little hands and accidentally almost summoned a demon.

“Hi!” Stiles chirps.

As usual, the young Spark carries with him blinding, deafening power. Soleil knew he was coming from blocks away. That’s about all she can do, has ever been able to do: see and hear things others can’t. She’s a shitty witch but a very good gossipy old woman.

“Hello, boys,” she says because she’s in a charitable mood today. “Lemme guess, you two are here to annoy me instead of buying something?”

“Got it in one,” Peter smirks harder. “How have you been, Soleil?”

Stiles jumps up to sit on her counter. She slaps him with a rolled-up magazine, narrowing her eyes, but he just laughs and scoots out of reach. That insolent imp.

“Same old, same old,” she says. “Joints creaking, the attic leaking. All the normal things.”

“A little birdie told me,” Stiles says, aiming for serious but unable to suppress his lips twitching, “that you must’ve always known what I am but still pretended to buy my story about a normal kid dabbling in some magic.”

“Uh-huh. Would that birdie happen to be werewolf-shaped, by any chance?” Soleil slants a look at Peter who raises his hands as if to say “guilty as charged”. “And it’s not buying it when it’s the truth, you little rascal. You’re a kid dabbling in magic. Spark, Shmark, who cares. Stop getting chocolate all over my books, then we’ll talk.”

“Yeah, we’re actually in the process of rebranding that,” Stiles says, snickering. “I need a cooler name than “Spark”. Peter’s been shooting down my every idea, so I was hoping you have one or two?”

“You made up the name you go by already, what do you need to make up another one for?” Soleil snorts and ambles away from the counter to start tea. At her age she has to move slowly. When everything aches, that’s how she knows she’s still alive.

“Stiles is convinced that if he picks a more fearsome name for what he is, other supernatural creatures might stop and think before coming here,” Peter explains, equal parts helpful and smarmy. It’s a Peter Hale special, and Soleil finds that she has missed this patented conman charm during the last six years.

“Ha, good luck with that,” Soleil scoffs, setting tea bags into three mismatched mugs. Hers is the one Stiles got her for Christmas last year. It has a picture of a cat with a mug in its paws on it, and above the cat it says “That’s what I do. I drink tea and I know things”. “Silly boy.”

“What do you mean?” Stiles frowns in confusion.

“Doesn’t matter what you call yourself,” she says, exasperated. “You have more power than a nuclear reactor, and there ain’t no hiding it. You’ve been a literal beacon for years, of course there’s gonna be all sorts drawn to that. The older and more powerful you’ll get, the more will come. Many of them can’t even help it. Oh, and is it because of the two of you that the Nemeton is getting stronger by the day? That’ll just make the call that much more enticing.”

Stiles looks stricken, and Peter looks tense.

“So it’s my fault?” Stiles whispers. “Every creature that came here to kill somebody, they did it because I was here?”

“Hey, no, sweetheart, none of that is your fault,” Peter hastens to envelop Stiles into a hug. Huh. Soleil didn’t think they were that close.

“Listen to your wolf,” Soleil advises. The newfangled electric kettle she only bought because Stiles bugged her until she gave in starts making burbling noises. She’s not sure she approves of water boiling so fast. If there’s anything unnatural under the sun, it’s that. “Those who looked to kill had been killing where they’d been before. Here at least you put them down fast.”

“You... know about how I killed a bunch of creatures?” Stiles seems stunned.

“Those who have the senses to tell when something’s up all do,” Soleil says. Honestly, how secretive did that boy think he was being? “Why do you think Evelyn over at the bakery always has some sort of weird sale going on when you come in? Ain’t no one else getting thank you discounts like yours.”

Peter starts laughing and doesn’t stop even when Stiles elbows him.

“How thoughtful of sweet old Evelyn,” Peter manages in between peals of laughter. “You do need all those calories, darling... digging graves is a grueling exercise!”

Stiles pushes off the counter to hang off Peter, hiding his face in the folds of Peter’s jacket, seeming secure in the knowledge that he will be supported by werewolf hands that won’t let him fall. Soleil watches their antics, amused.

“I will never live any of this down, will I?” Stiles whines into Peter’s chest. “But why the fuck didn’t anyone ever say anything?! Why didn’t *you*, Soleil?”

“And how do you imagine that conversation would go?” Soleil scoffs. “Hello, the incredibly powerful kid whom I don’t yet know very well and who is clearly okay with necessary killing, even though you seem like you don’t want to talk about it, seeing as you never say anything yourself, I suspect it’s you protecting the town, so thanks and please don’t kill me too?”

“People can’t still believe I’ll kill them if they say something I don’t like.” Stiles turns his face to Soleil, still pressing one cheek into Peter’s chest. His Bambi eyes are cutting right through to her worn-out, dried-up soul. “Do they? Do you?”

“No, it’s long since become clear you’re not the type,” Soleil says. There, that’s her sappiness quota for the day filled. “At this point people are just respecting your privacy since you never breathed a word to anyone. As for me... What would be the point? I was already giving you tea, candy and books. What else was I gonna do, shake my walking stick at a tengu?”

The kettle switches off with a loud snick that never fails to make Soleil jump. She glares at it disapprovingly as she pours the steaming water into the cups.

“For the record, I did notice that all those constant sales were weird,” Stiles says. While she wasn’t looking, he somehow managed to shift around Peter and is now hanging off his back, cheek pressed to the curve of Peter’s neck. Peter doesn’t seem to mind being climbed like a jungle gym. “I just thought she wanted to butter me up and get my mom’s rogaliki recipe out of me!”

“Oh, she does want that,” Soleil agrees. “She comes down for tea at least twice a week and always rants about how those cookies would be the crowning jewel of her bakery if only you weren’t so obstinate. But that’s not why she basically gives her bread away to you.”

“Huh,” Stiles says.

“Get down from there,” Soleil orders. “You can’t drink tea like that, you’ll spill it all over. What’s the deal with you two, anyway? You his emissary now or something?”

They look into each other’s eyes, identical conspiratorial smiles on their lips.

“I am,” Stiles says, sliding down to stand on his own two feet.

“We’re pack,” Peter says, preening.

“How did that happen?” Soleil wonders. “I know there was a big hullabaloo with hunters a while back but no details. Most of us were lying low at the time since we don’t got power for shit.”

“Well, this one ambushed me in the woods and talked me half to death until I agreed to a deal,” Peter says, his voice impossibly fond.

“Was that how that went? I seem to recall a certain someone who wanted to bite me and then snobbed all over my clothing choices,” Stiles snarks, eyes sparkling.

“Snob is not a verb, sweetheart.”

“It is if I say it is, Mr. Language Police Officer.”

“You seem a good deal friendlier than two folks only bound by a deal,” Soleil remarks.

“What can I say, he grew on me,” Stiles says, picking up his mug. “Like fungus.”

“What does that make you?” Peter wonders. “If fungus grows on you, does that mean you’re something moldy, sweetheart?”

“I’m no ordinary moldy thing, creeperwolf. I’m like blue cheese, the noblest of cheeses,” Stiles says decisively.

“Stinky?” Soleil asks dryly.

The boys are startled into laughing.

Mood light, the three of them settle by the counter on Soleil’s mishmash of chairs and stools and sip their tea.

“We’re establishing the Hale pack once again, Soleil,” Peter says, cradling his mug in his hands. His eyes flash red once and turn back into their normal blue. “I set things in motion to rebuild the house. I have two betas. Derek, my nephew, you must remember him. And Allison Argent.”

“Argent,” Soleil repeats.

“Yes, of those Argents.” Peter gives her a wry smile. “Her father is still in town but he’s retired, by the way. She’s a sweet girl once you get past the reputation attached to her name. We’ll bring her over some time.”

“An Argent werewolf,” Soleil marvels. “Well, I’ll be. How did you even convince her to take the bite?”

“Uhm, well.” Peter looks awkward.

“Peter Benjamin Hale,” Soleil says. “Do you mean to tell me you bit that girl out of the blue?”

“How did I not know your middle name is Benjamin?” Stiles wonders, slurping his tea.

“It’s a long story, Soleil, okay?” Peter makes an exasperated face at them both. “It’s all good now.”

“Long story? I’ve got time,” Soleil says pointedly.

She makes fresh tea twice more and brings out some candy while they tell her how they met, and what happened after that, and what they are planning to do now. They are, of course, hiding a half of it and glossing over a good bit of the rest, but she doesn’t mind.

She’ll come to know the rest in due time. That’s what she does.

* * *

Scott is confused.

It feels like he’s been in a state of perpetual confusion for weeks, to be honest. He’s thought about that night in the woods many times, all the time, but it never started making any more sense. A black bear turning into Peter Hale? Allison pushing Dr. Deaton so hard that he flew

several yards and crashed into the trees? That metal thingy causing Stiles to fall unconscious? The atmospheric pressure thing that Scott is pretty sure was anything but? And that fear.

Scott had never been so afraid in his life as he was then, when Stiles sat up, face slack and empty, blood still dripping from where the metal thingy was. He thought he might die just from how scared he was, and he didn't even know why. It's not like he had any reason to be afraid of Stiles.

He spent a few days after that night, agonizing over what to do. There was that niggling feeling that he'd done wrong, but he was only doing what Dr. Deaton had said he should, to help Stiles. There's nothing wrong with wanting to help one's best friend, Scott knows as much.

He wanted to ask Dr. Deaton again the next day but then Dr. Deaton turned up dead from a heart attack. And then Allison and Peter Hale came to the police, and the story the news told was not at all like what had happened, but Scott didn't know what to do with that knowledge. He thought about going to the Sheriff, but who would even believe this story? Bears don't turn into people.

He kind of wishes he could talk with Stiles about it. He thought he might be able to when Stiles showed up at school again, a bit paler than usual and limping slightly but otherwise fine, but Allison was with Stiles all the time, and she glared daggers at Scott.

He didn't dare get close when it was clear she didn't want it and when Stiles didn't seem to even notice Scott existed.

He's sitting alone at lunch and watching them. He hasn't been alone at school ever since he met Stiles, and it makes him feel lost.

Allison and Stiles are sitting very close to each other, and Scott isn't even sure if he's jealous about Stiles maybe possibly dating the girl of Scott's dreams or about Allison monopolizing Scott's best friend. How did this even happen?

Mom has been asking very insistently recently why he's so down and if he fought with Stiles and that was why Stiles hasn't been by at all. Scott doesn't know what to tell her. They didn't fight. Scott just listened to Dr. Deaton and put a metal thingy into Stiles' skin. That was all.

He's texted Stiles a million times over the last few weeks but never got a reply.

It's probably very obvious that he's staring at them wistfully. He doesn't care. He just wants things back to the way they were before Allison disappeared and strange things happened. He isn't sure what he did wrong, but he's sorry.

God, is he sorry. The loneliness grates on him so much.

Suddenly, Stiles looks right at him and frowns. Scott knows all of Stiles' faces, and this is not an angry, go-away-or-you-will-regret-it frown that Stiles directs at bullies. It's one that means Stiles can't decide on something.

Before Scott can capitalize on that, somehow, Stiles looks away and goes back to talking to Allison.

It's still enough of a good sign that the next day Scott migrates one table over, ignoring the surprised looks of the computer club who weren't expecting him to sit with them.

The day after that he ignores the theater kids asking him what he's doing at their table.

And the day after that the basketball players hit him in the head with a basketball for sitting with them and ignoring their demands for an explanation, but it's fine, it doesn't even leave a bump.

Scott is certain that Stiles, at least, knows what Scott's doing but does nothing to prevent it. It's another good sign.

Finally, there comes a day when he stands by Stiles and Allison's table, a lunch tray in his hands and a hopeful smile on his face.

Allison is glaring at him angrily. Stiles is studying him with polite interest. Both are extremely unnerving.

"Uhm..." Scott says. "Can I sit with you guys?"

The table is big but the end where Stiles and Allison are is fully covered with brown paper their lunches came wrapped in, huge sheets that look like house blueprints of all things, notebooks, textbooks and big plastic cups full of what can only be Stiles' signature lemonade, fragrant even through a lid. Stiles' laptop is sitting open where they can both see it, and Scott caught a glimpse of a furniture shop website while he was walking over.

"That depends, Scotty," Stiles says after a very long pause. Scott feels like he has died and come back to life several times during that pause. "Are you planning to assault me again?"

"Assault you? What?!" Scott flails and almost drops his lunch tray.

"What else would you call sticking sharp things into my neck?"

Scott hopes no one else has heard this. They would probably think Scott came at Stiles with a knife or something.

"I'm not going to do anything," Scott says in a small voice. This is the first time he's spoken to Stiles in weeks, and weeks, and weeks. They've never gone so long without talking before.

Scott misses his best friend something fierce, even though he's right here.

Stiles' face softens a little.

"Have a seat," he says. Scott sits down so quickly that all the dishes and things on his tray clunk against each other.

Allison isn't glaring quite as angrily anymore but she's watching Scott with mistrustful eyes.

“He could have died,” she says, voice low and protective. “Because of what you did. He was dying.”

Scott didn’t believe Peter Hale about that at the time but hearing it from Allison is another thing. She would hardly lie about that, would she? Not when it’s clear that she thinks Stiles needs protecting from Scott.

“I’m...” Scott’s words get stuck in his throat. He doesn’t understand how that small metal thing could hurt Stiles seriously enough for that but if it did, then that means Scott almost killed his best friend. “Stiles, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Dr. Deaton...”

“Was an asshole,” Stiles interrupts.

“He told me to do it,” Scott explains, nervously tearing a piece of bread in half. The bread smushes into paste under his fingers. “He said it would help you.”

“Scotty, I know you are, in fact, less dumb than a doornail,” Stiles says, exasperated. “How on Earth was what he asked you to do supposed to help anyone? Didn’t you stop to think about that for one second?”

“I, well, I asked but he insisted it was the only way and that we didn’t have the time for him to explain. And earlier that day Ms. Argent took me outside to talk with her and her father, and they told me how Peter Hale was making you help him, making you an accomplice to horrible things, and I was supposed to do my part because I was your friend and it wouldn’t be suspicious for me to get close, and that it would all come to a head very soon, and that you’d be alright if only I did exactly as they asked—”

“Scott,” Stiles says gently. “Breathe, dude. You’re going to ramble yourself into an asthma attack.”

Scott tries to breathe but it’s a lost cause, and he has to use his inhaler.

“I didn’t want to let you go wherever you were supposed to go that day,” he admits, staring at the bread paste. “I thought maybe I could just keep you away from whatever was going on with Peter Hale and the older Argents, and it would be alright. But you didn’t want to stay by my side, and I let you go, and later I changed my mind but you weren’t home and I didn’t know what to do. I should’ve told you all about it. You’re smart, you would’ve figured out what to do. I don’t know why I didn’t.”

Stiles sighs.

“Because you’re a stupid kid, Scott,” he says. He doesn’t sound angry, just tired.

“We’re the same age,” Scott objects.

“I don’t know about that,” Stiles mutters. “Sometimes I feel like I’m a thousand years old.”

Stiles has never said anything like that before. Scott tries to parse it.

“Why?”

“Never mind,” Stiles says. “Look, Scotty, here’s the thing: Deaton and the older Argents manipulated you and used you, and you fell for it hook, line and sinker. As a result, you betrayed me. I don’t know if we can be friends again. I don’t trust you not to pull another stunt out of misguided best intentions.”

“I don’t even know what I did, exactly,” Scott says, desperate. “Was that tiny thing coated in poison or something? Why was it so dangerous to you?” The thingy did have a thick needle soldered to the back, like a decorative pin. Maybe there was poison.

Dr. Deaton only touched it with gloves on and told Scott not to touch it until it was time to use it, Scott suddenly remembers.

Oh God, so there really was poison?!

“Something like that,” Stiles says.

Scott slumps in his seat. When Stiles takes a dislike to someone, he keeps at it; no one holds grudges like Stiles. Just look at his and Jackson Whittemore’s epic feud, spanning years. Scott used to think it was a bit funny, but there’s nothing funny in being on the receiving end of it.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats. “I’ll... I’ll go.”

He’s not hungry anymore. Maybe he can go outside and be sad by himself for a while until the after lunch classes start.

Then he can be sad in class. And at home. And everywhere.

He pushes his tray away and gets up. Stiles sighs again and looks at Allison.

“Your call,” she says. “My dad was my call. This one’s yours.”

“Fair enough,” Stiles says. “Get your butt back in that chair, Scotty. You know, a very crafty man once told me that trust is something that builds over time. You get one chance to build back what you destroyed, you hear me? One more “helpful” scheme behind my back, and I won’t just ignore you, I’ll make sure you’ll regret it.”

“Okay!” Scott beams, buoyed by joy.

He’s still confused and doesn’t know what exactly happened, but that’s okay. Stiles is talking to him again, and Allison is not looking so angry anymore.

As far as Scott is concerned, knowledge is secondary to happiness.

* * *

Derek has no idea what he’s still doing here. Both here, in Beacon Hills, and here, in the living room of Peter’s apartment.

He's pondering it, bent over a book in his armchair, not really seeing the text on the pages. It's quiet in the room. Peter and Stiles are reading too, cuddled together on the couch. Stiles' back is pressed to Peter's chest; they are cheek to cheek, legs entangled, and Peter's right hand is entwined with Stiles' left over Stiles' stomach. They are as close as two people can possibly get without taking their clothes off, something Derek prefers not to think about. Whatever might or might not be happening in the bedroom they claimed joint ownership of, Derek would like to never know any of that for sure.

With only one hand free each, Stiles' pet mountain ash is flipping the pages for them. If Peter has a signal that lets Stiles know when to turn a page for him, Derek can't see or hear it. It is quite possibly the creepiest peaceful domestic scene Derek has ever seen, and he has seen plenty lately.

He studies them, forgetting about his own book. Peter is reading *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and Stiles has got a tome of manga... a non-translated one, from the looks of it.

"Do you actually read Japanese?" Derek asks. He wouldn't put it past Stiles to stare at characters he can't decipher for hours just for the sake of messing with Derek.

"When I don't think too hard about it, yeah," Stiles says distractedly. Spatula-shaped mountain ash turns a page of the manga.

What does that even mean?

"What does that even mean?" Derek frowns.

"It means what I said," Stiles says, the insufferable brat.

"Okay, what's it about, then?" Derek challenges. The mountain ash flicks over a page for Peter.

"Jesus and Buddha secretly living as roommates in Tokyo," Stiles says, and it's probably true, if only because it's way too weird an idea to come up with on the spot. "Jesus just turned water into wine in a public bath. It's funny."

The mountain ash takes the manga from Stiles' hand and brings it over to Derek to show him, and, from the pictures, that looks to be exactly what is happening. Derek scowls at it. The mountain ash rears up, shaking minutely as if it's laughing at him, and for all Derek knows, it might be.

Stiles resumes reading while Derek stewes in frustration. It's been weeks, and Derek still has no idea what Stiles is besides something nebulously magical. Stiles smells and looks human, but half the time the things he says and does come across as anything but. Derek even asked him outright, twice. The first time Stiles grinned and said he was *something*, and the second time he told Derek to get back to him later because he was in the process of rebranding.

Whatever *that* meant. Brat.

Part of the reason why Derek's here is simple: he doesn't have anywhere else to go. His and Laura's tiny pack of two is no more, and even if he wanted to return to the New York apartment full of her scent, the lease is going to run out next week. His name is not on it. He could probably get that changed, but he's still tired from the paperwork required to swap the legal ownership of his Camaro.

When he submitted to the bite that reestablished their bond, he half-expected Peter to be the same as Laura and mom had been—take over Derek's everything, boss him around, have strong opinions on every single thing, big or small. However, Peter is the most easy-going, hands-off alpha Derek has ever even heard of.

To be honest, Derek is floundering in the sea of possibilities he has now. Peter told him he was free to choose what he wanted to do with his life: work, study, take up gardening or scrapbooking. Peter's only specific advice was to not do nothing at all because that leaves too much time for brooding, and to maybe consider some therapy for the Kate thing.

Derek didn't ask, but he thinks Peter would probably agree to dissolve their bond and let Derek go wherever if that was what Derek wanted.

He has no idea what he wants.

He has an unfinished degree in data analysis, something Laura thought would be a stable career and Derek thought was as boring as they come. He studied it the way a child eats their vegetables, reluctant but aware it was good for him.

He's sick of vegetables, that much he knows.

He puts his book aside and takes out his phone to Google "interesting careers". The results range widely, from an acupuncturist to sommelier to forensic pathologist, and they all look intimidating to someone who's spent years mostly learning the intricacies of Excel formulas.

Some days all he wants is to tear Peter's throat out and create a new Hale pack, one that would be more proper, less obscene than one with Laura's killer at the helm. Other days he wants nothing more than to cling to his last remaining family and never let go.

He really needs a job to take his mind off this seesaw.

He looks at Peter and Stiles again. He's been around them for a considerable chunk of time now, and they always smell happy together, relaxed, joyful, fond even when they bicker. Sometimes Derek suspects they are actually in love, which makes it even worse somehow than Peter seducing a pretty jailbait for some brief illegal fun between the sheets.

Being in love would make Peter that much more human than a monster; make it so much harder to never forgive him for Laura.

It would also make a stupid, stupid old pain rear its ugly head. Those thoughts that Derek has had creep up on him too many times already: why couldn't it be like this with him and Kate, he loved her, he would do anything for her, why couldn't she see past the fangs and the claws, why couldn't she love him, why did she have to go through with the plan to murder

his family, why can Stiles be enough for Peter but Derek was not enough, never good enough

“What are your thoughts on incubi?”

Derek blinks, the spiral of bad thoughts slowing down.

“Are you asking me?”

“Yes, you, sourwolf.” Derek isn’t a fan of this nickname, but, apparently, he’s a sourwolf, Peter’s a creeperwolf, and Allison has been known to respond to dimplewolf lately. There’s zero use fighting it. Whatever else Stiles is, he’s a force of nature.

Hell, maybe literally. So far, Derek’s best guess for what Stiles is would be a larva of an Eldritch god.

“I don’t have any thoughts on incubi,” he says, truthfully. “They exist, I suppose. Why?”

“There’s a gym run by one-sixth incubus in town,” Stiles says, still looking at the manga in front of him. “His name is Kyle, he’s a buddy. He’s been complaining that he’s run off his feet lately. The business is booming, and he’s looking into expanding the current place a bit. Getting a yoga or dance studio adjacent to the main gym space, maybe.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“Wanna help him out? At least until he finds someone permanent as a manager. He really just needs someone to keep an eye on the gym while he’s off trying to charm his way through the government bureaucracy. Your eyebrows of doom would make sure no testosterone-fueled machos start a brawl over the last couple of dumbbells or something. He promises fair wages and a free reign of the machines before and after hours.”

“Did you already tell him I’d do it?” Derek asks suspiciously.

“Nah, I just said I’d keep it in mind if I saw someone who might want the job. No skin off my nose if you don’t.”

Derek glances at Peter. Is that something his alpha wants him to do, maybe? Get out of the apartment, make himself useful, earn money for the pack?

Peter puts his book down, looking bored with their conversation, and starts thumb wrestling with Stiles.

Thumb wrestling.

Derek is man enough to admit that he’s gawking.

The Peter he knew before the fire would scoff at such a sappy, pointless thing to do. The Peter he thinks he knows now is also... incongruous with this. And yet, here they are. Stiles giggles as their thumbs push at each other, something that goes on even though Stiles, to

Derek's best knowledge, has no enhanced strength and Peter could have ended it in less than a second.

"What are you doing?" Derek can't help but ask.

"Inventing cold fusion, sourwolf. What's it look like?"

"Why are you doing it?" Asking these questions is like being in a trainwreck, honestly. It's not likely to end well, but there's not much he can do about it.

Stiles pauses for a moment.

"It's too boring to make up a prize for the winner, so the loser gets a kiss," he decides eventually. "To console them in their defeat."

Peter hums.

"Is that so?"

Peter's thumb folds smoothly under the push of Stiles' and twitches dramatically. Derek has no earthly idea how Peter manages to make it look dramatic.

"Woe is me," Peter says, sounding completely unfazed. "Looks like thumb wrestling is not a career for me after all. However shall I gather the pieces of my broken pride after such a fiasco?"

Stiles laughs his strangest laugh, the high and yipping kind, and kisses Peter. Derek looks away, stomach churning with habitual discomfort.

They don't bother to stop on his account after a few seconds, and Derek, admitting his own defeat, climbs out of his armchair. Maybe he'll swing by that gym and see what this Kyle person wants his temporary manager to do, just out of curiosity.

Before he flees the living room and the apartment with his tail between his legs, he looks over his shoulder and calls out:

"Hey, Peter?" He waits for Peter to break away from Stiles and look at him, eyebrows arched questioningly. "Dumbledore dies in this one."

He grins as he makes his getaway, Peter's outraged "Fuck you, Derek" seeing him off. The expression feels foreign on his face but nice.

As he steps out into the street, he feels lighter than he has in years.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfiction, Author Of

A fairly common beast. Possesses the ability to fascinate humans and manipulate their emotions, with power levels fluctuating from specimen to specimen based on many factors. Prone to daydreaming and can be distracted by debating narrative. Can subsist on its own mental energy but prefers to consume positive feedback which it finds rich, nutritious and satisfying.

—A 100% Real and Legit Excerpt from the Argent Bestiary

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